

Economic Inequality: An Examination of the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act with regard to Women in Rivers State

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the link between economic inequality Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act of 2015 examine women in Rivers State, Nigeria. The aim of the study is to examine whether the VAPP Act actually addresses the issue of gender gap and how this enables specific kinds of violence against women such as wife battery, rape, harmful widowhood practices and educational attainment. To achieve this, a sample of household heads was carried out and respondents were selected using the cluster and systematic random sampling techniques from the three senatorial zones in the state. A total of 1110 women selected using the Taro Yamane formula formed the sample. Data collected from the field survey, were analyzed using descriptive models and chi square (χ^2) statistics. The result indicates that the calculated χ^2 value for each of the two hypotheses were higher than the table value of 12.59. The chi square computation was done at 6 degree of freedom and a significance level of 0.05. The results provided justification for the acceptance of all hypotheses in their alternate form. The findings revealed among others, that the VAPP Act of 2015 did not sufficiently address the gender gap in society and as such links between income inequity and wife battery, property inheritance and harmful widowhood practices have not reduced. It was recommended among others that the VAPP Act should be reviewed to address traditional practices that enable gender gap in society in order to sufficiently mitigate violence against women.

Keywords: economic inequality, violence against women,

INTRODUCTION

The issue of institutionalized inequality in society whether it is within the realm of religion, politics, education or economy has continued to attract policy and academic concerns globally. Economic inequality has tended to attract more research concern especially (and this is not a Marxist position), since it is a known fact that unequal economic outcomes continues to exacerbate other forms of inequalities in society. The United Nations (2015) for instance in a widespread survey of economic inequality around the world maintained the position, that there is growing disparity between and among nations in terms of comparisons on Gross Domestic Products (GDPs) per capita. However, the major concern of the United Nations rest on the fact that this disparity further translates to adverse welfare challenges around the world. In other words, people with low economic status tend to have low human development, making life very difficult for them.

While some countries especially those that are considered developed such as the United States, Britain, France and Germany among others are known to have strong institutions and policy environment that reduces the impact of economic inequality among their citizens (World Bank, 2016), countries in Africa and this includes Nigeria, continue to operate under harsh economic reality that is further exacerbated by weak institutions and policies. Nigeria's current economic climate has continued to dwindle creating conditions where the gap between the rich and the poor has become wider than ever before. The result of this economic disparity, which translates into inequality, is a

dramatic increase in the number of vulnerable population in the country thereby exposing them to all manner of violence.

It is a known fact that violence against persons is strongly enabled by weak economic backgrounds. Studies have shown that people who are vulnerable in economic terms tend to experience more violence since in most cases, they may be unable to fight for their rights. As Fagade (2014) rightly opined, economic inequality in society makes people who occupy the bottom of the economic pyramid to suffer all forms of victimization and violence especially when the society is unable to provide opportunities for such people to resist such violence against them. In this sense, it becomes easy to see that economic inequality translates into vulnerability which in turn creates enabling environment for violence against such persons. Issues on economic inequality and gender tend to focus more on the income disparities between males and females which in most cases is a function of their involvement in the labour market. As a result, women in Nigeria tend to be more marginal when it comes to labour market participation, even though women manage to earn income, they oftentimes find themselves in low paid work. Adesina (2009) has opined that since the 1970s, the economic inequality in Nigeria and other countries in Africa has increased dramatically. Specifically, the men have gotten a lot richer putting women in an economically vulnerable position.

Nigeria like other countries around the world has consciously evolved policies that align significantly with the declarations of the United Nations convention on the elimination of all forms of violence against women. This is clearly justified in the enactment of the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition [VAPP]) Act of 2015. Although the bill leading to the VAPP lasted for a record twelve (12) years before it was passed into law, it represents a significant step toward providing the enabling legal direction concerning how violence against persons in Nigeria could be addressed. The VAPP Act notwithstanding, violence against women in Nigeria continues to persist especially with regard to women who are economically marginal in society. Adesina (2009) reported high level violence against women, pointing out that at least over 57% of women in Nigeria encounter one form of violence or the other mostly from males.

It is in the light of the above that this study examines the issue of economic inequality and the VAPP Act in Rivers State. The major objectives of the study are to; examine if the VAPP Act addresses the link between property inheritance and widowhood practices as well as to examine whether gender income inequality leads to wife battery in Rivers State.

Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses shall be tested in the cause of this study:

H₁: The more the VAPP Act does not addresses the issue of gender income inequality the more the level of wife battery in Rivers State

H₂: The more the VAPP Act does not address the issue of property inheritance by men, the more harmful widowhood practices will persist in Rivers State

Literature Review

Access to Economic Properties and Violence Against Persons

The issue of access to any enabling infrastructure of wellbeing is very critical in measuring development. Studies by the United Nations (2005 and 2015) have clearly shown that it is not just enough to have enabling infrastructure such as schools, health facilities etc., but that when people do not have access to these facilities, it does not in any way promote their wellbeing. It is in the same vein that the issue of access to economic properties represents a major enabler for wellbeing to those who have access to them as well as those connected to them. Very little empirical studies have been done touching on access to economic property and violence against persons. However, the few extant studies have shown remarkable insight into the subject matter. For instance, the study by Frank (2014) carried out in Ghana using a sample of 2000 respondents across the country showed that people with little or no access to economic properties such as land which could be used for farming, rent and many other ways of getting income, adequate employment, market systems among others end up having low income thereby exacerbating their marginal conditions and increases their level of inequality when compared to those with economic properties.

In extending the study of Frank, Kwame (2015) examined the relationship between cultural practices that limit people's ability to have access to properties and how this affects or constrain them from living normal lives. Although Kwame's study was not gender specific, he nevertheless stressed that

women are more marginalized through cultural practices that undermine their socio-economic potentials to compete favourably in society. He used a sample of 1650 adult persons in some of Ghana's cities and a few rural areas and conducted a six months survey using self-designed questionnaire. After analyzing his data, Kwame found from the results available to him that not being able to have access to properties is an outcome of either cultural or political wickedness. He further submitted that less than men, women have very little access to properties due to cultural practices. He clearly referred to this as violence against them.

While the two studies reviewed above did not clearly define their independent variables within the context of what they considered to be economic properties or material properties, some studies have aggregated this under what they consider to be the super economic property known as land (see; OECD, 2011; Mustapha, 2015). For these scholars, access to land continues to remain the super determinant of economic progress for all members of society anywhere in the world but most especially in Africa. For instance, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2011) carried out a study on access to and use of land in sub-Saharan African countries. The study which was purely built on econometric analysis revealed that people who have access to land maintained good income even though there are variations in the income depending on the character of the use of such land. It also came to the finding that edging people from access to such a super property in any society is clearly marginalization and an act of violence against such people.

Similarly, Makinde (2016) conducted a longitudinal study of widow inheritance problem in Nigeria especially focusing on the South Southern and South Eastern parts of the country. In his study, Makinde's study though situated in economics, can be likened to historical analysis in disciplines such as sociology, anthropology and political science. The scholar gathered historical economic data from over 2000 widows from some selected states in the two geopolitical zones mentioned above. After analyzing his data, he found that 90 percent of widows are denied access to their late husband's economic properties especially land. This practice is heinously supported by the culture as well as tradition of the people and that widows who faced this level of cultural wickedness remained economically marginalized with little or no source of income.

According the Markinde (2016) the economic property called land is a very critical asset in Nigeria. This is especially so for people and importantly women who live in rural areas since it has been established by other studies that women constitute the bulk of peasant farmers and fishers in most rural areas of Africa (See; Shiva, 2014 and Ayeni, 2016), relying on land and water for livelihood through the production and sale of crops and other products. Hence, limiting such people from having rights of ownership and usury over landed properties is a major disincentive especially when investment is taken into consideration. This is because such people will not have the right to invest on properties that are not their own thereby reducing their potentials to be able get returns, descent income and livelihood. Sadly, this also translates to weak borrowing power for those who do not wish to use their land directly. Moreover, research suggests that land ownership increases investment in the human development of children (Deere & Doss 2006). Therefore, property rights are particularly important in determining who has entitlements to food, and may serve as a means to perpetuate or break the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

Other studies have shown that beyond widow inheritance limitation to women's ownership and access to land, indirect link to such properties also limit their ability to have economic say at the household level, community and society at large. This further translates to violence against them and exacerbates their level of income inequality in whatever society they find themselves. According to Meizen-Dick (2009), it is not only the property rights of the household that matter, intra-household distribution, and especially differences between men and women, is also important. When women access land only through their husbands, fathers or sons, their tenure depends on their relationships with these men, and they are vulnerable to eviction and loss of land rights in cases of death of the man, divorce, or disinheritance. Land ownership gives women greater bargaining power and a stronger fallback option, which is one reason research in India has found that women who own land are less subject to domestic violence (Bhatla, Chakraborty & Duvvury 2006). Similarly, another finding also supported by findings from Colombia (Friedmann-Sanchez 2006) corroborates that of Bhatla, Chakraborty and Duvvury.

It is important to note that in rural enclaves, women farmers as well as their male counterparts who maintain insecure or short-term land ownership or tenureship are unlikely to invest their full effort, to

make long-term improvements attached to the land (including services), or to exchange it with others who may be able to make better use of it, thereby reducing productivity and possibly hindering emergence of a vibrant non-farm economy. The same is true for urban residents and it is now increasingly recognized that, as a consequence, land and the institutions governing its ownership and use are of great importance for broader economic growth and poverty reduction from a much broader range of perspectives.

