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Gender dynamics in the Boko Haram insurgency in Northern Nigeria: a review of internally displaced persons

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Abstract:

The Nigerian Army's push into the Sambisa forest and other strongholds of 'Boko Haram' has 'liberated' many women and children who are now in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) Camps in Northern Nigeria, homeless, jobless and without husbands, some with or without children. The interventions at the local, civil society, Federal government and international donor agencies level, have not done very much to alleviate the suffering of the IDPs. They face severe deprivations and maltreatment and often are forced to resort to sex for food, having no land for farming to augment the camp food, and lacking health information and services, as well as lacking skills and economic opportunities for a better life. There is therefore need for gender sensitive interventions that will recognize needs of women and include specially repackaged information that specifically focuses on their rights. This paper discusses what is currently being done, what advocacy actions are in place and how the Agency theory can be applied to bridge the information gap and use self-identity therapy to help the women and children get over the trauma of incarceration, forced recruitment as weapons of war and other negative activities, more quickly.

Keywords: Gender dynamics, Internally Displaced Persons, Information repackaging, Intervention strategies, Nigeria

Introduction

An internally displaced person (IDP), often referred to as a refugee although he/she does not fall within the legal definitions of a refugee, is someone who is forced to flee his or her home but who remains within his or her country's borders. The United Nations and UNHCR support monitoring and analysis of worldwide IDPs through the Geneva-based Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC, 2016). It is estimated that more than 20,000 lives have been lost through the insurgency in North East Nigeria, while up to 2.1 million people have been displaced from their communities.

A tracking of the IDPs across 207 Local Government Areas (LGA) in thirteen (13) States of Northern Nigeria indicate that Borno State has the largest number of IDPs – 1,434,149 in different camps. Abuja has 13,481 IDPs; Adamawa (136,010); Bauchi (70,078); Benue (85,393); Gombe (25,332); Kaduna (36,976); Kano (9,331); Nasarawa (37,553); Plateau (77,317); Taraba (50,227); Yobe (131,203); and Zamfara (44,929). Further assessments show that 12.6 percent were displaced due to communal clashes, 2.4 percent by natural disasters and 85 per cent as a result of insurgency attacks by Boko Haram terrorists (IDMC, 2015).

IDP camps in Nigeria have existed since 2009 for as long as there has been insurgency. Eight years after, some groups are calling for the closure of the camps in the north-east, because they are having negative effect on the women and children there. The Children’s Government of Nigeria, a non-governmental organisation (NGO), recently made this call. According to them: “Many of the women in the camps live irresponsible lives with nobody to check them. If they return to their various communities, they will be more careful.” “The children also live carefree lives due to the absence of parents or guardians. They are denied even basic means of livelihood,” according to the group (Guardian Newspaper, 2017).

While this may be true, it seems nobody has really bothered to find useful preoccupation for the IDPs, and there is actually no monitoring and proper care generally in the camps. This is a sad turn of events.

Objectives of the study

The question to be considered is: Are the IDPs not being dumped from frying pan into fire? More specifically,

1. What intervention strategies are being adopted to reintegrate the IDPs properly back into society?
2. What advocacy methods are being used?
3. How can the Agency theory and self-identity therapy be applied to bridge the information gap and help the women and children get over the trauma?
4. Is there any role for libraries and information professionals to help IDPs?

Methodology

Literature search and Participatory Observation methods were used to gather data. One of the researchers is involved in Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) intervention for the IDPS.

Theoretical Framework

This study hinges a helping solution on Milgrams’ Agency theory. The theory stemmed from Milgram’s experimentation. Milgram (1974) explained the behaviour of participants in his study by suggesting that people actually have two states of behaviour when they are in a social situation: the autonomous state where people direct their own actions, and take responsibility for the results of those actions; and the agentic state where people allow others to direct their actions, and then pass off the responsibility for the consequences to the person giving the orders. In other words, they act as agents for another person’s will, the will of their principals who control them.

Acting as agents for the will of another, is the state in which many of the internally displaced persons in Nigeria are. They have been through so much and have been brought to a stage where they mostly just do whatever they are told whether it has meaning or not. Some of them before being rescued were being groomed to be suicide bombers. Others had been ‘married’ to the members of the insurgency group and turned to a faith they did not originally belong to.

