

Integrating Faith-Based Approaches into Gender-Based Violence Prevention and Peace Building in Enugu State, Nigeria

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.37745/gjahss.2013/vol14n26373>

Published April 14, 2026

Citation: Chukwudulue S.H.O. and Ubelejit-Nte A.A. (2026) Integrating Faith-Based Approaches into Gender-Based Violence Prevention and Peace Building in Enugu State, Nigeria, *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 14(2),63-73

Abstract: *Gender-based violence (GBV) remains an issue of pressing concern in Nigeria. Studies have suggested that involving faith actors can be an effective strategy in tackling GBV from its roots especially in deeply religious communities. Therefore, this study aims to explore the integration of faith based approaches in GBV prevention and peace-building in Enugu state, Nigeria. The study adopted social norms theory in explaining how faith actors can serve as critical agents of social influence capable of shaping norms, attitudes, and behaviors within communities. The study adopted a qualitative design. Primary data was gathered through in-depth interviews with 27 Christian faith leaders from selected Enugu communities. The findings of the study revealed among others that even though faith leaders in Enugu communities lack fundamental training in handling GBV cases, they are open to learning and collaborations. The study concluded in line with other studies that integrating faith -based approaches into GBV prevention and peace-building offers a culturally relevant and sustainable strategy for reducing violence and promoting peace-building in Enugu state. This paper recommends targeted training for religious leaders as well as strengthened collaboration between faith based organizations and government agencies/NGOs in educating, creating awareness and handling GBV cases in Enugu communities.*

KEYWORDS: gender-based violence, faith-based organizations, peace-building, social norms, Enugu state

INTRODUCTION

Gender Based Violence (GBV) is as a violation of fundamental human rights that transcends cultural, socioeconomic, and religious boundaries. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), approximately one in three women experiences some form of GBV especially physical and sexual violence in her lifetime which is mostly perpetuated by intimate partners. In Nigeria, GBV is widely prevalent with studies showing high rate of

intimate partner violence (IPV), sexual abuse, and other forms of violence against women across different regions of the country. (Benebo et al., 2018; National Population Commission [NPC] & ICF, 2019).

In south-eastern Nigeria, studies have shown a high prevalence of IPV (Okedare et al., 2025; Oluwole et al., 2022). GBV manifests within sociocultural and religious contexts which influences response mechanisms and recurrence. Several scholars have established that religious teachings and institutions shape moral consciousness, social norms, and interpersonal relationships, especially in African societies where religious institutions holds deep moral and cultural authority (Le Roux *et al.*, 2020; Pew Research Center, 2016). In Enugu state, a predominantly Christian state, the same can be said about Christian religious institutions. They play a central role in defining acceptable behavior, family structure, and communal harmony (Adogame, 2010). As such, their doctrines and practices significantly influence how gender roles are understood and how violence is perceived or justified. Studies have noted that when doctrines and scriptures are interpreted through the lens of love, justice, and equality, these teachings can foster compassion, reconciliation, and social inclusion. However, when misinterpreted or selectively applied, they perpetuate silence, normalize suffering, and reinforce patriarchal dominance (Istratii, 2020; Nason-Clark et al., 2018).

Consequently, faith leaders have a significant role to play in GBV prevention and peace-building as they often command high levels of trust and authority thereby making them influential figures in society. Their authority often extends beyond the pulpit. They are regarded as spiritual intermediaries whose pronouncements carry sacred weight and moral legitimacy (Chaves, 1994). In contexts where state institutions are weak or distrusted, their authority can overshadow civil laws, meaning that the stance a Priest or Imam takes on GBV or IPV can determine whether abuse is condemned or ignored (Bartkowski & Read, 2003). It is against this backdrop that Organizations such as UN women, emphasize the need to engage religious leaders and religious institutions in addressing GBV particularly in deeply religious societies like Nigeria. The integration of faith based approaches into GBV prevention and peace building is in the limelight in both policy and academic discussions. Moreover, the inclusion of religious leaders and Faith based organizations (FBO's) in gender and peace-building efforts is vital to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) particularly SDG 5 which is centered on achieving gender equality and SDG 16 which is focused on peaceful, just, and inclusive societies.

Despite the promising potentials, integrating faith based strategies into formal prevention frameworks remains limited and empirical evidence on their effectiveness especially in local communities like Enugu state is largely limited. In light of this, the study aims to explore the integration of faith based approaches into gender based violence and peace-building in Enugu state, Nigeria. The specific of objectives of the study are to;

1. Explore the roles of faith leaders in the prevention of gender-based violence and promotion of peace-building in Enugu State.
2. Examine the opportunities and challenges associated with handling integrating faith-based approaches into GBV prevention and peace-building efforts in Enugu State.

