



# Gender-Based Violence Prevention and Response: **What Has Changed?**



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**Ford Foundation**



# Rivers State

Treasure Base of the Nation

Owu Fall

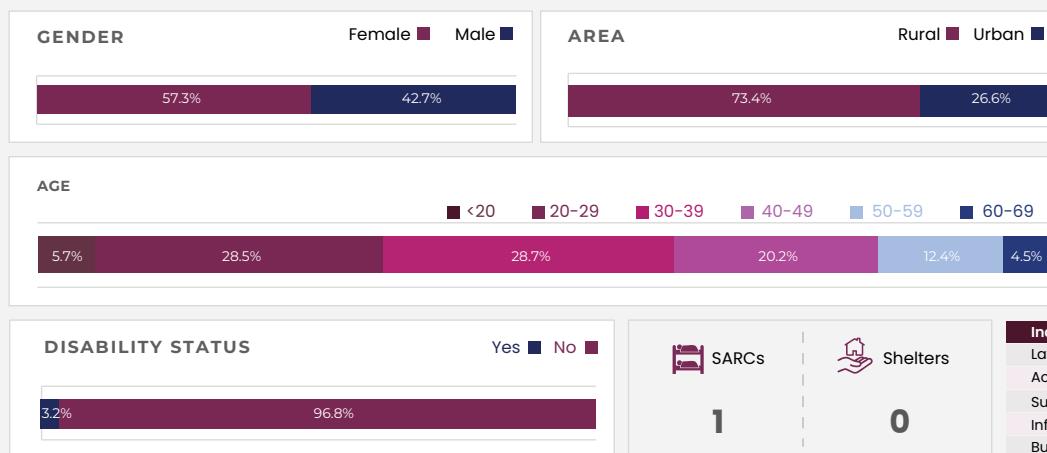
# Rivers State

Population: 9,587,035

49.3% Female 50.7% Male

Overall Grade 65.0%

## Respondents Demography (n = 1,045)



## Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development

### BUDGET ALLOCATION

₦2.57bn

(This accounts for 0.3% of the total state budget)

### BUDGET PERFORMANCE

₦162.59m

(This accounts for 6.3% of total allocation to the ministry)

6.3%

Capital   Personnel   Overhead

30.1%   56.6%   13.3%



Per Capita Spending

₦34.41

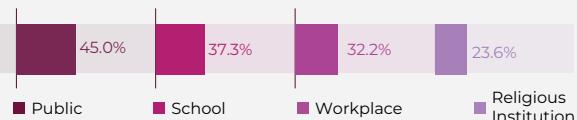
Indexes	Indicators			Total Grades
Laws and Policies	LP <sub>1</sub>	LP <sub>2</sub>	LP <sub>3</sub>	—
Access to Legal Justice	ALJ <sub>1</sub>	ALJ <sub>2</sub>	ALJ <sub>3</sub>	ALJ <sub>4</sub>
Support Services	SS <sub>1</sub>	SS <sub>2</sub>	SS <sub>3</sub>	SS <sub>4</sub>
Information and Awareness	IA <sub>1</sub>	IA <sub>2</sub>	IA <sub>3</sub>	IA <sub>4</sub>
Budget and Spending	BS <sub>1</sub>	BS <sub>2</sub>	BS <sub>3</sub>	—

## GBV Context 2025

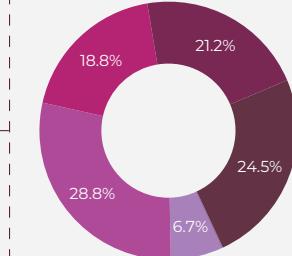
Have you or anyone you know experienced any form of gender-based violence in the last five years?



Where did you or the person experience the GBV?



Why did you or the person choose where you sought help?



What form of GBV did you or the person experience?



