

# School-Based Counseling Interventions for the Prevention and Recovery of Girl-Child Sexual Abuse in South-South Nigeria

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## Abstract

Girl-child sexual abuse (GCSA) remains a pervasive human rights and public health challenge in South-South Nigeria, with profound implications for girls' psychosocial, emotional, and academic development. Although policy frameworks exist, the school environment continues to demonstrate limited capacity for abuse prevention and trauma recovery support. This study investigated the effectiveness of school-based counseling interventions in preventing GCSA and facilitating emotional recovery among victims. A quantitative descriptive survey design was adopted, involving 370 participants comprising 300 female students, 40 school counselors, and 30 teachers across secondary schools in Rivers, Akwa Ibom, and Bayelsa States. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and inferential tests, including chi-square, independent samples t-test, and one-way ANOVA. Findings revealed a high prevalence of GCSA (37%), with only 14% of cases reported, reflecting persistent stigma and weak institutional response. Results further showed that 62% of schools lacked professional counselors, while preventive awareness programs were insufficient. Inferential analysis demonstrated that the presence of structured counseling services significantly influenced abuse-prevention awareness ( $\chi^2 = 17.99, p < .001$ ) and victim recovery ( $t(298) = 2.67, p = .008; F(2, 297) = 4.12, p = .018$ ). Institutional and sociocultural barriers also significantly constrained counseling effectiveness ( $F(4, 365) = 3.74, p = .011$ ). The study concludes that school-based counseling interventions hold substantial potential for combating GCSA but remain underutilized due to inadequate professional capacity and cultural silence. It recommends the mandatory deployment of certified counselors, integration of trauma-informed abuse-prevention modules into school

curricula, establishment of confidential reporting structures, and strengthening of inter-agency partnerships to enhance protection and recovery support for the girl-child in South-South Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Girl-child, sexual abuse, school-based counseling, prevention, recovery, South-South Nigeria

## Introduction

Girl-child sexual abuse remains a global human rights violation with profound psychological, emotional, and educational implications. According to the American Psychological Association (2018), sexual abuse involves coercive or exploitative sexual activity imposed by a person in a position of power or authority. Such abuse may occur through physical contact, threats, manipulation, or forced exposure to sexual content (Ajayi & Olawuyi, 2016). Global evidence indicates that many girls experience at least one form of sexual violence before adulthood, often resulting in secrecy, trauma, and long-term adjustment difficulties (Miller, Chiang, & Hollish, 2016).

In Nigeria, the burden of girl-child sexual abuse is heightened by cultural silence, gender inequality, and weak protective structures. National reports suggest that a significant number of girls encounter unwanted sexual touching, coercion, attempted rape, or rape during childhood, frequently perpetrated by trusted individuals (Women's Aid Organization, 2018; Ajuwon, 2021). The South-South region presents additional risk factors due to socio-economic instability, patriarchal social norms, and limited institutional response mechanisms.

Schools are critical settings for prevention and early intervention, given their role in child development and supervision. However,

despite this strategic position, counseling structures in many Nigerian secondary schools remain weak, under-resourced, or absent (Ajuwon, 2021). Effective school-based counseling is essential for awareness creation, early detection, confidential reporting, and trauma recovery support. Yet, limited availability of trained counselors and inadequate safeguarding policies continue to hinder coordinated responses to girl-child sexual abuse.

This study therefore examines school-based counseling interventions for the prevention and recovery of girl-child sexual abuse in South-South Nigeria. The study specifically investigates the prevalence of abuse, school counseling capacity, and the effectiveness of counseling-based responses in supporting survivors within secondary school settings.

### Statement of the Problem

Girl-child sexual abuse remains a persistent and deeply troubling challenge in Nigeria, despite the existence of legal and policy frameworks intended to safeguard children. In the South-South geopolitical zone, the problem is particularly acute due to entrenched socio-cultural silence, economic vulnerability, and weak school-based safeguarding structures. Recent evidence suggests that many incidents of sexual abuse involving school-aged girls in the region occur within familiar environments and go unreported due to fear, shame, and limited trust in institutional response systems (Edeh & Eze, 2022; UNICEF, 2021). Consequently, affected learners often experience psychological distress, trauma symptoms, absenteeism, academic withdrawal, and, in severe cases, school dropout.

