

## PSYCHOSOCIAL REHABILITATION OF WOMEN AFFECTED BY INSURGENCY IN BORNO STATE, NIGERIA: AN EVALUATION OF SUPPORT PROGRAMS

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### ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this research is to evaluate the effectiveness of the skill-building and psychosocial support programs utilized in Borno State to rehabilitate women affected by the violent Boko Haram conflict. The conflict in Borno State has caused widespread displacement, fatalities, sexual assault, kidnappings and severe damage to infrastructure, property and livelihood. Women have been subjected to violence based on their gender, and made to face various vices including forced marriages, sexual servitude and other serious abuses of their human rights. As a result of their ordeal, women suffered significant psychological consequences in the Boko Haram conflict, leading to post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD), anxiety, sadness and social stigma. Using qualitative data and the content analysis approach with emphasis on secondary sources, this paper evaluated the effectiveness of stakeholders' responses to the plight of women affected by the insurgency in Borno state through psychosocial and skills acquisition programs. It found a correlation between psychosocial therapies and assimilation of skills-building programs in the affected women in Borno state on the one hand, and on the other hand, it found that the psychosocial and skills-acquisition programs have positively impacted on the lives of these women improving their social ties, trauma symptoms and economic self-sufficiency. Although, the paper observed various challenges militating against the effectiveness of these programs, it concluded that the psychosocial and skill-acquisition programs adopted in Borno state have been quite effective, and can be improved with more investment, financing and commitment.*

**Keywords:** psychosocial support, skills acquisition, women, violent conflict, Boko Haram, Borno State

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Since 2009, Borno State in northeastern Nigeria has been the epicenter of an insurgency led by Boko Haram and its splinter group, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) (Onah, 2014: 70). The protracted conflict has had devastating consequences on the civilian population, with women and girls disproportionately impacted (Ali, Zakuan & Ahmad 2018: 27). Over a decade of violence has resulted in widespread displacement, trauma, loss of livelihoods, and disruption of social support systems. More than two million people have been displaced from the Lake Chad region alone, with over 35,000 people killed as a result of the violence (Omogunloye *et al*, 2023: 80-81). Women and girls are among the most vulnerable and particularly affected, as they bear the greatest brunt of the violence including being subjected to forced marriages, sexual slavery, kidnapping, and widespread sexual and gender violence (Abdu & Shehu 2019: 12-16). When they are not directly oppressed and exploited, they still face the backlash of the conflict as they lose husbands

and male family members, leaving them unprepared to take on the job of breadwinner and protector of their families without help from friends or family (Adebayo, 2020:32; Ali, Zakuan & Ahmad 2018). As a result, female survivors of conflict have a high prevalence of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic syndrome (PTSD), and other mental health disorders, indicating the profound psychological effects on their health (Amalu, 2015: 38). In Nigeria, these problems have worsened by a spiraling economic regression, which has upended conventional livelihoods and prevented women from achieving financial independence (Banerjee, 2022; Rexer, 2022: 1933).

As the link between psychological recovery and economic stability becomes increasingly clear (Zafar, Khan, Warsi, & Iqbal 2024: 346), governments and humanitarian organizations are adopting better rehabilitation strategies that integrate psychosocial support with skill development and livelihood initiatives. This comprehensive strategy is based on a number of fundamental principles, one of which is that in order to support women in their pursuit of skill development and income-generating activities, trauma must be addressed (Vandi 2023: 123).

