

# **S**OCIAL WORK PRACTICES FOR FAMILIES AMIDST SECURITY CHALLENGES IN NIGERIA

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## **ABSTRACT**

**T**he social work profession has also been a shelter and shield for families and communities since the inception of the disciplines. Hence, it becomes evident that providing care for conflict-affected families is part and parcel of the profession. It is against this backdrop that this paper examined social work and public health practices for families amidst security challenges in Nigeria. Consequently, the paper discussed the nature of security challenges, causes and effects on families. To address this problem using Social Work practices, relevant approaches and strategies based on global best practices were explained this include: family approach, art and social work practice,

## **Introduction:**

A report presented by United Nations Children Fund [UNICEF] (2018) showed that Nigeria is the world's fifth-highest death toll due to security challenges resulting from the activities of the banditry, Boko Haram insurgency, kidnapping, ethnic contestation and other social unrest with casualties exceeding those of past major incidents in Africa (namely Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo). The security challenge has led to the

ecological resilience and multidisciplinary approaches, tailoring of interventions according to children and family status, policy supports as well as the importance of culture and context. Finally, the paper recommended among others that Government all levels should overhaul Social workers by reviewing the practice to align to current needs and issues of children, youths, families and the general public as well as global best practices; Refresher courses should be mounted for in-service Social Workers to upgrade their knowledge and competence to enable them to employ the needed skills, methods, techniques and approaches in solving problems of families and the general public in the country.

**KeyWords:** Social Work Practice, Families, Approaches, Interventions, Security Challenges

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displacement of Over 2.4 million children and families in Nigeria (Campbell, & Harwood, 2018). Externalities from the conflict include family disorganisation, domestic violence, abuse and neglect, food insecurity, disease outbreaks, forced migration, loss of business, and loss of infrastructure.

In particular, the ongoing security challenge in Nigeria, which inflicts harm on families and renders women and children especially vulnerable, calls for Social Work intervention to resolve, rehabilitate and restore their psychosocial well-being. The U.S. Department of Labour (2021); Snoubar and Duman (2015); Toros (2013) advance the functions of social workers as professionals with a strong desire to help improve people's lives, help children and families function the best way they can in their environment, deal with their relationships, and solve personal and family problems. These problems may include psychosocial challenges, inadequate housing, unemployment, serious illness, disability, or substance abuse, domestic conflicts, including those involving child or spousal abuse. According to Orikpe (2013), all these problems mentioned above mean that children and families are very insecure in terms of human wellbeing and these constitute a threat to national security.

As noted by Oshio cited in Yakubu and Mohammed (2016) the term "national security" can be viewed from two perspectives, that is defence and survival of the state. He Equates "defence" with "security" and bestows its protection to the military as the custodians of national security and the other perspective of Oshio equate national security with the security of the state. This second conception takes into consideration the significance of human well-being in the security considerations of a country. Hence, the security challenge in Nigeria could be linked to the failure of the government and other relevant social institutions to provide basic needs to citizens. It is against this background that, this paper, seeks to examine relevant Social Work approaches, methods and strategies that could be used to address the problems of children and families in this time of security challenges in the country. However, at this point, there is a need to scholarly define the major concepts in this paper.

### **Clarification of Terms**

**National Security and Security:** Several attempts have been made since the cold war ended to redefine the concept of security. At the heart of this debate there have been attempts to deepen and widen the concept of security from the level of the states to societies and individuals, and from military to non-military issues (Daniel & Kwopnan, 2018; Ewetan & Urhie, 2014; Nwanegbo & Odigbo, 2013). Put simple, Babangida (2011) views national security as the physical protection and defence of our citizens and our territorial integrity and also the promotion of the economic wellbeing and prosperity of Nigerians in a safe and secure environment that promotes the attainment of our national interests and those of our foreign partners. Furthermore, Otto and Ukpere (2012) and Adebakin, (2012) asserts that security means protection from hidden and hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life in homes, offices or communities. Security must be related to the presence of peace, safety, happiness and the protection of human and physical resources or the absence of crisis, threats to human injury among others.

**Family:** According to Burgess and Locke cited in Rao (2012) family is a group of persons united by the ties of marriage, blood or adoption; consisting of a single household, interacting and inter- communicating with each other in their social roles of husband and wife, mother and father, son and daughter, brother and sister creating a common culture.

**Social Work:** International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW] (2000) defines social work as a profession that promotes social change, problem-solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.

