

Prevention and Response to Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Conflict North-Eastern Nigeria: A Critical Review of the Engagement Mechanisms of Communities Based Protection Committees

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Abstract: *The Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria rages on unabated, with no end in sight (Amodu, 2024). Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), has been the bane of the over 13 years' conflict. UN-OCHA (2022), posits that, there have been worrying incidence of violence against women, especially sexually since the onslaught of the Boko haram insurgency in North-eastern Nigeria. Among the most widely used community mechanisms for preventing and responding to survivors in conflict situations are community-based protection groups, often because governments fail in their duty to protect the most vulnerable, women and children. This study thus conducted a critical examination of their engagement mechanism in preventing and responding to sexual and gender-based violence concerns. Data was elicited from 6 study participant who are actively responding to the humanitarian crisis in the region. The research design adopted is phenomenology. Data was analysed using thematic framework. Findings reveal that the while community-based protection groups in the region are effective, there is concern regarding their sustainability. The study recommended that community-based groups should be focused on community resources not external funding for sustainability.*

Keywords: Sexual and gender-based violence, North-Eastern Nigeria, Community Based Protection Committees, Boko Haram

INTRODUCTION

The Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria rages on unabated, with no end in sight (Amodu, 2024). Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), has been the bane of the over 13 years' conflict (Oladeji et al, 2018). Millions have been displaced and taking shelter in displaced peoples camp (IDMC, 2019). An assessment of wellbeing and the living conditions in the camps, showed that rape is commonplace and other sexual offences is on the increase (UN-OCHA, 2016). UNFPA (2016) estimates that 51.5% of all sexual violence perpetrated in the region were by the insurgents, 17.8 % were by the police and members of the armed

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forces. The prevalence of SGBV have resulted in calls for communities to be in the driving seat of the response by aid agencies for survivors using the community-based approach.

The scourge of Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) is often heightened in conflict situations, as seen in conflict spots globally (Oladjeji et al, 2018.) UN-OCHA (2022), posits that, there have been worrying incidence of violence against women, especially sexually since the onslaught of the Boko haram insurgency in North-eastern Nigeria. A rapid assessment by the Sexual and Gender-based Violence Sub-Sector in Nigeria estimate that 1.3million people are in dire need of SGBV assistance. 45% and 34% of this target population are girls and women respectively (Relief Web, 2024). According to the GBV Sub Sector Working Group Nigeria (2017), one in five women affected by the Boko haram conflict experienced SGBV in some form. The institute of Migration (2019) estimates that 6 in 10 women in North-eastern Nigeria and affected by the Boko haram insurgency have experienced SGBV in some form. The prevalent of the SGBV scourge in conflict situation, in the view of Swedish International Development Agency Cooperation (2008) and UNHCR (2011) is based on heightened tension within households and the wider communities, large-scale displacements, a breakdown in justice system, social networks and poor welfare services. IRC and John Hopkins University (2015) share the view that the actual burden of SGBV especially in conflict situations is unknown owing to the sensitivity of the concept and the attendant stigma to survivors which inhibits disclosure and reporting.

Several studies share the view that existing gaps in health care services, shame, lack of belief in available services, stigma and inadequate knowledge about SGBV hinders women from accessing SGBV support service. (Tappis, 2016; UNOCHA, 2018; wirtz et al, 2014; IRC & JHU 2015; Bungaard 2016; Holmes & Bhuvanendra 2014; Chynoweth 2015; Casey et al 2015). While state and humanitarian intervention is ongoing, it is still not enough to reach the required length and depth, thus calling for a concerted community-based approach. This recognition of the need for action at the community level have found expression in community-based protection committees (CBPC), often volunteers, that work to ensure the protection and well-being of children, adolescent girls and women in a village, neighbourhood, or community (IOM, 2019). Despite their seemly enormous potential, It is thus pertinent to gain an in-depth and contextual understanding of the engagement mechanisms, being used by the affected communities to prevent and respond to SGBV survivors in the region. This is the thrust of this study.

