

# BULLYING BEHAVIOUR AMONG HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS: ANALYSIS OF PREVALENCE AND GENDER DIFFERENCES

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** This study sought to investigate the prevalence of bullying as well as to identify gender differences that exist in bullying behaviour. Bullying occurs mostly among children and adolescents in several settings such as schools and on the streets. The thrust of this study is on bullying that occur in schools.

**Methodology:** Four hundred secondary school students (mean age = 17.8, SD = 1.2) were randomly selected in four urban secondary school students in Lagos. The descriptive survey research design was employed for this study. A research question and one research hypothesis were raised and tested. The Bullying Prevalence Questionnaire (BPQ) by Rigby and Slee was adopted for data collection in this study.

**Results:** There was a high prevalence of bullying behaviour among the participants'. The result showed a significant gender differences in the prevalence of bullying behaviour ( $t = 3.135$ ,  $df = 398$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), the perpetration of bullying behaviour ( $t = .349$ ,  $df = 156$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and in being a victims of bullying behaviour ( $t = 1.332$ ,  $df = 171$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

**Conclusion:** To prevent psychopathological tendencies among victims of bullying, educational administrators are encouraged to put mechanisms in place to check incidences of bullying behaviour before they fester and to encourage victims to report acts of bullying with perpetrators sanctioned accordingly.

**Keywords:** Bullying behaviour, prevalence, gender, victims, perpetrators.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

*Every child and youth has the right to be respected and safe.*

*Bullying is a violation of this basic human right. Children and youth involved in bullying suffer.*

*Bullying and victimization problems begin early in life and for some last a lifetime.*

*(Kandersteg Declaration, Switzerland, June 10, 2007)*

There are definitional issues with bullying going by the history of the term. The way and manner researchers define and measure bullying varies across studies and participants (Espelage & Swearer, 2004; LaFontaine, 1991; Smith & Levan, 1995). Olweus (1993), a leading authority in the study of bullying posits that bullying is a repeated emotional, verbal, or physical attack against other persons or peers who are vulnerable because of size, limited strength, being outnumbered or other forms of imbalance of power. According to Olweus (1993), bullying behaviours are those direct or indirect aggressive acts that have three qualities such as that bullying behaviour are intentional, that bullying is repeated overcome and thirdly that bullying occurs between two parties where power differential exists. However, Solberg & Olweus (2003) warned that it is not bullying when two students tease each other in a friendly, playful way or when two students about the same strength or power argue or fight.

Rigby (1993) refers to bullies as individuals who have an aggressive personality pattern coupled with the tendency to react aggressively in situations. Bullies have an inability to control their countenance against aggressive tendencies and a positive attitude toward violence. School bullying is becoming a threat that no school can afford to dismiss. In Nigeria, widespread bullying occurs daily in secondary schools. It is becoming a threat that no school can afford to dismiss with a wave of the hand. Apart from Nigeria, bullying behaviour is no doubt a common feature and a nightmare in schools worldwide. It is a worrisome practice in schools because it infringes on the child's right to human dignity, privacy,

freedom and security. The physical, emotional and educational consequences of bullying behaviour can never be underestimated. As noted by Wet (2008), bullying influences the victims physical, emotional, social and educational well-being.

Although school is a social network for children and adolescents, children may, on occasion, demonstrate bullying or be exposed to various bullying types within this network. According to researchers such as Kapci, 2004; Karen & Karen 2004; Nelson, 1996 as cited by Karatas, Tagay & Savi Cakar (2016), bullying is a serious and common problem in schools. There are many definitions of school bullying in the literature, however, it is difficult to define the concept of school bullying merely as abuse and violence. Peer bullying includes words and actions made consciously and deliberately, and which are intended to pose physical, mental, social and psychological harm.

Bullying comes in different shades and most studies supports this assertion. Equally supported is that the types of bullying that occur are fairly similar across countries. In a British study covering 23 schools by Rivers & Smith (1994), it was found that direct verbal aggression was the most common form of bullying, occurring with similar frequency in both sexes. Direct physical aggression was more common among boys, while indirect forms were more common among girls. Similarly, in a study of several middle schools in Rome, the most common types of bullying reported by boys were threats, physical harm, rejection, and name-calling (Baldry, 1998).

