

# Violent Conflict and the Plight of Vulnerable Women and Children in Plateau State.

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## ABSTRACT

Internal displacement is common across Nigeria due to frequent conflicts. While some of the conflicts appear to be caused by overlapping and mutually reinforcing regional, religious and ethnic divisions, others often stem from competition for scarce opportunities and communal resources. Current levels of displacement are deemed particularly high by a number of organisations, but in the absence of a functioning monitoring mechanism, no accurate figures are available. Ad-hoc local registration exercises have hinted at the scale of the phenomenon, but those who seek shelter and support from family and friends - and who make up the majority of internally displaced people (IDPs) - tend not to be counted. The government has not yet adopted a national IDPs policy, leaving national and international agencies to assist IDPs in an uncoordinated way and on a sometimes selective basis. This paper examines the situation of displaced women and children as a vulnerable social category, particularly the displaced women and children within Zang Secondary School displaced Camp in Bukuru, Jos south L.G.A. of Plateau State. The study argues that the various attacks experienced by these people have engendered massive internally displaced women and children and have derailed the process of development. Therefore, the study recommends good governance as a panacea.

## KEY WORDS:

violent conflicts, women and children.

## Introduction

Today it is very rare that, a year passes by without an outbreak of conflicts in one state or the other in Nigeria. Most of these conflicts which are provoked by sundry factors such as opposing value system; stiff political competitions; aggressive struggles for economic resources, identity question and many others, unleashing terror with a phenomenal scale. For example States like Borno, Yobe, Taraba, Bauchi, Plateau, Nassarawa, Kaduna, Benue, Kogi States to mention but few have tested in their own way the venom of this dastardly orchestrated act of man's inhumanity to his fellow beings especially women and children.

Women and children experience conflict where they are vulnerable to its implications in different ways ... (Enloe, 2001). Conflict situations present women and children with variety of burdens, such as rape, lost of husbands or children, health challenges. They are often victims of multiple form of violence, and bear the

responsibility of ensuring the survival of the family... (Cock,2001).

For over a decade now, the once uniquely serene and peaceful city of Jos, the capital of Plateau State, with the popular slogan "Home of Peace and Tourism", has continued to witness seemingly unabated spates of violent conflicts. Although conflict situation is not peculiar to Plateau State capital, it has lingered in Jos with very intriguing implications. For instance, of late, the conflicts in and around Jos have graduated from localized disputes to scenarios of more horrendous, senseless perfidious act of reprisals in the villages surrounding the capital. Culminated in the mass killing of Berom people especially women and children in the villages of Rasat, Zot, Rim, Ndin, Dorowa Soho, Dorowa Babuje, Dogo Na Hauwa and of recent Gwol also known as Barkin Ladi and several other communities by Fulani/Hausa militia (PIDAN, 2010:1; Bot, 2013).

While commitment to finding sustainable peace is often shrouded in political rhetoric, the state however is crippled with businesses folding-up and relocating to neighbouring states where security is guaranteed. Although successive administrations have expressed regrets at the occurrence of every conflict in the state, yet efforts by government to resolving them were rather short term with little or no practical result.

It is obvious to understand the horror of displacement that affects these kind of vulnerable groups (women and children) in the society as a result of violent, armed conflict. The socio-economic and psychological impacts of these conflicts have transformed relations both during and after the conflicts. In the face of extreme hardship, traditional roles are adapted to meet the new realities imposed by conflicts. Where women assumed greater responsibilities as heads of the families, by taking up the responsibility of caring for the many children left orphaned or abandoned during and after the conflicts (Dayo,2012).

The economic impact of the conflict on women is severe. It compounds to their general poverty and hardship. Women lacked access to the means of production, particularly land and funds, on the other hand, children drop out of school, with quite a number of them being molested (Dayo 2012:214). Therefore, the picture captured above as a result of armed conflict is daunting.

Thus, to address the issues in this paper, the study asks the following questions: What is the nature of armed conflicts that affects vulnerable groups like women and children? What is the situation of displaced women and children in the internally Displaced Centre in Zang Secondary School Bukuru Jos-South L.G.A.? What is the impact of displacement on vulnerable groups like women and children? What are the efforts of government in curbing violent conflicts and meeting the needs of vulnerable displaced Women and children in conflict situations?

It is against this backdrop that the study seeks answers, particularly on the plight of vulnerable women and children in IDPs Camps, Zang Secondary School Bukuru.