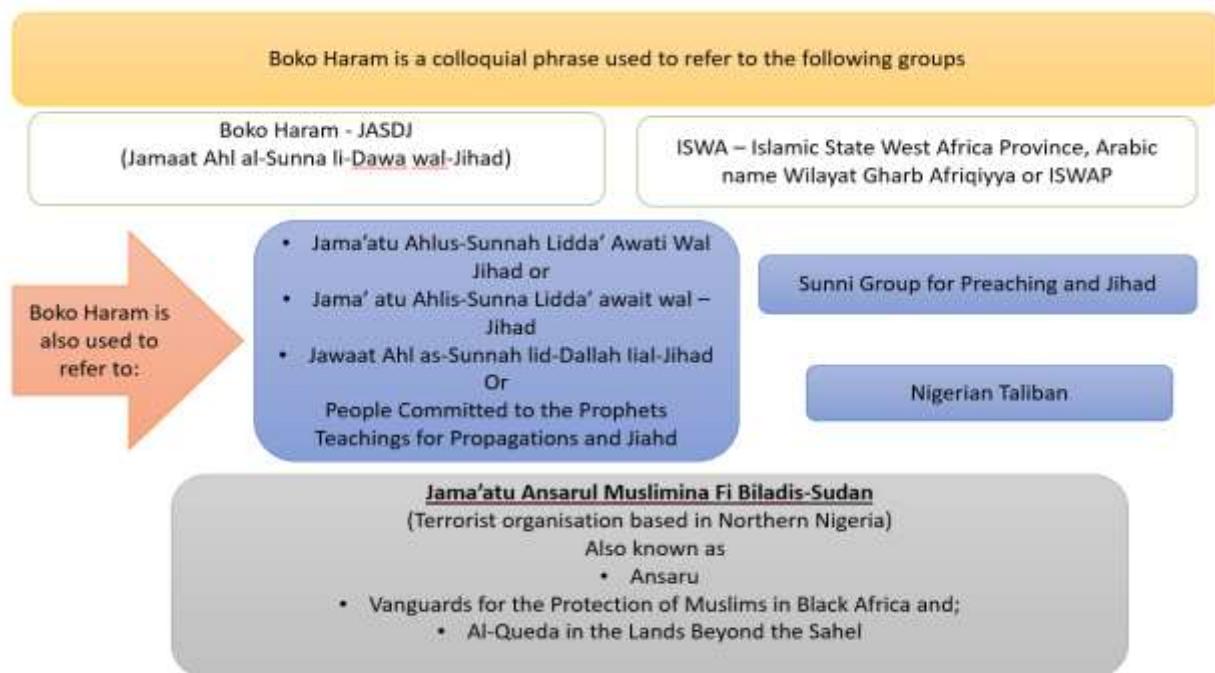
The broad aim of this study is to examine the engagement mechanisms employed by the community-based protection groups in preventing and responding to sexual and gender-based violence for women and girls affected by the conflict.

Specific objectives of the study include:

1. To analyse the interventions model, composition, capacity and effectiveness of the Community Based Protection Committees in preventing and responding to women and Girls affected by the conflict in North-eastern Nigeria. the effectiveness.
2. To explore the challenges and opportunities of the Community Based Protection Committees in preventing and responding to SGBV in North-eastern Nigeria.
3. To evaluate ways to strengthen the initiative and ensure sustainability.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**Conflict in North-eastern Nigeria**

According to Dan-Azumi (2025), the Boko Haram crisis started with the extra judicial killing of Mohammed Yusuf in Maiduguri Nigeria in July 2009 by the state security forces along with hundreds of his adherents. Yusuf had led a movement which called a holy form of Islam, and decried immorality and inequality. The remaining members of the group reformed and became 'Jama'atu Ahl al-Sunna li-l-Da'wa wa-l-Jihad' (JASDJ), which means "people committed to the propagation of the Prophet's teachings and jihad," often referred to as Boko Haram. In the beginning, they targeted only government forces, and later extended to communities, committing mass killings, sexual slavery and abduction. According to Home Office (2021), Boko Haram convinced its "followers that fighting a jihad is part of the will of Allah, and a cause every faithful must embrace and be ready to die for".