In a large multi-country surveys spanning 66 countries (Due & Holstein, 2008), result indicate that the prevalence of bullying among school children vary widely across settings from about 7 to 70%. Bullying is prevalent in Nigeria. However, actual statistics are hard to come by. The dearth of data has made it difficult to appreciate the prevalence of bullying behaviour in Nigeria (Umoh, 2000). According to Federal Ministry of Education (FME, 2007), since the last decade, several cases of violence against children such as torture, kidnapping, shooting, sexual harassment, rape, corporal punishment and so on have been reported in various newspapers, magazines and television station all over the world. However, there is lack of documentation of most of the violent acts. This lack of documentation and increasing violence rate against children were part of the reasons for the global in-depth study of violence against children by the UN Sectary-General as directed by the General Assembly Resolution 57/90 of 2002 to provide a global picture.

In the United States of America, bullying behaviour occurs in many American schools and is perhaps one of the most under-reported safety problems (Batsche & Knoff, 1994). However, American schools harbor approximately 2.1 million bullies and 2.7 million are their victims (Fried, 1997, 2007). Specifically Rigby (2011) in his study found that 81% of their sample reported at least one act of bullying behaviour during the last month. Another study found that 82% of the respondents were bullied at some period in their academic lives. In addition, several studies from different parts of the US have reported 10-29 percent of the student surveyed were either bullied or victims (Kenny, 2005)

Bullying is a global problem among school children in Africa (Kubwalo, Muula, Siziya, Pasupulati & Rudatsikira, 2013; Brown, Riley, Butchart & Kann, 2008; Liang, Fisher & Lombard, 2007), in Europe (Craig, Harel-Fisch, Fogel-Grinvald, Dostaler, Hetland & Simons-Morton, 2009), in Asia (Kim, Catalano, Haggerty & Abbott, 2011); Wong, Lok, Lo & Ma, 2008) and in Nigeria (Egbochuku, 2007). In Zimbabwe, Zindi (1994) reported that 16% of the sampled students were bullied now and then while 18% reported being bullied weekly or more often. A study by Egbochuku (2007) among students in Benin City, Nigerian revealed that four in five participants (78%) reported being bullied and 85% admitted to bullying others at least once. In the survey by the FME (2007), it was reported that physical violence and psychological violence accounted for 85% and 50% respectively of the bulk of violence against children in schools. Across school location, physical violence was more prevalent in the rural (90%) than urban areas (79%). The data on psychological violence further revealed a prevalence of 61% in the Southern and 38.7% in the Northern parts of Nigeria.

## **1.1 Objective**

An important factor in bullying research is the influence of gender on one's overall bullying experience. The objective of the current study was to determine whether or not there is a difference in the prevalence, perpetration and victims of bullying between males and females.

## 1.2 Research Question and Hypothesis

**Research Question:** How Prevalent is Bullying Behaviour among Students'?

**Hypothesis 1:** There will be a significant difference in the prevalence, perpetration and victims of bullying based on gender

## 1.3 Ethical Considerations

According to Cohen and Swerdik (2010), ethics pertain to a body of principles of right, proper or good conduct. They asserted that a respondent that is involved in a research study has the right: to give informed consent; to be informed of the results; the right to privacy and confidentiality; and not to be labelled in a stigmatizing manner. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained via the principal of the selected secondary schools who coordinated with parents and guardians. Consent letters were signed by parents and returned to the researcher through the principal to give consent for their wards to participate in the present study. Assent letters were also signed by learners and returned to the researcher whereby they agreed to voluntarily participate in the study.

## 2 METHODS

Four hundred secondary school students (mean age = 17.8, SD = 1.2) were randomly selected in four urban secondary school students in Lagos. The descriptive survey research design was employed for this study. A research question and one research hypothesis were raised and tested. The Bullying Prevalence Questionnaire (BPQ) by Rigby and Slee was adopted for data collection in this study. Based on the students' population, systematic and simple random sampling was performed to make the sample representative.

