

Predictors of Rape among Never-Married Young Females in Rural and Urban Communities in Nigeria

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Abstract

Electronic and print media have reported increased incidences of rape among different age groups. Never-married young females appear to be the main targets of this social menace. What predisposing factors make never-married young females a significant target in the growing epidemic of rape in Nigeria? This study seeks to provide an answer. A cross-sectional survey was conducted among young women randomly selected across Nigeria. Descriptive statistical tools and logistic regression were used to analyze the survey data using SPSS 26. The data were obtained from a subsample of 751 never-married females (10 years and older) surveyed in a larger study conducted in mid-2022. The findings suggest that the national incidence of rape among the study population is 19.2%. The rural-urban differences revealed that rape incidence among never-married females is higher in urban communities than in rural communities. Ethnicity, substance use, and childhood family background were significantly associated with rape incidence ($p < 0.05$). Therefore, advocacy will likely be impactful if exhilarated child protection laws and aggressive campaigns against substance use, especially among young females are considered in its design and implementation.

Keywords: Rape, never-married, young females, Nigeria

Introduction

Rape, as a form of sexual violence, is a major public health problem and violation of women's human rights. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines rape as a form of sexual violence that involves the use of physical force or forced penetration into the vulva or anus with a penis, other body parts, or an object (WHO, 2022). Rape is a form of sexual violence with severe psychological, social, moral, health, and economic consequences for both the victims and society (Ogunwale et al., 2019; Wusu, 2015). In view of its implications for individuals who are exposed to it and society, it could be considered the highest level of violence against humans (Adeleke et al., 2019). Not surprisingly, eradicating all forms of violence (rape inclusive) against women is part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG Goal 5, Target 2).

Globally, at least one in four girls and one in ten boys experience sexual violence before turning 18 years old (Adamu, 2020). The Nigerian

Demography and Health Survey (NDHS) found that 8.5% of women aged 15-49 years in urban areas and 9.7% in rural areas experienced sexual assault (National Population Commission [NPC] and NCF International, 2019). Additionally, the Nigerian Police Force (NPF) reported 717 rape cases from January to May 2020 (Adamu, 2020), indicating that the rate of rape may be rising in Nigeria. People commonly attribute rape among adolescents and young adults to indecent dressing, promiscuity, and alcohol or drug use, on the streets of Nigeria. These are common-sense predictors that lack an empirical basis. It is therefore important to examine the attributors using empirical data. Hence, the significance of this study cannot be overemphasized.

Studies have reported that cultism, rituals, social media influence, erroneous beliefs, violent environments, and family structures are factors for a new wave of rape (Agbo, 2019; Aruna, 2018; Idoko et al., 2020). This contradicts

Sulaiman's (2015) and Aruna's (2018) arguments that reporting would facilitate the prosecution of assaults and serve as a deterrent to others, as underreporting of rape cases has been a silent factor sustaining this menace. Based on recent observations, in most social settings, a high prevalence of rape occurs mostly among young females between the ages of 15 and 24 years and among the very young in the age group of 14 years and below. These appear to be the main targets of this epidemic (Ogunwale et al., 2019).

An important question begging for empirical evidence is, what are the factors that make young females susceptible to sexual assault? This study examined the predictors of rape among never-married young females in rural and urban communities to answer this question. In this regard, the objective of this analysis was to examine the cultural, economic, demographic, and social forces influencing the new wave of rape incidence among never-married young females in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This study was hinged on two theoretical underpinnings: self-control theory and feminist theory. In 1990, Gottfredson and Hirschi posited in the context of self-control theory that rape is an outcome of an uncontrollable male sex drive (Polaschek & Ward, 2002). The theorists opined that male sexual urge is barely controllable, and men are sometimes not responsible for their rape actions. Proponents of this theory suggest that men's sexual energy is very difficult to control and that women play an important role in this loss of control. When women reject sexual advances of men who struggle to maintain control over their sexual desire and who have to relieve their sexual tension, they facilitate the occurrence of rape (Akinlusi et al., 2014; Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2010). Thus, men with low self-control are likely to be rapist because they are usually interested in immediate sexual gratification. Self-control theory also suggests that crime is easy, exciting, requires little skill, and victims are always at the receiving end of pain, agony, and psychological degradation. A man

who cannot control his sexual gratification will be more impulsive, adventurous, self-centered, and more likely to participate in rape because of perceived benefits (Polaschek & Ward, 2002).