The study is guided by the following research questions;

1. What roles do faith leaders play in the prevention of gender-based violence and in peace-building efforts in Enugu State?
2. What are the perceived opportunities and challenges in integrating faith-based approaches into GBV prevention and peace-building in Enugu State?

Conceptual and Theoretical Review

Faith-based approaches are community interventions that explicitly engage religious actors, religious texts, and institutions to shape beliefs and behaviour; in Nigerian program evaluations they are framed as norms-shifting and congregation-centered strategies that use scripture and leader influence to address violence and gender roles (Shaw et al., 2023).

GBV is widely recognized as a significant global human rights and public health issue. It refers to harmful acts directed at individuals based on their gender, including physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse. The World Health Organization defines GBV as any act that results in physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering, including threats, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty (World Health Organization, 2010). According to Vyas and Jansen (2018) GBV is fundamentally rooted in unequal power relations and socially constructed gender norms that perpetuate discrimination, especially against women and girls.

Peace-building involves processes such as conflict resolution, reconciliation, and the promotion of social harmony (Galtung, 1996). The relationship between GBV and peace-building is increasingly recognized in both academic and policy discourse. This is because GBV contributes to cycles of violence and can undermine community stability and cohesion. Addressing GBV is therefore essential for achieving sustainable peace. Religious institutions are organized bodies that uphold and promote religious beliefs, doctrines, and practices within a society (Durkheim, 1912). These institutions, particularly churches in the Christian context play a crucial role in shaping community values, influencing individual behavior, and establishing ethical norms that govern social interactions (Weber, 1922). They provide spiritual guidance, serve as centers of moral authority, and exert significant influence over various aspects of personal and social life, including gender roles, family dynamics, and interpersonal relationships. Within these institutions, religious leaders function as figures of authority who interpret, teach, and enforce religious teachings (Chaves, 1994). They play a vital role in guiding their congregations, shaping attitudes toward societal issues, and influencing followers' beliefs about marriage, family, and gender relations (Woodhead, 2011). Their teachings and decisions affect not only the spiritual lives of believers but also their legal, cultural, and interpersonal relationships, including how violence against women and intimate partner violence (IPV) are understood and addressed within religious communities. The study is anchored on Social norm theory. This theory explains that people are influenced by the real, imagined or perceived behaviour of their peers (Johnson, 2012). Social norms can be understood as shared expectations within a group that influence how members are expected to behave, even in the absence of formal rules or legal enforcement (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). These norms often create a sense of social pressure that encourages individuals to either adopt or avoid certain behaviors (Ajzen, 1991). In many cases, social norms operate subtly, shaping individuals' actions through their perceptions of what others consider acceptable or typical. However, they may also be

reinforced through direct communication and interaction among group members (Hogg & Reid, 2006). In religious institutions, if GBV is condoned or scriptures are interpreted by religious leaders in a way that makes GBV implied or acceptable then it could affect behaviour among religious worshipers. In the context of Enugu state, the stance of the church and church leaders towards GBV can dictate how GBV is perceived and determine how members behave. Therefore it is pertinent to involve faith-based actors into gender-based violence (GBV) prevention and peace-building efforts.. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), inclusive and community-driven approaches are critical for effective peace-building (UNDP, 2020).