## Methodology

The study adopted both primary and secondary data collection methods and targeted internally displaced women and children from Zang Secondary School IDPs Centre Bukuru Jos South L.G.A. of Plateau State. In this respect, the authors randomly selected 10 women mostly from the Camp and were interviewed appropriately. The

paper therefore, summarizes data, creates appropriate boxes to describe the plight of women and children in the IDPs Camp.

## Conceptual Framework

### Violent Conflicts

Violent conflict is a prevalent characteristic of social life which happens not only in times of decay and decline of society but also in times of blossoming and healthy growth. According to Nader cited in Otite and Albert (1999:8), most conflicts happen at three different structural stages which consist of intra family, intra community and inter community. The ethno-linguistic nature of Nigeria often provides a salient laboratory for the production of knowledge in the area of conflict studies due to dimensions of conflict occurrences. Conflict occurs either due to struggle for access to diverse limited resource such as chieftaincy position, markets, power and status, water spots for animals, land, government policies, leadership of political parties and host of others (Otite and Albert, 1999:3; Osaghae, 2001:11).

According to Tenuche, most times, the negative mobilization of such identities as ethnicity, religion, language and race in the pursuit of access to the limited resources further fuels conflicts. He further insisted that as source of meaning and experience, identity possesses attributes of mobilization as it becomes a rallying force and organising principles for social actions (Tenuche, 2002; Castells, 1997:6). Conflict was analyzed within the frame work of the realist paradigm. But the end of the cold war and the dramatic change in the nature of conflicts has made way for the resurgence of ethnic, political and economic conflicts. As a result, conflicts are now analysed in market oriented ethos (Yeomans, 2003:1).

While conflicts may not always be accompanied by bloodshed, most of the recent post cold war conflicts in Africa degenerate into violence, quickly leading to destruction of lives and property. Violence, provoked by conflicts, have often turned the people's attention from creative production to creative destruction; (Nnoli, 2003:3).

Jega (2002) argues that, identity consciousness in itself and its varied forms, such as ethnic, religious, communal, gender, labour and youth, are not main problems in plural societies, but become problematic when they are not properly mobilized and used as platform on which socio political action is organised in the struggle for access to the scarce resources by diverse competing groups (Castells 1997:6; Jega, 2002). Therefore it is obvious to see identity as a strong force that if not well managed becomes a major cause of violent conflicts.

### Status of Women

Until recently, women were treated as second class citizens in most Countries. Consequently, they were under-represented in vital sectors and major decision making institutions. For example, women were not granted equal voting rights until the twentieth century in many countries, including the United States. Ironically, in many traditional monarchical systems, women emerged as queens but this was not the case in old liberal democracies. In traditional Nigeria, the heroic roles of Queens Amina (Zazzau/Zaria) Ida and Emotan (Edo/Benin), Inikpi (Idah/Kogi State) and Moremi

(Ife) have been documented. But since colonial rule, Nigerian women have been denied opportunities to play such roles (Okonjo, 1983).

On a global level, Britain, perhaps because of its institution of monarchy, produced Margaret Thatcher as her Prime Minister, in the 1980s. Otherwise, no large democracy in Europe has given women the opportunity to lead her country. Again, perhaps ironically, it is the so-called developing countries of Asia, Latin America, and Middle East, (India, Philippines and Israel, etc that have produced women Heads of State, through election. It is therefore, valid to state that in general, women have been victims of discrimination historically and globally (Centre for Law Enforcement Education (CLEEN), 2001).

The recognition of historical and global discrimination against women prompted the United Nations Organization to declare 1975-1985 as "Decade for Women". This declaration was to raise global awareness on status of women and to mobilise the world community to eliminate discrimination against women so that women may attain equal economic, social, political and legal status with their male counterparts (CLEEN, 2001).

During the "Women Decade" (1975 - 1985), the United Nations Organization also produced the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Further, the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, China, in September 1995 adopted a Platform for Action (PFA) for implementation by member countries. The platform document addressed several issues, including discriminatory practices that marginalise women from vital opportunities in society (CLEEN, 2001).

Women are disadvantaged in many spheres of social, economic and political life. Indeed, it may be appropriate to apply the concept of gender based social exclusion, as outlined above, to the conditions and experiences of women in the nation. They have been either historically, denied access to, or granted unequal access to, economic opportunities, power, status and privilege in society.

In several traditional societies in Africa, women play prominent roles and were accorded recognition within the economic, religious, and political spheres. But the advent of Islam, Christianity and colonialism did not advance the interests of women. On the contrary, they introduced new religious, economic and political systems in which the dominance of men and subordination of women were enthroned, or enhanced (Abiola, 1978; Omu and Makinwa, 1988; Eleazu, 1988).

