

AN ASSESSMENT OF RURAL WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES ON POLICING AND INSECURITY IN GWER WEST, BENUE STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract:

This study examined the perspectives of rural women on policing and insecurity in Gwer West, Benue State, Nigeria. Rural communities in Nigeria, particularly women, face significant security challenges due to communal conflicts, inadequate policing, and socio-economic vulnerabilities. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research investigated rural women's perceptions of police effectiveness and responsiveness; identified key insecurity challenges affecting their daily lives; explored their interactions with law enforcement in crime prevention, and assessed socio-economic and infrastructural factors influencing their trust in police services. Data were collected through structured questionnaire administered to 300 rural women and supplemented by in-depth interviews with community leaders and police personnel. Findings revealed that rural women generally perceive police services as inadequate and unresponsive to their specific security needs, with limited participation in community policing initiatives. Persistent insecurity, compounded by poverty and infrastructural deficits, severely disrupts women's livelihoods and undermines their confidence in law enforcement. The study underscored the necessity for gender-sensitive, community-oriented policing strategies that actively engage rural women and address the root causes of insecurity. Recommendations included enhancing police presence in rural areas, promoting women's inclusion in security governance, and improving socio-economic conditions to foster sustainable peace and security in Gwer West.

Keywords: Rural Women, Perspectives, Policing, Insecurity

Introduction:

Insecurity has become a pervasive challenge in many rural communities across Nigeria, with significant implications for the livelihoods and well-being of rural women. Gwer West in Benue State is one such areas that has experienced escalating insecurity, largely driven by communal violence, insurgencies, and conflicts between farmers and herders. These conflicts have led to the destruction of homes, farmlands, and displaced many indigenous people, forcing them into Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps or compelling them to live under constant threat of violence (United Nations Women's Institute of Peace and Conflict Resolution, 2019). Rural women, who are often the primary caretakers and economic providers through agriculture and trade, bear a disproportionate burden of these insecurities. Their indigenous activities have been severely disrupted, leaving many in despair and destitution.

Research indicates that rural insecurity in Nigeria manifests in various forms, such as kidnapping, banditry, cattle rustling, and communal clashes, with rural areas often lacking adequate police presence and

security infrastructure. This inadequacy exacerbates the vulnerability of rural populations, particularly women, who face heightened risks of physical, sexual, and psychological violence during periods of unrest (Ogunnowo & Olajide, 2024). The absence of effective policing and community engagement in rural areas undermine the sense of safety and security crucial for sustainable rural livelihoods.

Furthermore, communal violence in Benue State has been shown to have severe effects on the health security of rural women, exposing them to physical injuries, pregnancy complications, emotional trauma, and disruptions in family dynamics (Akpehe, Akor, Dewua, Mase Igbudu & Onah, 2021). These challenges are compounded by socio-economic marginalization and limited access to security services, which hinder women's ability to participate meaningfully in community policing or to influence security policies that directly affect them (Arisukwu & Okunola, 2013). Despite their critical role in sustaining rural economies and communities, rural women's perspectives on policing and insecurity remain underexplored, particularly in the context of Gwer West.

The dynamics of insecurity in rural Nigeria also intersect with broader issues of poverty and social disorder. Rural women disproportionately experience multidimensional poverty, which includes poor access to resources, information, and services essential for economic empowerment and security (Jerumeh, 2024). This poverty intensifies their vulnerability to insecurity and limits their capacity to respond to or recover from violent conflicts and criminal activities. Addressing rural insecurity thus requires a nuanced understanding of rural women's experiences and perceptions of policing and security measures, which can inform more inclusive and effective security strategies.

Insecurity in rural communities of Nigeria, particularly in Gwer West, Benue State, has escalated due to persistent communal violence, insurgencies, and conflicts between farmers and herders. This insecurity has disrupted the socio-economic activities of rural women, who are vital to agricultural production and community sustenance. Despite their critical role, rural women remain marginalized in security discourse and practice, with their perspectives on policing and insecurity largely neglected (UN Women IPCR, 2019).