**Fig 1 Boko Haram****Community Engagement**

To work in a community, it is imperative to understand the social dimensions of that community, which is necessary to engage with that community. Engagement refers to processes by which contact is established with the community. IOM (2020), defines community engagement as a process whose specific objective is working with groups of people, connected through ethnicity, affiliation, religion or history, with a view towards securing their safety and development. For Muzyamba et al, (2017, 2017a & 2018), community engagement is anchored on collaboration, meaningful participation and empowerment of marginalized groups. Community engagement in the SGBV response in North-East Nigeria is expressed through the community-based protection groups.

SGBV-related Policies and Strategies in Nigeria

In Nigeria, the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act 2015, and Child Rights Act 2003, constitute the legal basis for protecting women and girls and citizen's rights (World Bank 2019; IOM

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2019). Other SGBV-related national policies include the National Reproductive Health Policy 2017, the National Gender Policy 2006, the national GBV referral guidelines and National Health Policy 2016. SGBV practitioners rely on policy frameworks and guidelines, when managing and facilitating referrals for SGBV survivors (Ward & Laffreniere, 2015; Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2019).

It has been argued that SGBV-related laws and policies are limited in scope in the country, despite the existence of the above policies and commitment to international treaties. Scholars argue that the existing frameworks do not confer full protection for the right of women and girls (World Bank 2019; IOM 2019; Margrima & Onyekpere 2020; Center & LEDAP, 2020; Amnesty International Nigeria, 2017). The penal code which is in force in the Muslim dominated northern part of the country, for instance grants legal backing to assaulting one's spouse (Section 55(4)) and rape within marriage is not recognized in any of Nigerian laws (CARE International Nigeria 2017; Dirisu et al, 2020). There is also the issue of sharia law which legitimizes marriage to an underage child and the requirement of an eyewitness before establishing a case of rape (Dirisu et al, 2020). Although signatory to the Maputo protocol, Nigeria goes against its provision specifically, Article 14 (2) (c) by restricting abortion, which is provided for, by SGBV survivors who may request such (Oladeji et al, 2018; Okorie & Abayomi, 2019).

Despite the power and autonomy of the State governments to domesticate and adapt national laws and policies to their context, it is surprising that after more than a decade of terrorist attack in the region, the states who are worst hit, refused to domesticate the SGBV most critical laws, Child rights Act 2003 and VAPP Act, 2015. Margrima & Onyekpere (2020) and IOM (2019), argues that refusal to domesticate these laws has fuelled an environment which undermines the right of women and girls, as well as their access to SGBV support services. Sharing similar sentiment, IASC (2015) and GBV AoR (2019) posits that domestication of the relevant laws provides a comprehensive framework which is required for a multi-sectorial response for SGBV, which he asserts is current absent and non-efficient now. Scholars share a consensus that discriminatory sociocultural norms and lack of political will, perpetuate patriarchy and hinder gender equality. They opine that fear of women empowerment by the ruling patriarchy has resulted in the non-domestication of the relevant SGBV-related laws in the States (World Bank 2019; IOM 2019; Dirisu et al, 2020).

Contemporary issues affecting the utilization of SGBV services in local communities in North-Eastern Nigeria

Many factors come into play and determine whether SGBV services are utilized by the population, amongst these are the perceptions, individual level, beliefs, knowledge and attitudes in conjunction with his social environment in which the person exist. Some of these factors are presented below.

Knowledge and Awareness of SGBV and SGBV services

United Nations population funds and East European Institute for Public Health (2015) found that the availability of context-specific information regarding SGBV, options available, location of services, and benefits of SGBV services are vital when deciding whether to utilise an SGBV service. Studies have shown that personal knowledge of what constitute SGBV, its consequences, and why accessing care is pertinent, especially within 72 hours of sexual abuse, promotes utilization of SGBV services (UNICEF & Alert International 2016; Muuo et al 2020; Dirisu et al, 2020). Yet, UN Women, UNFPA, UNODC, and UNICEF (2020), found that in hard-to-reach locations in Nigeria, communities in the displaced camps have little or no information regarding SGBV or modalities to access its services, which clearly limits access to care. UNICEF and Alert International (2016), found that majority of women and girls in the IDP, does not possess the knowledge of how to make a formal report on SGBV issues and the reporting process.