### **Security Challenges in Nigeria**

The major security challenges in Nigeria include:

1. **Herders-Farmers Clashes:** There have been violent disputes between nomadic animal herders and farmers in Nigeria for many years. The tension has led to some state governors banning grazing on open land, and thus creating friction with the central government. In 2019, federal authorities launched a 10-year National Livestock Transformation Plan to curtail the movement of cattle and boost livestock production in an attempt to stop the conflict. But critics say a lack of political leadership, expertise and funding, plus delays are derailing the project (**Tanko, 2021**).
2. **Banditry and Kidnapping:** One of the scariest threats for children and families in Nigeria is the frequent kidnapping of school children from their classrooms and boarding houses. More than 1,000 students have been abducted from their schools since December 2020, many only released after thousands of dollars are paid as ransom. Some of the kidnapers are commonly referred to as "bandits" in Nigeria. These criminals raid villages, kidnap civilians and burn down houses. Attacks by bandits have forced thousands of people to flee their homes and seek shelter in other parts of the country. The northwest is the epicentre of

these attacks. In Zamfara state alone, over 3,000 people have been killed since 2012 and the attacks are still going on. Hundreds of schools were closed following abductions at schools in Zamfara and Niger state, where children as young as three years old were seized. By every indication, Nigeria's lucrative kidnapping industry is thriving - expanding into previously safe areas - and seemingly beyond the control of the country's army. It poses a real threat to trade and education, as well as the country's farming communities (**Tanko, 2021; Daniel & Kwopnan, 2018**).

3. **Separatist Insurgency:** A separatist group called the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) has been clashing with Nigeria's security agencies. IPOB wants a group of states in the south-east, mainly made up of people from the Igbo ethnic group, to break away and form the independent nation of Biafra. The group was founded in 2014 by Nnamdi Kanu. However, the idea of Biafra is not new. In 1967, regional leaders declared an independent state, which led to a brutal civil war and the death of up to a million people. Supporters of Nnamdi Kanu's movement have been accused of launching deadly attacks on government offices, prisons and the homes of politicians and community leaders (**Tanko, 2021; Daniel & Kwopnan, 2018; Ogionwo, 2016**).
4. **Oil militants:** For years, militants pressured the government by kidnapping oil workers and launching attacks on security personnel and oil infrastructure, like pipelines. To address this, ex-president Umaru Musa Yar'Adua launched a presidential amnesty programme in 2009, which saw the formal end of the Niger Delta militants. But armed cult groups still pose a security challenge in the region and industry officials have been warning that militancy is once again picking up (**Tanko, 2021; Daniel & Kwopnan, 2018; Ogionwo, 2016; Achumba & Ighomereho, 2013**).
5. **Boko Haram and ISWAP Terror Attacks:** Organised terror attacks in the name of so-called 'Jahid' by Boko Haram and the new fraction called Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP) are expanding into new

areas and taking advantage of Nigeria's poverty and other security challenges to fuel its extremist ideologies. According to the UN, by the end of 2020, conflict with the group had led to the deaths of almost 350,000 people and forced millions from their homes. Boko Haram launches deadly raids, in some cases hoisting its flag and imposing an extremist rule on local people. It levies taxes on farms and the sale of agricultural products.

### **Causes of Security Challenges in Nigeria**

The causes of security challenges in Nigeria could be examined from two (2) major areas, that is, internal and external causes. In others, the causes of security challenges include:

- i. **Weak Security Outfit:** This results from inadequate equipment for the security arm of government, both in weaponry and training. This is in addition to the poor attitudinal and behavioural disposition of security personnel. In many cases, security personnel assigned to deal with given security situations lack the expertise and equipment to handle the situations in a way to prevent them from occurring. Thus, instead of being national watchdogs and defending national interest and values, and protecting people from harm by criminals, they soon become saboteurs of government effort, by supporting and fuelling insecurity through either leaking vital security information or aiding and abetting criminals to acquire weapons or to escape the long arm of the law (Achumba & Ighomereho, 2013).
- ii. **Lack of institutional capacity resulting in government failure:** This is manifested by the incapacity of the government to deliver public services and to provide for the basic needs of the masses. The lack of necessities by the people in Nigeria has created a pool of frustrated people who are ignited easily by any event to be violent (Igbuzor, 2011).
- iii. **Pervasive material inequalities and unfairness:** Greater awareness of disparities in life chances is a major root cause of insecurity in Nigeria. As noted by Onuoha (2011) a large number of the Nigerian population is frustrated and have lost hope, especially the youths, and

have now emerged to express their disillusion about the pervasive state of inequality.