Family/relatives

Police/law enforcement authority

Friends/neighbors

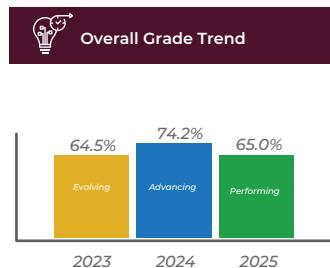
Traditional/community leader or group

Religious leader (Pastor, Ulama, Imam, Deity)

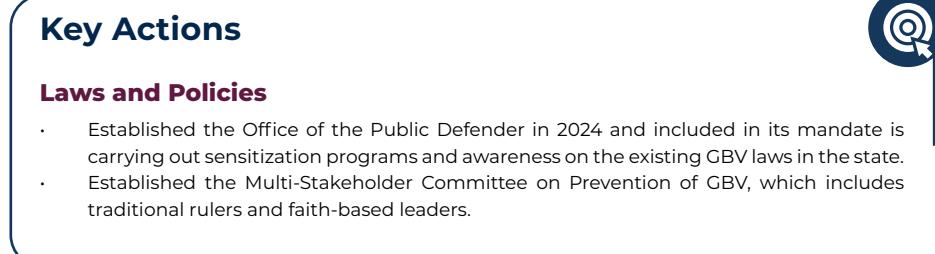
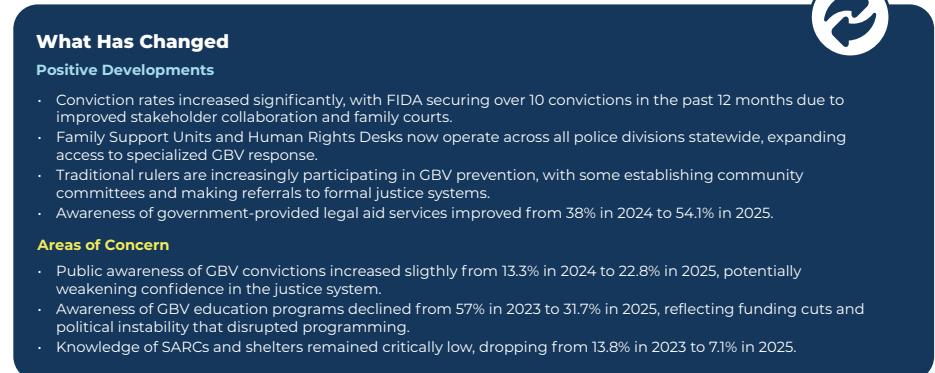
Employer/Work colleague/Labour group

I did not seek help

Lawyer



Index	2023	2024	2025
Laws and Policies	LP 75.0%	LP 83.3%	LP 75.0%
Access to Legal Justice	ALJ 86.3%	ALJ 81.3%	-1 ▼ ALJ 68.8%
Support Services	SS 75.0%	SS 75.0%	-1 ▼ SS 62.5%
Information and Awareness	IA 61.3%	+1 ▲ IA 81.3%	-1 ▼ IA 68.8%
Budget and Spending	BS 25.0%	+1 ▲ BS 50.0%	BS 50.0%



## Access to Legal Justice



- Established Family Support Units and Human Rights Desks across all police divisions in the state.
- Designated specialized GBV courts with two judges at the family high court level and two at the magistrate court level to expedite case processing.
- The newly created Office of the Public Defender provides free legal aid services with hotlines for residents unable to visit offices.

## Support Services

- Established 23 GBV response facilities ("Safe Homes") with trained response teams across all 23 LGAs, managed by the Ministry of Social Welfare and Rehabilitation.
- The Ministry of Health provides free medical services for survivors through the Rivers State Contributory Health Protection Programme (RIVCHPP) and enrolls eligible survivors in the program.

## Information and Awareness

- Office of the Public Defender conducted radio and television sensitization campaigns in August 2025 with support from Action Aid.
- TB Network partnered with Community Development Finance Initiative to create "My Story Project," a media platform where survivors share their experiences with consent to raise public awareness.

## Change Spotlight

Rivers State's most remarkable achievement between 2023 and 2025 has been the systematic establishment of Family Support Units (FSUs) and Human Rights Desks across all police divisions statewide. This represents a fundamental shift in how GBV cases are handled at the first point of contact with law enforcement.

The impact of this expansion is measurable and significant. The state designated specialized GBV courts at two judicial levels—two judges at the family high court and two at the magistrate court level—to expedite case processing. This structural reform contributed directly to a dramatic improvement in conviction rates, with FIDA securing over 10 convictions in the past 12 months alone, described as "high" due to increased awareness of the law among stakeholders. The establishment of the Office of the Public Defender in 2024, which provides free legal aid services with dedicated hotlines for residents unable to visit offices, further strengthened this justice ecosystem.

Public response to these reforms has been overwhelmingly positive. Awareness of government-provided legal aid services surged from 38% in 2024 to 54.1% in 2025. More telling is the community's trust in these systems: 82.8% of residents indicated they would seek help through formal justice channels if they or someone they knew experienced GBV, while 57.5% expressed willingness to serve as witnesses in GBV cases.