To complement the self-control theory, the feminist theory was used. The feminist view of rape is a continuum, from liberal to radical thought. The former views rape as an assault on women's autonomy that is gender-neutral, while the latter regards rape as an offshoot of the principles and doctrines of patriarchy. The theory regards rape as a means by which men exert dominance, intimidate, exploit women and reinforce women's oppression. This perspective is rooted in the unequal power relations between men and women in society (Musingafi et al., 2021). Feminist theory asserts that patriarchal norms in operation in society indirectly condone violence against women by promoting aggressive behaviors, including unwanted sexual advances by men and submissive behavior by women, through the process of socialization (McPaul, 2015; Shaw, 2017). They maintain that rape is instigated by the desire for power and control over women, and patriarchy is the expression of cultural values (Bahlieda, 2015).

Young females are prone to rebuff initial advances from members of the opposite sex, which is a sufficient trigger for men with uncontrollable sexual urges and thirst for power and control over women to have their way forcefully. Therefore, the theories suggest that the upsurge in sexual molestation cases among never-married young females could be a function of an increase in the proportion of men with little control over their sexual urges in rural and urban communities in Nigeria, coupled with norms of unequal power relations between men and women in a patriarchal society. The rise in rape cases in rural and urban communities may be due to an increase in women rejecting the sexual advances of men with low self-control who are always scouting for easy prey to satisfy their sexual urge and facilitated by the desire to exert masculine power and dominance over females. Therefore, the general premise of this study is that the preponderance of men upholding the ideals of

patriarchy and fueled by low self-control are contributing factors that promote rape among never-married young females in rural and urban communities of Nigeria.

Methodology

The data analyzed in this study were obtained from a national cross-sectional survey conducted in June and July 2022 among 3,023 randomly selected females in Nigeria. However, this analysis was based on 751 never-married females aged 10-24 years. The study employed a cross-sectional survey design using a multistage sampling approach because a reliable sampling frame was absent. The multistage sampling procedure involved random selection of two states from each of the six geopolitical zones (Kogi, Benue, Gombe, Taraba, Zamfara, Jigawa, Anambra, Ebonyi, Bayelsa, Rivers, Ogun and Ondo States).

In each state, one rural and one urban Local Government Area (LGA) were randomly selected. Subsequently, 5% of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) updated list of wards was randomly selected for each chosen LGA. In addition, 5% of the streets/villages in each ward were randomly selected, while 5% of the houses on the chosen streets/villages were selected systematically. The final stage involved the random selection of one household from the selected houses and identification of an eligible respondent for an interview. After obtaining verbal consent (from parents and caregivers for minors and others directly), research assistants (RAs) administered an online questionnaire (Questionnaire Easily Done, QED) to the selected participants face-to-face. They uploaded the completed questionnaires to the QED server.

Responses were downloaded in Excel and exported to the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26 for analysis. Various data cleaning processes were applied to prepare the data for univariate and multivariate analyses. In this case, the responses of young never-married females (10-24 years old) were extracted for

analysis. We then applied descriptive statistical tools and a logistic regression technique to the analyses.

In line with the focus of the analysis, the incidence of rape was the dependent variable. In the questionnaire, we measured rape using two questions: *“Was there any sexual encounter without your consent in the last two years? (Yes/No).”* The second question, *“Was it under any of the following conditions?” (none, drugged you, physically forced you, threatened to harm you, threatened to kill you, other specify).* Rape experience among never-married females was computed by combining a ‘Yes’ response to the first question and any of *“drugged you, physically forced you, threatened to harm you, threatened to kill”* response to the second question was coded *“Yes = 1” (Yes response to the first question plus “drugged you, physically forced you, threatened to harm you, threatened to kill” response to the second question) and No = 0 (No to the first question).*

The univariate analysis used descriptive statistical methods to describe the respondents’ background characteristics and all variables included in the analysis. It is also important to note that the independent variables were chosen based on existing literature. Multivariate analysis employed logistic regression to examine the data and develop a model to identify the key predictors of rape within the study sample.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethical Committee of the Lagos State University College of Medicine, Ikeja (LREC/06/10/1865) before the commencement of fieldwork. Also, informed consent was obtained from each potential study participant before they were recruited. Respondents were informed that they had the liberty to withdraw from the study at any point they desired. In particular, permissions and informed consent for never-married young females below 18 years of age were obtained from their parents or caregivers before proceeding.