For some of the women, they had accepted their fate, even becoming used to the ‘power’ and life of a well-liked woman in the eyes of the ‘husband’.

One of the IDPs told of how she became a powerful influence in the camp being the wife of one of the leaders. She told of how other women were made to be her slaves and she could even dictate to her husband that she did not want him to associate with some other women and he acceded by driving them away. This woman stated the fact that being in the IDP camp after her husband had been killed during the raid by government, she missed being in charge and having slaves do her bidding. She also expressed the fact that she missed the intimate relations with men. They had been totally radicalized and it was taking lots of effort to debrief them and make them see themselves as persons in their own right, and not persons that must do the bidding of others forcefully or through coercion.

Literature Review

The Nigerian Army has contributed to displacing citizens in the North East as they conduct heavy handed reprisal attacks on communities suspected to harbour Boko Haram terrorists. In recent times also, clashes between Fulani herdsmen and farmers have caused displacements in some Nigerian communities. It is estimated that 70 percent of all these internally displaced persons are women and children (Aboh, 2016, Ibekwe, 2014). However, there are cases where pockets of IDPs live outside the designated camps in accommodation provided by faith based organizations and non-governmental bodies. Although everyone in communities suffers when there is violence or natural disasters, it is often the females that lose most in such situations, especially in patriarchal societies such as Nigeria as gender inequalities become highlighted and basic human rights as pertains to them are side-lined (Opeyemi, 2016).

Since they fled their homes due to violence or natural disasters, IDPS are usually dispossessed of their homes, lands and sources of livelihood. Female IDPs are mainly vulnerable and defenceless as most have lost the male members of their families to the violence that displaced them. They largely depend on aid from the government, faith-based organizations, philanthropists and non-governmental bodies which come in the form of supply of food items, nutritional supplements for malnourished children, clothes, health care services, hygiene supplies and protection services. Most often these items are insufficient due to corruption and outright stealing by government and camp officials. This situation further exacerbates the vulnerability of the female IDPs and leaves them open to physical and sexual exploitation and gender-based violence as they seek to acquire more food, healthcare services and other consumables. Thus, while still trying to cope with the horrific trauma of being displaced from their homes by Boko Haram terrorists, female IDPs further face rape and abuse from government officials, vigilante groups and camp officials (Human Rights Watch, 2016). It is indeed a sorry tale. Unfortunately, they are being marginalized and facing discrimination even from family members they are supposed to return to because some have come back with babies borne for the insurgents.



IDPs being addressed by an official of the Nigerian Emergency Management Agency (NEMA)

Interventions for IDPs

International Alert (2017) called for more assistance for the reintegration of women and girls escaping insurgency. The London-based charity, UNICEF Nigeria and local partners, have been providing support to the hundreds of girls and women escaping Boko Haram captivity. The girls and women that return from captivity obviously suffer from distress symptoms, yet it is difficult for them to find acceptance and rebuild their lives (Financial Nigeria, 2017). Obi-Nwosu, Anazonwu, Ifedigbo, and Nweke (2016) assessed symptoms distress among internally displaced persons in Awka and Onitsha in Eastern Nigeria, who had been relocated home from war-torn areas in the North. They found that the IDPs suffered more distress than normal residents, while a strong correlation existed between symptom distress and internal displacement.

Many national and international organizations have provided humanitarian aid to the female IDPs. The U.S. Agency for international Development (USAID) gave a \$10.5 million grant to support the activities of the United Nation's Population Fund (UNFPA), UNICEF, and the World Health Organization (WHO) to improve access to health care services for female IDPs in North East Nigeria (US Mission, 2015). Deluxe Childbirth Services had donated 400 birth kits to female IDPs as the instances of sexual exploitation in the camps had spawned many pregnancies (Ezeamalu, 2015).

An online Advocacy Group SDGs Nigeria Action Group raised funds for the IDPs online on Twitter and on Facebook when it became clear that the government was not doing enough.

There are about 2.5 million children displaced in Nigeria. It is estimated that over 500,000 children will die this year alone.