## Rivers State GBV Assessment Survey

Overall Grade 65.0%

### LAWS AND POLICIES



Are you aware of existing laws and/or policies that address gender-based violence (GBV) in the state?

Yes ■ No ■

65.1% 34.9%



Do you think customary or religious laws and/or practices are sufficient in preventing and responding to GBV in the state?

Yes ■ No ■

39.4% 60.6%



Do you know of anyone who has been convicted for GBV-related offenses?

Yes ■ No ■

22.8% 77.2%

### SUPPORT SERVICES



Do you know of, or have you visited, any active shelters and/or Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARCs) for GBV victims/survivors in the state?

Yes ■ No ■

7.1% 92.9%



Do you believe that these shelters and/or SARCs are effectively functional, adequately equipped, properly maintained, and sustainable over time?

Yes ■ No ■

37.8% 40.5% 12.2% 9.5%

■ Agree ■ Strongly agree ■ Indifferent ■ Disagree ■ Strongly Disagree



Which of these processes and procedures for reporting GBV-related incidents are you aware of? (Referral Pathways)

Yes ■ No ■

72.5% 41.1% 11.9% 17.3% 12.1%

■ Police ■ Hospital ■ Support group ■ Legal ■ None



Do you think informal support systems such as family, friends, religious centres, community groups, etc., are helpful to GBV victims/survivors?

Yes ■ No ■

29.4% 70.6%

### ACCESS TO LEGAL JUSTICE



Where would you seek justice if you, or anyone you know, experience GBV?

82.8% 15.7% 1.5%

■ Formal justice: e.g., police, courts, etc.  
■ Informal justice: e.g., traditional or religious heads, community groups, etc.  
■ I will not seek justice



If you witness GBV, would you feel safe serving as a witness during the investigation and trial?

57.5% 15.5% 27.0%

■ Yes, I would  
■ It depends on the robustness and effectiveness of the witness protection program  
■ No, I would not



Are you aware of legal assistance and services provided by the State to GBV victim/survivors?

■ Yes ■ No

54.1% 45.9%

### INFORMATION AND AWARENESS



Do you know of any GBV information and/or education programs or materials in the state?

■ Yes ■ No

31.7% 68.3%



How useful is/was the content of the GBV awareness material in educating you on GBV?

■ Mostly useful ■ Completely useful ■ A little bit useful ■ Not useful at all

33.7% 51.5% 14.2% 0.6%



Which GBV information and education materials are you aware of for persons with disabilities?

■ Audio ■ Visual ■ Sign ■ Picture ■ Simplified ■ Subtitle ■ Braille ■ None

35.5% 3.3% 22.2% 14.6% 10.0% 1.4% 16.3% 35.1%

## Rivers State GBV Context Trend (2024-2025)

Overall Grade 65.0%

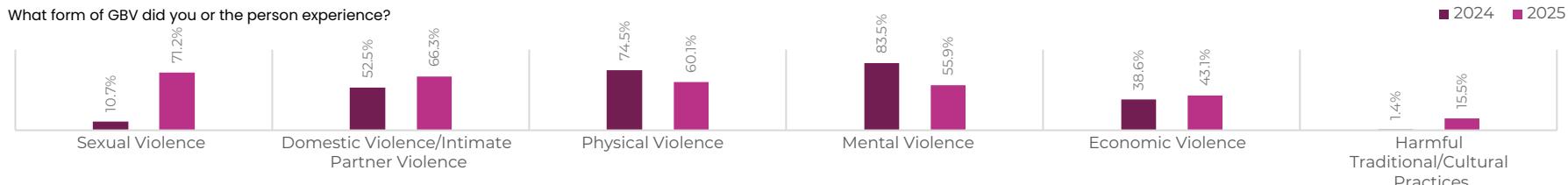
Have you or anyone you know experienced any form of gender-based violence in the last five years?



