

GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING AS A TOOL FOR MITIGATING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN NIGERIAN SCHOOLS

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Abstract

This paper examined the role of Guidance and Counselling as a strategic tool for mitigating Gender-Based Violence (GBV) within educational settings. It highlighted how school Counsellors can function as educators, advocates, and therapeutic supporters-raising awareness on GBV, equipping students with life skills for resilience, and providing psychosocial support to survivors. The study also identifies critical challenges, including insufficient staffing, poor funding, cultural taboos, weak policy enforcement, and limited professional training, which hinder the effectiveness of counselling services. GBV remains a pervasive challenge in Nigerian schools, undermining students' safety, well-being, and access to quality education. Despite existing policies, weak implementation, cultural stigma, and inadequate support systems continue to sustain the problem. Therefore, strengthening Guidance and Counselling Services is not only essential for reducing GBV but also central to achieving Sustainable Development Goals 4 (SDG 4) on inclusive and equitable quality education in Nigeria. To address these gaps, the paper recommends the recruitment and continuous training of professional Counsellors, adequate funding of Counselling units, integration of anti-GBV policies, establishment of confidential reporting mechanisms, and stronger collaboration with stakeholders such as NGOs, law enforcement, and health professionals.

Keywords: *Guidance and Counselling as a tool, Gender-Based Violence, Mitigating, Psychosocial Support, SDG 4*

Introduction

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) refers to harmful acts directed at an individual based on their gender, including physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse (UNICEF, 2020). In the context of Nigerian schools, GBV manifests in various ways such as sexual harassment by teachers or peers, physical assault, bullying, verbal abuse, coercion, exploitation, and even online harassment. These acts compromise not only the physical safety of students but also their emotional well-being, dignity, and ability to learn.

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) is one of the most pervasive violations of human rights globally, cutting across geography, culture, religion, and socio-economic status (UNESCO, 2021). The prevalence of GBV in Nigerian schools is alarming. UNICEF (2020), reported that about one in four girls and one in ten boys have experienced some form of sexual violence before the age of 18, with many of these incidents occurring in educational settings. Reports from civil society organizations further indicated that many cases were unreported due to fear of stigmatization, lack of trust in authorities, and the absence of confidential reporting mechanisms (Ede & Adebayo, 2021).

The consequences of GBV are devastating victims often suffer from anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and in severe cases, may drop out of school or engage in self-harming behaviours (Fawole, 2018). Schools should ideally be safe havens where children can learn and grow without fear of harm.

However, the reality in many Nigerian schools is that GBV remains a hidden crisis that undermines the goals of education and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education. The lack of effective prevention measures, inadequate policies, and weak enforcement mechanisms contribute to the persistence of GBV. Some school authorities even discourage victims from

speaking out, fearing that reports could tarnish the institution's reputation (Adewumi & Falaye, 2019). The culture of silence allowed perpetrators to act with impunity and discouraged students from seeking help.

Guidance and Counselling services stand out as the most effective yet underutilized tools for mitigating GBV in Nigerian schools. When effectively implemented, Guidance and Counselling Programmes provide safe and confidential spaces where students could share their experiences, seek psychosocial support, and learn coping strategies. Counsellors can play multiple roles as educators raising awareness on GBV, as advocates pushing for policy enforcement, and as first responders providing psychological first aid and referrals for survivors. The strategic positioning of School Counsellors within the educational system makes them key stakeholders in the fight against GBV. This therefore makes it urgent to strengthen and expand their capacity to respond to this challenge posed by Gender-Based Violence.

Relevance of Guidance and Counselling tools in mitigating Gender-Based Violence

Guidance and counselling is not just a supportive service in schools; it is a critical preventive and intervention mechanism that directly addresses the psychosocial and behavioural challenges that students could face. When it comes to mitigating Gender-Based Violence (GBV), Guidance and Counselling provides a unique platform for early detection, prevention, and rehabilitation (Okeke, 2020).

1. *Counsellors serve as educators and advocates.* Through structured awareness programmes, classroom talks, and school-wide campaigns, counsellors can educate students, teachers, and parents about the forms of GBV, its psychological consequences, and the importance of reporting abuse. Research has shown that schools with active counselling units record higher levels of student knowledge about sexual abuse and increased reporting rates (Omoniyi, 2020). By integrating GBV prevention into the school guidance curriculum, counsellors empower students to recognize abusive behaviour, understand their rights, and challenge harmful gender stereotypes.
2. *Guidance and Counselling empowers students with life skills* that make them less vulnerable to violence. Skills such as assertiveness training, emotional regulation, decision-making, and peer resistance equip students to set boundaries and report incidents without fear (Nwachukwu, 2021). This empowerment is particularly crucial for female students, who often experience disproportionate levels of sexual harassment and exploitation in schools.
3. *Counsellors play a therapeutic role* by providing psychosocial support to survivors of GBV. Many victims experience trauma, anxiety, or self-blame, which could disrupt learning. Counsellors provide a safe, confidential environment where victims could process their experiences, rebuild self-esteem, and receive referrals for further medical, legal, or psychological support if necessary (Adewumi & Falaye, 2019). Without such support, many students are left to cope alone, increasing the risk of dropout or long-term emotional harm.
4. *Guidance and Counselling acts as a bridge between students and school management.* Counsellors can advocate for stronger anti-GBV policies, collaborate with teachers to monitor at-risk students, and work with parents to create a supportive home environment. They can also recommend disciplinary action where necessary and ensure that victims are protected from retaliation. When properly resourced and recognized as a core part of school administration, Counselling Programmes can shift the school culture toward one that prioritizes safety in respect and gender equality (UNESCO, 2021).