Because economic empowerment gives people a fresh sense of agency, purpose, and hope for the future, it significantly enhances the psychological health (Zafar, Khan, Warsi, & Iqbal 2024: 346). Thus, possessing in-demand occupational skills often facilitates women's economic and social reintegration into communities and reduces their vulnerabilities to further mistreatment and exploitation due to greater financial independence (Bass, 2020). Psychosocial support programs are targeted towards helping individuals manage trauma, form new social connections and integrate seamlessly into normal life (Torre, 2019: 2). Among these programs, group therapy sessions, individual counselling, and community-based support networks are commonly employed as therapeutic interventions to address PTSD. A wide range of socio-economic programs may also be integrated with the psychological therapies to provide persons distraught by conflict especially women, access to economic possibilities and vocational training. This initiative enables women to become financially independent and contribute to the reconstruction of their communities. While more of these programs are frequently undertaken currently especially in the context of the insurgency in Borno State Nigeria (Umesi 2022; Isah, Iman & Abiso 2024: 14), a comprehensive evaluation of their effectiveness missing. This research aims to fill this gap by

examining the role that integrated psychological support and skill-acquisition programs play in rehabilitating women affected by the present armed conflict.

The paper is structured into eight sections. Apart from this introduction, section two addresses the key conceptual issues dealt with in the discourse. Section three dwells on the theoretical framework. Section four addresses the psychosocial support programs for conflict-affected women in Borno State. Section five focuses on the skills acquisition programs for conflict-affected women in Borno State: an overview. Section six discusses the impact and effectiveness of the psychosocial support and skills acquisition programs in rehabilitating women affected by violent conflicts in Borno State. Section seven uncovers the challenges militating against implementation of the psychosocial support and skills acquisition programs for women affected by the conflict in Borno State, while section eight contains the conclusion and recommendations.

## **2.CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS**

### **2.1 Psychosocial Support**

Psychosocial support is an all-encompassing strategy used to meet people's social and psychological needs, particularly during challenging times, traumatic events, or major life transitions (Torre 2019). Its goals are to improve social functioning, emotional stability, and mental health. It encompasses a range of programs and initiatives, including community involvement, group therapy, counselling, and practical aid (Wessells, 2023). Psychosocial support also fosters resilience, coping strategies, and social connections by acknowledging the interdependence of personal and social variables in an individual's well-being (Wessells, 2023). Community development initiatives, emergency responses, humanitarian aid, and medical settings frequently use this strategy. Psychosocial assistance is the process of combining social interventions and psychological care to help individuals and groups overcome challenges, grow from misfortune, and maintain overall well-being.

### **2.2 Skills Acquisition**

Skills acquisition refers to the process of gaining new talents, knowledge, or competencies. It comprises the deliberate improvement of performance through training, practice, and experience (Taie 2014). The process encompasses the affective, psychomotor

and cognitive domains, and often progresses from the novice to the expertise level. Effective skill acquisition requires deliberate practice, feedback, and reflection on the progress of development. It usually occurs through formal education, independent study, on-the-job training, or a combination of these (Taatgen 2002; Cornford 1996). A few factors influencing the process are individual differences, prior knowledge, motivation, and the learning environment (Adebayo, 2020).

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper adopts the empowerment theory to explain the variables involved in the discourse. The main proponents of the theory Rappaport (1987) and Zimmerman, (1995) view the theory as a multidimensional construct, spanning the psychological, organizational and community sphere. At its core, the empowerment theory posits that individuals and groups gain control over their lives and influence positive changes in their environments through active participation and critical awareness (Zimmerman, 2000).

According to Rappaport (1987), empowerment is the psychological process of developing a sense of personal competence, control, motivation, and self-efficacy. Through this internal process, people can recognise their skills and capacities, which promotes a proactive attitude to life's problems (Spreitzer, 1995). The importance of rules and processes that support cooperative decision-making, open communication, and opportunities for skill development is highlighted by the philosophy of empowerment. Community empowerment involves group action and the development of social capital in order to address shared problems and improved quality of life. This requires organizing the community, cultivating leadership, and engaging in advocacy efforts (Perkins & Zimmerman, 2019).

