A Legal Perspective on the Activities of Social Workers in Northern Nigeria

Aderonke Adegbite

Department of Private and Business Law

Lead City University Ibadan

E-mail: deronkeadegbite@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the activities of social workers in northern Nigeria, a region deeply affected by insurgencies, armed conflicts, and other forms of internal disturbances. Social workers play a crucial role in safeguarding the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict, providing assistance, promoting the application of international humanitarian law, and acting as neutral intermediaries between conflicting parties. While these are general functions of social workers globally, this research focuses on the specific roles they play in northern Nigeria. The study employs a doctrinal research methodology, which is particularly adequate and sufficient for this analysis due to its systematic and comprehensive focus on existing legal and academic resources. By relying on primary and secondary sources such as laws, textbooks, internet materials, periodicals, journals, and articles the doctrinal approach allows for a thorough and qualitative examination of documented data and perspectives on the contributions and challenges faced by social workers. This method is sufficient and was chosen because it provides the tools necessary to synthesize and critically analyze existing knowledge, highlighting patterns, identifying gaps, and drawing insights that may not require field-based or empirical investigation. Through the doctrinal method, the study identifies the extensive contributions of social workers in mitigating the impacts of internal strife and armed conflicts in northern Nigeria. It also illuminates the challenges they encounter and the strategies they use to overcome these obstacles. By relying on robust academic and professional literature, this method ensures a comprehensive understanding of the subject, making it an appropriate choice for the scope and objectives of the research.

Keywords: Social Workers, Northern Nigeria, Law, Vulnerable Persons, Conflicts

1. Introduction

Northern Nigeria has long been a region marked by a complex and often volatile socio-political landscape. Over the years, the region has faced a multitude of challenges, primarily stemming from insurgencies, armed conflicts, and a range of internal disturbances (Anierobi et al., 2024). The impact of these crises on the civilian population has been devastating, with communities experiencing displacement, loss of life, physical and psychological trauma, and widespread poverty (Osazuwa et al., 2024). In such contexts, the role of social workers becomes both critical and multifaceted. Social workers in northern Nigeria are at the forefront of addressing the humanitarian needs of those affected by these conflicts, ensuring that the lives and dignity of victims are protected while also providing them with much-needed support (Amadasun, 2020). Social workers play a vital role in conflict zones by offering not only emotional and psychological assistance but also practical support to survivors (Kano & Tukur, 2021). They are integral to the efforts of various humanitarian organizations, governments, and international agencies to mitigate the impact of violence and armed conflict on vulnerable populations (Ogunyemi, 2017). In northern Nigeria, the role of social workers is particularly significant due to the region's ongoing insurgency and internal strife, which have left millions of people in dire need of protection and assistance (Aliyu & Musa, 2018). This paper seeks to examine the activities of social workers in this troubled region, focusing on the various ways they contribute to alleviating suffering, promoting human dignity, and fostering peace amidst the chaos of conflict. The role of social workers in situations of armed conflict is not only about providing immediate relief but also about long-term advocacy for the application of international humanitarian law (IHL). IHL, designed to regulate the conduct of armed conflict and protect non-combatants, plays a critical role in ensuring that human rights are upheld during periods of violence (Ekweozor, 2015). Social workers contribute to the promotion and enforcement of IHL by helping to ensure that victims' rights are respected, advocating for humanitarian assistance, and working with various stakeholders to foster dialogue between parties in conflict (Fadimatu, 2020). By acting as neutral intermediaries, social workers help create spaces for negotiation and peacebuilding, thus reducing tensions and contributing to the resolution of conflict (Ndukwe, 2016).

This paper adopts a doctrinal research methodology to assess the role of social workers in Northern Nigeria, with a focus on the challenges they face and their efforts to overcome them (Ogunbiyi, 2022). The doctrinal method, often associated with legal and policy analysis, allows for a detailed examination of relevant literature, laws, and regulations. By reviewing laws, textbooks, internet materials, periodicals, journals, and articles, the research aims to present a comprehensive view of the scope and nature of social work activities in conflict-affected regions of northern Nigeria. Through this approach, the study seeks to identify key patterns, challenges, and successes in the work of social workers, offering insights into the broader field of humanitarian assistance in conflict zones (Aliyu, 2017). One of the key objectives of this research is to explore the specific activities undertaken by social workers in northern Nigeria and the laws that allow them. These activities range from providing direct support to victims of violence, such as medical and psychological care, to

facilitating the delivery of humanitarian aid and supporting the displaced (Abdullah, 2021).

Social workers also provide a crucial link between affected communities and relief organizations, ensuring that aid reaches those in greatest need. In addition to these immediate interventions, social workers engage in advocacy and policy reform, working to ensure that humanitarian principles are integrated into local and national governance structures. Their efforts help ensure that the protection of civilians is prioritized, and that the rights of displaced individuals are not overlooked amidst the broader political and security concerns (Akinyemi, 2019). The humanitarian landscape in northern Nigeria is fraught with challenges. Social workers face significant obstacles in carrying out their activities, including security risks, resource constraints, and difficulties in accessing affected populations (Sule, 2021). The ongoing insurgency, particularly in the northeastern states, has made it increasingly difficult for humanitarian workers to operate in certain areas. In some instances, social workers have been targeted by armed groups, leading to further disruptions in their ability to provide essential services. Furthermore, logistical challenges, such as inadequate transportation infrastructure and limited funding, often hinder the effective delivery of assistance (Yusuf & Mohammed, 2018). Despite these hurdles, social workers in northern Nigeria have found innovative ways to continue their vital work, often relying on local networks, collaboration with international agencies, and resilience in the face of adversity (Ahmad, 2020). The work of social workers in northern Nigeria also highlights the broader implications of conflict on social welfare systems. The displacement of large numbers of people, the destruction of infrastructure, and the breakdown of local governance structures have compounded the difficulties faced by social workers (Nwankwo, 2018). In many cases, social workers must operate in environments where basic services, such as healthcare and education, are severely limited or nonexistent. This lack of resources further exacerbates the challenges they face, particularly when working with vulnerable populations, such as women, children, and the elderly. Social workers are tasked with addressing not only the immediate needs of these groups but also their long-term recovery and reintegration into society (Mustapha, 2017).