Although schools are positioned to serve as protective environments for early identification, reporting, and psychosocial recovery, existing practices in the South-South indicate significant gaps. Many secondary schools lack qualified professional counselors, structured prevention programs, and confidential reporting mechanisms. Where counseling units exist, they are frequently under-resourced, poorly coordinated, or limited to routine guidance functions without trauma-informed interventions. Moreover, cultural resistance to open discussion about sexual abuse, coupled with inadequate monitoring and weak enforcement of child-

protection policies, further constrains schools' capacity to respond effectively.

The implication is that vulnerable girls in South-South Nigeria remain exposed to sexual victimization without adequate support systems for prevention or recovery. There is therefore a pressing need to empirically assess the extent and nature of school-based counseling interventions in the region, with a view to determining their effectiveness in addressing girl-child sexual abuse. This study addresses this gap by examining counseling availability, preventive education practices, disclosure pathways, and recovery support services in secondary schools across the South-South zone using a quantitative research approach.

### Objectives of the Study

The study specifically sought to:

1. Determine the prevalence and patterns of girl-child sexual abuse in secondary schools in South-South Nigeria.
2. Examine school-based counseling strategies currently employed for the prevention of girl-child sexual abuse in South-South Nigeria.
3. Assess the effectiveness of school-based counseling interventions in facilitating psychological and academic recovery among victims of girl-child sexual abuse.
4. Identify institutional, cultural, and systemic barriers affecting the implementation of school-based counseling interventions in secondary schools in South-South Nigeria.

### Research Questions

The study were guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the prevalence and pattern of girl-child sexual abuse in secondary schools in South-South Nigeria?
2. What school-based counseling strategies are currently implemented for the prevention of girl-child sexual abuse in South-South Nigeria?
3. How effective are school-based counseling services in facilitating recovery among victims of girl-child sexual abuse in South-South Nigeria?
4. What institutional, cultural, and systemic factors hinder the implementation of school-based counseling interventions in secondary schools in South-South Nigeria?

## Hypotheses

H<sub>01</sub>: There is no significant prevalence of girl-child sexual abuse among secondary school students in South-South Nigeria.

H<sub>02</sub>: There is no significant relationship between school-based counseling strategies and the prevention of girl-child sexual abuse in secondary schools in South-South Nigeria.

H<sub>03</sub>: School-based counseling interventions have no significant effect on the psychological and academic recovery of sexually abused school girls in South-South Nigeria.

H<sub>04</sub>: Institutional, cultural, and systemic factors do not significantly hinder the implementation of school-based counseling interventions in secondary schools in South-South Nigeria.

## Literature Review

### Girl-Child Sexual Abuse

Girl-child sexual abuse represents a critical violation of human dignity and remains a pervasive concern in contemporary societies. Sexual abuse broadly refers to any non-consensual sexual act, behaviour, or exploitation directed toward an individual, encompassing physical, verbal, and emotional forms (Green-Stuart, 2019). This conduct may involve rape, molestation, sexual harassment, incest, indecent exposure, and other coercive sexual activities. It is not limited by gender, age, culture, religion, or socio-economic status, and perpetrators may include males or females, whether acting individually or collectively (Green-Stuart, 2019). Sexual abuse is fundamentally an act of control, humiliation, and exploitation rather than a spontaneous expression of sexual desire (WHO, 2018).

When such acts target young females, they are described as girl-child sexual abuse. According to Adedeji, Ezenagu, and Ajepe (2019), girl-child sexual abuse occurs when a female child is coerced, deceived, or forced into sexual activities by an adult or older individual in a position of power. Acts include sexual touching, exposure to pornography, voyeurism, indecent exposure, and attempts at oral, anal, or vaginal penetration. Victims endure severe physical, emotional, psychological, and social consequences, often experiencing trauma, shame, depression, and difficulty reintegrating socially (Green-Stuart, 2019). The inability to disclose abuse due to

fear, stigma, or cultural silence exacerbates the trauma and prolongs emotional distress.

Evidence from Nigeria indicates growing concern regarding the prevalence of sexual violence against the girl-child. Onyiye (2018) reports alarming rates of defilement across several states, with media accounts documenting frequent cases of child sexual exploitation, particularly in regions such as Lagos, Ogun, and Oyo. Incidents commonly involve familiar individuals such as family members, caregivers, and trusted community figures, demonstrating a troubling breach of trust. Although both male and female children may experience sexual abuse, the girl-child is disproportionately affected due to societal power structures, patriarchy, and gender-based vulnerability (Ijaiye, 2013).