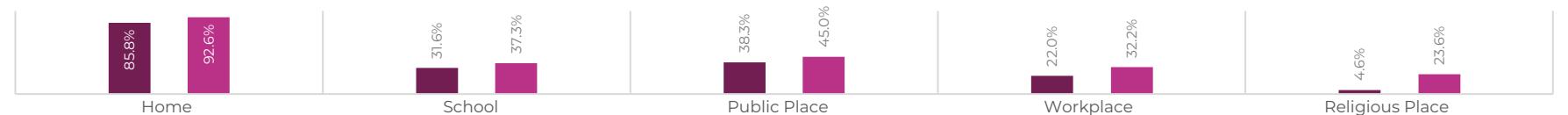
# 72.9%

of Rivers State population have either experienced GBV or knows someone who have experienced GBV

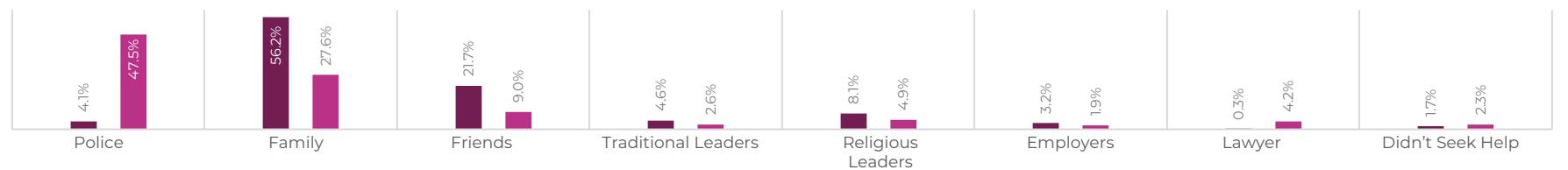
What form of GBV did you or the person experience?



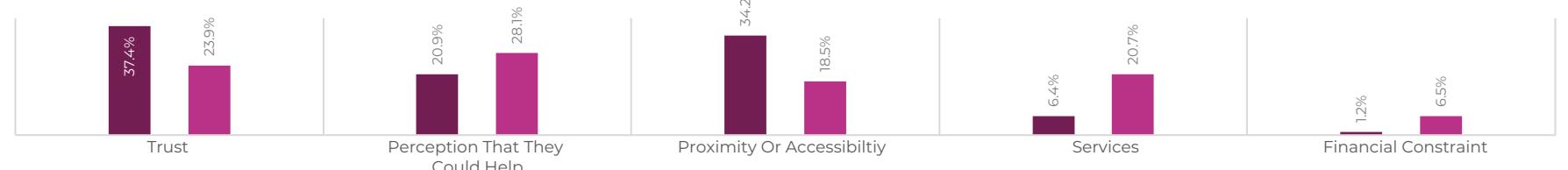
Where did you or the person experience the GBV?



Where did you or the person first seek help?