Beliefs, Attitudes, and Perceptions

Several studies in conflict settings in Africa show that community perception, attitude and belief affect disclosure, seeking help and utilization of service for SGBV survivors (Muuo et al, 2020; IOM 2019; IRC and GWI 2017; Odwe et al, 2018). In Nigeria, Tenkorang et al (2017), Pereira (2020) and Adejumo, (2020), found that personal experience of SGBV and its severity, is an influencing factor for help seeking behaviour and subsequent utilization of SGBV services. IOM (2019) showed that a perception of less severity of an SGBV incident is one of the causes of significant delays in disclosure, reporting and help seeking. Tenkorang et al (2017), IOM (2019) and Odwe et al, (2018), studied the role of the social environment in help seeking behaviour for survivors. Findings reveal that in conflict settings in Nigeria and other Africa nations, negative perceptions of family members and social environment in which they exist about SGBV militates against survivors' help-seeking behavior and subsequent service utilization. This is collaborated by David et al (2018), in a cross-sectional study on child sexual abuse in Lagos State, Nigeria. Majority of Adolescent survivors were reluctant to disclose to an adult, because they fear they will not believe them.

Socio-Economic Factors

Amnesty International (2017) observed that in displaced people's camp, women needing medical care, could not afford it, which resulted in death or limit help seeking. This further compounded by the provision of the VAPP ACT 2015, which only allows a survivor to be compensated when the perpetrator has been found guilty (World Bank, 2019). Considering the lengthy judicial adjudication process in Nigeria, survivors would have to bear cost of seeking care and support. This will deter poor survivors from utilizing available SGBV services. Dirisu et al, (2014) argues that the prevailing culture of silence among families and survivors is further reinforced by factors like poverty and indebtedness to perpetrators. Thus, undermining survivor's ability to disclosure or help-seeking.

METHODOLOGY

The study approached the research from the Interpretivist and social constructivist lens and worldview. This research philosophy focuses on peoples lived experiences and their perception of things. The research strategy and design used in the study was Phenomenology. Creswell and Creswell (2018) explains that it is a type of research where the participants describe their lived experiences of a phenomenon, they have experienced. The study adopted the qualitative descriptive method and study employed both primary and secondary data collection technique.

The study recruited Six (6) facilitators of the community-based protection committees, who work in organizations that work with survivors of sexual and gender-based violence in the region and have established various community protection committees. Quota and purposive sampling techniques was adopted for the study. Data for the study was collected through semi structured interview, using an interview protocol. The interviews were conducted virtually in a setting that was comfortable and enabling for the participants and later transcribed by the researcher. The researcher transcribed the recording of the interviews and arranged the data type based on the source of the information. Next, the ideas shared by the participants were identified and categories based on themes.

RESULTS/FINDINGS

Demographics of Participants

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Location	Years of Experience in GBV	Interview Mode
1	Female	Maiduguri	5 Years +	Video Conferencing
2	Male	Maiduguri	5 Years +	Video Conferencing
3	Female	Maiduguri/Yobe/Yola	5 Years +	Video Conferencing
4	Female	Yola	5 Years +	Video Conferencing
5	Female	Damaturu	5 Years +	Video Conferencing
6	Male	Maiduguri/Yobe/Yola	5 Years +	Video Conferencing

All participants identified as members of the SGBV sub-sector Nigeria and currently responding to the humanitarian crisis in north-eastern Nigeria, primarily working with local communities, and women and girls who have survived sexual and gender-based violence. All participants have more than five (5) experience in the region, are Nigerian citizens and indigenous to the region