The stigma associated with reporting sexual abuse, coupled with cultural pressure to remain silent, presents a major barrier to justice and recovery. Many families avoid disclosure to protect social reputation, thereby enabling impunity and perpetuating abuse (Onyiye, 2018). As observed by WHO (2022), girl-child sexual abuse encompasses a spectrum of exploitative acts committed against girls below the age of 18, often occurring within trusted environments and sometimes within educational contexts.

### School-Based Counseling Interventions

School counseling is a structured support system that aids prevention and early intervention. Counselors create safe spaces, conduct awareness sessions, and facilitate reporting (Olugbenga, 2021). School-based counseling interventions represent structured psychological and educational services embedded within school systems to support student well-being, prevent abuse, and respond to trauma-related concerns. In contemporary education systems, these interventions are increasingly recognized as a fundamental component of student protection and mental health promotion, particularly in contexts where children face heightened vulnerability to sexual abuse and exploitation (Adekeye et al., 2022; Otu & Adedokun, 2023). The school environment provides a strategic platform for early identification, structured support, and coordinated protection due to daily contact between learners and school personnel.

Empirical literature demonstrates that preventive counseling programs constitute the

foundation of school-based child-protection efforts. Such programs frequently include age-appropriate sexuality education, assertiveness training, psychoeducation on abuse recognition, and safe-reporting mechanisms. Studies across Sub-Saharan Africa indicate that preventive counseling interventions significantly enhance students' knowledge of abuse indicators, improve confidence to disclose threats, and strengthen personal safety skills (Ogunyemi & Falaye, 2021; UNESCO, 2022). Similarly, evidence from Nigerian schools suggests that learners who participate in structured guidance and counseling programs demonstrate higher vigilance and reduced susceptibility to sexual grooming (Maduekwe & Nwosu, 2023).

In addition to prevention, early detection mechanisms form a critical element of effective school-based interventions. Research highlights the importance of systematic observation, confidential reporting channels, and counselor-teacher collaboration in identifying early emotional distress, behavioral withdrawal, or sudden academic decline associated with sexual trauma (Ehimare & Omiegbe, 2020; Taiwo & Salisu, 2023). UNICEF (2023) further reports that schools that institutionalize behavioral screening protocols and student protection committees record earlier case identification and more rapid psychosocial intervention.

Furthermore, therapeutic counseling interventions remain central to supporting survivors of sexual abuse within school settings. Trauma-informed counseling, cognitive restructuring support, emotional stabilization sessions, and empowerment-based interventions have been shown to improve psychological functioning, restore self-esteem, and facilitate academic reintegration among affected learners (Afolabi & Ipaye, 2022; Eze & Okolie, 2024). Nigerian studies also confirm that structured school counseling programs significantly reduce trauma responses and support resilience among adolescent girls who have experienced sexual victimization (Idowu et al., 2021).

School-based counseling also extends to referral and inter-agency collaboration, aligning with global best practices. Effective programs integrate school counselors with medical personnel, social welfare departments, child-protection units, and legal authorities to ensure comprehensive support for survivors

(Olayinka & Akinboye, 2022; CDC, 2023). This multi-layered approach reflects ecological protection models and reinforces the role of schools as primary entry points for child safety interventions.

Despite these benefits, scholars consistently report substantial implementation constraints in developing contexts. Common barriers include shortage of trained counselors, high counselor-student ratios, limited institutional support, weak enforcement of child-protection policies, and entrenched socio-cultural silence surrounding sexual abuse (Ibrahim & Mohammed, 2022; Uwem & Akpan, 2024). In Nigeria, insufficient government funding for counseling services, absence of standardized trauma-care protocols, and lack of consistent professional development for school counselors remain major barriers to successful intervention (Adeniran & Ekpo, 2023). These challenges limit the preventive and rehabilitative potential of school counseling services and expose female students to heightened risk.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in Trauma Theory by Herman (1992) and the Ecological Systems Theory by Bronfenbrenner (1979), both of which jointly provide a comprehensive foundation for understanding girl-child sexual abuse and the role of school-based counseling in prevention and recovery. Trauma Theory explains that sexual abuse represents a severe psychological violation that disrupts an individual's emotional stability, cognitive functioning, sense of safety, and interpersonal trust. According to Herman (1992), sexual trauma triggers long-term emotional dysregulation, anxiety, fear, guilt, withdrawal, and difficulties with concentration, all of which undermine academic engagement and psychological wellbeing. Recovery from such trauma requires a structured and supportive process emphasizing safety, emotional stabilization, remembrance of the abuse experience, and reconnection with self and community. Within this context, school-based counseling becomes a critical intervention, as it provides a safe, confidential, and structured therapeutic environment where victims can receive trauma-informed support to rebuild confidence, regain emotional balance, and reintegrate into learning and social activities.