Despite the many challenges they face, social workers continue to provide essential services, advocate for the rights of victims, and contribute to the broader peacebuilding efforts in the region. This work explains the critical role that social workers play in conflict zones, not only as caregivers but also as advocates for human rights and justice. This include their jobs in ensuring that even in the most difficult circumstances, the voices of the most marginalized and vulnerable individuals are heard, and their needs addressed (Bala, 2020).

2. Definition of Terms

i. Social Work

Social work is a professional discipline that seeks to improve the well-being of individuals, families, and communities by addressing social, emotional, economic, and environmental issues. The goal of social work is to promote social change, empower marginalized groups, and enhance human well-being by advocating for human rights, justice, and equality. Social workers provide services in various settings, including healthcare, schools, prisons, social services, and in areas affected by conflict. Social work interventions include offering psychological support, helping individuals navigate systems of care, and advocating for policy changes that improve social conditions. In the context of conflict zones, such as northern Nigeria, social workers also help communities rebuild their lives after violence and displacement. Social work is defined by a strong commitment to social justice, dignity, and the rights of individuals (Banks, 2012; Garthwait, 2017).

ii. Vulnerable Persons

They are individuals or groups who are at an increased risk of harm, exploitation, or marginalization due to various factors such as age, disability, gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, or lack of access to essential services like education, healthcare, and housing. (Adegbite, A. E., & Ibhade, O. A. 2024). They are often disadvantaged in terms of power, resources, and opportunities, making it more difficult for them to protect their rights or improve their living conditions. Vulnerability can be temporary or long-term and may arise from external factors such as natural disasters, conflict, or discrimination, or from intrinsic conditions like physical or mental health challenges. These individuals often face difficulties in accessing justice, participating in decision-making processes, and achieving economic and social equality. As a result, they may require targeted interventions, policies, and support systems to ensure their inclusion and protection in society.

iii. Humanitarian Crisis

A humanitarian crisis occurs when a population faces an extraordinary and large-scale emergency, usually involving widespread deprivation of basic human needs such as food, shelter, healthcare, and safety. These crises often arise from armed conflicts, natural disasters, or systemic oppression, creating severe consequences for the affected individuals and communities. In conflict zones, a humanitarian crisis may be compounded by insecurity, violence, and the disruption of essential infrastructure, making it difficult for civilians to access basic services. The humanitarian community responds by delivering aid, ensuring protection, and working to address the underlying causes of the crisis. Social workers in northern Nigeria are integral to this process, coordinating relief efforts and providing services to those affected by insurgencies and violence (Barnett, 2013; Slim, 2015).

iv. Conflict Zones

Conflict zones refer to areas that are characterized by active and violent conflicts, often involving armed groups, government forces, and other stakeholders. These zones are marked by widespread insecurity, violence, and a breakdown of societal norms and systems. In these regions, civilians frequently face risks such as displacement, injury, death, and the destruction of critical infrastructure. Conflict zones in northern Nigeria, particularly in states such as Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa, are characterized by insurgencies (e.g., Boko Haram), ethnic conflicts, and banditry, leading to severe disruptions to daily life. Social workers in conflict zones focus on addressing immediate needs like safety, food, water, and healthcare while also working towards long-term peace and rebuilding efforts (Duffield, 2001; Muggah, 2009).

v. Psychosocial Support

Psychosocial support refers to the comprehensive interventions aimed at addressing the mental, emotional, and social well-being of individuals who have experienced trauma, such as those displaced by conflict or violence. These interventions include counseling, group therapy, peer support, and community-based programs designed to alleviate the emotional burden of trauma. Psychosocial support aims to help individuals regain a sense of stability, hope, and control over their lives. Social workers in northern Nigeria provide psychosocial support to victims of insurgencies, sexual violence, and displacement by offering counseling, conducting support groups, and helping communities cope with the trauma of conflict (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2007; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2013).

vi. International Humanitarian Law (IHL)

International humanitarian law (IHL) is a set of rules designed to limit the impact of armed conflict on civilians and those who are no longer participating in the conflict, such as the wounded, prisoners of war, and refugees. IHL is built on principles that protect human dignity and promote respect for human rights, even during times of war. Key conventions, such as the Geneva Conventions, provide the legal framework for the protection of civilians and combatants. In northern Nigeria, social workers often work within the confines of IHL to ensure that humanitarian aid is delivered without discrimination and that the rights of displaced persons are respected. They also advocate for the application of IHL in conflict situations and engage in efforts to prevent human rights violations (Sandoz, Swinarski, & Zimmermann, 2011; Kress, 2019).

