

SOCIAL SUPPORT: A PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING FOR WOMEN EXPOSED TO VIOLENT CONFLICTS IN PLATEAU STATE INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS' CAMPS, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study explores the critical role of social support in promoting the psychological well-being of women exposed to violent conflicts in Plateau State's internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, Nigeria. It highlights the devastating effects of conflict on women's mental health, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The study emphasizes the importance of social support in mitigating these negative impacts and fostering psychological well-being. It discusses the challenges and opportunities for social support interventions in conflict-affected settings, such as limited access, cultural barriers, resource constraints, and security concerns. The study also examines the potential benefits of community-based initiatives, technology-based interventions, and collaborative partnerships in enhancing social support for women in IDP camps. It concludes that social support is a critical factor in promoting the psychological well-being of women exposed to violent conflicts and recommends the development of context-specific interventions that address the unique needs and challenges faced by women in these settings.

Keywords: Social support, psychological well-being psychological well-being, violent conflicts, IDP camps.

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Introduction

Violent conflicts have devastating effects on individuals, communities, and societies, with women often bearing a disproportionate burden (Murthy & Lakshminarayana, 2006). Exposure to conflict can lead to significant psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). The trauma and stress caused by conflict can be particularly pronounced for women, who may experience displacement, loss, and increased vulnerability to violence and exploitation (UNHCR, 2020).

In Plateau State, Nigeria, the impact of violent conflicts on women has been particularly severe (Okoli & Orinya, 2013). Many women have been forced to flee their homes and seek refuge in internally displaced persons' (IDP) camps, where they face numerous challenges in accessing basic necessities, including food, shelter, and healthcare (IDMC, 2020). Despite these challenges, research consistently shows that social support can play a crucial role in mitigating the negative impact of conflict on mental health (Cohen et al., 2015). Social support encompasses the emotional, informational, and instrumental assistance individuals receive from their social networks, including family, friends, community members, and formal organizations (Taylor et al., 2008).

In the context of conflict, social support serves as a vital lifeline for women, providing them with essential resources and coping mechanisms to navigate the adversities associated with violence and displacement. By examining the complex relationships

between conflict, social support, and mental health, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the critical role social support plays in promoting the well-being of women in conflict-affected settings.

Psychological well-being refers to positive mental health (Edwards, Nuns & Mundi, 2015). Research indicates it is a diverse, multidimensional concept, developing through a combination of emotional regulation, personality characteristics, and life experiences. While some perceptions suggest physical health and spirituality can mediate the relationship between context and psychological well-being, this has undergone extensive empirical review and theoretical evaluation (Ryff, 2019). Psychological well-being encompasses various dimensions, including:

Hedonic well-being refers to the experience of pleasure, happiness, and life satisfaction. It involves the pursuit of joy, contentment, and fulfillment. Individuals with high hedonic well-being tend to experience more positive emotions, are more satisfied with their lives, and derive greater pleasure from daily activities (Kahneman, Diener, & Schwarz, 1999).

Eudaimonic well-being focuses on living a meaningful, purposeful, and fulfilling life. It involves pursuing goals and activities that align with one's values, beliefs, and passions. Individuals with high eudaimonic well-being tend to experience a sense of purpose, direction, and significance (Waterman, 1999).

Psychological functioning refers to the possession of positive psychological traits, such as self-acceptance, autonomy, and environmental mastery. It involves the ability to navigate life's challenges with resilience, adaptability, and effective coping strategies. Individuals with high psychological functioning tend to exhibit greater self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-motivation (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

Emotional well-being involves the ability to experience and manage emotions in a healthy and adaptive manner. It includes emotional awareness, emotional regulation, and emotional expression. Individuals with high emotional well-being tend to exhibit greater emotional intelligence, empathy, and effective relationships (Goleman, 1995). Cognitive well-being refers to the possession of a positive and adaptive cognitive profile, including optimism, self-efficacy, and resilience. It involves the ability to think critically, solve problems effectively, and maintain a positive outlook. Individuals with high cognitive well-being tend to exhibit greater confidence, motivation, and achievement (Seligman, 2011).