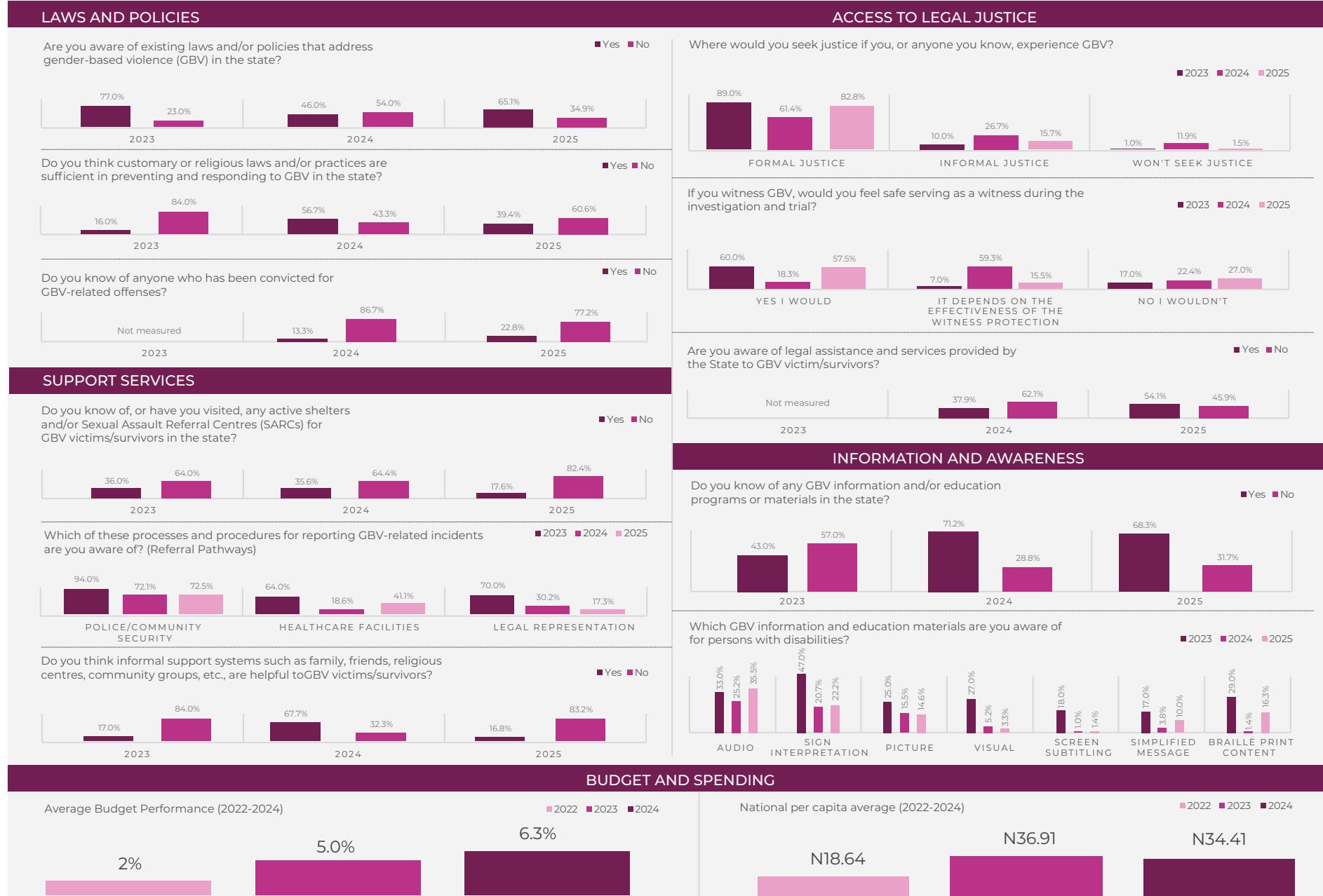


Why did you or the person choose where you sought help?



## Rivers State GBV Trend (2023-2025)

Overall Grade 65.0%





## KEY INSIGHTS

### Laws and Policies

#### Current State in 2025

Rivers State has been operating the VAPP Law since 2022, which closely mirrors the federal VAPP Act of 2015. A key modification was the designation of the Ministry of Social Welfare and Rehabilitation as the domicile ministry instead of Women Affairs. Public awareness of the VAPP Law and other GBV-related laws and policies is moderate (65.1%), and most residents (61.3%) believe these laws are effective in addressing GBV.

FIDA reported securing over 10 GBV convictions in the past 12 months, with conviction rates described as "high" due to increased awareness of the law among stakeholders. However, only 22.8% of residents are aware of any GBV-related convictions, which may weaken public confidence in the justice system.

Most residents (60.6%) view customary and religious laws as ineffective in preventing or responding to GBV. While harmful traditional practices such as widowhood rites that restrict women's remarriage, silencing of victims, and community-based settlements that prioritize family reputation over justice, persist, their influence appears to be declining due to ongoing sensitization efforts. The Multi-Stakeholder Committee on Prevention of GBV, which includes traditional rulers and faith-based leaders, has played an active role in raising awareness.

#### Changes Over Time (2023–2025)

Public awareness of GBV-related laws in Rivers State fluctuated over the years. After a sharp drop in 2024 (46%), awareness rebounded in 2025 to 65.1%.

In 2024, only 13.3% reported knowing someone who had been convicted for GBV, indicating little visibility of justice outcomes. However, this figure increased to 22.8% in 2025, which may reflect reduced transparency, fewer prosecutions, or weak communication around legal outcomes. Strengthening public communication and ensuring consistent follow-through on cases will be key to maintaining confidence in the formal justice system.

There was also growing recognition of customary and religious laws in GBV prevention, with perceptions of their helpfulness rising from 16% in 2023 to 39.4% in 2025. The Ministry of Justice

reported that traditional rulers are increasingly participating in GBV prevention efforts, with some establishing community-level committees to address cases and making referrals to formal justice systems. However, stakeholders emphasized that traditional systems remain biased and often fail to deliver justice commensurate with the severity of offenses.

### Access to Legal Justice

#### Current State in 2025

Rivers State residents show strong willingness to use formal justice systems, with 82.8% saying they would seek help through official channels if they or someone they knew experienced GBV. This is supported by the relatively high number (57.5%) willing to serve as witnesses in GBV cases. Stakeholders confirmed that formal justice processes are functional and effective. The typical journey involves reporting to police or organizations like FIDA, followed by investigation, medical examination, case filing, and prosecution.

