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Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in IDP Camps: An Assessment of IDP Camps in Benue State – Nigeria

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Abstract
This study examined sexual and gender-based violence among refugees and internally displaced persons in Benue State. One of the critical challenges the world is contending with is displacement, and the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Benue State of Nigeria has triggered sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), including rape, sexual slavery, trafficking, intimate partner violence, and sexual exploitation. Gender disparities and abuse of power experienced by women and young girls in Internally Displaced settings further exacerbate their vulnerability to different forms of violence. The paper employed a qualitative method of research. Findings from the study reveal a high rate of sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls across IDP Camps in Benue State. The violence is enabled by economic hardship, power imbalance, and other social factors associated with their prolonged status as Internally Displaced Persons. The key recommendation of this study is for Nigeria to expedite the domestication of the United Nations Guiding Principles on the Internal Displacement of 2004 for the protection of Internally Displaced Persons.

Keywords: Internally Displaced Persons, Camps, Sexual and Gender-based Violence, Conflict, Women and Girls.

INTRODUCTION

Sexual and Gender-based violence (SGBV) remains a rampant and systemic issue in Nigeria, with devastating consequences on millions of women and girls. Nigeria's 2018 Demographic and Health Survey reports that 28% of women aged 15-49 experienced physical violence, while 14% experienced sexual violence (National Population Commission, 2019). Though prevalent among women and girls, the abuse is experienced by both sexes, especially in conflict, post-conflict, and other vulnerable situations like that of persons living in Internally Displaced Persons camps. Nigeria is home to over 3.2 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), forcibly uprooted from their homes due to conflict, insecurity, and natural disasters (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2022). The majority of these displacements are attributed to the decade-long insurgency by Boko Haram in the Northeast region, which has ravaged

communities and destroyed infrastructure (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2022). Other factors contributing to displacement in Nigeria include banditry, communal clashes, and environmental degradation (International Organization for Migration, 2022). Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps in Nigeria provide temporary shelter for these individuals. However, the living conditions in the camps are often dire; characterized by overcrowding, inadequate access to healthcare, food, and water, and heightened vulnerability to gender-based violence and exploitation, particularly among women and girls. (Nigeria's National Emergency Management Agency, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2020).

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) as any act which is carried out without a person's consent, based on gender norms and unequal relationships. It includes acts that cause or may cause physical, sexual, mental, or financial harm or suffering. Perpetrators often use force, coercion, deception, or manipulation. Although SGBV can be experienced across all societies and social strata, certain conditions inclusive of prolonged conflicts, as experienced in some regions of Nigeria create an enabling environment of vulnerability, exploitation, and violence, particularly for women and girls. In Nigeria, heightened insecurity and violence have led to a significant increase in Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), with over 2.5 million individuals displaced internally as of 2022 (UNHCR, 2022). Benue State, plagued by herder-farmer conflicts hosts numerous IDP camps, where vulnerable populations, particularly women and girls, face the risks of SGBV. A 2020 survey revealed that 43% of women in IDP experience sexual violence, while 56% experience physical violence. The report also indicates that 71% of respondents lack access to healthcare services, exacerbating the physical and emotional trauma resulting from SGBV (NBS, 2020).

On the global stage, an estimated 736 million women and one in every three women and girls suffer physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence, non-partner sexual violence, or both at least once in their lifetime. Most of the abuse is experienced by women and girls in vulnerable conditions like Internally Displaced Persons Camps (UN Women, 2024). The living conditions of the camps in Nigeria exacerbate the vulnerability of these women, thereby exposing them to exploitation and abuse by members of the host communities, their male counterparts, and also security operatives within the camps. (Abdulkareem, 2020) reported that as high as 60% of the security operatives deployed to IDP camps in Nigeria abuse women and girls who are under their protection.

The consequences of gender-based violence are severe and long-lasting, with survivors facing increased risks of depression, anxiety disorders, unplanned pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, and HIV (UNFPA, 2016). Alarmingly, adolescent girls in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in Nigeria are disproportionately affected, with a staggering prevalence of sexual abuse reported in many camps. Compounding this issue is the pervasive underreporting of these crimes, which perpetuates a culture of silence and impunity, and underscores the need for urgent attention and action to address the menace. Hence, this paper aims to do an assessment t of the prevalence of sexual gender-based violence in IDP camps in Benue State and the responses to the violations. The paper employed a desktop review method and relied on secondary sources for data.