These efforts point to global recognition of and concern about discrimination against women and female disempowerment in general. However, the extent to which these efforts have been translated into practice in various countries can only be determined by a careful study of women conditions within the various institutions of society, in individual countries.

### **Internally Displaced Women And Children**

Internally Displaced women and children under international law are persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obligated to flee or to have cause to leave their homes or place of habitual residence in particular, as a result of or in order to avoid the effect of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and they must have either remain within

their own national borders (as internally displaced persons) or they must have crossed an internationally recognized state border (as refugees), (Ladan, 2006).

Hence displaced women and children are of two categories: Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons. (IDPs). The convention relating to the status of refugees (CRSR) of 1951 defines the term "refugee" as applying to any person who "...as a result of events occurring before 1st January 1951 and owing to well - founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion is outside the country of his (or her) nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is willing to avail himself (or herself) of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being made outside the country of his (or her) former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it..." (Ladan, 2006:252 - 3).

In comparison to the CRSR of 1951, the OAU convention (1969) governing the specific aspects of refugee problem in Africa gives a broader definition of the term "refugee", taking account of most of the root causes of the refugee problem. The second paragraph of article 1 of the OAU convention state that: "the term refugee shall also apply to every person, who, owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part of the whole of his (or her) country of origin or nationality, is compelled to leave his (or her) place of habitual residence in order to seek refuge in another place outside his (or her) country of origin or nationality". Under the Cartagena Declaration, the term "refugee" is defined as including "Persons who have fled their countries because their lives, safety or freedom have been threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violations of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order". (UNHCR, 1995).

There are also deep - seated factors underlying this phenomenon of mass displacement especially women and children. For example, Under-development, poverty, unequal distribution of wealth, unemployment, ethnic tensions, political and economic subjugation of minorities, intolerance, absence of democratic procedures, and many other factors have been cited as causes. Where such people, in fear of persecution, seek refuge in other countries, their interests are protected by the refugee convention of 1951 and the 1967; protocol relating to the statute of refugees.

If those persons are victims of armed conflict situations, they are entitled to protection under the Geneva Convention of 1949 and their additional protocols of 1977. In general, human rights law offers protection to all persons without any adverse distinction. However, where such people and displaced within their own country, specific problems as the rights and protection arise (Deng, 1994). Under the following working definition of "Internally Displaced persons" (IDPs), which was developed by the special Rapporteur on IDPs as there is at present no specific international legislation devoted to that issue, displaced persons are deemed as:

Persons or groups of persons who have been forced to flee their homes or places of habitual residence suddenly or unexpectedly as a result of armed conflict, internal strife, systematic violations of human rights or natural or man-made disasters, who have not crossed an internationally



recognized state border". (OCHA, 2003; UN, 2004).

There are more than twice as many people who have been uprooted from their homes but whom unlike refugees, remain within the borders of their own countries and are called internally displaced persons.

### **Impact of Conflict On Women and Children**

Apart from the challenges faced by displaced persons in general, women, and children, face extra challenge arising from their vulnerability. War situations turn life into a "living hell" for millions of women and children in the sense that atrocious crimes are committed against their dignity and liberty. They are sexually exploited by the armed forces, government officials and even humanitarian aid-givers. In addition to these attacks on their person, they are susceptible to post traumatic stress and debilitating depression. This is made worse by debilitating condition of poverty (Benderley, 1997).

Some issues appear to be common to most displaced women regardless of their location, even if they play out differently in different geographical contexts. For example, the women remain responsible for most domestic activities. It has been pointed out in studies that the day-to-day role of women often changes little while the same cannot be said for their displaced male counterpart who no longer is able to engage in any form of employment. The domestic activities of women are time-consuming and potentially dangerous because the women could get attacked when they go to fetch firewood or water for the use of the family.

In view of the high incidence of sexual violence on women, the rate of HIV infection and other sexually transmitted diseases spread more rapidly during armed conflict and displacement where health services are inadequate or unavailable. In Zang secondary school displaced camp, Jos Plateau State for example, cholera, depression, hypertension are the leading cause of death, with 20 persons killed in 2014 out of which 9 were children and 6 women (Interview with Camp leaders, 2015). Security is another problem that is also generally inadequate. The responsibility for security generally rests with government of the country within which displacement occurs. In a situation where the State is an active participant in an on-going conflict, the fate of vulnerable categories is better imagined (UNHCR, 2001).