- iv. **Ethno-religious conflicts:** These have arisen from distrust among various ethnic groups and the major religions in the country. Achumba and Ighomereho (2013); Igbuzor, (2011) identified ethno-religious conflict as a major source of insecurity in Nigeria. Frequent and persistent ethnic conflicts and religious clashes between the two dominant religions (Islam and Christianity) present the country with a major security challenge. The claim over scarce resources, power, land, chieftaincy, local government, councils, control of markets and sharia among other trivial issues have resulted in large scale killings and violence amongst groups in Nigeria (Adagba, Ugwu & Eme, 2012).
- v. **Loss of Socio-cultural and communal value system:** The traditional value system of the Nigerian society like most African societies is characterized by such endearing features as collectivism, loyalty to authority and community, truthfulness, honesty, hard work, tolerance, love for others, Mutual harmony and coexistence, and identification of the individual with one another (Clifford cited in Achumba & Ighomereho, 2013). Other distinctive features of Nigerian traditional society are abhorrence for theft and high value for life. Stealing was considered extremely disgraceful and lives were also highly valued. All of these values which made society secure and safe have all gradually been thrown away and lost. Thus, the new acculturated values have to lead to insecurity in the country.
- vi. **Porous Borders:** One major immediate factor which has enhanced insecurity in Nigeria is the porous frontiers of the country, where individual movements are largely untracked. The porosity of Nigeria's borders has serious security implications for the country. Nigeria is estimated to host over 70 per cent of about 8 million illegal weapons in West Africa (Edeko, 2011). Also, the porosity of the Nigerian borders has made it possible for the unwarranted influx of migrants from neighbouring countries such as the Republic of Niger, Chad and the

- Republic of Benin (Adeola & Oluyemi, 2012). These migrants which are mostly young men are some of the perpetrators of crime in the country.
- vii. **Rural /Urban Drift:** The migration of jobless youths from rural areas to urban centres is also one of the causes of insecurity in Nigeria (Onuoha, 2011). Nigeria is one of the countries in the world with very high rural/urban drift. Most urban areas in Nigeria have grown beyond their environmental carrying capacities and existing infrastructure and this has resulted in increased poor quality of the living conditions in urban areas in Nigeria (Adedeji & Eziyi, cited in Usiobaifo, 2019). Out of frustration, these youths are drawn into crime.
- viii. **Social Irresponsibility of Companies** Corporate social irresponsibility is a set of actions that increases externalized costs and/or promotes distributional conflicts (Kotchen & Moon, 2011). Companies engage in corporate social responsibility to offset corporate social irresponsibility. The rise of terror groups in some parts of the country is directly related to the neglect of social responsibility by companies to the community where they are operating. This was the case of the Niger Delta crisis.
- ix. **Unemployment/Poverty:** As a result of the high level of unemployment and poverty among Nigerians, especially the youths, they are adversely attracted to violent crime (Adagba, et al, 2012). Nwagbosa (2012) argued that the failure of successive administrations in Nigeria to address challenges of poverty, unemployment and inequitable distribution of wealth.
- x. **Terrorism:** At the most proximate and least disputable level, terrorism is the most fundamental source of insecurity in Nigeria today, and its primary bases and sources of support have generally been located in religious fanaticism and intolerance particularly in Islam dominated states of Nigeria (Achumba & Ighomereho, 2013).

### **Effects of Security Challenges on Families in Nigeria**

The activities of insecurity in Nigeria have caused a lot of havoc to the family system in different societies of this country. For instance, every

known and then, unspecified millions of naira is being paid as ransom for the release of victims of kidnappers in different parts of the country. Likewise, a huge amount of money is lost every day to army robbers and other terror attacks (Bello 2012).

Education institutions that are seen as the pivot of national development have turned down to be a place of fear and threats in many parts of the country. Most educational institutions, especially in the Northern part of the country, have been closed down for the fears of Boko Haram, while some universities in the country especially the university of Maiduguri has reduced their admission policy because of the fears of the insurgency (Bello 2012). Education according to Onouha (2011) is a pacesetter for family development but insecurity has led to the depreciating value of education in many parts of the country. Usually, security threats may result in to close down of many educational institutions or some operating at low capacity thereby reducing the production of human resources needed for family and national development in the country. Added to this, the resources for family use have been lost to insecurity, most families do not have a job, and place to live and their mental and physical health are affected negatively. This situation calls for social work intervention.

### **Social Work Practices with Families affected by Security Challenges**

Given its broad approach and careful consideration of context, social work as a profession and discipline has a great deal to offer to research and practise with children and families affected by insecurity/conflict. These include:

- i. **Family Approach:** To best support conflict-affected children and families, it is critical to assess existing protective capacities and deficits in the systems that surround them to form a "protective shield" to reduce the full impact of socioecological shocks, such as those posed by a terror attack, banditry, kidnapping and displacement (Denov, & Shevell, 2019). In this way, protective elements can be specifically supported to promote protective environments that help

to mitigate risks confronting conflict and crisis-affected children and their families.