Overview of the Study Population

Since 2018, communities in Benue State of Nigeria, including Agatu, Guma, Kwande, Logo Gwer West, Oturkpo, etc. have witnessed increased violent conflicts, especially

skirmishes between farmers and herdsmen. The conflicts have led to the forced displacement of people from their communities. The recent introduction of the open anti-grazing law in the state additionally displaced over 1,000 persons to different camps across the state (Uja,2020:13-15). Data from the Christian Aid Emergency Humanitarian Relief (2015) indicates that Benue state has more than 50,000 Internally Displaced Persons in the state and women and children make up 50% of the population of IDP at Mbawa, Ortese, Uikpan, and Ichwa camps. In the quest for survival in these camps, women and children especially the girl child are exposed to sexual and gender-based violence such as sexual. The living conditions of the camps have also affected gender roles, with more women having to take up responsibilities of sourcing for means of livelihood to sustain the sustainability of the family. Agaibe and Aliegba (2021), reported that one of the means for such women to cope with their new role is the exchange of sexual favors to male landowners in the host communities. The report further asserts that some women at Mbawa camps were raped or forcefully married to men in the host communities. Among the consequences of this abuse is the increase in the number of births in the IDP camps as reported by the Vanguard Newspaper (2022), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the World Health Organisation as over 200 births were recorded at Ortese and Ichwa IDP camps in Guma and Makurdi local government within a month. Newspapers, articles, and Reports.

Literature Review

The prevalence of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) across the globe has attracted the attention of scholars and other stakeholders. scholars across different spectrums of life have shared their views on displacement and sexual and gender-based violence. Though their opinions vary, they converge on the global acceptance that SGBV is pervasive and devastating affecting millions of people worldwide, particularly in conflict-affected and displaced populations due to the breakdown of social structures, lack of access to basic services, and inadequate security measures in IDP camp. This literature review provides a comprehensive overview of the existing research on SGBV in IDP camps, specifically focusing on Benue State, Nigeria. The review seeks to identify gaps in the literature, assess the effectiveness of existing interventions, and inform the development of evidence-based policies and programs to prevent and respond to SGBV in IDP camps.

Internal Displacement

Internal Displacement emerged as a global phenomenon in the 80s due to violent conflicts, internal strife, and national factors (Cohen, 2004). Internal displacement in Nigeria is not a new phenomenon because several internal displacements were triggered by violent conflict. The first incidence of displacement of persons is often multi-faceted, complex and even overlapping that is to say that armed conflicts, between nonstate actors, disasters, climate change, and natural disasters are general causes of internal displacements in Nigeria (Omoraka, 2021). The Internally Displacement Monitoring Centre asserts that the total global Internal displacement head count at 40 million with 30.6 million new displacements (IDMC, 2018) those displacement is mostly triggered by armed conflict or natural disasters.

Dengi (2001) asserts that displaced persons are faced with a lack of access to food water and human vulnerability, physical and sexual, and gender-based violence, and discrimination. Benue state one of the northcentral states has had a population of IDPs since 2019, as 483,669 persons are said to have been displaced due to herdsmen attacks (Sahara Reporters, 2019). Internally displaced persons are people or groups who have been forced to flee their homes due to armed conflicts, Internal strife, and systematic violation of human rights or

natural or manmade disasters, who have not crossed internationally recognized states (Kampala Convention 2009). In other words, they are persons who have been displaced by natural disasters or conflict from their traditional support structure or homes. But have not crossed the borders of their country.

