

The Abuse of Trust in Nigeria's Rivers State

Examining Patterns and Trends in Gender Based Violence

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Rivers State has experienced higher levels of violence and conflict-related fatalities in the past six months than at any time since the end of the militant insurgency in 2009. This rise in violence – predominately due to the new wave of militancy, political violence, criminality and cult violence – has been well documented in the media and international spheres. What is not getting reported are the impacts this is having on women and girls. Incidents of sexual assault, targeted criminality against vulnerable groups (including girls and pregnant women), and domestic abuse are all major contributors to Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) in the state. May 2016 had one of the highest numbers of VAWG-related incidents reported from the Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme (NSRP) Rivers State Observatory since its inception.

The main findings that have emerged from the trends in overall violence and fatalities, point to a pervasive environment where trust is compromised and abused. This includes both at the family and community levels as well as at the Local Government Area (LGA) and state levels. This report seeks to delve further into the impacts of militancy and collective violence on women and girls in Rivers state, and how it has contributed to an environment where trust is routinely abused and women and girls left vulnerable. It further seeks to provide recommendations for planning around prevention and response.

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Trends in Incident Reporting of Violence Against Women & Girls in Rivers
Figure 1: January 2015 - July 2016



Graph shows the number of reported incidents of Violence Against Women & Girls (VAWG), using all sources—including NSRP, ACLED and Nigeria Watch— formatted for the P4P Peace Map www.p4p-nigerdelta.org. Each data source has different data collection methods, and therefore should not be seen as an indication of overall patterns and trends across time and space of violence. As this brief shows, violence affecting women and girls often goes unreported. The graph does however show more incidents reported during months in Rivers state with heightened conflict risk (for example March 2015 elections, cult violence/militancy in early 2016, etc.)

Data used in this Brief is based on incidents reported using Partners for Peace (P4P) Map, which integrates and formats conflict data from different sources including NSRP, Nigeria Watch and ACLED. The platform is supported by Partnership Initiatives in the Niger Delta (PIND) www.pindfoundation.org

Background of Insecurity in Rivers State: 2015-2016

Rivers remains one of the most violent states per capita in the Niger Delta region. The 2015 Presidential elections, and subsequent National Assembly, State Assembly and Gubernatorial elections, took place amidst the backdrop of political violence, lethal criminality, and gang clashes. In April 2015, the state headquarters of the Independent National Election Commission (INEC) were burnt down, and large deployments of military and police personnel were mobilized across the state. Allegations of manipulation of votes, theft of ballot materials and intimidation of opponents led to inconclusive results in the legislative elections, and stoked tensions between party candidates and their supporters.

The resurgence of militancy in late 2015 with groups such as the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) sabotaging oil pipelines and infrastructure, and the rise in cult and gang-related violence – with scores of fatalities reported during cult clashes – have continued to heighten conflict risk in the state.

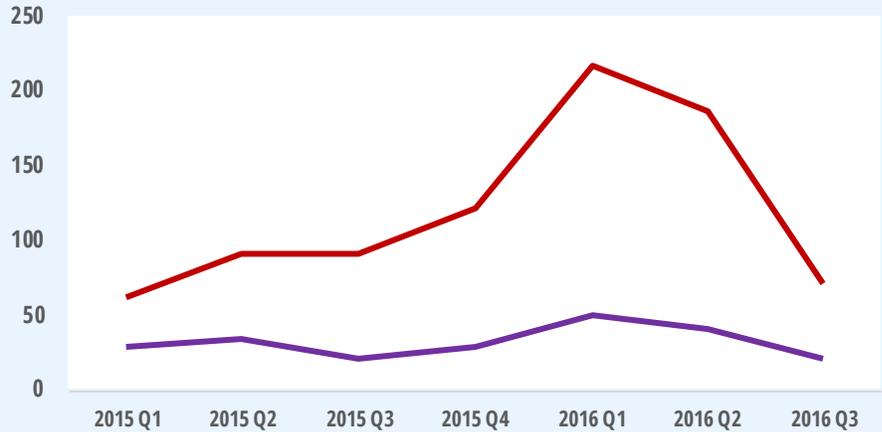
With violence and conflict-related fatalities higher in Rivers in the first half of 2016 than at any time since 2009 (Figure 2), the risk and impacts on women and girls have also risen (Figure 1). Continuing to monitor trends in VAWG is integral to understanding more about how these broader patterns in collective violence impact female community members, and inform wider prevention and response efforts within the state.