There is no doubt that the Boko Haram insurgency in Borno State, northeastern Nigeria has displaced and disrupted people's lives especially women and girls who are made to bear the brunt of the violence (Oriola 2017: 100). A large number of women have experienced trauma, lost their jobs, and had their social support networks shattered. However, as efforts to stabilize the area and help affected populations continue, there is an increasing emphasis on empowerment-based approaches to rehabilitation, namely psychosocial support and skill acquisition programs targeted at women (Bukar & Abdallah 2021). Therefore, the empowerment theory offers a useful framework for developing

rehabilitation programs in Borno State's conflict-affected districts. Empowerment strategies designed to help women affected by conflict attempt to boost agency and create possibilities that can help women take back control of their life and actively engage in their communities (Kabiru, Izugbara, & Beguy, 2019). Such strategies not only target the psychological and social repercussions of conflict exposure with the aim of promoting resilience, mending social bonds, and improving mental health, but also create coping mechanisms and establish new financial and economic support systems for women (Kabiru, Izugbara, & Beguy, 2019). The initiatives adopt a holistic approach to create social cohesion, treat mental health issues, expand women's economic options by offering business skills development, vocational training, and even provide start-up funds as crucial foundations for women's empowerment and community reintegration.

Common focus areas in Borno State include tailoring, food processing, animal husbandry, and other livelihoods that are important to the region (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2020). The objective of these projects is to enhance women's financial autonomy and decision-making ability by equipping them with marketable skills and resources in a region where fighting has severely disrupted livelihoods and conventional gender roles.

#### **4. PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT PROGRAMS FOR CONFLICT-AFFECTED WOMEN IN BORNO STATE**

According to Bass (2020), the Boko Haram insurgency has resulted in significant psychological repercussions for women and girls in the northeastern region of Nigeria, including depression, anxiety, social stigma and PTSD. Apart from widespread abductions, sexual slavery, forced marriage and forced labor, women and girls remain at the receiving end of the violence by losing means of livelihood, suffering from displacement, and losing the help and protection of their male partners and fathers (Oriola 2017: 100). These experiences coupled with the cultural and religious norms that make it difficult for women to ask for help or speak openly about their sufferings, consign women to misery, hopelessness and mental health disorder.

Notwithstanding the above, many international and local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have become involved in offering different levels of psychosocial support programs for women in Borno State (Saleh & Moses 2023: 208). These programs

often aim to support women in trauma-coping strategies and reintegration into their communities. Groups and safe places for women have been established by organisations such as the International Rescue Committee (IRC) (ACAPS Briefing Note 2017). These provide women with a quiet space where they can talk about their experiences, get therapy, and find out about available resources for economic empowerment. Indeed, many organisations operating in the region including the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) combine the goals of mental support with economic empowerment. This approach recognises that financial independence improves resilience and mental wellbeing (Adebayo, 2020).

Specialised programs use evidence-based techniques such as narrative exposure therapy and cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) to address the symptoms of trauma. One group offering these trauma-focused interventions in Borno is the NEEM Foundation, which provides support to help women who are displaced by the violence or who have escaped from Boko Haram reintegrate into their communities and overcome stigma (Merritt et al 2020). UNICEF has also been involved in this program, especially in the assistance of girls and young women (Banerjee, 2022). Considering the significant influence of religion on the region, several programs integrate religious components with psychosocial support. This entails collaborating with religious authorities and applying religious precepts to encourage recovery and adaptability (Ubong 2024: 62).

## **5.SKILLS ACQUISITION PROGRAMS FOR CONFLICT-AFFECTED WOMEN IN BORNO STATE**

Apart from the psychosocial programs developed by several agencies and NGOs, there are a number of skills acquisition initiatives developed to assist conflict-affected women in Borno State. The protracted insurgency in the northeastern region has led to massive internal displacement, with over 1.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Borno state alone (Borno State Government, 2024: 11). The conflict has also led to disruption of traditional livelihoods, increased poverty and food insecurity and limited access to education and vocational training, especially for women and girls (Oriola, 2022). Therefore, skills acquisition programs have emerged as a critical intervention to address these challenges, aiming to provide women with marketable skills for income generation, promotion of economic self-reliance and resilience, support reintegration of displaced women into their

communities and contribute to broader economic recovery and peace building efforts (Wessells, 2023).