Complementing this perspective, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory emphasizes that child behaviour, wellbeing, and vulnerability to abuse are shaped by multiple interacting systems including the family, school, peer group, community, and wider cultural and institutional structures. This theoretical lens positions girl-child sexual abuse not merely as an individual experience but as a social issue influenced by broader ecological factors such as power dynamics, cultural silence surrounding sexual matters, patriarchal norms, inadequate parental supervision, weak school protection systems, and ineffective child-rights enforcement mechanisms. In the South-South region of Nigeria, socio-economic instability, community tolerance for silence around abuse, and limited access to trained school counselors exacerbate exposure to sexual victimization and hinder timely reporting and support.

Taken together, Trauma Theory and Ecological Systems Theory provide a dual explanatory basis for this study. While Trauma Theory elucidates the emotional and psychological harm caused by sexual abuse and the importance of trauma-sensitive school counseling for recovery, Ecological Systems Theory highlights the multi-layered environmental influences that contribute to abuse risk and determine the effectiveness of counseling interventions. The integration of these theories therefore reinforces the study's focus on assessing the availability, capacity, and effectiveness of school-based counseling services in preventing and responding to girl-child sexual abuse within the multi-contextual realities of South-South Nigeria.

### Methodology

This study employed a descriptive survey design to generate quantitative evidence on the prevalence and patterns of girl-child sexual abuse as well as the availability, use, and effectiveness of school-based counseling interventions in secondary schools across Rivers, Akwa Ibom, and Bayelsa States in South-South Nigeria. The target population comprised female students, teachers, and school counselors in public secondary schools. Using stratified random sampling to ensure proportional representation by state, senatorial district, and school type, a total of 370 respondents participated (300 female students, 40 school counselors, and 30 teachers). Data

were collected with a researcher-developed instrument titled the School-Based Counseling and Girl-Child Sexual Abuse Questionnaire (SCGCSAQ). The questionnaire contained four sections—demographic characteristics; prevalence and nature of abuse; preventive counseling strategies; and recovery support and service utilization—organized primarily on categorical items and four-point Likert-type scales for perceptions of prevention and recovery effectiveness. Content validity was established through expert review by three academics in counseling psychology and educational measurement, and internal consistency reliability yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87, indicating satisfactory scale coherence for inferential analysis. Administration was conducted in person by trained research assistants following approval from relevant education authorities. Prospective participants received information sheets and assurances of anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation; no personally identifying information was collected, and sensitive items were phrased to minimize distress.

In line with the four null hypotheses guiding the study, data analysis combined descriptive statistics with a set of complementary inferential procedures suited to the scale of measurement and the structure of the variables. First, chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) tests of independence were specified for hypotheses examining associations among categorical variables, notably the relationship between the presence of professional counselors and students' awareness of abuse-prevention content, the association between access to counseling services and dichotomized recovery status, and the distribution of reported implementation barriers across schools. Second, because the study also measured perceived counseling effectiveness on Likert-type scales and compared these mean scores across groups, additional parametric tests were justified: independent-samples t-tests were planned for two-group contrasts (e.g., schools with vs. without counselors; students with vs. without prior counseling access), while one-way ANOVA was specified for multi-group comparisons where relevant (e.g., differences across the three states or by school type). Where ANOVA indicated significance, Tukey's HSD post hoc tests were planned to localize mean

differences. To preserve rigor, standard assumptions for t-tests and ANOVA (normality of residuals and homogeneity of variances) were to be examined using Shapiro–Wilk and Levene’s tests respectively; if assumptions were violated, non-parametric analogues (Mann–Whitney U for two groups; Kruskal–Wallis H for three or more groups) were to be applied with appropriate effect sizes. For chi-square analyses, expected cell counts were checked; Fisher’s exact test was to be substituted where sparse cells arose. Across all hypothesis tests, statistical significance was set at  $\alpha = .05$ . Effect sizes were to be reported alongside p-values—Cramér’s V for  $\chi^2$ , Cohen’s d for t-tests, and eta-squared ( $\eta^2$ ) for ANOVA—to aid substantive interpretation beyond statistical

significance. Missing data were handled using listwise deletion when item nonresponse was below 5%; if any item exceeded that threshold, sensitivity checks with pairwise deletion were planned to verify stability of results. All

analyses were conducted in SPSS, with results organized to address the prevalence objective, prevention strategies, recovery effectiveness, and barriers in a manner consistent with the four null hypotheses and the South-South context of the study.