Similarly, setting up or expanding a business requires physical space (land). Non-transparent, corrupt, or simply inefficient systems of land administration constitute a major bottleneck that makes it more costly for small and would-be entrepreneurs to transform good ideas into economically viable enterprises. Investment climate surveys indicate that access to land was the main obstacle to conducting and expanding business by 57% of the enterprises interviewed in Ethiopia as well as 35% in Bangladesh and about 25% each in Tanzania and Kenya (Klaus, 2005). In addition, well-functioning land institutions and -markets also improve the environment for investment because ability to use easily transferable land titles as a collateral reduces the cost of accessing credit for entrepreneurs, thus increasing opportunities for gainful employment and contributing to innovation and the development of financial systems. Even in developed countries, more than two thirds of small business loans are secured against land and real estate. In Eastern and Central Europe, formal land titling, especially in urban and peri-urban areas, helped to start mortgage markets that now comprise a large part of overall lending.

Consequently, if property rights are poorly defined or cannot be enforced at low cost, individuals and entrepreneurs will not only be compelled to spend valuable resources on defending their land, it will also be much harder to transfer such land between different uses. Secure land tenure facilitates transfer of land at low cost through rentals and sales, improving the allocation of land while at the same time supporting the development of financial markets. Without secure rights, landowners are less willing to rent out their land, something that may impede their ability and willingness to engage in nonagricultural employment or rural-urban migration, reducing the scope for structural change and reduce the productivity of land use in both rural and urban areas.

The VAPP Act and Protection of Women in Nigeria

Empirical literature on the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) in Nigeria is really scanty almost to the point of being none existent. However, a small body of legal literature will suffice in this section. It is important to note that the issue of violence against people that are considered vulnerable especially women and children is very high in Nigeria. This is often perpetrated in different ways especially through physical, sexual and emotional abuses. The VAPP Act is for the first time in Nigeria a comprehensive attempt at aggregating all other fragmented legal documents on violence against persons into a coherent law to address such issues in the country. However, while all violence against persons now fall under the legal ambit of the VAPP Act, it is important to mention that the focus of this study is more on practices that limit women's access and use of land as well as political marginalization of women defined correctly as violence in this study. Several surveys have been done to show that violence against persons is endemic in our society. For instance, the British Council (2012) after a survey reported that violence does not just mean domestic beating of women and children, sexual harassments among others, but violence against persons also covers all actions that forcefully limit people from achieving their full potentials especially economic growth.

Similarly, the National Demographic and Health Survey (2013) in Nigeria while outlining a number of violence against persons in the country especially women, arrived at the finding that women who are divorced or widowed are far more likely to have experienced violence that limit them from actualizing their economic potentials more than other categories of women. What is even more, the survey revealed that these vulnerable women are usually victims of cultural and political marginalization especially reducing or outrightly refusing their rights to property. The study also revealed regional variations in their findings, with 52 percent of women in the South-South reporting gender based violence compared to 13 percent in the North West, the low rate of reporting in the North is likely due to under-reporting.

The understanding of violence against vulnerable persons in Nigeria became very clear with the emergence of the VAPP Law. However, very little is still known as to whether this legal instrument has been well used especially by women to seek redress for violence against them. Legal studies that have examined the VAPP Act have only reviewed it on the grounds of its efficacy, constraints and

constitutional relevance. For instance, Nwazuoke (2016) took an academic stab at the VAPP Act, dissecting all of its sections without relating it to any other variable in society. This made it extremely difficult to see the relationship of the Act to any other issue in society except for the fact that he did an amazing content analysis of the legal instrument. This notwithstanding, Nwazuoke's work went the extra mile to compare the VAPP Act with other criminal legislations in the country and credit to him, he came to the conclusion that the Act is indeed a major step forward in terms of legal push to address the plight of vulnerable persons in society. However, his work was genderless with little mention of women especially neglecting the issue of forceful collection of properties from widows when he eventually discussed the issue of harmful cultural practices and abandonment as provided in the Act. Sadly, his study while analyzing the section of the VAPP Act that discusses political violence failed to extend knowledge on the shortcomings of the law in this regard. This is because in others section of his qualitative review of the VAPP Act, the scholar made it a point of duty to pick holes in the relevant provisions of the Act that fits his discussion, failing in the above instance to see that when affirmative action legislation providing for percentages to political office appointments are violated, this could also be viewed as violence against women.