Among the strategic approaches is the N-Power program, launched in 2016, which include key components that target conflict-affected areas (Mohammed, Danladi & Sunday 2022: 44). In Borno State, it offers vocational training in areas such as agriculture, construction and technology, entrepreneurship development, and temporary employment opportunities (Zaifata, Abiso & Shaffa 2023). While not exclusively for women, the program has made efforts to increase female participation in conflict-affected areas. The Borno State Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development also developed an initiative in partnership with international organizations to implement various skills training programs, including vocational training in tailoring, food processing, and handicrafts (Mohammed 2023: 35). Mobile skills training units of the Ministry transverse IDP camps and rural areas to implement the program targeted at women and girls, in addition to providing microfinance and business development support for graduates (Banerjee, 2022).

The United Nations women's empowerment program is another comprehensive program, which focuses on economic empowerment of conflict-affected women in Borno State through market-driven vocational training, business skills development and financial literacy training, linkages to markets and value chains (Bass, 2020). Apart from this, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) economic security programs in Borno State includes skills training in agriculture, animal husbandry, small business management, and provision of productive assets (sewing machines, farm inputs etc), cash grants for business start-ups, community-based savings and loan associations (Awotoye 2024: 35). Numerous other local and international Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) implement targeted skills acquisition programs, such as Care International's Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) and GOPRI's (Gender Equality, Peace and Development Centre) vocational training for women in IDP camps (Okoli & Lenshie, 2018).

Successful skills acquisition programs for conflict-affected women in Borno State typically incorporate the following elements: market-driven skill selection to identify in-demand skills and economic opportunities; trauma-informed approaches, recognizing and addressing the impact of conflict-related trauma on learning and economic participation; and community-based learning and flexible schedules to accommodate women's

responsibilities and security concerns.

## **6. Impact and Effectiveness of Psychosocial Support and Skills Acquisition Programs in Rehabilitating Women Affected by the Conflict in Borno State**

Initiatives to develop skills and psychological assistance have had a variety of consequences on the rehabilitation of women affected by violent conflicts in Borno State. The interventions have partially addressed the complex needs of women who experienced trauma, relocation, and loss as a result of the ongoing insurgency in the state (Saleh & Moses 2023: 208). For instance, psychosocial support programs have played a vital role in helping women overcome the mental health challenges associated with violence, bereavement and displacement (Kabiru, Izugbara & Beguy, 2019). One of the key benefits of psychological support programs for affected women in the conflict has been the restoration of their sense of worth and dignity. Those who survived the gruesome experiences of Boko Haram captivity often feel a sense of guilt, shame and social stigma, which exacerbates their psychological distress and social isolation (Ajayi 2020: 182). However, through targeted therapies, these women have been able to regain control over their lives, develop coping mechanisms, and reclaim their feeling of self-worth. Many of such women have gone ahead to assume active roles in providing psychosocial assistance and contributing to the development of the conflict-ridden society (Oriola, 2022).

Secondly, the skill-building initiatives for conflict-affected women in Borno State have no doubt, had tremendous impact on their livelihood, financial independence and economic self-sufficiency (Blattman & Ralston, 2015). Skills acquisition programs such as small-scale manufacturing, agriculture, tailoring, and entrepreneurship have given women marketable knowledge thereby, significantly raising their prospects of achieving economic freedom (Ali & Ali 2024: 26). Because of their increased capacity to earn income, women are now better equipped to support their families, invest in their children's education, meet their basic needs, and contribute to the society (Mshelia & Abdulrahman 2018: 252). There is no doubt that this renewed sense of emancipation has altered the gender relations in families and communities in Borno state where empowered women increasingly take up more responsibilities and achieve social acceptability. This is especially significant for women who were kidnapped and those who willingly joined the armed groups, as their reintegration is

often met with strenuous resistance (Adebayo, 2020).