Results

Table 1 presents the percentage distribution of respondents according to the selected socio-demographic characteristics and variables involved in further analysis. The majority (46.5%) of respondents were aged 20-24 years. More than half (55.0%) of the respondents were urban residents. Nearly one-third (38.7%) of the respondents belonged to ethnic groups other than the three prominent ethnic groups in Nigeria. About half (51.4%) were identified as non-Catholic Christian faith. The level of religiosity was progressive among respondents; the majority attended religious services more than once a week (65.6%). Likewise, the majority (71.4%) of the respondents had senior secondary school education and 73.9% were unemployed.

The majority (76.4%) of the young females sampled did not use any substance. A considerable proportion of the respondents (29.6%) lived in a two-bedroom apartment. Also, a large proportion of the respondents (75.0%) reported heterosexual sexual orientation. Most respondents (67.2%) stated that their clothing choice was driven by their desire to be well covered, while 17.3% indicated that they dressed to appear attractive or inviting. Regarding the respondents' family background, monogamy was the predominant form (68.7%) in the sample, and the majority grew up with both parents during their childhood. In addition, between 1% and 24% reported one form of childhood sexual molestation or the other. Unconsented touch of the breast was the most popular (23.8%), and the majority (80.8%) had no rape experience in the last two years. A large majority (78.4%) of respondents who experienced rape two years before the survey reported the act as forceful.

Table 1: Sociodemographic Characteristics of Respondents

Characteristics	N	(%)
Age		
10-14 years	92	12.3
15-19 years	310	41.3
20-24 years	349	46.5
Total	751	100
Area of Residence		
Rural	338	45.0
Urban	413	55.0
Total	751	100
Ethnic Group		
Hausa	187	24.9
Igbo	128	17.0
Yoruba	145	19.3
Minority Group	291	38.7
Total	751	100
Religious Affiliation		
Catholic Christians	128	17.0
Non-Catholic Christians	386	51.4
Islam	233	31.0
Others	4	0.5
Total	751	100
Religiosity (Attendance of Religious activities)		
Once a week	259	34.5
Twice a week	225	30.0
Thrice or more a week	267	35.6
Total	751	100
Educational Qualification		
No formal Education	22	2.9
Primary Education	102	13.6
Senior Secondary	536	71.4
Tertiary	91	12.1
Total	751	100
Employment Status		
No	555	73.9
Yes	196	26.1
Total	751	100
Substance Use		
None	574	76.4
Alcoholic drinks	110	14.6
Gum	61	8.1
Others	6	0.8
Total	751	100
Accommodation type		
A room	211	28.1
A room self-contained	133	17.7
Two bedrooms apartment	222	29.6
Three or more bedrooms apartment	18	2.8
Duplex	14	1.9
Total	751	100
Sexual Orientation		
None	140	18.6
Heterosexual relationships	563	75.0
Same sex relationships	20	2.7
Both heterosexual and same sex relationships	28	3.7
Total	751	100
Driver of dressing mode		
Be well covered	505	67.2
Be attractive or inviting	130	17.3
Tradition	47	6.3
Visibility of body structure	36	4.8
Weather	25	3.3
Others	8	1.1
Total	751	100

Childhood Family Background		
Monogamy	516	68.7
Polygyny	220	29.3
Others	15	2.0
Total	751	100
Lived with Who Growing up		
Both Parents	485	64.6
Single Parent	147	19.6
Grandparent	49	6.5
Others	70	9.3
Total	751	100
Childhood Sexual Abuse		
None	428	57.0
My breast was touched	179	23.8
I was kissed emotionally	57	7.6
I was fingered	50	6.6
Penis was inserted into my vagina	25	3.3
Penis was inserted into my anus	1	0.1
Others	11	1.5
Total	751	100
Rape Experience		
No	607	80.8
Yes	144	19.2
Total	751	100
Rape Encounter under which condition		
I was drugged	30	20.8
Physically forced me	80	55.6
Yielded because he threatened to harm me	27	18.8
Yielded because he threatened to kill me	7	4
Total	144	100

Figure 1 illustrates the prevalence of rape within the sample: 19.2% nationwide, 18.6% in rural communities, and 19.6% in urban areas.