Similarly, Shimawua, (2020) asserts that factors such as internal communal clashes, religious tension, insurgency, and resource-based conflict of farmers/herders are all responsible for the increase in IDPs in Nigeria. While Durosaro and Ajiboye (2011) assert that IDPs consist of two components of involuntary movement, some of these involuntary movements are caused by armed conflicts, violence, disasters, and human rights violations, from their assertion involuntary movement gives people the opportunity to leave their homes, as they get deprived of basic services, thus the case of Nigerian displacement has led to the breakdown of family structures, as well as the loss of lives. The Norwegian Refugees Council (2019) asserts the Security Condition of people living them with no other choice than to migrate from their habitation, in the same vein Obaji and Alobo (2016) are also on the same page, as they assert that displaced persons are exposed to security challenges ranging from sexual and gender-based violence of sex for food, child molestation. In the same vein Akuto, (2019) states that IDPs are often faced with challenges of insecurity, violence, and sexual harassment. Olajide (2016) is on the same page as Akuto, who asserts that there are high cases of rape and other forms of violence against women and children in IDP camps. In the light of both Olajide and Akuto, the case of IDP camps in Benue is not an exception. From the various IDP camps, there has been a series of sexual and gender-based violence against women and children, particularly the girl child. While Olaide and Olufemi (2023) are still on the same page they are also of the view that women and children are most vulnerable to gender and sexual-based violence sexual diseases and infant marriage. These all corroborate previous scholar's assertions.

Sometimes, displaced persons are forced to live in makeshift tents, and some live in Uncompleted buildings in their host communities. These conditions expose them to insecurities and even health issues. Ahmad (2018) affirms the above statement as he asserts that many IDPs in Nigeria live in schools, places of worship (mosques and churches), makeshift tents, town halls, etc., but these shelter homes are not conducive for them.

Agaigbe and Aliegba, (2002) expressed the view that displaced persons in some communities are faced with a barter system to acquire land for farming and women often fall victims such that they end up paying for the acquisition of land through forceful sex with men in the host communities, in some situations, the women are left with the option of surrendering their bodies in other to acquire farmland. Children in the IDP camps are forced to work to earn a means of livelihood in their host communities' course they engage in child pregnancy, and sex workers and they gradually become victims of sexual abuse and molestation. Sometimes women and girls living in these camps which are usually guarded by men became victims of sexual violence or even had to prostitute themselves to obtain food, money, or permission to leave the camps (ICG, 2016: 14). The gap the paper intends to identify, is that so much attention is paid to the challenges such as poor living conditions, lack of access to water, education, primary health care, etc. but little attention is given to sexual and gender-based violence on the vulnerable ones particularly women and the girl- which is a gross violation of human rights and how it is under-reported compared to other challenges IDPs undergo.

Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF

2023) in its report stated that there is a high incidence of sexual violence such as sexual harassment against children in Mbawa, Ortese, and Uikpan IDP camps all in Guma local government in August 2023. However, Maina, (2015) pointed out that perpetrators of sexual and gender-based violence are the same people survivors depend upon to assist and protect them, and this makes it difficult for survivors to report such violations. There are incidences of rape, child pregnancy, abortion, sex work, and early marriage at Mbawa, Ichwa camps. Many of the young girls in the camps have engaged in sex work, while some have carried out abortions and some are forced into early marriage.

OCHA (2021) in its report stated that in one of the Unofficial camps in Ikpaam, a woman who was helped by a man to acquire accommodation and food demanded for sex in exchange for his services. Also, at Agbagena IDP Makurdi the State Emergency Management Agency (2021) also attest that many of the women in the camp got pregnant without having partners, and because of the culture of silence, most of the rape cases are underreported and this has resulted into a rise of birth of many babies. There were also incidences where women had to exchange sex to camp officials in exchange for food or provisions. Thus, most of the survivors hardly report cases of violations. Also, Emmanuel (2023) in his report from the Daily Trust revealed that the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) carried out a safety audit and it showed there were incidences of sexual violence against children living in Ichwa camps, however these violations against these children and even women, is quite alarming in these camps, and the culture of impunity for perpetrators of these acts contributes to continued violation (Daily Trust E-paper, Tuesday 28Nov 2023).

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative method for data collection where it relied on secondary sources of gathering its data majorly from Newspapers, journals, articles and reports.

Key Findings of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) in IDP Camps in Benue State.

The United Nations Children's Fund in collaboration with JASPI Health and gender development alongside Benue State rural water supply and sanitation had to conduct training for stakeholders to help check sexual exploitations, and gender-based violence at the IDP camps for the internally displaced persons, as the prevalence of gender-based violence on women, girls, and children is becoming alarming at Uikpam, Ortese, Daudu II Mbawa IDP camps. (vanguard October 14, 2023). The medicines San Frontiers/doctors without border report an account of a sexual and gender-based violence survivor who was forcefully raped at Mbawa camp by a male acquaintance. In the desperation to borrow money to buy food from her acquaintances at the camp, he chooses to offer her help if only she had sex with him, upon her refusal he physically forced her. He invariably assaulted her. (Medicine San Frontiers April 15, 2024). According to them some of the perpetrators of this sexual violence are strangers, acquaintances, and intimate partners.