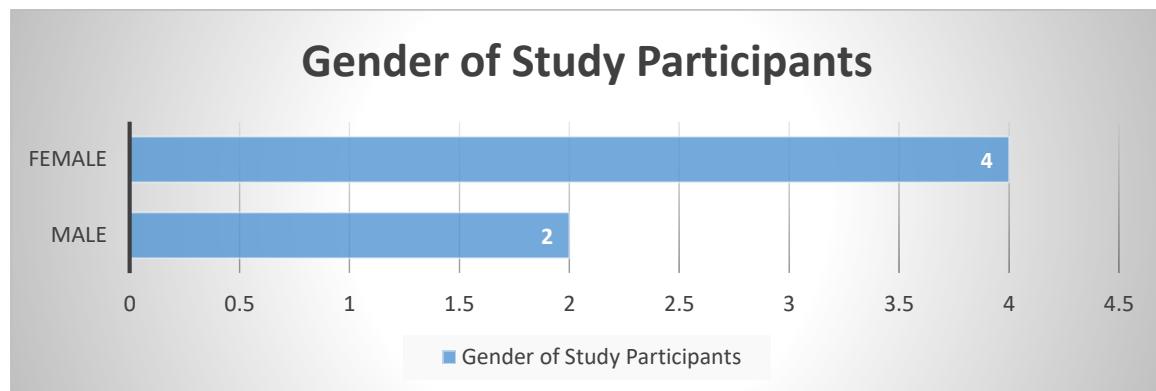


Fig. 2 Gender distribution of study participants

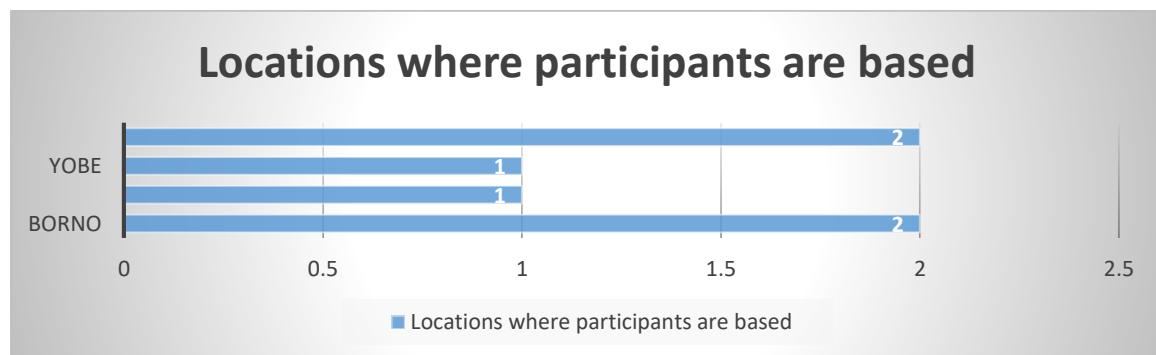


Fig. 3 Spatial distribution of study participants

Presentation of data findings and analysis based on the study objectives.

The study has 3 main objectives, around which the study research questions were framed. These objectives were: Analysing the models of intervention, composition and capacity of the community protection groups; evaluate the challenges and opportunities of the community engagement model; and explore mechanisms to strengthen the initiative and for sustainability. In this section, the study findings are presented based on each of the objectives.

Theme 1 - Community engagement models

The study participants share a consensus on the current model of community engagement in the north-eastern State grappling with insurgency, namely, Borno, Adamawa and Yobe (BAY) states. According to them, in the last five (5) years, the community engagement model comprises of the community-based protection groups. In the words of the participant 2, who is a co-lead, representing locally based organizations in the region:

“At the start of the insurgency in 2009, there was no coordination of responses to protection issues in the region. The response was led by international organizations like International Rescue Committee and staff were not from the region, thus it was difficult to work with the local communities. The turning point was the abduction of over 200 schoolgirls in Chibok in one night in 2014. The communities took it upon themselves to protect their community and their youths, and formed a neighbourhood group, instead of waiting and depending on the government who clearly cannot protect them, considering the size of the state. With approval from the government, UNICEF started to organize the groups in line with internationally accepted best practice into community-based protection groups and recruited some people as community volunteers and trained to identify protection violations concerns and refer to them for specialized services.”

Theme 2 – Composition of the groups identified

Findings from the study show that community-based protection groups and community-based volunteers are drawn from members of the community. Participant 3, who has set up various community protection groups in communities where they are not in existence puts it this way:

“Community-based protection groups are members of the community who are volunteer themselves willingly to serve this course for the good of their community. The group is reflective of strata of the community, from the traditional leaders to the women and even children. Before, UNICEF stepped in, it was an all-men affair and not for children. However, in the guideline, which was adapted by UNICEF, we must show best practices in line with international standards. So, you will find, religious leaders, teachers, farmers, market women, women leader, youth leaders and every sector of the community represented. It is a platform for the people to meet and talk about protection issues in the community, concerning girls and women, even children and propose solutions.”