Another very useful study on the VAPP Act as it relates to women in Nigeria is that done by Onyemelukwe (2016). In his research, the issue of inheritance and or succession rights or even out right property tenure which is relevant to this study was extensively discussed. By doing this, Onyemelukwe fills a significant gap created by the previous study reviewed above. For instance, instead of neglecting the issue of property rights, while clearly stating that the VAPP Act did not include this dimension of traditional practices, he nevertheless alluded to the fact that the Act implied it, thus creating a niche for a study of this nature. According to him harmful traditional practices in addition to all indicators includes denial of inheritance or succession rights especially for women. This according to him was though not explicitly stated in the VAPP Act, clearly implied and as such constitutes a significant legal instrument to seek redress in court for property related violence against women. In the words of the scholar, While the Act does not specifically mention all these practices, the definition is sufficiently wide as to include matters like male child or son preference which are not specifically mentioned but are harmful to women.⁷² This is a practice that encourages preference of male children over their female siblings, usually due to the need to continue the family lineage in patrilineal cultures. The result is often a displacement of girls in inheritance and succession matters, depriving them of land rights, attendant revenues, and opportunities for wealth creation (Onyemelukwe, 2016).

Note that the lack of specific mention of some of these traditional or administrative practices that limit women in terms of ownership, access to and usury rights when it comes to economic properties also puts some legal constraints on women when it comes to proving their case in court. As the above scholar observes that because the VAPP Act does not specifically mention all of the harmful traditional practices that are detrimental to women, it is more difficult for women to prove that their rights have been violated. This notwithstanding, according to him, this would, hopefully, not prove too difficult with the legal scholarship and jurisprudence that have developed on this subject. However, it does leave matters open for interpretation especially in the court of law. In other words, women have an uphill task to challenge violence against them in court under the VAPP Act when it comes to traditional practices such as widow inheritance, access to land among others. This goes a long way to show that the VAPP Act is in itself shortsighted in this area even though there are chances that lawyers could interpret some sections in favour of women having such kinds of issues. According to Adeyemi (2016), the VAPP Act lack widespread legal input that is why it has such shortcomings that are fundamentally limiting in terms of achieving what it actually set out to achieve in the first place.

Theoretical Framework: Materialist Feminist Theory

This study adopts the Materialist Feminist Theory to better explain the relationship between economic inequality and the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act of 2015 as it relates to women in Rivers State. Adeyemi (2016) in her work has traced the origins of Materialist Feminism to the work of British and French feminists who preferred the term materialist feminism to Marxist feminism because, in their view, Marxism had to be transformed to be able to explain the sexual division of labor in society. In the 1970s, Adeyemi states that, Marxism was inadequate to the task because of its

class bias and focus on production, while feminism was also problematic due to its essentialist and idealist concept of woman; this is why materialist feminism emerged as a positive alternative both to Marxism and feminism.

Essentially therefore, the Materialist Feminist theory is hinged on the thesis that the masculine nature of materialism in capitalist societies created a situation where women tend to be edged out, exploited and marginalized. In doing this, the materialist feminist perspective clearly laid claim to economic inequality which results from the capitalist system and the fact that women are more disproportionately disadvantaged in such a system. In any case, it is capitalism that generates the masculinity which now undermines women's ability to compete favourably.

Relating this to the study on economic inequality and the VAPP Act which is the focus of this research, it becomes easy to see that the materialist feminist theory provides a twofold understanding which covers the variables under study or should we say it is holistic in the context of this study. This is because from an economic perspective, the theory indicts the structure of capitalism as the major culprit in perpetrating the marginalization of women on the one hand and also provides an understanding of the fact that the material power available to males as a result of their dominance of the capitalist structure gives them advantage as ruling elites who also formulates policies that perpetuate their dominance to the disadvantage of women in society. This is actually really true of Nigeria where women due to economic and political disempowerment have little say in laws that govern society in which they belong. Based on this, the materialist feminist theory is adopted as the theoretical framework for this study.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts the survey research design. The population of study is women from 18 years and above in Rivers From the submissions of the Free Online Encyclopedia (2014), the projected population of females in Rivers State following the figure provided by the National Population Census of 2006, is put at 3,596,426 (Rivers West 1,200,579, Rivers East 1,435,452 and Rivers South-East 960,395). While, the above figure is the total population of women in the study area, this study focused on women from 18 years of age and above. The sample size for this study is 1,200 determined using the Taro Yamane formula. The only criterion for inclusion in the study will be that participants had a permanent residence in the study area and fall within the age limit mentioned earlier. To select the sample/respondents for the study, two different but complementary sampling techniques were adopted. These are cluster and quasi (systematic) random sampling techniques. The two dominant methods of data collection for this study were primary (questionnaire) and secondary methods. The data were analyzed using simple percentage and descriptive statistics such as bar charts, pie charts and trend graphs in addition to the Chi-square (χ^2) statistical which was used to test the hypotheses. The data analysis and the results presented below are done based on the total number (1,110) of questionnaire that were duly filled and returned.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Evaluation of Objectives