### 2.1 Measures

The 20-item Bullying Prevalence Questionnaire (BPQ) developed by Rigby & Slee (1993) was employed for data gathering. Victims are identified from their responses about frequency and intensity of reported physical, verbal and indirect bullying. A respondent is considered a victim if they reported being bullied in one or more ways "once in a while" or pretty often (frequency) and classified the experience as "never" or "very often" (intensity). This measure can be used to differentiate three sub-scales: the bully scale, the victim scale and the pro-social scale.

This scale was validated by Rigby & Slee (1993) and it is widely used and cited justifying its relevance. The reliability of the BPQ using the Spearman-Brown coefficient was 0.724. for this study, the reliability of the BPQ was established using a test-retest reliability method. It was administered to 32 students in an urban secondary school which was not part of the selected four and after a four-week interval, the same instrument was re-administered. The Cronbach Alpha was used to calculate the reliability coefficient, which was 0.71. The research trajectory was therefore considered adequate for testing purposes.

In Table 1, it was revealed that 400 participants were involved in the study. More than half of the participants were male accounting for 51.5%. Majority of the participants (250) are between the ages of 10 and 14 years (62.5%). As expected, more males reported being victims of bullying (61.8%) and perpetrators (73.4%) of bullying behaviour respectively. Data on participants current class indicates that more than half (56.7%) are in the senior secondary school while the remaining 43.3% are currently in the junior secondary school.

### 3 RESULTS

Table 1: Demographic Variables of Respondents

Variables	Frequency (N = 400)	Percent
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	206	51.5
Female	194	48.5
<b>Age</b>		
10-14 years	250	62.5
15-17 years	150	37.5
<b>Victims of Bullying</b>		
Male	107	61.8
Female	66	38.2
<b>Perpetrators of Bullying</b>		
Male	116	73.4
Female	42	26.6
<b>Current Class</b>		
Junior School 1	28	7.0
Junior School 2	68	17.0
Junior School 3	77	19.3
Senior School 1	74	18.5
Senior School 2	79	19.7
Senior School 3	74	18.5

**Research Question 1:** How Prevalent is Bullying Behaviour among Students’?

Table 2: Summary of Mean Scores of Participants Showing the Prevalence of Bullying Behaviour among Secondary School Students

SN	Variables	Mean	Remark	SN	Variables	Mean	Remark
1	I like playing sports	2.66	High	11	I like to make others scared of me	3.01	High
2	I get good marks in class	3.51	High	12	Others leave me out of things on purpose	3.01	High
3	I get called by names by others	2.55	High	13	I get into fights at school	2.19	Low
4	I give soft kids a hard time	1.74	Low	14	I like to show others I am the boss	2.90	High
5	I like to make friends	3.39	High	15	I share things with others	3.05	High
6	I play up in class	2.56	High	16	I enjoy upsetting someone I can easily beat	1.73	Low
7	I fell I cannot trust others	3.02	High	17	I like to get into a fight with someone I can easily beat	1.67	Low
8	I get picked on by others	2.53	High	18	Others make fun of me	3.39	High
9	I am part of a group that goes on round teasing others	2.08	Low	19	I get hit and pushed around by others	1.70	Low
10	I like to help people who are being harassed	2.87	High	20	I enjoy helping others	3.48	High

Table 2 shows the prevalence of bullying among the study participants. The table represents the mean of respondents who have been bullied and are bullies which implies the prevalence of bullying. The mean which was set at 2.0 shows a high level of bullying. Fourteen (14) items show a high level of the

prevalence of bullying and six (6) items indicate a low level of bullying. Therefore, the research question is sustained.