Social well-being involves maintaining and building positive social relationships and connections. It includes social support, social integration, and social contribution. Individuals with high social well-being tend to exhibit greater empathy, cooperation, and community involvement (Keyes, 1998).

Violence against women is a global issue that violates their human rights and hinders their equality, security, liberty, integrity, and dignity in all aspects of life (Abama & Kwaja, 2019). These issues often stem from gender inequality, deeply ingrained in social, cultural, and economic structures, perpetuating unequal power dynamics between men and women. The culture of silence and denial surrounding the health

consequences of abuse sustains this violence, while powerful institutions and normative systems collude in maintaining the status quo.

The perpetuation of violence against women has deep historical roots, with evidence of its prevalence and normalization across centuries. As noted by Dobash and Dobash (1979), violence against wives has been a long-standing issue, often justified as a means of maintaining patriarchal control. Similarly, Lerner (1986) highlights the role of patriarchal societies in perpetuating violence and discrimination against women, underscoring the complex interplay between societal structures and gender-based violence. These historical studies emphasize the need for a nuanced understanding of the complex factors contributing to violence against women. Presently, violence against women has expanded beyond private life to encompass various social settings.

Despite efforts such as provisions, committees, national policies, and organizations for women's empowerment in Nigeria, the reality for women remains harsh due to a lack of implementation, as well as persistent gender, caste, and class biases within society, rendering constitutional and legal protections meaningless for many women (Krahé, 2018).

Women exposed to violent conflicts often experience severe psychological distress, which can have long-lasting effects on their psychological well-being. Some common effects, according to Gone (2013), include:

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): Women may experience flashbacks, nightmares, and avoidance of triggers that remind them of the traumatic event. They may also exhibit hypervigilance, exaggerated startle responses, and difficulty sleeping. *Depression and Anxiety:* The trauma of violent conflict can lead to persistent feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and helplessness. Women may also experience anxiety, worry, and fear that are difficult to control.

Traumatic Grief: Women may experience intense grief and bereavement due to the loss of loved ones, cultural identity, and social support networks. This can lead to complex and prolonged grief reactions.

Substance Abuse: Some women may turn to substance abuse as a coping mechanism for their trauma, which can lead to addiction and other physical and mental health problems.

Self-Esteem and Body Image Issues: Sexual violence and exploitation can lead to negative self-perception and body image issues, including shame, guilt, and self-blame.

Social Isolation: Women may become socially withdrawn, fearing stigma or further trauma. This can lead to feelings of loneliness and disconnection from others.

Hypervigilance: Women may constantly feel "on edge," anticipating potential threats or dangers. This can lead to difficulty relaxing and feeling safe.

Memory and Concentration Problems: Trauma can affect cognitive function, leading to memory and concentration difficulties. Women may have trouble remembering important details or focusing on tasks.

Guilt, Shame, and Self-Blame: Women may experience intense guilt, shame, and self-blame related to their experiences. This can lead to negative self-talk and self-criticism.

Cultural Disruption: Violent conflict can disrupt cultural practices, traditions, and identity, leading to cultural bereavement. Women may experience loss of cultural heritage and identity.

The Concept of Social Support

Social support is a multifaceted concept encompassing the perception and actuality of being cared for, having assistance available from others, and being part of a supportive social network (Cohen et al., 2015). This support can be emotional, informational, or instrumental in nature and can be provided by various sources, including family, friends, community members, and formal organizations.

There are several types of social support, each with distinct characteristics and benefits. Emotional support, for instance, provides comfort, empathy, and reassurance, helping individuals feel understood and valued (Cutrona & Russell, 1990). This type of support is particularly important for individuals experiencing stress, anxiety, or depression. Informational support, on the other hand, offers advice, guidance, and information that can help individuals understand and navigate challenging situations. Instrumental support, which includes tangible assistance such as financial aid or practical help, can alleviate stress and improve well-being by reducing the burden of daily tasks and responsibilities (Gone, 2013).

Social support can be provided by various sources, including informal and formal networks. Informal support networks, such as family and friends, can provide emotional, informational, and instrumental support, and are often the primary source of support for individuals (Taylor et al., 2008). Formal support networks, such as professional services and organizations, can also provide a range of support services, including counseling, therapy, and case management (Davidson et al., 2012).