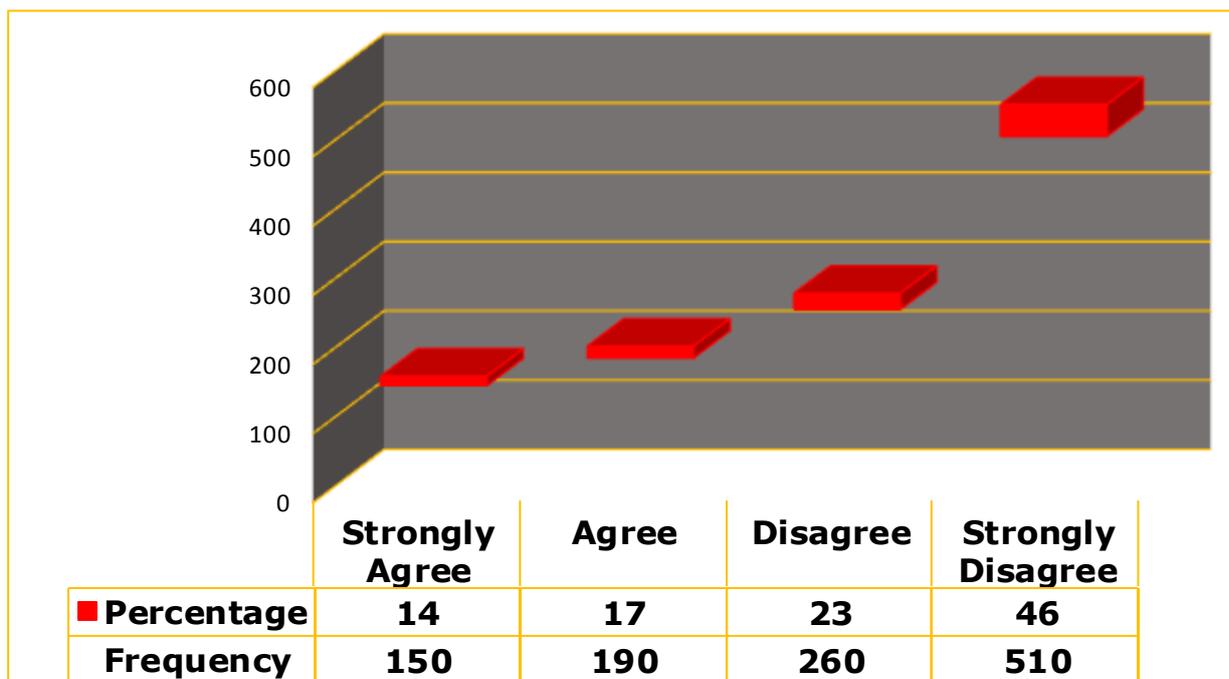


Fig. 4.1 VAPP Act, gender income inequality and wife battery in Rivers State

Figure 4.1 above reveals that 150(14%) of the respondents strongly agree that the VAPP Act does address the link between gender inequity and wife battery, 190(17%) of the respondents agree, 260(23%) of the respondents disagree, while a significant number 510(46%) of the respondents strongly disagree. The study by the Rivers State Observatory Group (OBSTEC, 2017) corroborates the above position by reporting that domestic violence involving high rates of wife battery was the highest level of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) recorded in the State. Figure 4.2 below shows the data from the study conducted by the group:

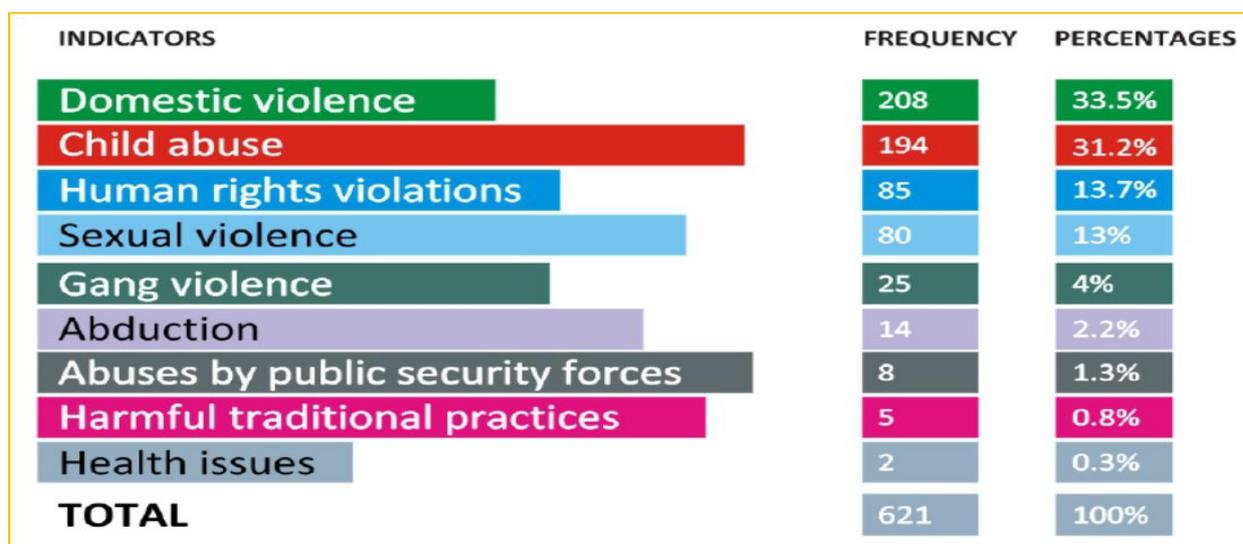


Fig. 4.2: Violence Against Women & Girls in Rivers State 2015-2016

From the data retrieved from the Rivers State Observatory on Violence Against Women and Girls in Rivers State, it is easy to see, that domestic violence was the highest level of VAWG in the state with

208 (33.5%) occurrence between 2015 and 2016. This goes a long way to show that despite the VAPP Act, wife battery is still a major issue in the State.

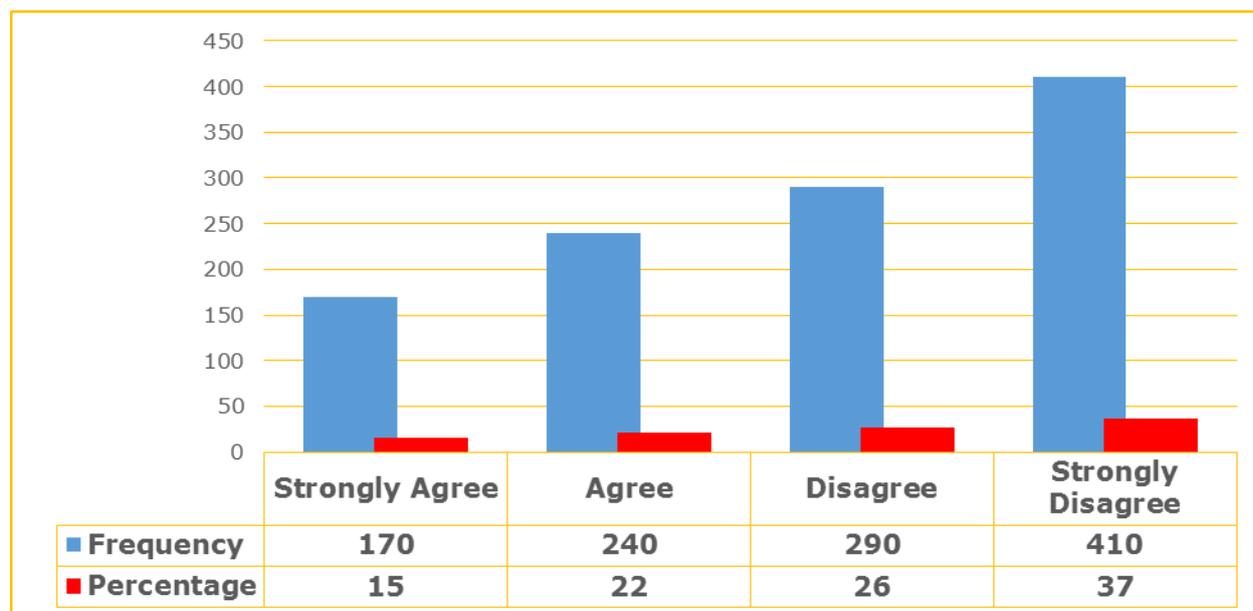


Fig. 4.3: VAPP Act, property inheritance and widowhood practices in Rivers State

Data in Figure 4.3 above provides information on whether the link between the VAPP Act, property inheritance and harmful widowhood practices in the study area. From the data represented in the chart, it is easy to see that 170(15%) of the respondents strongly agree that the VAPP Act actually does address the link between property inheritance and harmful widowhood practice, 240(22%) of the respondents agree, 290(26%) of them disagree, 410(37%) of them strongly disagree. Due to the number of respondents that took a negative position on the issue concerning whether the VAPP Act reduced the harmful widowhood practices occasioned by male-dominated property inheritance, it therefore, follows that the VAPP Act does not sufficiently minimize the issue of property inheritance. This goes a long way to show that despite the VAPP Act, women are still being edged out from inheriting property thereby making them vulnerable to harmful widowhood practices.