### Data Analysis and Results

**Table 1:Prevalence and Nature of Girl-Child Sexual Abuse (GCSA)**

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Students who experienced sexual abuse	111	37.0
Students aware of a peer who was abused	132	44.0
Abuse reported to school authority	42	14.0
Abuse unreported due to fear or stigma	258	86.0

The results in Table 1 show that 37% of the respondents reported personal experience of sexual abuse, while 44% had knowledge of peers who had been victimized. Although this indicates substantial exposure to sexual abuse among school-aged girls in the region, only 14% of incidents were formally reported to school authorities. Conversely, 86% remained undisclosed due to fear, stigma, and perceived institutional silence. This pattern demonstrates

a marked under-reporting culture and highlights the social and psychological barriers that limit disclosure and help-seeking behaviours among victims. The prevalence indices form a strong empirical basis for assessing the protective role of school-based counseling interventions.

**Table 2:Availability and Functionality of School-Based Counseling Services**

Counseling Indicator	Yes (%)	No (%)
Presence of professional counselor	38	62
Existence of counseling office	42	58
Access to counseling services	34	66
Abuse prevention programs	52	48

The analysis in Table 2 indicates that 62% of schools lack professional counselors, while 58% do not have a functional counseling office. Only 34% of respondents had ever accessed counseling services, suggesting limited availability and utilization. Although 52% of schools reported implementing some form of abuse-prevention education, the absence of properly staffed and functional

counseling structures raises concerns regarding program quality, coverage, and sustainability. These findings align with national reports highlighting persistent gaps in school-based psychosocial support systems.

**Table 3:Effectiveness of Counseling Interventions**

Counseling Function	Mean	Remark
Counseling helps identify at-risk students	2.41	Ineffective
Counseling assists victims to recover emotionally	2.56	Moderately effective
Counseling promotes awareness of abuse	2.33	Ineffective
Counseling provides referral & protection support	2.48	Moderately effective

Using a four-point effectiveness scale, responses in Table 3 revealed mixed perceptions regarding the usefulness of counseling services. Although emotional recovery ( $m = 2.56$ ) and referral support ( $m = 2.48$ ) scored slightly above the threshold for moderate effectiveness, identification of at-risk learners ( $m = 2.41$ ) and abuse-awareness promotion ( $m = 2.33$ ) were rated ineffective. On the overall, these findings suggest that

existing counseling systems are under-resourced, under-utilized, and not yet optimally structured for trauma-informed intervention. These baseline patterns justify the need for inferential analysis to determine whether counseling access significantly influences recovery outcomes and preventive awareness.

#### Table 4: Barriers to Effective Counseling Interventions

Barrier	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Lack of trained counselors	230	62.2
Fear of stigmatization	192	51.9
Cultural & religious silence	165	44.6
Administrative negligence	158	42.7
Inadequate policy support	140	37.8

In Table 4, the most prominent challenge to effective school-based counseling was a shortage of trained personnel (62.2%), followed by fear of stigmatization (51.9%) and socio-cultural silence surrounding sexual matters (44.6%). Administrative neglect (42.7%) and weak policy enforcement (37.8%) further hinder implementation. These constraints substantiate the systemic barriers that restrict institutional response to sexual abuse, and they are statistically useful in

testing whether contextual factors significantly influence the functioning of counseling interventions in the region.

#### Test of Hypotheses

##### Hypothesis 1

$H_{01}$ : There is no significant prevalence of girl-child sexual abuse among secondary school girls in South-South Nigeria.

#### Table 5: Chi-Square Goodness-of-Fit Test for Prevalence of GCSA

Category	Observed	Expected	$(O-E)^2/E$	$\chi^2$	df	p
Experienced abuse	111	75	17.28	23.04	1	<.001
No abuse reported	189	225	5.76			

\*\*Note.  $\chi^2$  goodness-of-fit test;  $\alpha = .05$ ;  $p < .001$  indicates significantly higher prevalence than expected.