The combination of skill-building programs and psychosocial assistance has shown to be incredibly effective in meeting the diverse needs of women affected by violence in Borno State. By treating psychological well-being and economic empowerment simultaneously, these interventions have resulted in a comprehensive approach to rehabilitation that recognises the interdependence of mental health, social integration, and economic stability. One of the key benefits of this integrated approach has been demonstrated to be its ability to create a positive feedback loop between psychological rehabilitation and economic empowerment. Women who receive psychological support are better able to engage in and benefit from skill-acquisition programs because it helps them develop coping strategies and self-worth (Saleh & Moses 2023: 208). Conversely, women's increased economic independence through skill development strengthens their sense of agency and self-worth and improves mental health outcomes (Wessells, 2023). Not only do these efforts benefit the individual recipient, but they also benefit entire communities. Women's improved mental health and growing economic independence have allowed them to become change agents in their families and communities. Indeed, many of the program's alumni in Borno state have gone on to lead their communities, advocate for peace, and mentor other women who have been affected by war (CCCPA 2022: 23). There is no doubt therefore, that the state's attempts at dispute settlement and wider societal change have benefited from this knock-on effect.

## **7. Challenges Militating against Implementation of Psychosocial Support and Skills Acquisition Programs for Women in Borno State**

There are many intricate obstacles in the way of providing psychosocial assistance and skill-building programs for women impacted by the violent conflicts in Borno State. The goal of these programs is to provide women in the conflict zone with practical skills to reconstruct their lives and livelihoods, while simultaneously addressing the profound psychological damage they have endured. The distinct circumstances of Borno State, characterized by a persistent insurgency and its aftermath, provide considerable challenges to the successful implementation of these endeavors.

A major barrier is the continuous security threat posed by the insurgency. Borno State has been the epicentre of the Boko Haram insurgency for over a decade. Thus, it is

challenging to offer psychosocial support services and skill-training programs in this uncertain security environment. The ability of program implementers and humanitarian workers to reach vulnerable women is hampered by risks to their safety, especially in rural or high-risk locations (Awotoye 2024: 45). Indeed, the unpredictable nature of the conflict has had a detrimental effect on program efficacy and continuity, leading to multiple disruptions or suspensions (Oriola, 2022). The huge displacement of individuals caused by the fighting is another significant barrier. Many women who were not eligible for these programs moved to camps or host communities where their living conditions worsened and even became more unpredictable and dangerous so that it was difficult to provide them with continuous, long-term care (Banerjee, 2022). Furthermore, psychological suffering is often made worse in IDP camps due to congestion and a lack of resources, which may reduce the efficacy of psychosocial interventions (Akawu, Adibe & Luka 2023: 86).

Cultural and societal barriers introduce an additional layer of complexity. Receiving mental health therapy or participating in some skill-building projects is not socially acceptable in Borno State's traditional community, especially when such activities challenge traditional gender standards (Ajayi 2020: 182). Indeed, there are occasions when family members and community leaders oppose women's participation in these ventures. Moreover, the trauma they endured during war usually reinforced feelings of mistrust and dread, making it difficult for women to open up and actively participate in psychological help programs (Adebayo, 2020). The linguistic diversity of Borno State further complicates the successful implementation of initiatives. Given the multiplicity of local languages and dialects spoken throughout the state, it is crucial—though usually challenging—to ensure that psychiatric support and skills training are provided in a linguistically appropriate manner. Owing to the linguistic diversity, it is essential to employ and train local staff members or translators, which can be difficult in an area with limited people resources and a history of war (Bass, 2020).

Due to a lack of finance and infrastructure, there are numerous operating issues. Many community centres, educational facilities, and healthcare facilities in Borno State that might have provided the framework for these projects have suffered significant damage (Walker 2019). The absence of suitable venues for skill-development workshops or counselling sessions hinders the implementation of the programs. Furthermore, when access to

essentials like electricity and clean water is limited, it becomes difficult to create an environment that is conducive to learning and healing (Adebayo, 2020). Funding restrictions and sustainability issues are ongoing roadblocks for these kinds of programs. Even though non-governmental groups and foreign donors may initially support these initiatives, long-term viability can be challenging. The chronic nature of the war requires long-term commitments for psychosocial treatment and skill-acquisition programs, even if finance cycles are typically short-term. As a result, program terminations were often abrupt, depriving participants of continued support (Haruna 2022).