Family Support Units and Human Rights Desks now exist across all police divisions, according to both police officials and civil society actors. The state has designated GBV courts at two levels: two judges at the family high court level and two at the magistrate court level. Court officials confirmed that these specialized courts expedite GBV case processing.

FIDA and the Office of the Public Defender provide free legal aid services to indigent survivors, ensuring that financial constraints do not prevent access to justice. But awareness of these state-provided services stands at 54.1%, meaning nearly half of the population remains uninformed about available assistance. Stakeholders noted that only two LGAs – Port Harcourt and Obio-Akpor – have optimal access to legal aid services, while riverine and distant areas like Ahoda, Khana, and Omoku remain underserved.

Confidence in informal justice systems is low, with only 15.7% believing they can deliver justice for survivors. Multiple stakeholders described how traditional and religious systems often pressure victims to withdraw cases or accept out-of-court settlements, undermining formal justice. Sustaining public trust in formal systems will require ongoing investment in public education and improved access to legal support.

#### Changes Over Time (2023–2025)

Over the years, most people continued to prefer formal justice systems, with 89% in 2023 and 82.8% in 2025 choosing this option. This shows that trust in formal institutions remained strong, even though there was a temporary drop in 2024. Similarly, the number of people who felt safe serving as

witnesses during GBV investigations stayed fairly stable – 60% in 2023 and 57.5% in 2025 – though concerns about protection still exist.

Awareness of legal support provided by the government improved over time. In 2024, only 38% of residents knew about these services, but by 2025, this increased to 54.1%. While this is a positive change, nearly half of the population still lacks awareness, showing that more public education is needed.

## Support Services

### Current State in 2025

Most residents (70.6%) prefer formal support systems for GBV survivors over informal options such as help from family, friends, religious institutions, or community channels. Unfortunately, availability and access remain significant barriers. Rivers State has one operational government-run SARC in Port Harcourt. This facility is complemented by 23 GBV response facilities across all 23 LGAs, with trained response teams in each. However, awareness of these facilities is critically low: only 7.1% of residents report knowing about the existence of a SARC or shelter in the state. Officials also acknowledged that services are not equally available across the state due to funding constraints, with rural and riverine areas particularly underserved.

Multiple stakeholders confirmed the existence of a comprehensive referral pathway: medical facilities provide treatment and counseling, the Ministry of Justice handles legal issues, the Ministry of Social Welfare addresses social concerns, and the Ministry of Women Affairs offers skills acquisition and economic support. Awareness of these broader support services such as medical, legal, psychological, or economic assistance, is modest, with 48.8% of residents indicating familiarity.

While most residents (72.5%) are aware of the police reporting and referral pathway, fewer know about hospital-based options (41.1%). Awareness of other channels, such as support groups (11.9%) and legal pathways (17.3%), remains limited. Officials described the referral pathway as “not really encouraging,” noting that fear, stigmatization, and community pressure to settle matters internally prevent many survivors from accessing formal support.

### Changes Over Time (2023–2025)

Perception of informal support systems such as family, religious centres, and community groups declined sharply. In 2023, most residents (74%) believed these systems were helpful to survivors, but by 2025, only 29.4% held that view. This change may reflect growing awareness of the limitations of informal support in addressing serious cases of GBV. It also highlights a stronger public preference for formal services, even though access to those services remains limited.

Between 2023 and 2025, awareness of shelters and SARCs remained low across the period: 13.8% in 2023 and 7.1% in 2025, suggesting that public knowledge of available support services is still far from adequate.

While knowledge of police reporting and referral pathways stayed relatively high, with a small drop from 94% in 2023 to 72.5% in 2025, awareness of other pathways such as healthcare and legal

options was more unstable.

## Information and Awareness

### Current State in 2025

Public awareness of GBV information and education materials in Rivers State remains low, with only 31.7% of residents reporting exposure to such materials. Although various government ministries and NGOs conducted awareness campaigns through media and community channels, their reach appears limited. This may be due to the absence of standardized, government-led production and distribution of IEC materials. Stakeholders noted that political instability and emergency governance disrupted planned activities and reduced funding for GBV programs: “We didn’t get government funding as much as we would have expected.” “We are trying to do one or two things before the emergency came in. So, that has really disrupted a lot of things.”