**Hypothesis 1: There will be a significant difference in the prevalence, perpetration and victims of bullying based on gender**

Table X1: Means, Standard Deviations and t-values of Prevalence, Perpetration and Victims of Bullying Behaviour by Gender

<b>Prevalence</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>t-value</b>	<b>p</b>
Male	206	16.560	7.402	398	3.135	0.004
Female	194	14.361	6.214			
<b>Perpetration</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>t-value</b>	<b>p</b>
Male	116	15.785	2.130	156	0.349	0.044
Female	42	15.643	2.565			
<b>Victim</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>t-value</b>	<b>p</b>
Male	107	12.056	1.380	171	1.332	0.030
Female	66	12.394	1.952			

The resulting difference between male and female respondents in the prevalence of bullying behaviour as presented in Table X1 reveals that there was a significant difference in the prevalence ( $t = 3.135$ ,  $df = 398$ ,  $p < 0.005$ , one-tailed), perpetration ( $t = 0.349$ ,  $df = 156$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , one-tailed) and in being victims of bullying behaviour based on gender ( $t = 1.332$ ,  $df = 171$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , one-tailed). However, the mean indicate that bullying behaviour is more prevalent among male respondents. Hypothesis one was therefore sustained.

#### 4 DISCUSSION

This study showed a high prevalence of bullying behaviour among students. This is in line with the findings of Olweus (1978) where it was reported that between 5 to 9 percent of students are exposed to bullying regularly globally. As noted by the Federal Ministry of Education (2007), Nigerian schools are rife with bullying and despite the growing incidents; the Federal Ministry of Education reported that its eradication or reduction remains an issue of great concern; largely because of the fact that reporting of incidents of violence in Nigerian schools is generally low. The reason for this is that students generally feel nothing will be done by school authorities if ever they report incidents of physical violence. A survey conducted in England of 253,755 children and young people of ages 6, 8 and 10 indicates that bullying was widespread with about 60% of children reporting being bullied in their school (Campbell, 2005). Crick and Grotpeter (1995) suggested that, “both girls and boys are aggressive but tend to exhibit distinct forms of the behavior” (p.721). Findings in this study show that bullying behaviour is prevalent. In secondary schools, students are more interested in gaining control and attention and in order to achieve such control and attention, they resolve to the perpetration of bullying behaviour.

The hypothesis revealed that there is a statistical significant difference in the prevalence of bullying behaviour. The mean difference shows that more males than females engage in bullying behaviour and that males bully more than the female respondents. This assertion are supported by Bosworth (2009); Kumpulaine (2008) and Rivers and Smith (1974). Bosworth (2009) found that boys engage in higher amounts of bullying behaviour than girls. Kumpulaine (2008) found that males were more likely to stay involved in bullying over a 4-year period of time than females. Farrington (1993) noted that the prevalence of female bullies reduces steadily with age, but the prevalence of male bullies remains constant from about the age of earth to sixteen years. Additionally, Chapell, Hasselman, Kitchin, Lomon, Maclver, & Sarullo (2006) discovered that males bullied significantly more in both elementary and high school than female did.

In this study, there was a statistical significant difference in the perpetration of bullying behaviour based on gender. The mean difference shows that more males than females perpetrate bullying behaviour. This position is supported by a study (Turkel, 2007) where it was reported that parents discourage direct physical aggression in girls but boys on the other hand have more freedom to

express their anger in direct physical ways. However, because girls are not permitted to express physical anger, they resort to gossiping and spreading rumours as a way of letting out their anger. Studies (Turkel, 2007; Griezel, Finger, Bodkin-Andrews, Craven & Yeung, 2012) have found that males are mainly bullied by males while females are bullied by both male and females indicating that both genders are victims of bullying. In this study, there is a significant difference in victims of bullying by gender, however, the mean scores show little difference. In a study by Griezel et al., (2012), it was reported that, "overall, boys engaged in and were the target of traditional bullying more than girls" This finding suggests that boys not only bully more but also fall victim to bullying more so than girls.

#### 4.1 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to discover the prevalence, perpetration and victims of bullying between male and female respondents. The study found a high level of bullying behaviour among the respondents with males showing significant difference in prevalence and perpetration of bullying behaviour. In conclusion, to prevent psychopathological tendencies among perpetrators and victims of bullying, having established a high prevalence of bullying behaviour among students, educational administrators are encouraged to put mechanisms in place to check incidences of bullying behaviour before they fester and to encourage victims to report acts of bullying with perpetrators sanctioned accordingly.

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