The inadequate presence and responsiveness of police forces in rural areas exacerbate the problem, leaving women vulnerable to various forms of violence, including physical assaults, sexual violence, and psychological trauma (Emerald & Nwafor, 2024). The failure to effectively engage rural women in community policing initiatives further weakens the potential for collaborative security efforts and undermines trust between the police and rural communities (Tonipre & Nikereuwem, 2023). Consequently, rural women's sense of insecurity is heightened, and their livelihoods are threatened by ongoing violence and inadequate protection.

There is a critical need to assess rural women's perspectives on policing and insecurity in Gwer West to identify gaps in security provision, understand their unique vulnerabilities, and develop inclusive strategies that enhance their protection and participation in security governance. Thus, this study aims to fill the gap by providing an in-depth assessment of how rural women in Gwer West perceive the police and the insecurity challenges they face, thereby contributing to more gender-sensitive and community-centered approaches to rural security management in Benue State.

The study sets out to specifically examine rural women's perceptions of the effectiveness and responsiveness of police services; identify the key insecurity challenges faced by rural women and how these affect their daily lives; explore the nature and extent of rural women's interactions and cooperation with the police in crime prevention and community safety efforts as well as assess the socio-economic and infrastructural factors influencing rural women's sense of security and their trust in law enforcement agencies.

Literature Review:

Studies have revealed that rural women's perceptions of police effectiveness in Nigeria are shaped by both the limited presence of police in rural areas and the patriarchal social structures that marginalize women's voices in security matters. In Benue State, women's participation in peace and security processes remain low due to discrimination and marginalization, despite their active engagement at grassroots levels (UN Women IPCR, 2019). The male-dominated nature of security agencies and decision-making bodies further diminishes women's influence and affects their trust in police responsiveness. Women-led special desks addressing gender and human rights issues exist, but are insufficient to bridge the gap in police effectiveness as perceived by rural women.

Moreover, rural policing is hampered by inadequate infrastructure and resources, which reduces police visibility and responsiveness in remote areas, reinforcing women's feelings of insecurity (Archibong, Udobong & Antia, 2014). Studies on community policing in Nigeria suggest that women often view police as distant and unapproachable, yet some express willingness to collaborate if their concerns are acknowledged and if police adopt a more community-oriented approach (Arisukwu, Igbolekwu, Oyeyipo, Iwelumor, Abrifor & Olorunmola, 2022). This indicates a complex perception where rural women recognize police limitations but also see potential for improved policing through community engagement and gender inclusion.

The herdsmen-farmers conflict in Benue State, including Gwer West, has been extensively documented as a major source of insecurity that disproportionately affects rural women. Women's primary livelihoods-farming, livestock rearing, and petty trading-are severely disrupted by violent attacks, leading to displacement, loss of property, and psychological trauma (Ogunnowo & Olajide, 2024). The insecurity also restricts women's access to healthcare and education, exacerbating their vulnerability.

Insecurity challenges include physical violence, sexual assault, and loss of family members, which have profound socio-economic and health impacts on rural women (UN Women IPCR, 2019). The conflict's political orchestration further complicates resolution efforts, leaving women exposed to ongoing risks. These challenges undermine women's ability to sustain their households and contribute to community stability, reinforcing cycles of poverty and insecurity.

Community policing has emerged as a key strategy to address rural insecurity in Nigeria, but women's participation remains limited due to socio-cultural barriers and gender biases (Arisukwu et al., 2022). Studies show that rural communities have evolved informal crime prevention mechanisms, but interactions between women and police are often minimal and characterized by mistrust (Igwe-Okomiso, Obadimu, Iloma, Ogonna, Okom, & Edet, 2023). Women's involvement in community policing is constrained by patriarchal norms that view security as a male domain, despite women being primary victims of crime.