The state has made some progress in promoting GBV education through school-based sensitization. However, a formal GBV curriculum has not yet been introduced, despite strong public support: 91.6% of residents believe GBV and child sexual abuse education should be taught across all school levels.

Efforts have also been made to reach persons with disabilities using formats such as audio materials and picture-based messages. Still, the lack of dedicated sign language interpreters and limited access to other inclusive tools means these efforts are not yet consistent or widespread. Awareness of disability-inclusive materials remains low: 22.2% for sign interpretation, 16.3% for braille or printed content, and only 1.4% for screen subtitling.

### Changes Over Time (2023–2025)

Public awareness of GBV education programs dropped significantly, from 57% in 2023 to 31.7% in 2025. This decline suggests that outreach efforts have been inconsistent and may not be reaching new or wider audiences. This trend could be linked to major funding cuts from external donors such as USAID and PEPFAR, which led many organizations to scale back their awareness activities.

## Budget and Spending

### Budget Analysis 2024

Rivers State presents one of the most troubling GBV budget performances in 2024. Although ₦2.57 billion was allocated (0.32% of total budget), actual spending reached only ₦162.59 million—a dismal 6.3% execution rate that represents the lowest implementation performance among all states examined. This resulted in a per capita expenditure of merely ₦34.41, the lowest in the entire dataset, despite Rivers being a relatively wealthy, oil-producing state with substantial revenue. The stark gap between budget and execution suggests either severe administrative dysfunction or a fundamental lack of commitment to implementing GBV programs, leaving the state’s residents with virtually no funded support systems for addressing gender-based violence.

### Changes Over Time (2022–2024)

Budget allocations for GBV-related programmes have consistently declined in Rivers State, falling from ₦3.63 billion in 2022 to ₦3.12 billion in 2023 and ₦2.57 billion in 2024. While the state has consistently included GBV-specific line items in its budgets, none of these allocations recorded any implementation over the three-year period. This persistent non-performance underscores systemic challenges in fund release and project execution. The state continues to struggle significantly with budget implementation. Recorded performance was 2% in 2022, 5% in 2023, and 6.3% in 2024. Per capita spending stood at ₦34.41 in 2024, ₦36.91 in 2023, and ₦18.64 in 2022. Although there was a slight rise between 2022 and 2023, the decline in 2024 reinforces a pattern of persistently low and inconsistent investment in GBV-related interventions. In the 2024 budgets, Rivers State has the lowest per capita spending nationally, followed closely by Anambra State.

## Human Angle Stories

Ada (pseudonym) faced immense violence from her husband at the instructions of her mother-in-law. The abuse ranged from being pushed by her husband to induce labor according to her mother-in-law's wishes, which led to an episiotomy procedure that later developed into a fistula.

When she turned to the elders of her community in Rivers State, she was told that the man is the head of the home and should be obeyed. Six months after her first birth, her mother-in-law also began demanding that she get pregnant again. She ran away from the house and reached out to an NGO that offered her support, but all efforts to help her with her husband and newborn baby proved futile.