In Table 5, a chi-square goodness-of-fit test was conducted using an expected national prevalence of 25%. Results revealed that the observed prevalence of 37% differed significantly from expectation,  $\chi^2(1, N = 300) = 23.04$ ,  $p < .001$ . This indicates that girl-child

sexual abuse is significantly prevalent in the region, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis.

##### Hypothesis 2

$H_{02}$ : There is no significant relationship between school-based counseling programs and abuse-prevention outcomes.

#### Table 6: Chi-Square Test of Counseling Strategies and Abuse-Prevention Outcomes

Category	Observed (O)	Expected (E)	$(O - E)^2 / E$	$\chi^2$	df	p-value	Cramer's V	Decision
Counseling Yes × Prevention Yes	120	99.63	4.164	17.990	1	<.001	0.22	Reject H <sub>02</sub>
Counseling Yes × Prevention No	72	92.37	4.491					
Counseling No × Prevention Yes	72	92.37	4.491					
Counseling No × Prevention No	106	85.63	4.844					

\*\*Note.  $\chi^2$  test of independence;  $\alpha = .05$ ;  $p < .001$  and  $V = .22$  indicate significant moderate association.

In Table 6, a chi-square test of independence examined the association between the presence of counseling programs and prevention/awareness indicators. Results revealed a significant association,  $\chi^2(1, N = 370) = 17.99, p < .001$ , Cramér's  $V = .22$ , prompting rejection of the null hypothesis. Schools implementing

structured counseling programs demonstrated higher prevention and awareness outcomes.

**Hypothesis 3**

H<sub>03</sub>: School-based counseling interventions have no significant effect on emotional recovery among victims of sexual abuse.

**Table 7: ANOVA on Emotional Recovery Across States**

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p	$\eta^2$
Between groups	3.82	2	1.91	4.12	.018	.027
Within groups	137.70	297	0.46			
Total	141.52	299				

\*\*Note. One-way ANOVA;  $\alpha = .05$ ;  $p = .018$  and  $\eta^2 = .027$  indicate significant state differences.

The one-way ANOVA in Table 7 examined differences in emotional recovery scores among students across Rivers, Akwa Ibom, and Bayelsa States. Results indicated a statistically significant variation in recovery outcomes,  $F(2, 297) = 4.12, p = .018, \eta^2 = .027$ . Although the effect size was modest, the

result suggests that state context influences post-abuse emotional recovery among school girls in South-South Nigeria. This implies that differences in school-based support structures and access to counseling services may contribute to varying recovery experiences across the three states.

**Table 8: Tukey HSD Post-Hoc Test for Emotional Recovery Scores Across States**

Pairwise Comparison	Mean Difference	Standard Error	p-value	Decision
Rivers vs Bayelsa	0.24	0.09	.021	Significant
Rivers vs Akwa Ibom	0.07	0.08	.312	Not significant
Akwa Ibom vs Bayelsa	0.17	0.10	.154	Not significant

\*\*Note. Tukey HSD post-hoc analysis conducted at  $\alpha = .05$ . Significant pairwise difference observed between Rivers and Bayelsa; other contrasts non-significant.

Tukey's post-hoc analysis was conducted to identify the specific state-level differences in emotional recovery scores. The results showed that students in Rivers State reported significantly higher emotional recovery scores

than those in Bayelsa State ( $p = .021$ ). However, no statistically significant differences were found between Rivers and Akwa Ibom or between Akwa Ibom and Bayelsa. This finding indicates that while recovery support appears stronger in Rivers State, counseling accessibility and trauma-support systems remain comparatively similar in Akwa Ibom and Bayelsa, emphasizing the

need for equity in school-based psychosocial services across the region.

**Table 9 : t-Test on Emotional Recovery by Counseling Access**

Group	N	Mean	SD	SE	t	df	p	Decision
Counseling access	102	2.65	0.51	0.050	2.67	298	.008	Reject H <sub>03</sub>
No counseling	198	2.41	0.48	0.034				

\*\*Note. Independent t-test;  $\alpha = .05$ ;  $p = .008$  and  $d = .43$  show significant recovery advantage with counseling.

To further validate the result, an independent samples t-test in Table 9 showed that victims who accessed school counseling reported significantly higher emotional recovery ( $M = 2.65$ ,  $SD = .51$ ) than those without counseling access ( $M = 2.41$ ,  $SD = .48$ ),  $t(298) = 2.67$ ,  $p$

$= .008$ . Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected.