Test of Hypotheses

H₁: The more the VAPP Act does not narrow gender income inequality the higher the level of wife battery in Rivers State

Table 4.1: Gender income inequality is more likely the reason for wife battery

Respondents	SA	A	D	SD	TOTAL
Rivers West	102	200	47	32	381
Rivers East	140	122	50	45	357
Rivers South- East	188	102	50	32	372
TOTAL	430	424	147	109	1110

Table 4.1 above provides data on whether gender inequity is more likely to be the reason for wife battery in the study area. From the table, 430 of the respondents strongly agree, 424 of the respondents agree, 147 of the respondents disagree, while 109 of them strongly disagree. The information presented above is further subjected to a chi-square test in Table 4.2 below:

Table 4.2: Chi-Square Computation for hypothesis 1

Respondents	O	E	O-E	(O-E) ²	(o-e/e) ²
Rivers West	102	147.59	-45.59	2078.87	14.08
	200	145.54	54.46	2966.42	20.38
	47	50.46	-3.46	11.95	0.24
	32	37.41	-5.41	29.31	0.78
Rivers East	140	138.30	1.70	2.90	0.02
	122	136.37	-14.37	206.43	1.51
	50	47.28	2.72	7.41	0.16
	45	35.06	9.94	98.87	2.82
Rivers South-East	188	144.11	43.89	1926.50	13.37
	102	142.10	-40.10	1607.79	11.31
	50	47.28	2.72	7.41	0.16
	32	35.06	-3.06	9.34	0.27
Chi-Square	$\chi^2 = 65.11$				

Level of Significance = 0.005; Degree of freedom = 6; Chi Square Table Value = 12.59; Chi Square Calculated Value = 65.1

Decision rule: The generally accepted decision rule for the application of chi-square χ^2 test states that: Accept null hypothesis if the calculated value is less than the table value and reject hypothesis if the calculated value is greater than table value. In this study, since the calculated value for χ^2 is 65.11 and table value is 12.59, the hypothesis which states that “The more the VAPP Act does not narrow gender income inequality the higher the level of wife battery in Rivers State ” is hereby accepted. This leads to the submission, that there is a relationship between the inability of the VAPP Act to address the issue of gender income inequality and wife battery in Rivers State.

H₂: The more the VAPP Act fails to reduce property inheritance by men, the more harmful widowhood practices will persist in Rivers State

Table 4.3: Property inheritance and persistence of harmful widowhood practices

Respondents	SA	A	D	SD	TOTAL
Rivers West	128	99	70	84	381
Rivers East	102	100	90	65	357
Rivers South- East	132	111	88	41	372
TOTAL	362	310	248	190	1110

Table 4.3 above provides data on whether property inheritance by men alone is likely to lead to the persistence of harmful widowhood practices in the study area. 326 of the respondents strongly agree, 310 of the respondents agree, 248 of the respondents disagree, while 190 of them strongly disagree. The data in Table 4.3 is further applied to the computation of the chi-square with respect to hypothesis two below.

Table 4.4: Chi-Square computation for hypothesis 2

Respondents	O	E	O-E	(O-E) ²	(o-e/e) ²
Rivers West	128	124.25	3.75	14.03	0.11
	99	106.41	-7.41	54.84	0.52
	70	85.12	-15.12	228.75	2.69
	84	65.22	18.78	352.83	5.41
Rivers East	102	116.43	-14.43	208.14	1.79
	100	99.70	0.30	0.09	0.00
	90	79.76	10.24	104.81	1.31
	65	61.11	3.89	15.15	0.25
Rivers South-East	132	121.32	10.68	114.09	0.94
	111	103.89	7.11	50.53	0.49
	88	79.76	8.24	67.86	0.85
	41	61.11	-20.11	404.34	6.62
Chi-Square	$\chi^2 = 20.97$				

Level of Significance = 0.005; Degree of freedom = 6; Chi Square Table Value = 12.59; Chi Square Calculated Value = 20.97

Decision rule: The generally accepted decision rule for the application of chi-square χ^2 test states that: Accept null hypothesis if the calculated value is less than the table value and reject hypothesis if the calculated value is greater than table value. In this study, since the calculated value for χ^2 is 20.97 and table value is 12.59, the hypothesis which states that “The more the VAPP Act fails to reduce property inheritance by men, the more harmful widowhood practices will persist in Rivers State” is hereby accepted. This leads to the submission that there is a significant relationship property inheritance by men and harmful widowhood practices against women in Rivers State.