Participant 1 adds:

“In the past, everyone can volunteer. But now, things are no longer that way. UNICEF through the ministry of women affairs and social development in the state, selects those with communication skills, good reputation in the community and understand the community terrain, culture and way of life. In fact, you must be from the community, residing in the community and be known in the community. You must also need to read and write, because we do complete weekly report and sent to them. You must have some level of education. It is not restricted to any gender.”

Theme 3 - Capacity of the groups to prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence and survivors

Based on the study findings, experience in child protection or gender-based violence program area is not a perquisite for being part of the community-based protection group. Yet, this is a sensitive area, requiring competency and relevant skills, which community members may be lacking. Thus, each protection group is trained in child protection concepts, harmful social and gender norms, making referrals and identifying risks and protection concerns, by the organization that set them up.

According to Participant 4, who have set up and supervised various community-based protection group, *“The work of the protection groups is enormous and sensitive, that is why various capacity building trainings, supportive supervision and monitoring sessions are prepared for them. With these trainings, they can carry out their functions. They work to prevent protection concerns by raising awareness of what constitute protection concerns and facilitate referrals to specialized services”*.

Theme 4 - Effectiveness of the community-based protection groups

While community-based model of protection has been lauded as appropriate, the question remains of whether it has proved effective, especially in conflict contexts. The study participants share a consensus that the model has been amazingly effective in North-eastern Nigeria. In the view of the Participants,

“The effectiveness of working with community-based groups and the community-based volunteers is because they are part of the community, they are not outsiders, they can see the risks that implementing partners cannot see and have a culturally appropriate way of handling it. They know the preferred way of going about things. And you know that to tackle an issue, it is important to know the source, which is only available at the community level. In fact, since we started forming protection groups in the communities and working with the community leaders, perpetrators are now handed promptly to the police and not shielded. Because the community leaders have been trained as GBV champions and want to leave up to expectation.”

Theme 5 - Opportunities of the community engagement mechanism.

The study found that community-based protection groups present a plethora of opportunities. For instance, it presents a platform to engage men and boys in the fight against SGBV, creating male SGBV champions is significant because men have always been identified as a major perpetrator of SGBV in the Nigeria context and wield more influence and power in the home and community.

Participant 6 recalls: *“Many women were kidnapped alongside their daughters by Boko Haram and used as sex slave for years, upon there rescue by the soldiers when a camp is destroyed, they are often rejected alongside the children they bore for the insurgents by the community and families. Through the community protection groups, the community have been sensitized to reintegrate them as they had no choice in what happened to them.”*

In the view of participant 6: *“community-based protection groups and community-based volunteers are often the first line of response especially in hard-to-reach communities here in Borno state. Because, they are always with the people, they are always the first to notice that someone has been violated, at risk of abuse, or has perpetrated abuse. Then, they will facilitate referral or notify us and we come to respond”*.

Sharing similar view, participant 2 believes they can be used to do much more. *“Considering the level of training that these groups have received, they can cascade what they learn to the community*

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members. For instance, in our project location community protection groups mediate in child protection cases, because they are a reflective of the various parts of the community, including the community and religious leadership. It is only when the people involved disagree with the verdict of the community, that the matter is taken to the government agencies. Surprisingly, the government agencies always agree with verdict of the community, because the community protection groups consider child best interest as they have learnt in different capacity strengthening initiatives that we have organized for them.”

Theme 6 - Challenges of the community engagement model.

Community-based protection mechanism in North-eastern Nigeria are confronted by several challenges today. There is also lack of legislative framework which is necessary for their work. The participants agree that in view of the protracted crisis in North-eastern Nigeria, particularly in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe States which affects children, domesticating the Child Rights Acts would have been the priority of the government of the affected states. Sadly, it was only in 2022, just two (2) years ago, out of the fifteen (15) year - long conflict, that Borno state passed a child protection bill into law.