Overall Trends in VAWG in Rivers: January 2015-July 2016

Domestic abuse, rape and sexual assault of women and girls accounted for the vast majority of the VAWG incidents reported between January 2015 and July 2016 in Rivers state (Figure 3). This included scores of incidents documenting the rape of young

Overall Levels of Violence in Rivers State

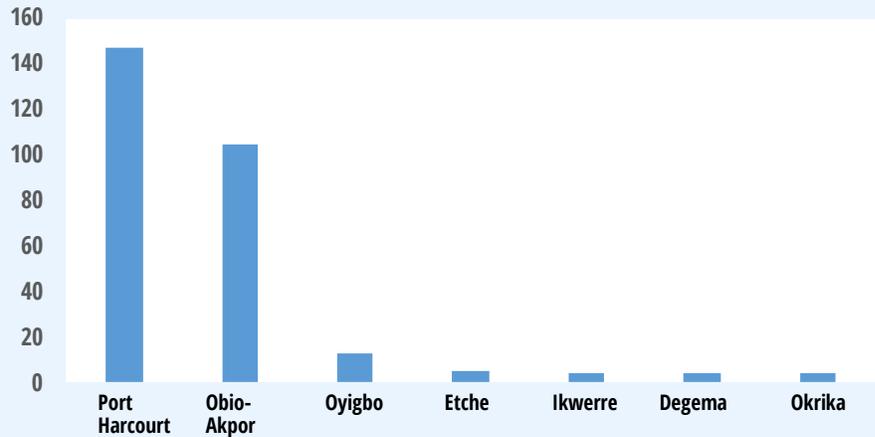
Figure 2: Reported Incidents Q1 2015 - Q3 2016



Graph shows the number of reported incidents of violence and conflict-related fatalities, in Rivers state over the past seven quarters, Jan. 2015— Sep. 2016. Source: ACLED and Nigeria Watch data. Formatted for the for the P4P Peace Map www.p4p-nigerdelta.org.

Domestic Abuse, Sexual & Interpersonal Violence by LGA

Figure 3: Reported Incidents January 2015 - July 2016



Bar chart shows the number of reported incidents of Violence Against Women & Girls (VAWG) related to domestic abuse, sexual assault and other interpersonal violence since the beginning of 2015. Trends in reporting show that Port Harcourt and Obio-Akpor LGAs has the highest levels of reporting. As this report outlines, the abuse of trust by relatives and community leaders often means sexual assault and violence goes unreported. Source: ACLED and Nigeria Watch data. All data sources were used—including NSRP, ACLED and Nigeria Watch— formatted for the P4P Peace Map www.p4p-nigerdelta.org.

girls and women by male family members – including fathers, husbands, brothers and relatives, as well as neighbours and local community members.

This abuse of trust by community figures, including reports of pastors and police officers sexually assaulting minors,

highlights the pervasive norms which still exist towards VAWG within the state. In one particularly gruesome incident reported in Ikwerre in January 2016, the corpse of a nine-year-old girl was found after she was abducted by a gang of boys likely known to her and raped until she died of her injuries. She had been sent to run an errand for her

mother within the local area. In another incident in July 2016 in Obio-Akpor, a 10-year-old girl was raped by a local store owner when she went to get supplies, later dying in hospital. Other incidents detail the sexual assault of girls as young as two-years old by men and boys predominately from within their community or family networks. Domestic violence and rape perpetrated by husbands was also commonly reported, as well as issues related to economic disempowerment of women left by their husbands without means to support their families.

In most reported instances of sexual assault and murder, the perpetrators were known or, worse, trusted by the survivor or the survivor’s family or community. This also impacts the willingness of survivors to report their cases and may further impact



how — and if — perpetrators are held accountable.