vii. Displacement

Displacement refers to the forced movement of people from their homes due to threats of violence, persecution, or natural disasters. Displacement can be either internal (within a country) or external (across national borders). Internally displaced persons (IDPs) remain within their own country but are forced to leave their homes and

communities. Displacement often results in significant hardships, including loss of livelihoods, education, and access to basic services. In northern Nigeria, displacement is a widespread consequence of the ongoing insurgency and ethnic violence, with millions of people living in temporary shelters or camps. Social workers assist displaced populations by providing food, shelter, medical care, and access to education, while also facilitating their safe return or integration into new communities (Cohen & Deng, 2016; UNHCR, 2020).

viii. Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) are individuals who have been forced to flee their homes due to conflict, violence, or natural disasters but remain within their own country's borders. Unlike refugees, IDPs have not crossed international borders and, therefore, may not have the same legal protections under international refugee law. In northern Nigeria, IDPs face significant challenges, including limited access to basic necessities like food, water, and healthcare. The government, along with NGOs and social workers, provides support for IDPs by establishing camps, distributing aid, and facilitating their resettlement or reintegration. Social workers also advocate for the rights of IDPs, ensuring they receive adequate support and protection (UNHCR, 2019; Zetter, 2007).

ix. Peacebuilding

Peacebuilding refers to the process of establishing lasting peace in societies that have experienced conflict. It includes activities designed to prevent the recurrence of violence, promote social justice, and address the root causes of conflict. Peacebuilding can involve political dialogue, reconciliation efforts, social integration, and the strengthening of institutions that promote the rule of law and human rights. In northern Nigeria, where ethnic and religious tensions often fuel violence, social workers are involved in peacebuilding efforts by facilitating dialogue among communities, helping to resolve grievances, and promoting conflict resolution mechanisms. They work to build social cohesion and foster long-term peace in post-conflict areas (Galtung, 2004; Paffenholz, 2014).

x. Advocacy

Advocacy is the process of actively supporting or recommending a cause or policy, especially one that aims to bring about social change. In the context of social work, advocacy involves defending the rights and needs of vulnerable groups and pushing for the implementation of policies that improve their well-being. Social workers advocate for human rights, better access to services, and the protection of individuals affected by conflict and displacement. In northern Nigeria, social workers advocate for the protection of displaced persons, the release of kidnapped individuals, and the implementation of laws that safeguard civilians during armed conflict (Minkler, 2012; White, 2015).

xi. Human Rights

Human rights are the fundamental rights and freedoms to which every individual is entitled, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, or religion. These rights include the right to life, liberty, freedom of expression, and protection from torture and inhuman treatment. In conflict zones, human rights violations are common, and social workers play a crucial role in ensuring the protection of these rights. In northern Nigeria, where civilians are often subjected to violence, abductions, and other forms of mistreatment, social workers advocate for the protection of human rights, provide legal assistance, and help victims of violations access justice (Donelly, 2013; Mertus, 2009).

xii. Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

Gender-based violence (GBV) refers to any harmful act directed at an individual based on their gender, typically affecting women and girls. In conflict settings, GBV includes rape, sexual slavery, and other forms of sexual violence, which are often used as weapons of war. Social workers are instrumental in providing support to survivors of GBV, including counseling, legal assistance, and access to healthcare. In northern Nigeria, GBV is prevalent, particularly among displaced populations and those living in conflict zones. Social workers play a critical role in responding to and preventing GBV, offering a safe space for survivors and advocating for their rights (Heise, 2011;).

xiii. Rehabilitation and Reintegration

Rehabilitation and reintegration are processes that focus on helping individuals and communities recover from the impact of conflict or crisis. Rehabilitation often includes providing psychological care, medical support, and vocational training to help individuals reintegrate into society. Reintegration involves the social, economic, and cultural reinsertion of displaced persons or former combatants into their communities. In northern Nigeria, social workers play a central role in rehabilitation programs by helping IDPs, former insurgents, and victims of violence rebuild their lives (Jensen, 2008; Muggah, 2014).

xiv. Neutral Intermediary

A neutral intermediary is an impartial third party that facilitates communication or negotiations between conflicting parties. In humanitarian and conflict settings, social workers often act as neutral intermediaries between parties to conflict, humanitarian organizations, and affected populations. They help ensure that the needs of civilians are prioritized and that humanitarian aid reaches those in need without discrimination. In northern Nigeria, social workers often serve as mediators between communities, government forces, and insurgent groups to ensure the safe delivery of aid and advocate for the protection of civilians (Kerr & Crea, 2008; Smith, 2017).

xv. Social Justice

Social justice refers to the fair and just distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society. It focuses on ensuring that marginalized and vulnerable groups have equal access to resources, rights, and protections. Social workers, especially in conflict zones, strive for social justice by addressing issues of inequality, discrimination, and human rights abuses. In northern Nigeria, social workers advocate for the rights of displaced persons, victims of violence, and marginalized groups to ensure they receive the support and protection they need (Reisch, 2013; Van Den Bergh, 2018)

xvi. Social Cohesion

Social cohesion refers to the strength of relationships and the sense of belonging that people feel within their communities. In conflict-affected areas, rebuilding social cohesion is essential for long-term peace and stability. Social workers play a role in promoting social cohesion by facilitating dialogue, rebuilding trust, and fostering collaboration among divided communities. In northern Nigeria, where religious, ethnic, and political divisions often lead to violence, social workers work to repair fractured relationships and promote understanding and cooperation (Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 2016).