The importance of social support for mental and physical health cannot be overstated. Research has consistently shown that social support is a critical factor in promoting mental health, reducing stress and anxiety, and improving overall well-being (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). Social support can also have a positive impact on physical health outcomes, including reduced blood pressure, improved immune function, and better health behaviors (Umberson & Montez, 2010). Furthermore, social support can enhance resilience, helping individuals cope with adversity and trauma (Bonanno et al., 2010).

Challenges for Social Support to Women Exposed to Violent Conflicts

The provision of social support to women in conflict-affected settings is fraught with several challenges that can impede the effectiveness of interventions. Some of the key challenges include:

Limited Access: Women in remote or hard-to-reach areas may face significant barriers in accessing social support services, including lack of infrastructure, transportation, and communication networks (UNHCR, 2020). This can exacerbate the sense of isolation and disconnection, further compromising their mental health and well-being (Kessler et al., 2017).

Cultural Barriers: Cultural norms and values can influence the way women perceive and experience social support (Tol et al., 2011). For instance, in some cultures, women may be expected to prioritize family obligations over their own needs, making it difficult for them to seek support (Hynes et al., 2004). Additionally, cultural differences between service providers and recipients can lead to misunderstandings and miscommunication, undermining the effectiveness of social support interventions.

Resource Constraints: Limited resources, including funding, personnel, and infrastructure, can hinder the provision of social support services (WHO, 2019). This can result in inadequate staffing, insufficient training, and limited capacity to respond to the complex needs of women in conflict-affected settings.

Security Concerns: Insecure environments can pose significant risks to both service providers and recipients, making it challenging to deliver social support services (IASC, 2018). The presence of armed groups, violence, and instability can create an environment of fear and mistrust, further exacerbating the trauma and stress experienced by women.

Opportunities for Social Support Interventions

Despite these challenges, there are opportunities for social support interventions to make a meaningful difference in the lives of women in conflict-affected settings. Some of the key opportunities include:

Community-Based Initiatives: Community-based social support initiatives can be effective in promoting women's psychological well-being (Tol, *et al.*, 2011). By leveraging existing social networks and community structures, these initiatives can provide women with a sense of belonging, support, and connection.

Technology-Based Interventions: Technology, such as mobile phones and online platforms, can expand access to social support services, particularly in remote or hard-to-reach areas (WHO, 2019). This can include online counseling, support groups, and information dissemination.

Partnerships and Collaborations: Partnerships between organizations and stakeholders can enhance the delivery of social support services (IASC, 2018). By pooling resources, expertise, and knowledge, partners can develop more comprehensive and effective interventions that address the complex needs of women in conflict-affected settings.

Empowering Women: Social support can empower women to take control of their lives and make informed decisions about their well-being (Women's Refugee Commission, 2019). By providing women with the skills, knowledge, and resources they need, social support interventions can promote women's empowerment and autonomy, enhancing their ability to navigate the challenges of conflict and displacement.

Understanding these challenges and opportunities is crucial for designing and implementing social support interventions that effectively promote the psychological well-being of women exposed to violent conflicts. This requires a nuanced understanding of the complex contexts in which women live, as well as a commitment to developing interventions that are responsive to their needs and priorities.

Social Support for Women in IDP Camps

The function and quality of social relationships have been defined in various ways (Rook, 2019). For example, it may be regarded as resources provided by others, as coping assistance, or as an exchange of resources. Several types of social support have been investigated, such as instrumental (e.g., assisting with a problem), tangible (e.g., donating goods), informational (e.g., giving advice), and emotional (e.g., giving reassurance), among others. Rook (2019) contends that health and well-being are not merely the result of actual support provision, but are the consequence of participation in a meaningful social context. Receiving support gives meaning to individuals' lives

by virtue of motivating them to give in return, to feel obligated, and to be attached to their ties. Rook uses the term companionship to refer to such a harmonious network of mutual support and obligation, which are embedded in a positive social world.