Figure 1: *Percentage Distribution of Rape Experience among Never-Married Young Females in Nigeria*

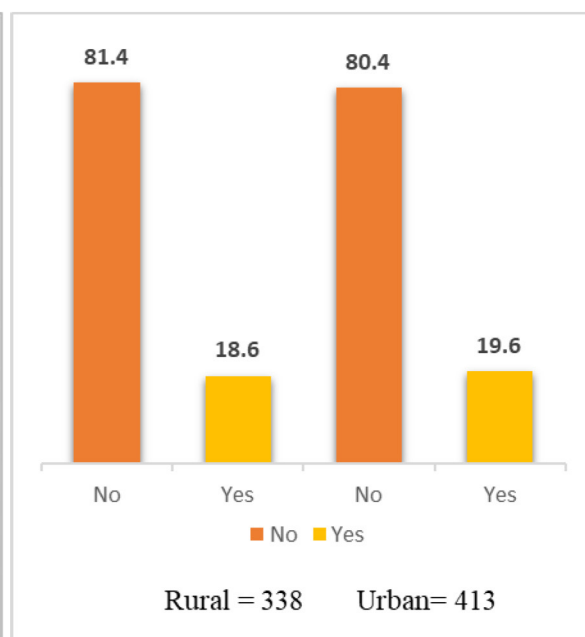
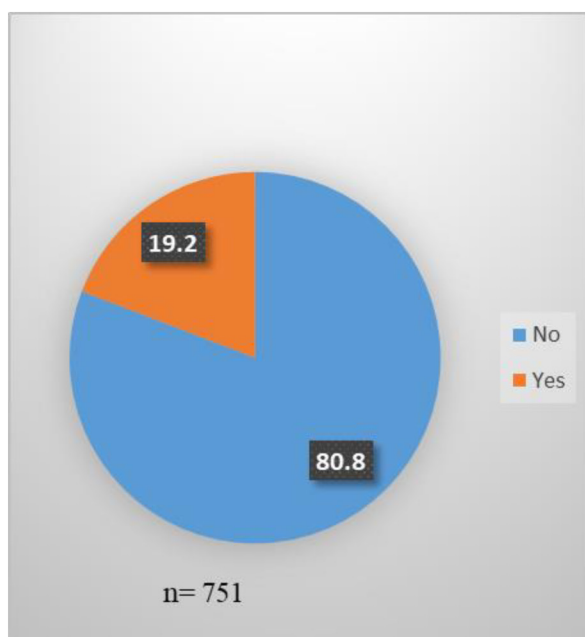


Table 2 presents the influence of socio-economic factors on the likelihood of rape experience in the study sample in the two years preceding the survey. Three socioeconomic factors significantly predicted rape experiences in the study sample. The odds ratios suggest that ethnicity, childhood family background, and substance use significantly predicted rape experience among never-married young females. Specifically, young females of the Igbo and Yoruba ethnic groups were three times more likely to have experienced rape. In contrast, minority ethnic groups were twice as likely to have experienced rape ($p < 0.01$) compared to their counterparts in the Hausa/Fulani ethnic group. Also, young females who had a polygamous childhood family situation were almost twice as likely to experience rape relative to those who grew up in a monogamous family situation ($p < 0.05$).

Conversely, young females who used substances were almost twice as likely to have been victims of rape when compared with their colleagues who did not use any substance ($p < 0.05$). The model's goodness-of-fit test yielded a significant statistic (0.061), implying support for the model's good fit. Additionally, the model's pseudo-R Square (0.073) suggests that approximately 7.3% of rape experience is accounted for by the model.

Table 2: *Odds Ratios from Logistic Regression on Sociodemographic Factors and Rape Experience*

Characteristics	Rape in the last two years
Place of residence	
Rural (r)	-
Urban	1.02 (0.68-1.51)
Current Age	1.01 (0.94-1.07)
Ethnic Group	
Hausa (r)	-
Igbo	3.09 (1.51-6.31)**
Yoruba	3.60 (1.84-7.06)***
Minority Group	2.87 (1.55-5.33)**
Childhood Family Background	
Monogamy (r)	-
Polygyny	1.64 (1.07-2.52)*
Others	2.02 (0.56-7.26)
Employment Status	
No (r)	-
Yes	0.29 (0.79-0.50)
Use of Substance	
No (r)	-
Yes	1.71 (1.1-2.64)*
Nature of accommodation	
A room (r)	-
A room self- contained	1.17 (0.68-2.01)
Two bedrooms apartment	0.92 (0.56-1.52)
Three or more bedrooms apartment	0.66 (0.36-1.20)
Educational Qualification	
No formal Education (r)	-
Primary Education	0.47 (0.15-1.45)
Senior Secondary	0.45 (0.16-1.29)
Tertiary	0.53 (0.16-1.75)
Living with who growing up	
Both parents (r)	-
Single parent	1.60 (0.99-2.59)
Grandparent	1.84 (0.89-3.81)
Others	1.26 (0.67-2.39)
Model chi-square	56.641***
The Cox & Snell R Square	0.073
Nagelkerke R Square	0.116
Hosmer and Lemeshow test	14.909 (0.061)