xvii. Northern Nigeria

Northern Nigeria refers to the region of Nigeria that lies in the northern part of the country. It is home to a diverse mix of ethnic and religious groups, including the Hausa, Fulani, Kanuri, and others, with Islam being the predominant religion. Northern Nigeria has long faced socio-economic challenges, including poverty, unemployment, and underdevelopment. The region is particularly affected4. by violent conflict, notably from insurgent groups like Boko Haram and other armed factions. States such as Borno, Yobe, Adamawa, Kaduna, and Zamfara have been severely impacted by these conflicts, which have caused widespread displacement, loss of life, and destruction of infrastructure. The ongoing humanitarian crisis in northern Nigeria presents significant challenges for social workers and humanitarian organizations, who are working to mitigate the impact of these crises on the affected populations (Sule, 2021; Osazuwa et al., 2024).

3. The State of Humanitarian Crisis in Northern Nigeria

Northern Nigeria, a region of immense cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity, has been grappling with a protracted humanitarian crisis exacerbated by insurgencies, armed conflicts, and socio-economic instability. The crisis, which has spanned several years, has deeply affected various states in the region, including but not limited to Borno, Yobe, Adamawa, Kano, Katsina, Zamfara, and Plateau. These states have been severely impacted by both regional and internal conflicts, contributing to a humanitarian emergency that has caused widespread displacement, loss of life, and severe economic and social disruption. In addition to insurgencies, the region has also been troubled by communal violence, inter-ethnic clashes,

and criminal activities such as banditry. This section delves into the multifaceted nature of the humanitarian crisis in northern Nigeria, its causes, and the significant challenges that humanitarian organizations and social workers face in mitigating the suffering of affected populations.

The humanitarian crisis in northern Nigeria can be traced to a combination of factors that have shaped the socio-political landscape of the region over the past few decades. One of the primary catalysts of the ongoing crisis is the insurgency carried out by the extremist group, Boko Haram, which began in the early 2000s and escalated dramatically in 2009 (Anierobi et al., 2024). Boko Haram's attacks primarily targeted the northeastern states of Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa, where the group sought to impose its interpretation of Islamic law. These insurgent activities have not only led to significant loss of life but also forced millions of people from their homes, contributing to widespread internal displacement. As of 2021, the United Nations estimates that more than 2.5 million people are displaced in the northeastern states alone, with many living in overcrowded camps where access to basic services, including healthcare, education, and sanitation, is limited (UNHCR, 2021). In addition to the Boko Haram insurgency, the region has experienced several other forms of conflict that have fueled the humanitarian crisis. In the northwest, the rise of banditry has become a prominent source of violence. Armed groups, commonly referred to as "bandits," have terrorized communities in states such as Katsina, Zamfara, and Sokoto, engaging in kidnapping, extortion, and violent attacks on civilians (Osazuwa et al., 2024). These armed groups operate with relative impunity due to the weak security infrastructure in some parts of northern Nigeria, and their activities have contributed to large-scale displacement and insecurity in these states. The influx of internally displaced persons (IDPs) into neighboring states further strains already limited resources and services, compounding the humanitarian emergency.

4. Impact of Insurgencies and Violence on the Population

The impact of the violence in northern Nigeria is felt most acutely by vulnerable populations, including women, children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities (Adegbite, 2024). The ongoing insurgencies and violence have not only resulted in large-scale displacement but have also led to significant human rights violations, including abductions, sexual violence, and exploitation. In the northeastern states, Boko Haram has been responsible for the abduction of thousands of women and children, many of whom are forced into servitude or marriage (Amadasun, 2020). The most infamous of these abductions occurred in April 2014, when Boko Haram kidnapped over 270 schoolgirls from the town of Chibok in Borno State, drawing international attention to the crisis. Although some of the girls have been released, many others remain in captivity, highlighting the ongoing challenges faced by humanitarian actors in securing the release of abducted persons and providing them with the necessary care and support upon their release (Mustapha, 2017). Similarly, the insurgency has contributed to a severe breakdown of social infrastructure, with schools, hospitals, and marketplaces being targeted for destruction. In the aftermath of violent attacks, communities are left without the most basic necessities, including access to education, healthcare, clean water, and adequate shelter. The destruction of these social services creates an environment of prolonged instability and suffering, where recovery and rebuilding efforts are hindered by a lack of

resources and security (Ndukwe, 2016).

Another devastating consequences of the ongoing violence and conflict in northern Nigeria has been the massive displacement of civilians. As violence has spread across various states, millions of Nigerians have been forced to flee their homes, seeking refuge in other parts of the region or in other states of the country. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that as of 2021, over 3.2 million people were displaced across the country, with the majority of them residing in the north (UNHCR, 2021). The states of Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa are home to the highest concentrations of IDPs, but other states, including Kano, Katsina, and Plateau, have also seen an influx of displaced populations (Ogunyemi, 2017). The sheer volume of displaced persons in these states places an enormous strain on local resources. Humanitarian aid is often insufficient to meet the needs of the affected populations, and host communities are overwhelmed by the influx of people seeking shelter, food, and basic services. Local governments, many of which are already operating with limited resources, struggle to provide adequate assistance to both IDPs and host communities, further exacerbating the humanitarian crisis (Yusuf & Mohammed, 2018). Furthermore, the lack of infrastructure and inadequate security in some areas make it difficult for humanitarian organizations to access those in need and deliver essential services effectively.