Participant 2 posits that: “*The delay in domesticating the child right act is hinged on the disconnect between the religious and cultural values of the people, in relation to the provisions of the law. The law empowered women, girls, and children, which is in variance to the cultural and religious view of the people, where they are considered properties of the family patriarch.*”

Another challenge identified by the study is the meaningful participation of women, girls and children in their own protection. According to participant 3:

“*Organizations setting up community-based groups demand that children, women and girls play a key role in all decision making affecting their protection and well-being. But this is not the case in my community. Our protection group is made up of members of the cabinets of chief, the religious heads, the youth leader, family head, children, women, and girls. Whilst not saying it out, the group are not comfortable with deliberating community discussions with women, girls and children. These too are not comfortable to always demand inclusion.*”

DISCUSSION

The main objective of this research endeavour is to critically examine the engagement mechanisms of the community-based protection groups in the prevention and response to sexual and gender-based violence for women and girls affected by the conflict in North-eastern Nigeria. After analysing the responses of the study participants, the following findings were made:

The community models of intervention in preventing and responding to survivors of sexual and gender-based violence in North-eastern Nigeria is the Community-based protection groups. The community-based protection groups are made of the different strata of the community, representative of the traditional institutions, religious leaders, women leaders, youth leaders, boys and girls, etc. It is not restricted to any gender but must possess good reputation in the community. understand the community terrain, culture and way of life. On-going capacity development is being implemented for the community-based protection groups to equip them with requisite skills for the work. Findings reveal that the group have been effective in preventing and responding to women and girls, survivors of sexual and gender-based violence.

Implication to Research and Practice

The community-based protection mechanism in North-eastern presents opportunities to engage men and boys in the fight against SGBV; mobilize communities for change; promote locally based solutions in protection issues; prevent and respond to protection concerns in the community; facilitate referrals to other protection systems; and promote and support social reintegration of survivors. The challenges facing the community-based protection mechanism includes inadequate legislative framework; operation of the penal code and sharia law in the region which conflict national legislation; and exclusion of meaningful participation of women, girls and children in their own protection.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this research work, we can conclude that while the current community engagement mechanism has been effective, it is a work in progress and but there is a great concern as to its sustainability.

Recommendations

In view of the findings of this research work, the study hereby makes the following recommendations:

- Community-based protection mechanisms should be established as a long-term, a sustainable means to address protection concerns for women, girls, and children. It should not be set up as a temporary measure that depends on the commitment of a few volunteers. It should be community owned and led.
- Facilitators of community-based protection group should focus on community resources, not funding: While financial support is deemed necessary for the group to kick start operation, evidence has shown that providing financial support leads reliance and dependency on the facilitating organization. When projects are completed and funding stops, groups may feel withdrawn or close permanently.
- community groups should be supported by facilitating organizations to identify, source and mobilise resources internally. This is important to promote sustainability and mitigate dependency. This can be done through the establishment of cooperatives or income generating opportunities for community-based protection mechanisms to generate their own income and remain self-sustaining.
- On-going capacity development, coaching and mentoring of community-based protection groups. Within the community, protection groups facilitate myriads of activities aimed at the protection of survivors, women, girls and children. On-going capacity development will ensure that groups do no harm to survivors while trying to protect them. It ensures that engagement mechanisms and interventions reflect the best interest of survivors, mitigate the lack of requisite skills and competencies by the group as they attempt to prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence concerns within the community.
- Community-based protection groups should reflect adequate representation and diversity. The principle of community-based protection espouses representation of the entire community diversity and strata. If community protection mechanism disregard this in the selection of its members, it can affect their achievement and sustainability. This is because issues of power dynamics are particularly important especially in community setting. The group should be

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representative of the most vulnerable, include boys, women and girls, survivors and even those with disabilities. Inclusivity is pertinent for awareness raising of sexual and gender-based violence and ensure positive values are promoted. It ensures that boys, women and girls acquire gain confidence and can express their views, which enhances their self-protection.

Suggestions for Further Research

Having seen that there is dearth of evidence base regarding sustainability of current community-based engagement mechanism in conflict situation, it is imperative to venture into this area and ascertain how this initiative can be sustained for the long term.

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