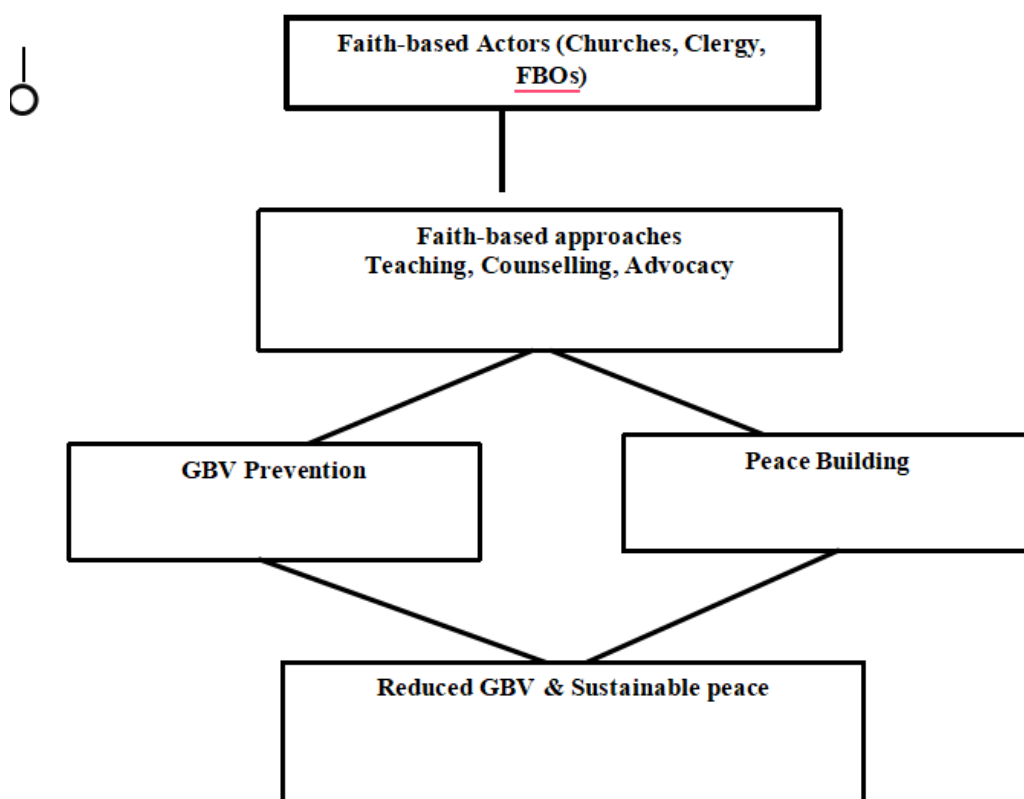


Figure 1.1 Conceptual Framework

Figure 1.1 highlights the conceptual framework of this paper and shows the flow of relationship between faith-based actors such as churches, pastors, and faith-based organizations (FBOs) and how they serve as critical agents of social influence capable of shaping norms, attitudes, and behaviors within communities through the various means available to them.

Faith-based approaches, includes religious teachings, pastoral counseling, advocacy, and scriptural interpretation, represent the primary mechanisms through which these actors engage with issues of GBV and peace-building. The framework further illustrates that faith-based approaches contribute to two key outcomes: GBV prevention and peace-building. GBV prevention involves efforts aimed at changing harmful gender norms, increasing

awareness, and providing support for survivors. Evidence suggests that community-based interventions that challenge patriarchal norms and promote gender equality are effective in reducing violence (Heise, 2011; UN Women, 2020). Faith leaders, when properly engaged, can play a transformative role in reshaping beliefs that justify or tolerate violence against women.

However, it is important to note that the effectiveness of faith-based approaches is influenced by several moderating factors. Cultural norms and patriarchal structures may reinforce gender inequalities Nnnabueze (2000). This can hinder the ability of faith actors to challenge harmful practices. Additionally, certain interpretations of religious doctrines may perpetuate victim-blaming or discourage reporting of GBV. Studies such as Heise (2011) highlight the importance of addressing these structural and normative barriers in violence prevention efforts. Government policies, institutional support, and community perceptions also play a critical role in shaping outcomes.

Ultimately, the framework proposes that when faith-based approaches are effectively integrated, they can lead to reduced GBV and enhanced sustainable peace in Enugu State. The framework is in line with the study of Le Roux *et al.*, (2020) in their study titled “Engaging with Faith Group to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls in Conflict-Affected Communities: Results From Two Community Surveys in the DRC “. The study was carried out in a three-year time frame and the intervention consisted of two surveys (baseline/endline) in three health areas in Ituri Province in the DRC. The baseline survey was carried out before the involvement of faith actors, while the end line survey was conducted after the intervention at the end of the three year period. With a total sample size of 751 respondents for the baseline survey and 1198 respondents for the end line survey. The primary instrument of data collection were interviewer-administered questionnaire. The study showed more equitable gender attitudes and less tolerance for IPV during the end line survey. The study concluded that faith leaders are key entry points into a community and are able to influence the community members thereby being an effective intervention strategy.

METHODOLOGY

Enugu State, located in Nigeria's southeast geopolitical region, serves as the research's subject area. The state is a predominantly christian state and is divided into three Senatorial Districts. The state has seventeen local government areas, with an estimated population of 7,690,000, and a total land area of about 13,161 km². The Igbo ethnic group makes up the majority of the population, and both English and Igbo are widely spoken. Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Pentecostal christian religious institutions are prevalent, therefore indicating that Christianity is the predominant religion. Few mosques were observed in the communities visited with some communities having no mosque at all. Therefore, Enugu State's extensive network of Christian religious institutions offers an appropriate setting for examining integrating faith based approach to GBV prevention and peace-building.