These are just a few examples of the hundreds of reported incidents from the NSRP Rivers Observatory and other sources

in the state over the past eighteen months related to domestic abuse, sexual assault and other interpersonal violence (*Figure 3*). The trends in reporting of VAWG data were highest in Port Harcourt LGA, followed by Obio-Akpor LGA. These incidents however, represent only the small fraction that have been reported. The abuse of trust by relatives and community leaders often means that sexual assault and violence goes unreported. Strengthened reporting of VAWG is needed to continue to break this pervasive culture of silence.

Other salient trends from this time period that have impacted the well-being and livelihoods of women and girls, relate to rising collective and criminal violence in the state, as well as abuse by public security forces.

How Collective and Criminal Violence Impacts Women and Girls

While reported incidents of VAWG predominantly related to domestic and interpersonal sexual and physical abuse in Rivers, data also points to the increasing impacts of collective violence and criminality on women and girls (*Figure 4*).

It has been well documented in research by multinational organizations such as the UN¹ that women and girls are often disproportionately impacted by conflict and collective violence. As Rivers State continues to be marred by insecurity, particularly in the context of ongoing local election uncertainty, and a rise in cult tensions, women and children remain vulnerable to the impacts of this violence. Since the beginning of 2015, reports have included incidents involving women and girls as part of broader criminality and communal violence, as well as being actively targeted in connection with political and cult tensions. Several high profile women — including the wives and female family members of politicians — were reported to have been abducted or killed. Also female professionals, including at least two doctors, were targeted by kidnappers. Unlike instances where high profile males are kidnapped or abducted, females are normally subjected to a range of physical threats and abuse related to their gender, in addition to traditional requests for ransom and other forms of intimidation.

Criminal Violence: Women and Girls in the Crossfire

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons has impacted levels of insecurity in Niger Delta states such as Rivers, where incidents related to lethal violence have risen significantly in recent years (see *Figure 1*). Research published in 2016 from Enugu State University of Science and Technology by I. Ugwuja Daniel² suggests that arms proliferation may have exacerbated

insecurity in the region. The impact of the flood of small arms and light weapons into the Niger Delta region, and Rivers State in particular, is likely a trend that is only beginning to manifest and will likely worsen in coming months. Looking at the impacts of gun violence and lethal criminality on women and girls in Rivers since 2015, several incidents have resulted in fatalities from women and girls being caught in the crossfire of armed attacks. In March 2015, a woman died during a bank robbery in Port Harcourt. In another incident in the same LGA, a girl was killed by a stray bullet during gunfire.

Incidents where women were directly targeted included the attack and kidnapping of a female Registrar from a Polytechnic in Khana in November 2015, who was subsequently rescued during a police shoot-out which killed the four kidnappers. In other incidents, a female doctor was abducted on her way to church in January 2016 in Port Harcourt, while a radio host was killed by armed robbers in Eleme in May 2015.

Robbery also featured in reported incidents, where in Obio-Akpor in October 2015 a group of boys staged nightly attacks harassing, abducting and raping women and girls. In December 2015 in Port Harcourt, it was reported that a group of boys had carried out attacks stealing women's belongings.

Cult and Gang Violence: Intimidation and Reprisal Attacks on Women and Girls

Cult and gang-related violence has been a significant driver of conflict risk in Rivers State during the time period examined, and one of the major contributors to the fatalities reported in the state over the past

Cult/Gang Violence: VAWG Key Incidents

- **January 2015** - man and woman attacked and robbed by cult members
- **February 2015** - During a party held by a female cult member, an ex-militant was shot and killed
- **March 2015** - 14-year-old raped by cult member
- **June 2015** - A woman reported that she was attacked by a cult member because she didn't respond to his advances
- **August 2015** - Intimidation of a woman to maintain a relationship with a cult member, with parents scared to intervene
- **September 2015** - Cult members threaten to kill a female food seller
- **October 2015** - A known cultist beats up his wife at the slightest of provocation, but remains unchecked due his status
- **February 2016** - Member of a cult group attacked a community, and killed seven people including an elderly woman
- **February 2016** - A 30-year-old cult member sexually abused a 9-year-old girl, threatening that he will kill her if she tells anyone
- **May 2016** - During ongoing violence between rival cult groups the Icelanders and Greenlanders, eight people were killed including a woman was beheaded and burnt beyond recognition
- **June 2016** - In a reprisal attack as part of Icelanders and Greenlanders violence, up to 28 people were reportedly killed, including a nursing mother
- **June 2016** - An elderly woman was killed along with 14 others during Icelanders and Greenlanders violence