The vast amount of need in Borno State makes programs difficult to access and remain effective. It is hard to provide comprehensive coverage of the war because so many women are affected by it. Programs usually have to favor certain groups of people or areas over others, which might keep many disadvantaged women from taking advantage of opportunities and vital assistance. Furthermore, there are unique difficulties in observing and assessing these programs in a war area. The uncertain security environment makes it challenging to collect accurate data on program outcomes and conduct regular assessments (Banerjee, 2022). This makes it more challenging to modify and improve software approaches in response to information and user feedback.

Highly qualified mental health practitioners are needed in Borno State due to the psychological depth of the trauma experienced by women. However, the State frequently lacks licensed psychologists, counsellors, and social workers with experience in treating trauma related to conflict (Sadat & Onimisi 2023: 74). This mismatch in skills jeopardizes the quality and efficacy of the psychosocial support that is being provided. Additionally, combining psychological aid with skill-acquisition programs requires careful synchronization and balance. It can be challenging to integrate both in a way that does not overwhelm participants or reduce the benefits of each one, but both are necessary for the full healing of women affected by conflict (Bass, 2020).

Despite the challenges outlined above, skill-building programs and psychosocial support have generally had a positive impact on women affected by violent conflicts in Borno State. These therapies have shown to be able to transform people's lives and communities by offering a path to recovery and resilience in the face of severe adversity.

## 8. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The comprehensive approach in Borno State that combines skill development and psychosocial support has shown promising results in the rehabilitation of women affected by violent conflict. This all-encompassing strategy addresses the psychological distress of these women in addition to their request for economic growth in a post-conflict setting. With the help of the psychological support component, women have experienced considerable success in processing their traumatic experiences, regaining their sense of self-worth, and reintegrating into their communities. People have found healing and resilience through community-based therapies, group therapy, and individual counselling. These programs provide women with a safe space to talk about their feelings, which has helped to reduce the symptoms of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

In addition, women now have valuable professional and entrepreneurial skills thanks to the skill-building component, which increases their financial options and independence. Many people have been able to make a living and support their families by training in industries such as tailoring, small business management, and agriculture. Their economic empowerment has improved their material well-being, but it has also improved their social status and self-esteem in their communities.

One noteworthy finding has been the synergistic advantage of integrating psychological support with skills training. Self-assured and financially stable women are better equipped to take part in their own psychological healing. However, improved mental and emotional well-being improves their capacity to pick up and apply new skills. The widespread adoption of these initiatives is still rife with challenges, though. Sometimes, a lack of funding, security concerns, and cultural differences limit the effectiveness and reach of these programs. In addition, the long-term sustainability of skill-based livelihoods in Borno State's recovering economy depends on ongoing support and market ties. Despite these challenges, the integrated approach has demonstrated a great lot of potential in aiding in the thorough rehabilitation of women who have experienced conflict-related injuries. Given this, the following steps are recommended to enhance the rehabilitation of women affected by violent conflict in Borno State by accelerating the integration of skill-building programs with psychosocial support:

- a) In addition to skill-acquisition initiatives, investments in the creation of psychological support are necessary to reach more disadvantaged women in Borno State and nearby states.
- b) Efforts should be made to further integrate skill-development and psychosocial aid programs with more general peace building and development activities in order to ensure a lasting effect.
- c) Ongoing research and assessment are needed to enhance program strategies and adapt to the evolving needs of women in conflict-affected areas.
- d) These initiatives must advance, widen their scope, make sure they are carried out with cultural sensitivity, and forge partnerships between local communities, NGOs, and government agencies in order to maximize their impact and reach more beneficiaries throughout Borno State.

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