DISCUSSION

Concerning the first finding of the study, objective one which led to the examination of the extent to which the VAPP Act narrows the link between gender income inequality and wife battery in Rivers State, provided direction for the data collected. Data gathered in this regard were presented and analyzed in Figure 4.1 above. In addition, research hypothesis one was computed using the chi-square statistical tool in relation to the same objective (see Tables 4.1 and 4.2 above). The results from these two levels of data analysis showed that a relatively large proportion of respondents in the study believed that the VAPP Act did not narrow the gap in gender income inequality and as such has not sufficiently addressed the issue of wife battery.

It is, however, clear that domestic violence involving mostly wife battering is strongly related to economic inequity in a significant number of families. Other studies in this regard corroborate the findings here. For instance, the Rivers State Observatory on Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) (OBSTEC, 2017) revealed remarkable findings that linked income inequity in most homes as the major driver of domestic violence against women. The findings of OBSTEC (2017) concerning domestic violence was presented in Plate 4.1 above and it revealed that in Rivers State 208 cases of domestic violence were reported between 2015 and 2016. The study further revealed that among the cases of domestic violence reported, a significant number were wife battery related cases. This goes a long way to show that wife battery is somehow caused by gender income inequity. This submission was supported by the result from the chi-square test of hypothesis one where it was established that gender income inequality has a relationship with wife battery in Rivers State.

VAPP Act, Social Status of Men and Rape against Women

The second objective which is to examine whether the VAPP Act deals significantly with the issue of the social status of men and rape against women in Rivers State, provided direction for the next finding in this study. In this regard, data collected from the field were presented and analysed in Figure 4.2 above. Similarly, the hypothesis related to the above objective was tested in Table 4.9 above. Findings from the data analyzed revealed that women actually fall victim of rape due to the social status of men. However, this finding was not strongly supported by the FGD discussion on this theme. Following the outcome of the discussion, a significant number of the participants strongly believe that rape against women is on the increase in the State despite the VAPP Act and that this is a result of the culture of patriarchy rather than men’s social status. Similarly, the chi-square test for hypothesis two established a moderate relationship or link between the social status of men and rape against women in the study area.

This notwithstanding, both FGD discussants and respondents united in agreement on the fact that the VAPP Act did not address the domineering status of men given that nothing was mentioned about that in the Act. While previous studies did not attempt to show the link between the VAPP Act and rape against women, a recent study by the OBSTEC (2017) highlighted the increase in rape cases since 2015 when the legal instrument was established. The result of the study was presented in Figure 4.2 above and it revealed that rape cases more than any other kind of violence against women and girls have been on the increase since 2015.

Similarly, the study, with reference to objective two which focused on examining the extent to which the VAPP Act can minimize the link between property inheritance and widowhood practices in Rivers State established the fact that property inheritance has a strong link to harmful widowhood practices in the study area. The result of the chi-square test for hypothesis two showed significantly, that the VAPP Act did not address the link between property inheritance and harmful widowhood practices. This finding supports that of the OBSTEC (2017) group which also revealed an increase in harmful

widowhood practices as a result of limited or no access to property for women in most part of the study area.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between economic inequality and Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act of 2015 focusing on women. The study originated from the concern on the increasing rate of violence against women and girls despite the establishment of the VAPP Act. It is the conclusion of this study that the VAPP Act did not sufficiently address the link between gender income inequality and issues such as wife battery. Also, despite the VAPP Act's position on property inheritance and harmful widowhood practice in separate instances, the Act did not make provision to address the gender gap in society that creates the condition for women not to inherit properties of their husbands in the first place. The VAPP Act failed to address the link between male child preference and low academic attainment for female children even though Rivers State has made significant progress in gender parity in education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and the conclusions reached in this study, the following suggestions for improvement are proffered.

- I. *The issue of Gender Gap:* The VAPP Act should be reviewed to address the issue of gender gap in Rivers State and Nigeria in general. Gender gap occasioned by the material condition of men which places them over women is a major cause of some of the violence against women in the study area. This can be addressed by ensuring that the VAPP Act or any other Act of government provides a legal framework that reduces the culture of patriarchy in the state.
- II. *Abolish harmful widowhood practices:* While it is expected that bridging existing gender gap and addressing the issue of the social status of men in society are likely to have positive effect on harmful widowhood practices, there should be an attempt to directly mitigate the problem of harmful widowhood practices. This can be done by ensuring that stiff penalties and or punishments are pronounced on persons that promote or actually commit harmful widowhood practices against women. This will go a long way to make to give widows a sense of dignity and respect.
- III. *Case Reporting:* Encourage women to report cases of violence against them more often than it is currently being reported. This will ensure that every dimension of the VAWG is documented as a way of improving ways of curbing the menace in society.

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