For female IDPs to escape from being preyed on sexually due to lack of basic necessities, they need rehabilitation strategies that will empower them economically. A number of non-governmental organizations such as the Coalition of Nigerian Muslim Women in partnership with Hope for All Foundation Trainers have trained female IDPs in shoe and bag making, tailoring, soap and pomade making, GSM repairs, beads and jewellery making. The Girl Child Concerns (GCC), another NGO, provided female IDPs with weaving materials to start economic activities as before many women in most parts of North East Nigeria became IDPs, they were well known for their expertise in crafting hand-made caps and mats.

Millions of the IDPs have stayed in camps for more than 18 months, and quite a number of them yearn for rehabilitation and resettlement so that they can continue with their lives. The Nigerian government, United Nations, African Union, other international organizations and various NGOs all agree that rehabilitation of the IDPs which will facilitate their full integration into the society, either in their original homes or where they are currently settled, is necessary. However, there are noticeable gaps between the humanitarian aid provided and appropriate rehabilitation efforts that will enable the IDPs to regain the ability to fend for themselves economically and socially.

Beyond the supply of food and healthcare items for the IDPs, the Nigerian National Policy on IDPs (2012) recognizes the lack of information that will enable the IDPs to make informed decisions about their welfare and future possibilities as a major factor that deepens the predicaments of the IDPs and hinders their rehabilitation. Information is an input which reduces the level of uncertainty in any decision process. Information has the power to transform individual lives and strengthen communities. In a developing and transitioning country such as Nigeria people need relevant and timely information to competitively engage and function in a dramatically ever-changing world. It is thus a crucial factor and an enabler for better living.

Female IDPs need information that would help them build up their self-identity and self-esteem. They have to be helped through empowerment programmes, re-orientation and debriefing programmes to get a hold of themselves as persons, and have their own self-identity

without relying on the insurgents who have been controlling them. They need to be taught survival in the normal society without the thought of recourse to their ‘principals’ who had held them in captivity. Education is thus the key factor as an intervention strategy.

More Interventions?

The interventions by Governmental, Non-Governmental and International agencies for the IDPs have not totally solved the problem. This is because the sheer number of persons displaced is too large, and there is not enough monitoring, nor is there sincerity of purpose in some of the interventions. In actual fact, the supplies (which are not enough) meant for the camps have been diverted, and the little that gets there is again being unfairly distributed.

Libraries, health and social workers can partner to help in the debriefing exercise being carried out by the various groups assisting the IDPs. Mobile library services have to be intensified in areas where the IDPs are. Books, videos and games, magazines and different literature that will help to relieve the tension in the IDPs should be provided. The women and girls as well as the boys should be involved in activities that will bring their recent experiences to the fore in a positive way. For example, they should be encouraged through storytelling and role-play to see what they have gone through as something that is not a norm, and should be encouraged to look ahead and forward to a better life. The stories of those who have survived such trauma in other countries, who have come out better at the end, should be shared with the IDPs to encourage them to see hope and light at the end of the tunnel.

The IDPs who were trained to be suicide bombers, or were ‘wives’ of the terrorists need counselling in order to be de-radicalized. The counselling sessions can be held in libraries with librarians as part of the counselling team. The library as a space is relatively safe and neutral as pertains to political and religious beliefs. Also, the availability of diverse information resources will be a spur for the beginning of teaching basic literacy for the displaced women and children. It will also help build the relationship in the minds of the IDPs between libraries, learning, a better life and safety.

The public library in Abuja, the capital of Nigeria, had experimented with bringing in street children known as *almajiris* into the library to sit down, look at books and touch them as well as to draw with art materials. The outcomes of the engagements show that the street children in that community now see the library as a place where they can go and feel safe, draw and see pictures in books. This can be replicated with the IDPs. Information repackaged in libraries to suit their needs should be prepared and made available to them. The repackaging in various formats and media will help them to reconnect faster to the changes required to make them totally reintegrated into society.

Conclusion

The self-worth of a person should be harped upon in such a way that the person can easily reintegrate him/herself back into society and live without much fear. Definitely a lot of resources are needed, and the collaboration of many professionals with social work, psychology and even mental health backgrounds to work with libraries in the northern parts of the country where the insurgency is rampant, is required. Making sure that the principals are not going to leave a permanent mark on the IDPs is going to take a lot of time and effort, but it will be worth the while because in two, three or five years’ time, a much better scenario would have emerged and information professionals would be able to proudly say that they contributed to salvaging the situation with the emergent issues that arose from the Boko Haram insurgency.

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