However, there is growing recognition of the benefits of including women in community policing to enhance crime prevention and build social capital (Archibong et al. 2014; Arisukwu et al, 2022). Empowering women through awareness campaigns and integrating them into policing operations can improve police-community relations and reduce incidents of police brutality. Regular engagement platforms such as town hall meetings are recommended to facilitate feedback and collaboration between police and women in rural areas (Arisukwu et al., 2022).

Socio-economic deprivation and infrastructural deficits are critical factors shaping rural women's sense of security in Gwer West. Poverty, unemployment, and lack of basic amenities such as roads and communication infrastructure limit women's mobility and access to police protection (Ogunnowo & Olajide, 2024). These factors also contribute to high crime rates, particularly theft and youth-related offenses, which directly affect women's safety and economic activities.

The patriarchal structure of rural society marginalizes women from decision-making processes in security governance, reducing their trust in law enforcement agencies (UN Women IPCR, 2019). Low representation of women in police and judicial systems further alienates rural women from formal security mechanisms. Studies recommend closing the gender gap in policing by recruiting and empowering more women officers and creating gender-sensitive policing strategies to build trust and enhance security outcomes (Arisukwu et al., 2022).

Theoretical Framework:

This study adopted the Community-Oriented Policing (COP) framework, grounded in Social Resource Theory and complemented by Social Capital Theory and the Gap Theory to explain the phenomenon in this work. The Community-Oriented Policing (COP) emphasizes active collaboration between police and community members to address crime and insecurity through mutual trust, shared responsibility, and problem-solving partnerships. According to Social Resource Theory (Lin, in Willis, 2018), the police are viewed as social resources embedded within communities, whose effectiveness depends on leveraging community assets such as social cohesion, trust, and collective efficacy. COP operationalizes this by encouraging law enforcement officers to engage with community members, understand their concerns, and foster positive relationships that enhance cooperation in crime prevention and security management (Ajibade 2025).

For rural women in Gwer West, this theory explains how their perceptions of policing and insecurity are influenced by the quality of police-community interactions and the extent to which police engage with their unique security needs. When police recognize and incorporate the social resources within rural communities—such as women’s local knowledge, informal networks, and community leadership roles—they can improve responsiveness and legitimacy in the eyes of rural women. This engagement fosters trust and a shared sense of responsibility for security, which is essential for addressing the multifaceted insecurity challenges women face in rural settings.

Rural Women’s Perspectives (Dependent Variable): The framework posits that women’s perceptions of policing and insecurity are shaped by the quality of police-community relationships, the inclusiveness of policing strategies, and the responsiveness of police to their specific needs.

Policing Effectiveness and Responsiveness (Independent Variable): COP and Social Resource Theory suggest that police effectiveness is not only about crime control but also about building trust, legitimacy, and cooperation with community members, especially marginalized groups like rural women.

Insecurity Challenges (Contextual Variable): The nature and extent of insecurity in Gwer West influence women’s experiences and perceptions, which in turn affect their willingness to engage with police and participate in community safety efforts.

In summary, this theoretical framework provides a comprehensive lens to analyse how rural women’s perceptions of policing and insecurity in Gwer West are shaped by police-community interactions, community participation, and socio-economic contexts. It underscores the importance of inclusive, community-centered policing strategies that recognize and utilize the social resources within rural communities to enhance security outcomes and trust in law enforcement.

Materials and Methods:

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach combining both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques to comprehensively assess rural women’s perspectives on policing and insecurity in Gwer West, Benue State. A structured questionnaire was administered to rural women aged 18 years and above across selected communities in Gwer West. The questionnaire was designed to capture data on women’s perceptions of police effectiveness, experiences of insecurity, interactions with police, and socio-economic factors influencing their sense of security. To ensure representativeness, a multistage sampling technique was used: first, purposive selection of communities, followed by systematic random sampling of

households, and finally, selection of eligible women respondents within households. Due to high insecurity in Gwer West at the moment, most of the communities earmarked for the study were not accessible. Most residents have since relocated to Naka, the headquarters of the local government, this is where women respondents were identified and sampled. The researchers conducted face-to-face interviews accommodating varying literacy levels. This approach aligns with established practices in rural Nigerian contexts where direct engagement improves response rates and data quality (Nwabuaku, Chijioke & Chidi, 2024).