*Significant at $P<0.05$; **Significant at $P<0.01$; ***Significant at $P<0.001$

Discussion

This study examined the factors predisposing never-married young females to rape in Nigeria within self-control and feminist theoretical frameworks. The findings suggest that rape is a serious issue in Nigeria. Young females lead the cart as rape victims, as previously reported (Folayan et al., 2014; National Popu-

lation Commission NPC and NCF International, 2019; Sulaiman et al., 2024). Unfortunately, many of these cases are often unreported and, thus, unpunished (Idoko et al., 2020; Selengia et al., 2020;). Previous studies have indicated that victims in urban residential areas were more likely to experience rape than their counterparts in rural areas in Nigeria, thus suggesting

that place of residence is a significant factor in exposure to rape (Adeleke et al., 2019; Ajah et al., 2022).

However, in this study, only the descriptive data supported this position; the multivariate analysis did not identify area of residence as a significant predictor of rape after controlling for other factors among never-married young females in Nigeria. Differences in the study population, sample size, and age range of respondents in previous studies compared to this study could explain the variance. The age of the study participants was found to be a significant predictor of rape incidence. This could be attributed to the belief that younger females are easy prey and can be lured and misled easily (Ajah et al., 2022; Alkan & Tekmanli, 2021; Amole et al., 2021; Kunnuji & Esiet, 2015). A plausible explanation for this finding could be attributed to the increased vulnerability and gullibility of younger females, thereby making them easy targets for men seeking easy means of sexual gratification and exploitation. However, this study did not establish any striking influence of age on being a rape victim.

Ethnicity was also found to significantly predict rape experience among never-married young females in Nigeria, especially among the Yoruba, Igbo, and minority ethnic groups in Nigeria. Thus, never-married young females from the Hausa/Fulani ethnic group in Nigeria face a limited risk of experiencing rape. This could be related to the culture of early marriage and entry into sexual relationships. Thus, this study reaffirms that cultural factors contribute greatly to the incidence of rape among females in Nigeria (Amole et al., 2021; Ogunwale et al., 2019). In addition, the dataset revealed a significant association between being a rape victim and the use of a substance. This finding suggests that substance use by young females makes them susceptible to rape as it hinders them from effective reasoning and avoiding compromising situations. This finding corroborates previous studies that have reported substance use as a risk factor for rape among young females (Ajayi et al., 2021; Gezahegn et al., 2021).

Furthermore, childhood family background was found to be a significant predictor of sexual assault among never-married young females. Specifically, females who grew up in polygamous families were more likely to be victims of rape than their counterparts in monogamous families. This finding suggests that a monogamous family setting serves as a shield against rape among young women. This finding is consistent with those of Kunnuji and Esiet (2015) and Amole et al. (2021), who reported living arrangements as an index of rape among young females. However, the analysis found no association between rape experience among never-married young females in Nigeria and education level, employment status, type of accommodation, and living arrangement, as suggested by some earlier studies. Differences in samples, scope, sociocultural environments, and period of data collection could account for the variations in findings between this study and previous studies.

This analysis is limited in a few ways. First, the analysis does not imply a cause-and-effect relationship between predictors and rape experience among never-married young females, and the interpretation should be limited to the test of association. Second, the biases associated with self-reporting could have influenced the data analyzed, particularly the experience of rape reported by the sampled females. Some females might have underreported due to stigma, underestimated their experiences, or exaggerated them.

Conclusion

Despite the limitations expressed above, this study has established that rape among never-married young females is higher in urban communities than in rural communities. It has also demonstrated that ethnicity, substance use, and childhood family background are statistically significant predictors of rape among never-married young females in Nigeria. Therefore, the data analysis confirmed the study hypothesis that cultural, demographic, and social forces significantly influence the incidence of rape among never-married young females in

Nigeria. Obviously, these significant predictors account for young females' vulnerability to rape. Relevant government agencies seeking to curb rape incidences among young females should generate social policies capable of addressing the influencers identified in this study based on previous studies on rape. In addition, advocacy activities among civil society organizations should focus on engaging the significant influencers towards reorienting them in favor of reducing the incidence of all kinds of rape endangering the self-dignity, health, and socio-economic future of young females in Nigeria. Finally, child protection laws and aggressive campaigns against substance use, especially among young females, must be considered in their design and implementation.

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Conflicts of interest: None

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