Medicine's San Frontier (MSF) also reported another account of a female survivor and also a student who was lured into forced marriage to a man 30 years older, by her family, the survivor escaped but was captured and raped in a locked-up house at the same Mbawa camp, a female survivor living with disability recounted how a male acquaintance promised to get food for her, she also recounted how he forced the door of her tent, insisted on having sex, upon her refusal, he forcefully raped her.

Another survivor, a widow in Mbawa camp also recounts in April 2023 how she and other women working on a farm were ambushed and raped by five men, she recounted her inability to

walk as a result of the rape. The channels TV carried out a report on the rising menace of rape and gender-based violence against women and girls at IDP camp in Benue state. It interviewed a female IDP who was sexually assaulted and raped by a security agent in the camp at night despite pleas from other women. (Channels. com 2019). this has also called for the Benue state government to investigate the menace. Likewise, in the Abegena IDP camp in Makurdi local government, there is a high prevalence of sexual behaviour among displaced teenagers, due to a lack of awareness and access to contraceptives, there have been incidences of unexplained pregnancies (Envuladu, Anke, Zwanikken & Zoakh,2017).

Discussion of Key Findings

Benue State has witnessed violent conflicts that have led to the forceful displacement of people from their traditional homes to settle in camps. The most recent has been the environmental degradation and climate change that has reduced the availability of fertile land as well as led to clashes between herders and farmers, this crisis resulted in the displacement of over 400,000 people from their homes according to the International Organisation of Migration leaving them to settle in camps. The living conditions of these camps are quite precarious as the level of sexual and gender-based violence against women and children is high. Most of the women at the camps have to seek means of livelihood, to cater for their families, and likewise to manage their health, in case they expose themselves to the risk of sexual violence. That is why Agaibe & Aliegba 2002) in their research reported that displaced persons (women)in their quest to find means of survival in some of the IDP-acquired land for farming by surrendering their bodies, while in their host communities, had to acquire land through forceful sex by men from their host communities. At the Mbawa IDP camp the Medicine San Frontiers, (2023) with doctors without borders, reported cases of women who in the quest for means of livelihood fell victim to rape, some girls were lured into forced marriage because of the difficulty in surviving at the camp of their mothers, while Most of the perpetrators of sexual violence are men from the host communities, camp Officials and acquaintance. Some of the exploitation of the victims is underreported as it has paved the way for the perpetrators not to be apprehended. Another key finding from the study was that in some camps girls were lured into forced marriage by their family members as a means of survival.

Conclusion

Several factors such as farmer's/herders' conflicts, communal clashes, and environmental degradation have forced people to leave their homes and live in Internal Displaced Persons, and most of the displaced persons encounter various challenges ranging from poor sanitary conditions, lack of access to water, education, the condition of the camps is unconducive for the displaced person. One major challenge that affects the vulnerable (women and girls) is sexual violence. Benue state the north-central state an epicenter of Internally Displaced Persons who were forced out of their communities, due to inter-communal clashes, and herdsmen attacks. These farmers migrate to live in camps such as Mbawa, Ortese, Uikpan, and Abenega. The displaced persons who are majorly women constitute 50% of the camp, and due to the hardship in the camps, some of these women have to find means of livelihood in the camps, because gender roles have changed. In the quest for a means of survival, some of the women in these camps are exposed to sexual and gender-based violence. At the Mbawa, Abenega, and Ichawa camps, there have been empirical cases of rape and sexual exploitation of women and girls. Despite these challenges, survivors' cases have been underreported.

Recommendations

1) The United Nations Guiding Principles on the Internal Displacement in 2004 to protect

IDPs thus principles 1,2,3 and 4 should be fully domesticated in states that have IDP camps and Internal Displaced persons.

2)The government needs to be more sensitization and protect women and girls (children) in IDP camps against sexual and gender-based violence. Through sensitization programs.

3) The female gender (women and girls) should be included in the decision-making process regarding violations of rights such as gender-based violence.

4) The Kampala Convention should be thoroughly domesticated (i.e. there should be thorough implementation of the Kampala (KC) in IDP camps in Benue)

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