#### Hypothesis 4

H<sub>04</sub>: Institutional and cultural factors do not significantly hinder implementation of school-based counseling interventions.

**Table 9 : ANOVA on Barriers to Counseling and Intervention Effectiveness**

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p	$\eta^2$
Between groups	5.76	4	1.44	3.74	.011	.039
Within groups	140.77	365	0.39			
Total	146.53	369				

\*\*Note. One-way ANOVA;  $\alpha = .05$ ;  $p = .011$  and  $\eta^2 = .039$  indicate barriers significantly reduce effectiveness.

In Table 9, a one-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect of institutional and cultural barriers on counseling effectiveness,  $F(4, 365) = 3.74$ ,  $p = .011$ ,  $\eta^2 = .039$ . Schools citing lack of trained counselors and stigma reported lower effectiveness. Thus, H<sub>04</sub> was rejected.

Across all four hypotheses, inferential results consistently demonstrated high prevalence of GCSA and showed that access to structured school-based counseling interventions significantly enhances prevention and recovery, while institutional and cultural barriers constrain optimal implementation.

#### Discussion of Findings

The present study provides empirical evidence that girl-child sexual abuse remains significantly prevalent across secondary schools in South-South Nigeria. The high proportion of learners reporting abuse experiences substantiates prior scholarship asserting that Nigeria continues to face a systemic burden of child sexual victimization (Ajuwon, 2021; Fawole, 2020). Notably, the low rate of official reporting observed in this study reinforces existing arguments that

survivors frequently remain silent due to cultural stigma, fear of retribution, and the absence of secure disclosure systems (Onyiye, 2018; UNICEF, 2021).

A major contribution of this research is the demonstration of the critical role school-based counseling structures play in mitigating GCSA. Schools with trained counselors recorded higher levels of awareness and victim support, in alignment with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasizes the influence of school environments on child wellbeing. Likewise, the study's findings corroborate Trauma Theory (Herman, 1992), affirming that access to trauma-responsive counseling significantly enhances emotional recovery among victims.

However, the findings further reveal that schools in the region largely lack adequately trained counseling personnel and functional prevention frameworks. This institutional deficit, combined with entrenched sociocultural norms that discourage disclosure, significantly diminishes the potential effectiveness of school-based interventions. These insights align with national reports highlighting the limited prioritization of mental-health and child-protection services in Nigerian schools (Olugbenga, 2021; Edeh &

Eze, 2022). As such, while counseling holds measurable value in prevention and recovery, implementation gaps remain a critical barrier requiring urgent policy and systemic redress.

### Conclusion

This study concludes that girl-child sexual abuse continues to be a major concern in secondary schools in South-South Nigeria. Although school-based counseling demonstrates clear potential to enhance awareness, encourage disclosure, and support survivor recovery, its effectiveness is currently constrained by inadequate professional capacity and systemic silence surrounding sexual violence. Strengthening counseling provision, institutional accountability, and culturally responsive reporting frameworks is therefore vital to ensuring the protection, psychological safety, and academic continuity of female students in the region.

### Recommendations

#### 1. Mandatory Employment of Qualified Counselors

Education authorities should enact enforceable policies requiring the deployment of licensed school counselors across all secondary schools.

#### 2. Specialized Training and Professional Development

Continuous professional training should emphasize trauma-focused counseling, ethical reporting procedures, and child-protection competencies.

#### 3. Mainstreaming Child-Protection Education

Prevention-focused curriculum modules should be incorporated into relevant subjects to build students' knowledge and self-protective capacities.

#### 4. Confidential and Secure Reporting Systems

Schools should provide safe, private, and student-friendly mechanisms for reporting abuse, including anonymous reporting options.

#### 5. Strengthened Collaboration with Child-Protection Stakeholders

Partnerships with NGOs, social workers, healthcare providers, and law-enforcement units should be established to support referral pathways and survivor safety.

#### 6. Monitoring and Enforcement Mechanisms

Oversight bodies should routinely evaluate counseling programs, with sanctions for non-compliance and incentives for effective safeguarding practices.

7. Policy Advocacy and Cultural Engagement  
Stakeholders should advocate for stronger enforcement of existing child-protection laws and engage community actors to challenge norms that perpetuate silence.

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