Three LGAs were chosen at random from each senatorial district in the state using a simple random sampling technique. Igbo-Etiti, Nsukka, and Udenu were the three LGAs chosen at

random from the Enugu North senatorial district. The three LGAs from the Enugu East senatorial district are Isi Uzo, Enugu South, and Nkanu East. Aninri, Udi, and Oji River are the LGAs chosen from the Enugu West senatorial district. Next, a tour of the nine local government areas' headquarters communities was conducted. Ndeaboh, Ogbede, Ikem, Nsukka, Amagunze, Oji River, Obollo-Afor, Udi, and Uwani were thus among the communities that were visited. Three FBO's specifically churches were visited in each community. The head Pastor, Priest or Chaplain or an assigned representative of the Clergy of the churches visited were interviewed. This brought the total sample size to 27 which is considered sufficient for a qualitative inquiry. The in-depth interviews were conducted. Informed consent was gotten from all participants and the principles of anonymity and confidentiality were strictly adhered to.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this paper are presented under key themes that emerged in relation to the roles of faith leaders in gender-based violence prevention and peace building in Enugu State, as well as the opportunities and challenges of integrating faith-based approaches.

Theme one: Role of faith based actors in GBV prevention

Findings suggest that faith leaders play a central role in shaping community attitudes towards gender relations and violence through sermons, marriage counselling, and pre-marital guidance sessions. These platforms are used to promote messages of respect, fidelity and non-violence within families. In many cases, religious teachings are used to discourage aggressive behaviour and encourage reconciliation between partners.

"I always tell them when they come for marriage counselling to love and respect one another" — Clergy 27

"I ensure to always have a special session for Men in pre-marital counselling. Its high time Men stop seeing their wives a property but rather as individuals who have a mind of their own" — Clergy 13

"Any Sunday I preach about these things you can see the atmosphere in the church is charged. Some Men have even accused me of supporting women too much. It is important to be balanced in these issues" — Clergy 18

This finding is in line with Le Roux *et al.*, (2020) whose study identified faith leaders as strategic partners and key players in addressing GBV through sermons and other interactions in the religious domain.

However, some responses indicate that certain religious interpretations by faith leaders may unintentionally reinforce gender hierarchies particularly when teachings emphasize female submission without equal emphasis on mutual respect as seen below;

"I cannot preach what is not in the scriptures. I only teach what bible says. Women must be submissive no matter what that is what the bible says." — Clergy 10

"A man is the head of the home and so he has the authority over his wife. She has to obey him and do what he says." — Clergy 8

The above highlights the need to actively engage faith leaders who might unknowingly blur the line between submission and abuse.

Theme two: Faith-Based Institutions as Agents of Peace-building

Findings indicate that faith-based institutions play a significant role in peace-building within communities in Enugu State. Religious leaders are frequently involved in mediating family disputes, marital conflicts, and broader community tensions.

Faith-based peace-building efforts focus on reconciliation, forgiveness, and restoration of social harmony. Participants report that as religious leaders, they often encourage conflicting parties to resolve disputes amicably, drawing on spiritual and moral teachings.

“You cannot be a christian if you do not love peace or you are not a peaceful person. In my church we resolve issues peacefully” — Clergy 2

“We try to do our part. When we are faced with issues always find a way to resolve them.” — Clergy 5

“Jesus was a man of peace. If we claim to be his followers it means we are called to peace in our family lives and in the society at large.”— Clergy 21

“I believe that dispute resolution is one of the functions of the church. Its something we do almost all the time” — Clergy 9

This aligns with the findings of Haynes (2009) that religious institutions are trusted mediators, capable of fostering unity and rebuilding relationships in conflict situations.

Theme three: Opportunities for Integrating Faith-Based Approaches

The study identifies several opportunities for integrating faith-based approaches into GBV prevention and peace-building. First, the high level of trust placed in religious leaders provides a strong foundation for influencing social norms and behaviors.

Second, the widespread presence of churches and religious organizations in both urban and rural areas ensures broad community reach. Third, collaboration between faith-based organizations and non-governmental organizations has the potential to strengthen awareness campaigns and survivor support systems.

The Clergies interviewed also noted that their platforms offer acceptable channels for discussing sensitive issues such as domestic violence, sexual relations and gender issues. They noted in the following verbatim quotes that collaborating with other specialized organizations is a welcome development;

“Collaboration is a welcome development. For events like Father’s days, Mother’s day and other celebrations the church is open to collaborations with specialized organization.” — Clergy 9

“I think it is very important that the church plays a central role. We have the platform and the people. It will be good to work with NGO’s and organizations that can teach us more about this topic as long as they do not teach anything that is against the christian faith. ” — Clergy 1

“If churches can work with social welfare and legal bodies, maybe women will stop dying silently.” — Clergy 16

The findings corroborate Le Roux and Bartelink (2017) study which emphasized the effectiveness of multi-sectorial partnership in addressing harmful practices and Nason-Clark *et al.*, (2017) study where faith settings was identified to reduce stigma and encourage open dialogue.