## KEY GAPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Index	Key Gaps	Recommendations
 <b>Laws and Policies</b>	Only 22.8% of residents are aware of any GBV-related convictions, despite FIDA securing over 10 convictions in the past 12 months. This gap undermines public confidence in the justice system.	Establish a public communication strategy that regularly shares case outcomes through media channels, community meetings, and social media platforms to demonstrate accountability and build trust in the justice system.
	While declining, practices such as widowhood rites that prevent women from remarrying, community-based settlements with token and pressure on victims to forgive perpetrators continue to undermine formal justice in some communities.	Scale up targeted sensitization programs for traditional and religious leaders across all LGAs, emphasizing the legal consequences of GBV and the limitations of informal justice. Partner with progressive traditional rulers to champion reform within their communities.
 <b>Access to Legal Justice</b>	Only two LGAs (Port Harcourt and Obio-Akpor) have optimal access to legal aid services, while riverine and distant areas like Ahoada, Khana, and Omoku remain underserved.	Establish legal aid desks in underserved LGAs. Deploy mobile legal aid clinics on a rotating schedule and provide transportation stipends to desk officers to enable outreach to remote communities.
	While 57.5% of residents are willing to serve as witnesses, stakeholders identified enforcement challenges including victims refusing to proceed to court due to fear and intimidation.	Develop and implement a comprehensive witness protection program that includes safe housing options, security escorts for court appearances, and legal protections against intimidation.
 <b>Support Services</b>	The state has only one-government run SARC, complemented by GBV response facilities across all LGAs. Awareness of these facilities remains critically low (7.1%).	Expanding the number of SARCs, ensuring equitable coverage across LGAs. Conduct public campaigns involving media coverage, community announcements, and distribution of contact information through multiple channels including healthcare facilities, police stations, schools, religious institutions, and markets.
	Support services are not equally available across the state. Rural and riverine areas lack adequate resources, and facilities in areas like Okrika must refer cases to Port Harcourt, creating access barriers for survivors.	Establish mobile support units that can reach riverine and remote communities on a scheduled basis, while strengthening existing GBV response facilities in underserved LGAs.
 <b>Information and Awareness</b>	Despite strong public support (91.6% of residents), a formal GBV curriculum has not been introduced in schools.	Pending the development of formal GBV curriculum, create and distribute state-level supplementary teaching guides and train teachers on integrating GBV topics into existing subjects.
	While efforts have been made to reach persons with disabilities using multiple formats, the lack of dedicated sign language interpreters limits consistent access.	Recruit or contract dedicated sign language interpreters for GBV awareness programs and ensure all public sensitization events are disability-friendly and accessible.
 <b>Budget and Spending</b>	Rivers State allocated ₦2.57 billion for GBV in 2024 but spent only 6.3%, the lowest execution rate nationally, resulting in ₦34.41 per capita—also the lowest. Despite being an oil-producing state with substantial revenue, budget implementation remained under 7% for three consecutive years, with less than 1% spending on all GBV-specific line items since 2022.	Conduct immediate administrative review to identify and remove barriers preventing fund release. Implement mandatory quarterly disbursement schedules with oversight mechanisms to ensure at least 50% budget execution and operationalize stalled GBV-specific programs that have recorded zero implementation for three years.

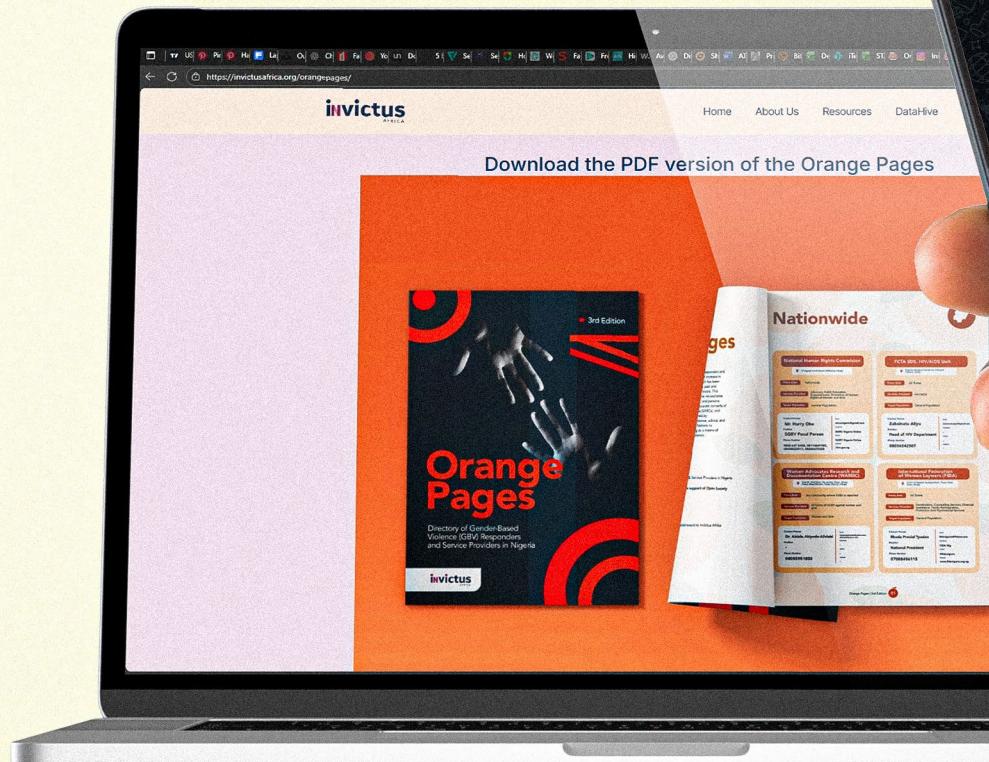


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