1. URL located at: <http://www.un.org/press/en/2003/sc7908.doc.htm>

2. URL located at: [http://idosi.org/ajbas/ajbas8\(2\)16/5.pdf](http://idosi.org/ajbas/ajbas8(2)16/5.pdf)

Criminality: VAWG Key Incidents

- **March 2015** - Four people, including a woman, died after they were hit by stray bullets during an armed robbery inside a commercial bank
- **March 2015** - A girl was shot dead by a stray bullet in front of her house.
- **May 2015** - A female radio host was shot and killed when armed robbers attacked a bus
- **October 2015** - Female Registrar of a Polytechnic was kidnapped
- **December 2015** - A female doctor was kidnapped on her way to work
- **January 2016** - A female doctor was dragged from her car and abducted by armed men, as she was driving to church with her children

year. As part of ongoing clashes between groups such as the Icelanders and Greenlanders, women and girls have been impacted by the widespread violence. The power and fear of cult group and gang association has also led to several incidents being reported of women being abused or intimidated, but feeling powerless to report crimes. In August 2015 in Port Harcourt, it was reported that a woman was intimidated with threats of violence to remain in a relationship with a cult member against her will, with her family scared to intervene due to his gang affiliations. Similarly, in a case of ongoing domestic violence in October 2015 in Port Harcourt, a wife was severely beaten by her husband, but no one had intervened due to his cult member status. In another incident in February 2016 in Okrika, it was reported that a 30-year-old cult member sexually abused a nine-year-old girl, threatening that he would kill her if she told anyone.

Other trends in cult and gang-related tensions include multiple incidents of rape; including during reprisal attacks between

groups, where women were amongst community members singled out to be raped or killed. In May 2016, a woman was beheaded along with her husband in a clash between the Icelanders and Greenlanders in Ogba-Egbema-Ndoni.

Though cult groups have their origins in traditionally male University Confraternities, there have been reports of several female cult groups emerging since the 1990s in the Niger Delta, as highlighted by the Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor.³ While recent incident data has not identified female cult groups as part of the ongoing cult clashes in Rivers, it is important to highlight that women can also play an active role in perpetrating communal violence. In February 2015 for example, a female cult member was referenced in an incident during which an ex-militant was killed.

Political Violence: How Political Uncertainty Impacts Women

Amidst the backdrop of jockeying between gubernatorial and legislative candidates, their parties and supporters, political violence has been a major source of conflict risk in Rivers since 2015. Impacts on women and girls from political violence have included incidents related to protests, as well as targeted abductions and killings.

In the lead-up to the Nigeria general election in March 2015, followed by the Gubernatorial and House Assembly Elections in April 2015, Rivers state saw a significant rise in overall violence (see *Figure 1*). Several incidents involved women and girls being injured as part of violence during political rallies and protests. With the uncertainty that followed the gubernatorial election results, and local elections held in May 2015, incidents of lethal violence were reported. In June 2015, the wife of a former Eleme LGA chairman was abducted and killed in Port Harcourt, while a woman and

her two-year-old son were killed during the abduction of a committee member for Degema LGA in December 2015.

In March 2016, a spate of violent incidents was reported during the legislative election re-run. In Tai, two pregnant women were reported to be among at least 40 people killed during a clash with men wearing military uniforms over electoral materials designated for the federal and state rerun elections. Also that month, an APC ward chairman was murdered along with his wife and son in Ogba-Egbema-Ndoni, while in Ikwerre the mother of an Asari-Toru LGA caretaker chairman was abducted at gunpoint.

As an environment of pervasive uncertainty continues following the March 2016 re-run elections, with some election results unannounced and further ballots still required, conflict risk remains high within Rivers – as do the potential impacts on women and children.

The Role of Public Security Forces

The role of public security forces is an important part of the government's response to the security pressures within Rivers. As a result of the insecurity created by election violence, militancy and cult clashes, officers – including joint task forces of military personnel and police – have been deployed throughout the state.