Against this background, it is trite to state that the need for extra protection for women and children is becoming increasingly necessary. The protection of women and children from violence and other forms of abuse particularly in war situations is imperative since they are least able to protect themselves at such periods. Physical, emotional and psychological abuses persist because there are few mechanisms for reporting violence and other human rights violations.

IDP women face distinct difficulties surviving and recovering from armed conflict. Many of their husbands' lives were undermined by the violence, which contributes to their burdens, some are widows of combatants who were killed during the conflicts, others are widows of civilian casualties of the crisis and Still others were alone with their families for months or years while their husbands went into hiding to avoid forced conscription or remained behind to fight or to protect their property.

Women IDPs from Nigeria are less likely to have been employed before becoming displaced than women elsewhere and, therefore, may lack employment training and skills, as well as the confidence to earn a living.

Consequently, IDP women are having unwanted pregnancies. Many said they did not want to bring babies into their present living situations. Most of the women's husbands were killed before they fled with their families.

On the other hand, displaced children may have lost parents, siblings and others. They may also lose physical items, such as their homes. These children endure traumatic experiences such as war, destruction of their homes, violent deaths of family and friends, becoming separated from family, injury, the arrest of family members, witnesses to the sexual assault and violation of female members of their families, arrest, detain or tortured themselves, forced recruitment into the army or militias, rape, grave shortage of food, water or other necessities and even hostilities in their new homeland. Statistics show that in areas affected by the conflict, a child under 5 years dies every 3 seconds because they lack simple vaccinations and medications, adequate food and clean water (UNHCR, 2001).

Sudan is one of the countries with the worst records of forced child recruitment. Such recruitment is contrary to humanitarian principles on the protection of internal displacement which establishes special guarantees for internally displaced children and young people in order to protect them from taking part in hostilities. The lacuna which seems to exist in the definition of who a 'child' is, is solved by Article 77.2 of Protocol I additional to the Geneva Convention which state inter alia:

The Parties to the conflict shall take all feasible measures in order that children who have not attained the age of fifteen years do not take a direct part in hostilities and, in particular, they shall refrain from recruiting them into their armed forces. In recruiting among those persons who have attained the age of fifteen years but who have not attained the age of eighteen years, States Parties shall endeavour to give priority to those who are oldest.

Armed conflict is a gendered process. Women and men experience conflict and are vulnerable to its implications or negative impacts in different ways determined by the gender roles and identities of masculinity and femininity in each particular society. Men are more often combatants, and therefore suffer the majority of fatalities and injuries, but children and women are not always aggressors, they often play leading roles in peace-building initiatives.

Conflict situations present children with a variety of burden: They are always victims of multiple form of violence, and often bear the responsibility of ensuring the survival of the family and the sustainability of the community both during and after the conflicts. This category of children suffer incalculable harm consequent upon neglect, malnutrition, sexual abuse and growing up under conditions which threatens their physical, emotional and psychological survival and well-being. Indeed, the education of such children is interrupted with lifelong consequences across the continent. A few of these children may manifest disturbing behaviour and may require specialist support which may be unavailable in most developing country (Women's Commission

Interview, 2001).

## Lived Experience Of Idps Women And Children

### Box 1

#### Plight of Women

Godiya's situation is typical: After her husband was killed in a bomb blast in Jos, she and her four children moved to the internally displaced Centre in Jos after they were evicted by their landlord because Godiya cannot pay her rent. Her father-in-law became sick last September and died in a local hospital. Now she and her mother-in-law are left with children aged 9, 7, 4 and 1. Godiya would like to work, but she does not have any skill.

She admits that she does not know what a solution could be for herself and her family. She said she wanted her two girls to be more independent than she is. She told how her father-in-law would never allow his wife to buy anything unless he was with her. Before her husband's death, Godiya felt that her position as a woman was better than her mother-in-law's because her husband gave her money and trusted her to do the shopping alone. But even so, since she did not work, she could not be fully independent. She said she dreams that her daughters will be able to support themselves and thereby be more independent than she could ever be.

Source: Interview with Godiya at Zang Secondary School displaced Camp in Bukuru, Jos.

### Box 2

#### Impact of Displacement on Children

Children affected by displacement are vulnerable to the dangers of the society. They are often uncared for and spent most of their childhood in lack of basic necessities of life, which keeps them traumatized because often family roles have dislocated as a result of long-term displacement, and parents are not able to provide normal boundaries and role model for their children. When fathers are present, they have lost their roles as family providers and protectors, and this has affected their self-esteem. Often the fathers turn to alcohol, which causes or adds to family violence.