To complement and deepen understanding, in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted with selected rural women, community leaders, and police officers. These qualitative methods explored issues such as barriers to women's participation in community policing, trust in law enforcement, and the socio-cultural dynamics affecting security perceptions. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods is critical in rural Nigerian settings where complex social factors influence security perceptions and police-community relations. Quantitative data provided measurable trends and correlations, while qualitative data uncovered underlying reasons, attitudes, and cultural factors shaping rural women's experiences with policing and insecurity. This triangulation enhances the validity and reliability of findings.

Results and Discussions:

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents:

This section presents findings on the socio-economic characteristics of the sampled respondents for the study.

Variables	Frequency (n=300)	Percentage
Sex		
Male	Nil	
Female	300	100
Age		
18 – 25 years	50	16.7
26 – 30	87	29.0
31 – 40	122	40.7
41 and above	41	13.6
Marital status		
Single	49	16.3
Married	131	43.7
Widowed	92	30.7
Divorced/ separated	28	9.3
Educational qualification		
Non-formal education	100	33.3
Primary Education	132	44.0
Secondary Education	50	16.6
Tertiary Education	18	6.1
Primary Occupation		
Farming	186	62.0
Civil Service	32	10.7
Trading/ Petty Business	82	27.3

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

From the figures in Table 1, the sociodemographic characteristics for the study showed that only women were sampled for the quantitative data collection, so we administered all the questionnaires to women. However, for the in-depth interviews, the police officers and traditional rulers interviewed were all males, 5 of them in total. The women sampled were between the ages of 18 years and above, with most of

them within the age bracket of 31-40 years. Also, for marital status, the majority of the women were married; the unfortunate part is that there were also young widows in their numbers amongst our respondents. This is as a result of the constant crisis in the area, which has claimed the lives of many young men, leaving behind their families.

For educational attainment, the majority of the respondents were between non-formal education and primary education. This shows that most of the women from the rural parts of Gwer West are not formally educated; only a few have attained secondary and tertiary education. This also explains why many of the women are mostly into agriculture and petty trading.

Effectiveness and Responsiveness of police services in Gwer West:

This section presents the findings on the perception of women on the effectiveness and responsiveness of police services in the study area.

Table 2: Women's Perception of the effectiveness and responsiveness of police services in Gwer West

Women's perception on police effectiveness & responsiveness	Satisfied/ Unsatisfied(n=300)	
	Satisfied	Unsatisfied
Police Presence	57(19%)	243(81%)
Police Responsiveness	43(14.3%)	257(85.7%)
Police Effectiveness	59(19.7)	241(80.3%)
Trust and interactions	44(14.6)	266(88.6%)
Community Engagement	88(29.4)	212 (70.6%)

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

The findings indicated that majority of the women sampled were highly unsatisfied with police presence 81%, police responsiveness to their plights 85%, police effectiveness in carry out their duties 80%; whether they trusted the police in their interactions with the community 88%, whether they carried the community along on crime prevention and control 70% of women were unsatisfied. From the findings, rural women of Gwer West were highly unsatisfied with the effectiveness and responsiveness of police services in the study area.

Findings from the qualitative data also supported the findings from Table 2; one of the traditional chiefs interviewed, a 67-year-old male, stated that:

The police are not effective or responsive to our plights, it is not just the police, even the army seems to be working hand in hand with these Fulani armed herdsman. When they eat our crops and kill our people, it is as if nothing has happened, but once you touch one of them, the police and security will come for you (KII, 2025).