Social support for women in IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) camps refers to the emotional, informational, and tangible assistance provided by others to help them cope with the challenges of displacement. The concept of social support is critical in IDP camps, where women often face heightened vulnerability due to the loss of their homes, livelihoods, and social networks (Koenen, 2017).

According to Cohen and Wills (1985), social support can be categorized into four types: emotional, informational, tangible, and companionship. Emotional support refers to the provision of empathy, encouragement, and reassurance. Informational support involves the provision of advice, guidance, and information to help individuals navigate their circumstances. Tangible support refers to the provision of practical assistance, such as food, shelter, and clothing. Companionship support involves the provision of social interaction and a sense of belonging.

In IDP camps, social support for women is crucial for mitigating the psychological distress associated with displacement. Research has shown that social support can help reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression, improve mental health outcomes, and enhance overall well-being (Sullivan et al., 2018). Moreover, social support can play a critical role in promoting women's empowerment and agency in IDP camps. For instance, women's groups and community-based initiatives can provide a platform for women to share their experiences, access information and resources, and develop skills and knowledge to improve their circumstances (UNHCR, 2019).

However, social support for women in IDP camps can be compromised by various factors, including cultural and linguistic barriers, limited access to resources and services, and the breakdown of social networks and community structures. Therefore, it is essential to develop and implement context-specific interventions that address the unique needs and challenges faced by women in IDP camps.

Social Support as a Catalyst for Psychological Well-Being of Women Exposed to Violent Conflicts

Social support can directly affect psychological symptoms and mediate the effects of stress. Despite this knowledge, the mechanisms through which supportive relationships lead to psychological benefits are still not fully understood. This lack of understanding poses challenges in developing effective supportive intervention programs (Thoits, 2015).

Social support and psychological well-being are essential for women exposed to violent conflicts. Social support refers to the emotional, informational, and tangible assistance provided by others, which can help women cope with the trauma and stress of conflict. Psychological well-being, on the other hand, refers to the positive emotional and cognitive states that enable women to thrive despite adversity.

Women exposed to violent conflicts often experience a range of negative emotions, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Social

support from family, friends, and community members can help alleviate these symptoms by providing a sense of safety, security, and connection. Additionally, social support can also promote psychological well-being by fostering a sense of hope, optimism, and resilience (Koenen, 2017).

Studies have shown that social support is a critical factor in promoting psychological well-being among women exposed to violent conflicts. For example, a study by Sullivan et al. (2018) found that women who received social support from their communities had lower levels of PTSD and depression than those who did not. Similarly, a study by Hammock and Oesterle (2017) found that social support from family and friends was associated with greater resilience and coping capacities among women exposed to conflict. However, social support is not always available or accessible to women exposed to violent conflicts. In some cases, women may be isolated or displaced, making it difficult for them to access social support networks. Additionally, cultural and social norms may restrict women's ability to seek support or disclose their experiences of violence.

To address these challenges, it is essential to develop and implement interventions that promote social support and psychological well-being among women exposed to violent conflicts. This may involve training community members to provide emotional support, establishing support groups for women, and promoting cultural and social norms that support women's well-being.

Conclusion

This study highlights the significant role of social support in promoting the psychological well-being of women exposed to violent conflicts. It recognizes that social support can mitigate the negative impact of conflict on mental health, reducing symptoms of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The study also emphasizes the importance of understanding the complex contexts in which women live and developing interventions that are responsive to their unique needs and priorities.

Recommendations

Based on the study's conclusions, the following recommendations are proffered:

1. Community-based social support initiatives should be prioritized as they are effective in promoting women's psychological well-being. These initiatives can foster a sense of belonging, support, and connection.
2. Partnerships and collaborations between organizations and stakeholders are crucial to enhance the delivery of social support services. By pooling resources, expertise, and knowledge, more comprehensive and effective interventions can be developed.
3. Interventions should focus on promoting women's empowerment and autonomy, enabling them to take control of their lives and make informed decisions about their well-being.
4. Interventions must be culturally sensitive and accessible to women from diverse backgrounds. This may involve providing language support and cultural training for service providers.

5. Efforts should be made to increase access to resources and services, including funding, personnel, and infrastructure, to overcome the limitations that hinder the provision of social support.

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