The conflict in northern Nigeria has also had a devastating effect on the region's economy, leading to widespread poverty and unemployment. Agriculture, which is the primary source of livelihood for many northern Nigerians, has been severely disrupted by the violence. In areas such as Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa, farmers have been forced to abandon their lands due to the constant threat of attacks by insurgents (Aliyu & Musa, 2018). This disruption has not only led to food insecurity but has also resulted in a collapse of local economies that were dependent on agriculture and trade. The destruction of markets and roads has hindered the movement of goods, further exacerbating the economic challenges faced by both displaced persons and host communities. In states such as Zamfara and Katsina, where banditry and communal violence have disrupted trade and commerce, the economic devastation is even more pronounced (Osazuwa et al., 2024). Many families have lost their primary sources of income, while others struggle to access basic necessities, further deepening the poverty levels in the region.

5. Overview of the Functions of Social Work and How They Are Carried Out In Northern Nigeria

Social work is an essential discipline aimed at enhancing the well-being of individuals, families, and communities, particularly in areas of crisis and vulnerability. Social workers serve as advocates for marginalized populations, provide direct support services, and contribute to the development and implementation of policies and interventions that promote social justice. In regions affected by conflict, such as northern Nigeria, social workers play a critical role in mitigating the effects of violence, displacement, and socio-economic instability. This section explores the diverse functions of social work and examines how these functions are carried out in northern Nigeria, a region that has long been affected by insurgencies,

communal violence, and other socio-political challenges.

Social workers are often the first point of contact for individuals and communities affected by armed conflicts, natural disasters, and humanitarian crises. Their core functions include providing emotional and psychological support, facilitating access to essential services, ensuring the protection of vulnerable populations, and advocating for the rights and needs of affected individuals:

i. Protection and Advocacy

One of the primary functions of social work is the protection of vulnerable individuals and groups, including children, women, the elderly, and people with disabilities. In the context of northern Nigeria, where insurgencies, communal violence, and banditry have taken a heavy toll on civilians, social workers are involved in ensuring that these vulnerable populations are safeguarded against further harm (Osazuwa et al., 2024). This involves not only providing direct protection but also advocating for the implementation of legal frameworks that protect human rights and dignity. Social workers in northern Nigeria often work closely with local and international agencies, including the United Nations, to advocate for the protection of displaced persons, particularly women and children who are at risk of abduction, sexual violence, and exploitation. For instance, social workers have played a significant role in advocating for the release and reintegration of abducted children and women by insurgent groups such as Boko Haram. Their work is not limited to providing direct care but extends to legal advocacy, ensuring that those responsible for atrocities are held accountable under international humanitarian law (Amadasun, 2020).

ii. Psychosocial Support and Mental Health

The mental health of individuals affected by armed conflicts is a significant concern in northern Nigeria. The trauma experienced by conflict survivors can have long-lasting effects on their mental well-being, leading to conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety (Kano & Tukur, 2021). Social workers provide psychosocial support to help individuals process their experiences and cope with the emotional and psychological toll of the conflict. This includes conducting individual counseling sessions, group therapy, and facilitating community-based mental health initiatives. In northern Nigeria, where mental health resources are scarce, social workers are often at the forefront of providing basic mental health support. They employ various approaches to help individuals and communities rebuild their emotional resilience. These may include organizing support groups for survivors of violence, facilitating trauma healing workshops, and working alongside local and international organizations to provide mental health services in conflict-affected areas (Amadasun, 2020). Social workers also play a role in educating communities about mental health issues and reducing the stigma associated with seeking psychological support.

iii. Displacement and Humanitarian Assistance

One of the most pressing challenges in northern Nigeria is the displacement caused by ongoing conflicts. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

(UNHCR), millions of Nigerians have been forced to flee their homes due to violence, particularly in the northeastern states of Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa, where the Boko Haram insurgency has been most severe (UNHCR, 2021). In these regions, social workers play a vital role in providing humanitarian assistance to displaced persons, including food, shelter, and healthcare services. Social workers also assist in the establishment of camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs), ensuring that basic needs such as sanitation, water, and security are met. They work closely with other humanitarian organizations to coordinate the delivery of services and ensure that the rights of displaced persons are protected. In addition to addressing the immediate needs of displaced populations, social workers also help in facilitating the longer-term process of reintegration, which may include securing housing, education, and employment for IDPs (Abdullah, 2021). This process often involves complex negotiations with local authorities and other stakeholders, as well as advocacy for the provision of social services to displaced communities.

iv. Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding

In conflict-affected areas, such as those in northern Nigeria, social workers are instrumental in promoting peace and resolving conflicts within communities. Social workers use a variety of tools, such as mediation, dialogue facilitation, and community mobilization, to address underlying grievances and foster social cohesion. These efforts are especially important in northern Nigeria, where ethnic, religious, and political tensions often lead to communal violence. Social workers in northern Nigeria engage in peacebuilding activities by facilitating conversations between different community groups, encouraging tolerance, and addressing the root causes of conflict, such as poverty, marginalization, and lack of access to resources. Their work often involves collaborating with local leaders, religious groups, and government representatives to develop strategies for preventing violence and promoting reconciliation (Akinyemi, 2019). Through these efforts, social workers aim to create an environment where communities can coexist peacefully, despite the challenges posed by ongoing conflicts and tensions.