Similar studies have indicated that rural women generally perceive police services as ineffective and unresponsive to their security needs. The findings from Willis (2018) and Arisukwu et al (2022) agreed with this finding that there is often a low level of trust and limited interaction between rural communities and the police, largely due to police absence, inadequate resources, and historical mistrust rooted in colonial policing legacies. However, pockets of positive perception exist where community policing initiatives have fostered closer relationships, with women appreciating approachable and culturally sensitive police officers who engage actively in community events (Igwe-Okomiso et al, 2023). Overall, rural women's perceptions are mixed but tend toward skepticism, emphasizing the need for more community-oriented and gender-sensitive policing.

Table 3: Challenges and how they affect women in Gwer West LGA:

This section presents the findings on the key security challenges of rural women in Gwer West local government area and how these challenges have affected the everyday lives these women in the study area.

Insecurity Challenges	Frequency(n=300)	Percentage (%=100).
Displacement/Loss of property	258	86.0
Loss of Family members	223	74.3
Physical and sexual violence	182	60.7
Disruption of socio-economic activities	282	94.0
Disruption of cultural/religious activities	219	73.0
Psychological trauma	193	64.3

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

From the findings women highlighted the key security challenges they face in the study area; 86% have been displaced and lost their ancestral homes and farmlands; 74% of the women have lost one or more family members, 60% have experienced either one or both physical and sexual violence; 94% reported distortion of social and economic activities, 73% reported disruption in socio-religious and cultural activities while 64% affirmed that these challenges have caused psychological trauma for them. The findings from the qualitative data also supported these key challenges, with much emphasis on the loss of lives and invasion of ancestral homes and farmlands by the invaders. A 56-year-old police officer resident in Naka lamented that:

Crime control in Naka is becoming extremely difficult because young people that are supposed to be in the farm now that the rains are here cannot do so because their farmlands have been invaded, out of all the 15 council wards in this LGA, only Naka is a little bit habitable, even this Naka has recently been attacked leaving over 23 people dead in one night, the rest rural areas are completely not accessible or habitable, so you can see the high population here, it has made our job more difficult because the youths are idle (KII, 2025).

Studies have consistently reported that rural women face multiple insecurity challenges, including violent conflicts (e.g., farmer-herder clashes), physical and sexual violence, displacement, and disruption of livelihoods (Akpehe et al, 2021; Ogunnowo& Olajide, 2024). These challenges severely affect their economic activities, health, and social well-being. Women often experience heightened vulnerability due to socio-cultural norms that limit their ability to seek police protection or report crimes. The effects extend beyond physical insecurity to psychological trauma and social marginalization, undermining community stability and women's empowerment.

Table 4: Women involvement in crime control and community safety efforts in Gwer West LGA:

This section presents data on the nature and extent of rural women's interactions and cooperation with the police in crime prevention and community safety efforts

Nature and extent of women's involvement in crime control	Satisfied/ Unsatisfied(n=300)	
	Satisfied	Unsatisfied
Cooperation/Collaboration	110(36.6%)	190(63.3%)
Respect for Women's Opinion	63(21.0%)	237(79.0%)
Women Inclusion	59(19.8)	241(80.3%)
Protection of Women's Rights	44(14.6)	256(85.3%)
Support for Patriarchal Cultural System	13(4.3%)	287 (95.6%)

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

The findings show that majority of the women were unsatisfied with the nature and extent of women's cooperation with the police in crime prevention and community safety efforts in the study area. On cooperation and collaboration, respect for women's opinion, women inclusion, protection of their rights and

support for patriarchal systems, in all these options, respondents were clearly unsatisfied with the nature that police handle these issues and it has been reflected in the figures on table 4.

To buttress this, a 46-year-old female women leader echoed:

The police and the military have no single regard for women, how will they even bother to collaborate or include us in their decisions. They also support patriarchal systems, imagine that when someone is arrested and taken to the station, no matter the status of a woman, she can never be allowed to bail her relative except she brings a man, even when the man is of lower social status, they will rather release the suspect to the man than a woman. Some of the police officers even abuse their positions and victimize women. This is why the relationship between the police and the community generally is not a friendly one (KII, 2025).