While maintaining law and order is a crucial part of ensuring stability, this has also caused friction within some communities, and led to multiple reports of misconduct by officers. There have been several reported allegations of VAWG perpetrated by members of the public security forces. In May 2015, a woman was reportedly beaten by police officers while trying to intervene in the beating of a bus driver in Obio-Akpor. In another incident, a woman reported being

3. <https://jamestown.org/program/nigerias-cults-and-their-role-in-the-niger-delta-insurgency/#.V9tk9JgrLIU>

Reported VAWG Incidents by Violence Type

Figure 4: January 2015 - July 2016

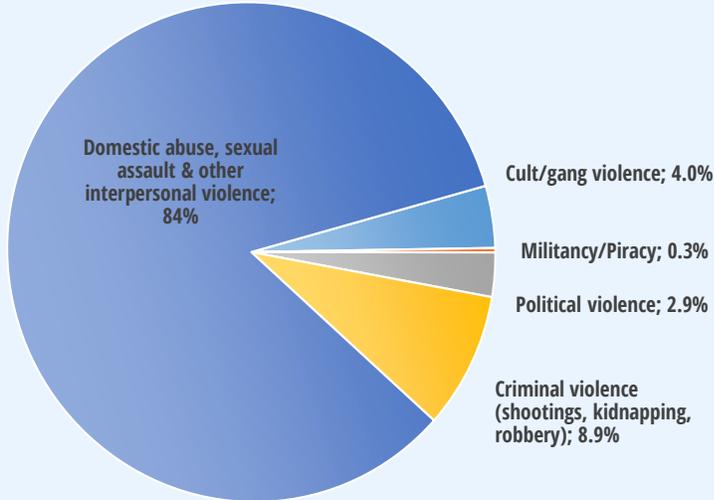


Chart shows the types of violence reported during January 2015 to July 2016, with more than three quarters of the incidents relating to inter-personal violence, sexual assault and domestic abuse. The next most salient category within the data was criminal violence, including incidents such as abduction, murder and robbery. All data sources were used—including NSRP, ACLED and Nigeria Watch—formatted for the P4P Peace Map www.p4p-nigerdelta.org.

dragged from her car and beaten by police officers in September 2015 in Port Harcourt.

Sexual assaults by law enforcement officials were also reported, with a 16-year-old girl allegedly raped by a police officer in Port Harcourt in August 2015. In a March 2016 incident in Khana, it was reported that a military officer molested a woman, allegedly pushing and dragging her.

As in the cases of women and girls who are sexually and otherwise physically attacked by perpetrators known to them, their families, or their communities, abuses by public security forces also constitute violations of trust. Police and military officers who abuse their positions of authority to sexually assault women, or who use the monopoly on force entrusted to them to physically harm women and girls,

are often not called to account for their actions. Moreover, as in the case of family and community members, as well as cult and gang members, the factor of intimidation looms large over whether a survivor reports the abuse and whether it is actually followed-up on by authorities. The resurgence of armed militancy in the Niger Delta, and the deployment of an increased presence of public security in communities, presents a heightened risk of cases of VAWG in the coming months. Particularly with the commencement of military exercises in the region and the deployment of additional security forces to protect vulnerable national and international business and infrastructure assets, it is imperative that incidences of VAWG by public (and private) security forces be closely monitored and documented. It is vital that preventative measures are taken

Political Violence: VAWG Key Incidents

- **January 2015** - During a political rally, violence erupted and five female party supporters were severely injured
- **February 2015** - Girl was injured during violent political rally
- **March 2015** - Women were injured by tear gas during political protest
- **April 2015** - Women were injured during election violence
- **June 2015** - The wife of the former chairman of Eleme Local Government and PDP State Chairman was abducted and killed by gunmen
- **December 2015** - A woman and her 2-year-old son were shot dead by gunmen during an abduction of a member of the caretaker committee for Degema LGA
- **March 2016** - An APC Ward Chairman was attacked and beheaded in Omoku, with his wife and son also shot dead
- **March 2016** - Gunmen kidnapped the mother of Asari-Toru LGA caretaker chairman on her way to church
- **March 2016** - A group of boys beat up a woman on election day because she prevented them from taking her son away
- **March 2016** - Two pregnant women were among at least 40 people killed during a clash over electoral materials

to encourage greater collaboration between communities and security forces, and promote respectful and appropriate conduct, especially toward women and girls.