v. Advocacy for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law

Another critical function of social work in northern Nigeria is the advocacy for human rights and the application of international humanitarian law (IHL). In regions affected by insurgency and violence, there are widespread violations of human rights, including extrajudicial killings, abductions, and forced displacement (Sule, 2021). Social workers play an important role in ensuring that international humanitarian standards, including the Geneva Conventions, are respected and that victims of conflict are provided with the necessary protection and assistance. Social workers in northern Nigeria engage in advocacy at the local, national, and international levels to ensure that humanitarian organizations and government actors uphold human rights. They also work with legal teams to provide support for victims of violence in accessing justice. Their work in this area extends to raising awareness about the rights of refugees and internally displaced persons, particularly in the context of armed conflict (Ndukwe, 2016). Social workers also contribute to the documentation of human rights abuses and provide evidence that can be used in the pursuit of accountability and

justice.

5.1 Specific Activities of Social Workers in Northern Nigeria

In Northern Nigeria, social workers carry out a wide range of activities that are specifically tailored to the unique challenges faced by communities affected by conflict. These activities include:

i. ***Emergency Relief and Assistance:*** Social workers coordinate the distribution of emergency relief items such as food, water, and medical supplies to communities affected by conflict. They also provide direct support to individuals in distress, offering counseling and assistance in securing shelter.

ii. ***Community Mobilization and Education***: Social workers play a key role in mobilizing communities to engage in peacebuilding and development initiatives. They also conduct awareness campaigns to educate people about health issues, rights, and available services.

iii. ***Child Protection and Family Reunification***: In regions where children are particularly vulnerable, social workers focus on protecting the rights of children by advocating for their access to education, healthcare, and social services. They also play a role in reunifying children with their families after displacement.

iv. ***Support for Survivors of Gender-Based Violence***: Social workers provide critical support to women and girls who have experienced sexual violence and exploitation during conflicts. This support includes legal advocacy, counseling, and assistance with accessing healthcare services.

v. ***Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programs***: Social workers design and implement rehabilitation programs for conflict survivors, focusing on vocational training, psychosocial support, and reintegration into communities.

5.2 Challenges Faced by Social Workers in Northern Nigeria

Humanitarian organizations and social workers operating in northern Nigeria face immense challenges in addressing the needs of conflict-affected populations. One of the most significant obstacles is the security situation. The ongoing violence, particularly in states like Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa, poses significant risks to aid workers, who are often targeted by armed groups (Anierobi et al., 2024). The inability of humanitarian organizations to access certain areas due to insecurity means that many affected populations go without much-needed assistance. In some instances, humanitarian convoys have been attacked, leading to the suspension of aid delivery and putting the lives of workers in danger. Another major challenge is the inadequate funding available for humanitarian operations. Despite the widespread need for assistance, many organizations struggle to raise sufficient funds to meet the scale of the crisis. The lack of funding often leads to gaps in service delivery, with only a fraction of those in need receiving the help they require (Ekweozor, 2015). Additionally, the fragmentation of aid efforts, with multiple organizations working in different areas without coordination, has resulted in inefficiencies and duplications of effort, further complicating the

response.

Furthermore, social workers in northern Nigeria face the additional burden of providing psychosocial support to conflict victims who are often traumatized by their experiences. The lack of adequate mental health resources, particularly in the conflict zones, means that many survivors of violence, including women and children, do not receive the psychological care they need to recover (Kano & Tukur, 2021). The humanitarian crisis in northern Nigeria is a multifaceted emergency that continues to affect millions of people across the region. From the insurgency of Boko Haram in the northeast to the rising wave of banditry in the northwest, the conflict has resulted in widespread displacement, loss of life, and the collapse of local economies. Despite the critical role they play, the presence of insurgent groups, criminal gangs, and bandits makes it difficult for social workers to access conflict zones and provide aid to those in need (Aliyu & Musa, 2018). Humanitarian workers, including social workers, are often targeted by armed groups, and their safety is a constant concern. In addition to security challenges, there are limited resources available to social workers in northern Nigeria. The overwhelming demand for services, combined with inadequate funding and infrastructure, means that social workers often struggle to meet the needs of affected populations. This is particularly true in rural and hard-to-reach areas, where social workers must contend with logistical difficulties and a lack of basic services (Fadimatu, 2020). Furthermore, the stigma surrounding mental health issues in some communities can make it challenging for social workers to provide psychosocial support to those in need.

6. Laws, Treaties, and Codes Governing Social Work Activities in Northern Nigeria

The practice of social work in northern Nigeria is heavily influenced by a combination of national laws, international treaties, and professional codes that provide the legal and ethical foundation for social workers to operate effectively, particularly in conflict-affected areas. These legal frameworks guide social workers in their role of protecting vulnerable populations, advocating for social justice, and delivering humanitarian services amidst challenges like insurgency, violence, and displacement. Key laws such as the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the Child Rights Act, and international conventions like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, along with professional codes of ethics, shape the actions and responsibilities of social workers in the region. This section explores the various laws, treaties, and codes that govern social work activities in northern Nigeria, highlighting their importance in ensuring the protection and welfare of affected populations and promoting the professional integrity of social work practice.

i. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999)

The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, as the supreme law of the land, plays a significant role in defining the rights and duties of individuals, including the legal and professional responsibilities of social workers in northern Nigeria. The Constitution guarantees fundamental human rights that guide social work practice, providing a framework for advocating for vulnerable populations such as displaced persons, refugees, women, children, and victims of violence (Sule, 2021; Mertus, 2009). Key provisions of the grund num that influence social work practice in northern Nigeria include:

Section 33 guarantees the right to life, ensuring that no individual, especially in conflict zones like northern Nigeria, is deprived of life except in the execution of a court sentence.