Previous researches show that rural women's interaction with police in crime prevention is generally low due to mistrust and socio-cultural barriers (Archibong, et al. 2014; Arisukwu, et al. 2022). Community policing efforts often exclude women or fail to address their specific concerns, limiting their participation. Nonetheless, where women are involved, especially through informal community groups or age-grade neighbourhood watches, cooperation improves and contributes positively to crime control (Nwabuaku, et al. 2024). The studies recommend enhancing women's participation in community policing to build social capital and improve security outcomes.

Table 5: Factors Influencing rural women's sense of security

This section presents findings on the socio-economic and infrastructural factors influencing rural women's sense of security and their trust or otherwise in law enforcement agencies in the study area.

Socio-economic/Infrastructural Factors	Frequency(n=300)	Percentage (%=100).
Insufficient Police Presence	163	54.3
Poor Roads	228	76.0
Patriarchal Social Structures	182	60.6
Bribery/Corruption/Extortion	293	97.7
Communication Barriers	112	37.3
Poverty	131	43.7

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

Findings from other studies show that poverty, lack of infrastructure, and limited access to police services exacerbate rural women's insecurity and distrust in law enforcement (Arisukwu, et al. 2020; Tonipre & Nikereuwem, 2023; Jerumeh, 2024). Poor roads, communication barriers, and insufficient police presence reduce police visibility and responsiveness. Additionally, patriarchal social structures and low representation of women in policing institutions diminish women's confidence in police fairness and effectiveness. These studies emphasize the need for gender-sensitive policing policies and improved socio-economic conditions to enhance rural women's trust and security perception. They also align with broader empirical evidence from rural Nigeria, underscoring the critical need for inclusive, community-based, and gender-responsive policing strategies to address rural women's security concerns effectively.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

This study assessed rural women's perspectives on policing and insecurity in Gwer West, Benue State, Nigeria. It explored how rural women perceive the effectiveness and responsiveness of police services, identified key insecurity challenges they face, examined their interactions and cooperation with police in crime prevention, and assessed socio-economic and infrastructural factors influencing their sense of security and trust in law enforcement. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data, the study

highlighted the complex interplay between policing practices, community dynamics, and gendered experiences of insecurity in a rural Nigerian context.

The findings indicate that rural women in Gwer West generally perceive police services as inadequate and unresponsive to their unique security needs. Persistent insecurity, driven by armed herdsman attacks, communal conflicts and socio-economic deprivation, significantly disrupts their livelihoods and well-being. Women's participation in community policing remains limited due to socio-cultural barriers and mistrust, which undermines effective collaboration with law enforcement. Furthermore, poor infrastructure and entrenched patriarchal norms exacerbate rural women's vulnerability and diminish their confidence in police agencies. To enhance rural security and promote social stability, it is imperative to adopt inclusive, gender-sensitive policing strategies that actively engage rural women as key stakeholders in security governance.

Implementing the following recommendations will contribute to building safer rural communities in Gwer West

1. Enhance Police Presence and Responsiveness in Rural Areas: Strengthen police infrastructure and resource allocation in Gwer West to improve visibility, accessibility, and timely response to security incidents affecting rural women.
2. Promote Gender-Sensitive Policing: Train police officers on gender issues and cultural sensitivity to improve their interactions with rural women and address their specific security concerns effectively. Also create dedicated units or desks within police stations to handle cases involving women victims, ensuring confidentiality, protection, and appropriate legal support.
3. Empower Rural Women's Participation in Community Policing: Facilitate the inclusion of women in community policing committees and decision-making platforms to leverage their local knowledge and foster trust between police and communities.
4. Improve Socio-Economic Conditions and Infrastructure: Invest in rural development projects such as roads, communication networks, and livelihood programs to reduce vulnerabilities that contribute to insecurity.
5. Conduct Continuous Awareness and Sensitization Campaigns: Educate rural communities on the importance of collaboration with police and the role of women in enhancing community security.

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