Conclusion

The impacts of collective, criminal and political violence on vulnerable groups — particularly women and children — is a critical part of the conflict cycle. The stakes remain high in Rivers state amidst political uncertainty and factionalized party politics, a rise in cult and gang violence, and an ongoing wave of militancy met with public security deployments.

Data has shown that the heightened conflict risk in the state is having pervasive impacts on women and girls. While communal violence has been a factor in incidents of VAWG, the majority of the data reported centres on sexual abuse and domestic violence. As noted in this report, a persistent theme in the cases of VAWG reported is the abuse and violation of trust by perpetrators.

This pernicious undercurrent effects both reporting and response. To address this, strengthening the capacity for incident reporting over time and space remains a powerful tool for breaking the culture of silence around the violence. This is especially important in the context of bringing to account the perpetrators that are known and potentially trusted by the survivor, including community leaders, family members, guardians, neighbours and public security forces.

Coupled with the reporting and tracking of incident data, prevention efforts can be reinforced with the deterrent of criminal prosecution. Since the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP) was signed into Nigerian Federal Law in 2015, it has provided a strengthened platform for victims to seek redress, and carries

punishment for perpetrators up to life imprisonment. While the VAPP has attracted some publicity at the national level, it only applies to the Federal Capital Territory where the legislation was passed. Rivers state must work to domesticate the VAPP, along with implementing a State Action Plan based on the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.

At the local level, awareness raising campaigns could be aimed both widely at communities as well as specifically at those who are in a position to aid in the prevention and response of VAWG. These policy areas need to be addressed, along with other suggested proactive measures outlined in our Recommendations.

Recommendations

1 Incident reports overwhelmingly point to sexual assault and violence perpetrated by male figures known to victims. This includes trusted family members, guardians, and community leaders or local acquaintances, such as shop owners. Education campaigns that target potential perpetrators, as well as instilling better awareness about risks and reporting within communities, will strengthen prevention efforts. Local awareness campaigns to different targeted audiences could seek to:

- Highlight the criminal ramifications for perpetrators (e.g. applicable under VAPP 2015 in the Federal Capital Territory, crimes can attract sentences of life imprisonment).
- Encourage more collective vigilance and accountability within communities, especially looking out for young girls and boys unaccompanied, and for reporting abuse.
- Encourage parents, traditional leaders, and teachers to educate children about the risks and understand concepts of personal and physical boundaries. This is particularly important when it comes to inappropriate conduct by people in positions of trust.

2 Strengthen the capacity of local NGOs, Peace Clubs, and other community organizations through regular training on the reporting of incidents to help to break the culture of silence. Whether it is domestic abuse, cult tensions, or criminal violence, the impacts on women are often not known or are recorded in a way that does not facilitate easy follow-up or planning for prevention. This is where the NSRP Observatories and Observatory Steering Committees (OBSTECs) can and do play a key role. In training and encouraging proper reporting, by survivors as well as wider community members who may witness these incidents of violence, data can be effectively used to support research and planning for prevention.

3 Work closely with OBSTEC members to plan targeted awareness raising among their constituencies in Rivers state about how the current environment of increased violence and insecurity is specifically impacting women and girls, and how this can be addressed. OBSTEC members are in key positions to not only impact awareness, but also help catalyze response.

4 Convene a dialogue among community leaders, policy makers and peace actors, which also seeks input and engagement from the law enforcement and military representatives. The dialogue could help develop messaging to reinforce appropriate and respectful conduct towards women and girls, and support efforts to strengthen reporting of crimes. This forum should also seek to identify a path forward with state policy makers to implement the VAPP and State Action Plan for Women, Peace, and Security.

5 Work with national and international organizations to help implement state-wide strategic messaging and communications campaigns about how the environment of rising insecurity in Rivers state is impacting women and girls. This can and should include engagement and outreach with local media outlets and courtesy calls by OBSTEC members and others who are familiar with the issue to community leaders. These courtesy visits should include traditional rulers, hospitals, schools, courts, and local public security forces.