Section 34 ensures the dignity of the human person, a crucial principle for social workers who work with survivors of violence, trauma, and abuse, especially in the context of insurgencies.

Section 42 addresses discrimination, empowering social workers to combat social inequalities and ensure equal access to resources for marginalized groups, such as those displaced by Boko Haram or other armed groups in northern Nigeria.

The Constitution serves as a foundation for human rights advocacy, providing a legal basis for social workers in northern Nigeria to challenge the violations of fundamental rights and protect vulnerable individuals (Reisch, 2013; Kerr & Crea, 2008).

ii. The Child Rights Act (2003)

The Child Rights Act (CRA), enacted in 2003, is another significant legal instrument that impacts social work practice in northern Nigeria. The Act guarantees the protection and welfare of children, aligning Nigeria's legal framework with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). In northern Nigeria, where child exploitation, child soldiers, and trafficking are prevalent due to the insurgency, social workers are at the forefront of ensuring that children's rights are protected and upheld.

The CRA specifies that:

Children have the right to protection from violence, abuse, exploitation, and neglect, which is critical in conflict-affected regions such as northern Nigeria, where children are often exposed to the horrors of armed conflict.

Children should be provided with adequate care, education, and shelter, ensuring that displaced children or those orphaned by conflict have access to essential services (Heise, 2011).

Special provisions for the rehabilitation of children involved in armed conflict are critical in areas affected by insurgency, where children may be recruited by militant groups or separated from their families due to violence (Galtung, 2004).

Social workers in northern Nigeria are tasked with ensuring that children receive protection, care, and education, advocating for their rights to grow up in a safe and supportive environment despite the challenges posed by ongoing conflicts (Woolcock, 2016; Mertus, 2009).

iii. The Nigerian Labour Act (2004)

The Nigerian Labour Act of 2004 is also relevant to social work practice in northern Nigeria, especially in terms of safeguarding the rights and welfare of social workers and ensuring that they are working under fair and professional conditions. Social workers in northern Nigeria often face difficult working conditions due to insecurity, resource scarcity, and high demand

for humanitarian services. The Labour Act guarantees that workers, including social workers, are entitled to fair wages, safe working environments, and the right to form trade unions.

Key provisions include:

Fair remuneration and work conditions, which are essential for social workers operating in northern Nigeria, where the work can often be physically and emotionally demanding (Jensen, 2008).

Protection from exploitation through enforcement of fair labor practices, ensuring that social workers are not subjected to unfair treatment by employers, especially in the humanitarian field (Reisch, 2013).

The right to work-related benefits such as pensions and health insurance, which are vital for the well-being of social workers operating in conflict zones, where the risk of injury or trauma is high (Kress, 2019).

By ensuring that social workers are protected under the Nigerian Labour Act, the government provides a stable and professional working environment for those who serve on the frontlines of humanitarian relief in northern Nigeria (Garthwait, 2017).

iv. The National Policy on Social Welfare

The National Policy on Social Welfare outlines Nigeria's approach to social welfare and the role of social workers in providing services to vulnerable populations. This policy is crucial in shaping social work practice in northern Nigeria, particularly in conflict zones where the population faces dire needs related to displacement, poverty, and trauma. The policy focuses on providing services such as healthcare, education, economic empowerment, and social protection to marginalized groups.

Specific areas of focus include:

Promoting social justice by ensuring that social workers advocate for the most vulnerable populations in northern Nigeria, including internally displaced persons (IDPs), refugees, and individuals affected by violence (Minkler, 2012).

Providing support to displaced populations, particularly in regions such as Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa, where insurgent violence has caused massive displacement and disruption of social services.

Fostering social cohesion and peacebuilding efforts, ensuring that displaced populations are reintegrated into their communities and provided with the necessary resources to rebuild their lives (Putnam, 2000; Slim, 2015).

The National Policy on Social Welfare guides social workers in promoting human rights, providing humanitarian assistance, and fostering long-term development in conflict-affected regions (Sule, 2021; Muggah, 2009).

v. International Human Rights Treaties and Conventions

Nigeria's adherence to several international treaties and conventions significantly influences social work practice in northern Nigeria, where the challenges posed by conflict and humanitarian crises are most acute. These treaties ensure that social workers can hold the Nigerian government accountable for its human rights obligations and promote the protection of vulnerable populations. Key treaties and conventions include:

a. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (1989)

The CRC, ratified by Nigeria in 1991, influences social work practice in northern Nigeria by guiding social workers in the protection and welfare of children. In conflict zones, social workers must ensure that children are protected from recruitment into armed groups, trafficking, and other forms of exploitation.

b. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (1948)

The UDHR outlines fundamental human rights, including the right to education, the right to work, and the right to adequate living standards, all of which are central to the work of social workers in northern Nigeria. Social workers use the UDHR to advocate for equal access to these rights for people affected by conflict and displacement (Garthwait, 2017).

c. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (1966)