Theme four: Challenges in Integrating Faith-Based Approaches

Despite these opportunities, several challenges were identified. A major challenge is the persistence of patriarchal interpretations of religious texts, which may discourage reporting of GBV or normalize certain forms of abuse as seen in the following verbatim responses;

“I cannot preach what is not in the scriptures. I only teach what bible says. Women must be submissive no matter what....” — Clergy 10

“There is a stance Christians have towards all these things and I don’t think we should keep over flogging the issue. A woman was made for a man, she was made to help a man. She is a help-meet. If she isn’t helping, then what is she doing?” — Clergy 17

This finding is in line with Lewis et al (2025) whose study recorded that many faith leaders tilt towards male-privileging interpretations of scripture and require targeted engagement to shift their position.

Secondly, some religious leaders lack formal training on GBV, limiting their ability to respond appropriately to cases involving violence. This is depicted in following verbatim quotes;

“...I felt helpless. I didn’t know what else to do than to counsel them with the Bible.” — Clergy 25

“We are trained in scriptures, not in trauma or abuse.” — Clergy 7

“When cases like this come up, we handle some and for the cases that are very serious, we refer the matter to the extended family or police.” — Clergy 19

“Honestly I think we need to receive some form of training on how to handle these cases. We depend on the holy spirit to guide us in dealing with some of these issues but sometimes the cases are beyond us...” — Clergy 9

Lastly, stigma surrounding GBV within religious communities also discourages survivors from openly reporting abuse.

“There are cases where we hear of them but I think it is shame that make some of these men and women going through violence at home not come out to report ” — Clergy 15

“Some people still see us as third parties and maybe feel we will preach about them so they don’t let us know on time when they start experiencing such” — Clergy 11

“Nobody wants to be labeled as having a troubled marriage so I cannot blame them” — Clergy 26

Stigma surrounding gender based violence within religious communities can discourage survivors from reporting abuse, particularly where cultural and religious expectations

emphasize silence, endurance and family preservation (Gillum, 2008; World Health organization, 2010).

Theme five: Cultural and Structural Influences on GBV and Peace-building

Findings also highlighted the influence of cultural norms and societal expectations on both GBV and peace-building efforts. In some Enugu communities, there are certain traditional beliefs that reinforce male dominance and foster GBV. This is in line with the findings of Nnnabueze (2000) who identified son preference, inheritance distribution to only male children and a host of other harmful traditional practices prevalent in Enugu state. These cultural factors interact with religious interpretations, sometimes strengthening resistance to GBV prevention messages. However, where religious leaders actively challenge harmful norms, positive behavioral change is likely to occur. While structural support was sparse, two church had begun initiating support mechanisms such as specialized women's ministries or inviting professional counselors.

"We recently invited a counselor to train the women leaders of the various women groups in the church." — Clergy 14

"We have a specialized women's ministry and I know they teach the women about all these things there" — Clergy 20

Though few, the above show how powerful and instrumental the faith leaders can be when there is structured institutional support and a firm stance against GBV. This finding is in line with the conclusion of Le Roux et al. (2020) who pointed out that faith leaders are key entry points into a community and are instrumental in influencing not just the members of their faith but the community at large.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study examined the integration of faith based approaches into GBV prevention and peace-building in Enugu State, Nigeria. The findings reveal that faith based actors play a significant role in shaping norms, mediating conflict and influencing community responses to GBV. However, the study also noted that while faith-based institutions possess considerable potential to challenge harmful practices and promote gender justice certain interpretation of religious teachings may reinforce patriarchal norms that sustain violence. The study concludes that integrating faith based approaches into GBV prevention and peace-building is not only necessary but equally promising and possess great potential to shape narratives, perceptions, attitudes and behaviour towards GBV and in maintaining sustainable peace. The study recommends the following:

1. Religious leaders should undergo capacity trainings on GBV prevention, human rights and appropriate response mechanism to GBV and IPV. This will equip them with practical tools for counselling, referral and also enhance their capacity to provide informed guidance and support to survivors.
2. Government agencies and NGOs should collaborate closely with religious institutions to design and implement community based interventions. Leveraging on the platforms, trust, and influence faith leaders have, can ensure wider reach and deeper community

engagement, thereby enhancing awareness, promoting positive behavioral change and improving the effectiveness of GBV prevention and response effort.

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