Children in such situations are understandably grown with low self esteem and feelings of helplessness. Peers are the most important relations for this age group and with anger and lack of direction; they are prone to turn to destructive behavior. If they remain without good role models and opportunities to constructively be involved in creating a more positive future for them, they are at risk of growing into angry and violent young people who will perpetuate the circle of violence and retaliation.

Interview with Youth at the Internally Displaced Camp in Zang secondary school 2015

### Box 3

#### ECONOMIC AND EDUCATIONAL PLIGHT OF THE WOMEN

During the interview, which was conducted by the only running water source, the women were scrubbing their clothes, when one of the women interrupted to say that the women would be better off working for money outside the IDPs Centre so that they would be able to provide for the family. Before the conflict we used to go to the farm freely, but now we cannot, because we are attacked by the Fulani nomads at every angle. Life is no longer sacred but cheap.

The women started talking about the fact that it was important to go to school and learn to read and write. "At least to be able to write your own name," added a middle-aged woman. One went on to say that the only way that could happen would be if a school started in their settlement.

Interview with Youth at the Internally Displaced Camp in Zang secondary school 2017

In a similar interview with the displaced women in Zang Secondary School IDP Camp Bukuru Jos South L.G.A., they expressed themselves thus:



Box 4

## VOICE OF WOMEN

"We are not violent people we have been living in peace with Hausa -Fulani Muslim neighbours for decades and they have enjoyed a lot of benefits from our community, all of a sudden we started experiencing series of attacks from these the same neighbours and we were not pleased with the situation that have left many of our women widows, our children fatherless, motherless, our farm lands destroyed, our homes razed down by fire. Secondly, at the wake of the crisis we have soldiers posted to our communities to maintain law and order but we later discovered that, these the same soldiers were used by our enemies to attack our community as we usually find some traces of their belonging at the scene of the attack. Therefore we demand that soldier be withdrawn from our communities as they have failed in their responsibilities of maintaining peace and security in Plateau state" (Voices of Women from Zang IDPs Camp Bukuru).

Interview with Youth at the Internally Displaced Camp in Zang Secondary School 2017

From the above interviews it is crystal clear that displaced women and children in IDPs Centres have lost their economic grip because of the violent conflicts that have bedeviled the state in a decade. Yet they maintain their position as "the backbone of the economy. Direct labour sector in the state can boost of more women, even in the civil service we are competing favourably. It is only the technical works you see men more and not because we cannot do it, but because the men have dominated and are segregating against women"(Interview of Du Women Association, 9<sup>th</sup> November, 2014). also children might have lost parents, siblings and others. They might have also lose physical items, such as their homes, violent deaths of family and friends, becoming separated from family, injury, the arrest of family members, witnesses to the sexual assault and violation of female members of their families, arrest, detain or tortured themselves, forced recruitment into the army or militias, rape, grave shortage of food, water or other necessities and even hostilities in their new homeland. That puts at a very compromising situation to their detriment.

## CONCLUSION

Since Nigeria's return to civilian rule in 1999, thousands of people have been killed in recurring inter-communal conflicts and politically motivated violence that have also led to consistently large waves of internal displacement (Amundsen, 2010: 9; Best, 2011: 1). Flooding and forced evictions have caused further, significant population movements. In April 2012, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Dataset (associated with the Oslo International Peace Research Institute) reported that the level of violence had increased drastically over the last few months, putting Nigeria on a par with Somalia in terms of the high number of conflict events it experiences. Internal Displacement remains a pressing issue in Nigeria. While some significant displacement crises have attenuated due to the cessation of hostilities and tens of thousands of IDPs have been able to return to their original place of residence, over a million more in the region remain in a precarious situation and new situations of internal displacement continues to occurs. A great deal therefore needs to be done to address IDPs protection and assistance, to find durable solutions to their plight and to prevent further displacement from taken place. These are challenges for national and local authorities, first and foremost, to address together with the affected populations. But internal displacement also is a problem of particular impact at the regional level and one that

regional bodies as well as the international community can help to address, in particular by promoting and reinforcing national efforts.

### Recommendations

Indeed, given the magnitude and complexity of crises of internal displacement, working in partnership with regional bodies and the international community may prove valuable to ensuring effective responses. The interplay of prompt intervention, constructive vibrant institutions embedded in the value of good governance, social-welfare and functional institutions engendering nation building and true dividends of democratic governance for the people should be ensued.

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