The ICCPR, which Nigeria ratified, guarantees rights related to personal security, equality before the law, and protection from torture and inhuman treatment. Social workers use the ICCPR to safeguard the civil rights of displaced persons and victims of violence in northern Nigeria (Garthwait, 2017; Kress, 2019).

d. The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) (1981)

The ACHPR ensures the protection of both civil and economic rights, which are central to the work of social workers in northern Nigeria. The Charter's provisions for social justice and protection from discrimination provide a legal basis for social workers to advocate for marginalized communities in the region (Sule, 2021; Jensen, 2008).

vi. The Code of Ethics for Social Workers in Nigeria

The Nigerian Association of Social Workers (NASoW) has developed a Code of Ethics that serves as a guideline for social work practice across Nigeria, including in the northern region. This code ensures that social workers adhere to ethical standards and practice with integrity, compassion, and professionalism.

Key ethical principles include:

Respect for human dignity and the right to self-determination, ensuring that social workers in northern Nigeria treat clients with respect and dignity, regardless of their socio-economic status or background (Garthwait, 2017).

Confidentiality and protection of personal information, particularly in regions where

individuals may face security threats due to their association with social services (Slim, 2015).

Commitment to social justice, ensuring that social workers advocate for policies and practices that support the rights and well-being of vulnerable populations (Putnam, 2000).

The Code of Ethics is an essential tool for social workers in northern Nigeria, ensuring that they provide services in an ethical and professional manner while addressing the complex challenges of conflict and displacement.

In all, the legal framework surrounding social work practice in northern Nigeria is multifaceted, encompassing national laws, international treaties, and ethical guidelines. These laws provide social workers with the tools and principles necessary to advocate for and protect vulnerable populations in conflict zones. By adhering to these legal structures, social workers in northern Nigeria can effectively support displaced persons, victims of violence, and marginalized communities, ensuring their rights are upheld and their needs met. Continued adherence to these frameworks is essential for the long-term stability and social cohesion of northern Nigeria (Galtung, 2004; Kress, 2019).

7. Conclusion

Social work in northern Nigeria plays a pivotal role in addressing the humanitarian crisis caused by armed conflicts, insurgencies, and violence. Social workers provide essential services to affected populations, including protection, psychosocial support, and humanitarian assistance. They also contribute to peacebuilding efforts and the promotion of human rights in conflict zones. However, social workers in the region face significant challenges, including insecurity, resource limitations, and the complex needs of displaced and vulnerable populations. Despite these challenges, social workers continue to demonstrate resilience and commitment to improving the lives of individuals and communities affected by conflict in northern Nigeria. In conclusion, social workers play a critical and transformative role in regions affected by armed conflict, displacement, and humanitarian crises, such as northern Nigeria. Their unwavering dedication to human rights, social justice, and the restoration of dignity in the face of violence and adversity highlights the immense value they bring to affected communities. From providing psychosocial support to advocating for the protection of vulnerable populations, social workers serve as essential mediators, offering both immediate relief and long-term solutions to the challenges faced by displaced persons, survivors of violence, and marginalized groups.

Futhermore, the complex and multifaceted nature of the crises in northern Nigeria calls for an even greater empowerment of social workers to maximize their impact. Empowering social workers entails several key strategies. Firstly, increasing access to training and capacity-building programs is vital. Social workers must be equipped with the skills to navigate the intricacies of conflict, trauma, and human rights law to respond effectively to the needs of affected populations. Tailored programs focusing on cultural sensitivity, conflict resolution, and legal frameworks particularly international humanitarian law will enable them to better support vulnerable groups. Secondly, strengthening collaboration between social

workers, government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and international bodies will create a more coordinated and holistic approach to crisis management. By fostering these collaborative relationships, social workers will have greater access to resources, networks, and expertise, thus enhancing their ability to respond to the immediate needs of affected populations.

Additionally, providing social workers with adequate financial support, professional recognition, and improved working conditions is paramount. Too often, social workers in conflict zones face inadequate compensation, overwhelming caseloads, and limited resources. Ensuring they are sufficiently supported not only enables them to work more effectively but also affirms the value of their work, reinforcing their commitment to humanitarian goals. Incorporating technology and innovation into social work practice will also significantly improve the efficiency and reach of interventions. For instance, digital tools can enhance the delivery of psychosocial support, improve data collection and monitoring, and facilitate communication between social workers and other humanitarian actors in remote or conflict-affected areas. Empowering social workers with the latest technological advancements ensures that their work remains relevant and adaptable in an ever-changing landscape. Finally, advocacy for policy changes that strengthen the role of social work in humanitarian crises is crucial. Engaging in policy dialogues that emphasize the importance of social work in peacebuilding, post-conflict recovery, and human rights protection can result in structural reforms that bolster the impact of social workers. By ensuring that their contributions are recognized at the policy level, social workers will be better positioned to secure resources, influence decision-making, and advocate for the rights of the communities they serve.

In summary, while social workers in northern Nigeria have made significant strides in alleviating the suffering of conflict-affected populations, continued efforts to empower them are necessary. Through enhanced training, collaboration, support, technology, and advocacy, social workers can become more effective agents of change, capable of addressing the complexities of humanitarian crises with resilience, compassion, and expertise. By investing in their growth and development, society can ensure that social workers continue to play a pivotal role in rebuilding lives, restoring dignity, and fostering lasting peace in the region.

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