Challenges in using Counselling Tools for Mitigating Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

Despite the critical role Guidance and Counselling tools can be used to address Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in Nigerian schools yet several challenges hinder effective implementation. One of the foremost challenges is the shortage of Professional Counsellors. Adewumi and Falaye (2019) reported that many schools either have no Counsellor at all or have just one Counsellor serving hundreds or even thousands of students, far below UNESCO's recommended ratio of a Counsellor-to-at most 250 students (Ratio of 1:250). This heavy workload makes it invariably impossible for counsellors to provide individualized attention, carry out proactive awareness campaigns, or offer timely intervention in cases of abuse.

Another significant barrier is insufficient funding and resources. In most public schools, counselling programmes receive little to no budgetary allocation, leaving counsellors without private offices, confidential reporting systems, or educational materials for campaigns. The absence of dedicated spaces also discourages students from approaching counsellors for fear that their conversations might be overheard, further perpetuating silence around GBV (Ede & Adebayo, 2021).

Cultural and social barriers also play a major role in limiting the success of school-based counselling programmes. In many Nigerian communities, issues related to sexual abuse and harassment are treated as taboo. Victims, particularly girls, are often blamed for their experiences, which lead to shame, fear of retaliation, and underreporting of cases (Fawole, 2018). This culture of silence not only allowed perpetrators to act with impunity but also isolated survivors from the support they need.

Moreover, the weak enforcement of policies further undermines the impact of counselling interventions. Although some states have child protection laws and anti-GBV policies, implementation in schools still remains often inconsistent. In some cases, school authorities downplay incidents to protect the institution's reputation, which compromises accountability and deters students from coming forward (Ede & Adebayo, 2021).

In addition, many school Counsellors face limited training and professional supervision, which reduces their capacity to handle sensitive GBV cases effectively. Cases involving sexual violence or severe trauma require specialized knowledge of crises counselling and referral network skills. Counsellors need to be adequately trained to provide an up-to-date help (Okeke, 2020).

Finally, low awareness of counselling services among students further hinders effectiveness. Some students are unaware of the role of school Counsellors, while others do not trust that their complaints will be handled confidentially and without bias (Omoniyi, 2020).

Suggestions

If Nigeria is committed to achieving safe, inclusive, and gender-sensitive learning environments as recommended by UNESCO (2021), Guidance and Counselling must be strengthened and institutionalized as a frontline mechanism for GBV prevention and response. This requires:

1. *Recruitment and Training:* The government, through the Federal and State Ministries of Education, should prioritize employing trained Guidance Counsellors in all secondary schools, ensuring compliance with UNESCO's recommended counsellor-to-student ratio. Continuous professional development programmes should be organized to equip counsellors with advanced skills in trauma-informed care, crises intervention, and referral procedures for GBV cases (Okeke, 2020).
2. *Adequate Funding:* Resources must be provided to strengthen counselling units. This includes provision of convenient offices to ensure confidentiality especially for individual counselling, installation of confidential reporting systems such as: anonymous suggestion boxes, hotlines, and materials for regular awareness campaigns. Adequate budgetary support should be provided to enable Counsellors to conduct school-wide sensitization programmes and peer- education initiatives.
3. *Policy Integration and Enforcement must be Strengthened:* Schools should develop clear anti-GBV policies that outline preventive strategies, reporting mechanisms, disciplinary actions, and protection for victims. Counsellors should be part of the school management team involved in drafting and implementing these policies. Furthermore, collaboration with external stakeholders such as child protection agencies, NGOs, law enforcement, and health professionals will provide a holistic response framework to GBV.
4. *Confidential Reporting Systems:* Schools should set up hotlines, suggestion boxes, or digital reporting platforms to make it easier and safer for students to report incidents.
5. *Collaboration with Stakeholders:* Counsellors should work with NGOs, child protection agencies, and law enforcement to provide holistic support for survivors.
6. *School-wide Culture change should be promoted.* Counsellors, Teachers, and School Leaders should work together to create a safe, respectful, and inclusive environment where gender equality is emphasized and guaranteed. Extra-curricular activities such as debates, mentorship programmes,

and peer support clubs can be integrated to strengthen students' sense of belonging and reduce the conditions that enable GBV to thrive.

Conclusion

Guidance and counselling is more than a supportive service, it is a cornerstone of a safe and inclusive educational environment. The paper carefully articulated Guidance and Counselling Tools that could be used in mitigating Gender-Based Violence in Nigerian schools. They include raising awareness, empowering students with life skills, identifying victims early, providing psychosocial support, and advocating for policy enforcement. However, challenges such as inadequate staffing, poor funding, cultural stigma, and weak policy implementation continue to hinder the effective use of Guidance and Counselling Tools to mitigate Gender – Based Violence.

Therefore, for Nigeria to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) on inclusive and equitable quality education, strengthening Guidance and Counselling Services must be a national priority. Investing in Counsellors' recruitment, training, infrastructure development, and policy integration, could make schools to become safer places where students can learn without fear of harassment, exploitation, or violence. In the long term, such efforts will not only reduce the prevalence of GBV but also contribute to the development of emotionally resilient, confident, and socially responsible citizens.

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