A family approach can be particularly helpful in identifying the various risk and protective factors present in the multiple supportive layers, or social ecologies, that surround children and youth (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020; Bethell, Jones, Gombojav, Linkenbach, & Sege, 2019). Several authors have applied this model to the realities of conflict-affected children and families to gain a more holistic understanding of their well-being (Betancourt, Meyers-Ohki, Charrow, & Tol, 2013; Kangas, Haider, & Fraser, 2014; Denov & Akesson, 2017; Mattingly, 2017). Added to this, Miller and Rasco cited in Wells, Lawsin, Hunt, Youssef, Abujado and Steel (2018) highlight the significance of interactional relationships between environmental demands and available adaptive resources on shaping conflict/security challenged children and families healing and adaptation.

McGregor, Melvin, and Newman (2016) described the importance of family as a supportive factor, for emotional and social support during the insecurity, conflict and resettlement process. The presence of family members can transform adversity into a source of strength, by aiding in the rebuilding of a meaningful universe. This strength may help ensure the psycho-social, cultural, and economic survival of the children, family and the larger group. As noted above, it is also important to (re)consider the notion of the family itself. The enormous societal changes in Nigeria require that social workers contend with the transformations of what constitutes “family” in their practice and education. Indeed, conventional conceptualizations of the nuclear family no longer reflect current family realities (Woodford cited in Canadian Journal of Children’s Rights, Denov, & Blanchet-Cohen, 2014). This is particularly important when considering conflict/crisis-affected children and families who may have lost their entire relatives, may be separated from family, and may create new family structures in the post-conflict and post-migration contexts—

ones that are not simply based on traditional bloodlines and kinship structures (Denov & Blanchet-Cohen, 2014).

- ii. **Art and Social Work Practice:** Social work as a profession has historically engaged with art. As far back as the settlement house movement in the late 1800s, social work has incorporated the arts in community action by forming partnerships with artists in addressing social issues and human challenges (Moxley & Feen, 2016). This approach has prevailed in contemporary social work where a focus on managerialism and mechanistic practices have resulted in what many see as the repression of social work as a creative endeavour (Huss & Sela-Amit, 2018). Given the tragedy of terror attack, crisis, banditry and displacement, words and narrative alone often cannot adequately capture the realities and complexity of conflict and migration-related experiences. As such, D'Amico, Denov, Khan, Linds, & Akesson (2016) suggested that increasingly turning to the arts will enable multiple forms of expression, as well as for the therapeutic, restorative, and empowering qualities of arts-based techniques.
- iii. **Ecological Resilience Approach:** A social-ecological approach is necessary because some of the greatest risks to and sources of distress for children and families arise at these different levels of social environments (Tol, Jordans, Kohrt, Betancourt, & Komproe, 2013). It would be a mistake, though, to develop an ecological approach that focuses mostly on deficits or risks to conflict-affected children and families. For example, a focus on sexual violence against girls and women in kidnapping and banditry areas of the country can inadvertently stigmatize girl survivors at the moment when they most need support. Further, deficits approaches frequently underestimate children and families resilience and can undermine the empowerment that is needed for healing and also sustainability (Wessells, 2016). A better approach centres on resilience and builds on the ecological resources and strengths at multiple levels that support children and families well-being. Even amid a conflict or crisis, children and families may receive important support from people such as parents,

friends, teachers, and religious leaders. From this standpoint, what is needed is an ecological resilience approach (Tol, Jordans, Kohrt, Betancourt & Komproe 2013) that recognizes risks but builds upon the protective and promotive factors that help security challenged children and families to cope amid difficult circumstances and that provide leverage for prevention.

- iv. **Multidisciplinary Approaches:** Although the need exists for specifically social work interventions for children and families in conflict or crisis zones, such interventions combined do not comprise a comprehensive approach. Imagine, for example, a boy who is being treated by Social Workers and other related professionals for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) but who lives in a highly impoverished neighbourhood where Boko Haram/ ISWAP groups are actively recruiting children and paying them to join and where parents encourage children to join to help support their families. In such a context, PTSD treatment is necessary but would have limited value unless there were also economic supports such as livelihood supports for families that help to prevent recruitment into armed groups (Wessells, 2017).

More broadly, social work in security challenged zones should be poverty sensitive and include or link with complementary efforts to reduce poverty and its associated stresses. Team approaches in which social workers, psychologists and economists collaborate can be useful in this respect. Also useful is interagency collaboration in which one agency takes primary responsibility for psychosocial elements and the other takes primary responsibility for the economic elements. The challenge in such approaches is to not only coordinate the agencies' work but also to integrate as fully as possible the psychosocial and economic components. In addition, mental health and psychosocial support is not something to be done by social workers only (Wessells, 2016). Hence, humanitarian workers in different sectors can potentially boost their impact by building in a psychosocial lens, which is, by working in a manner that decreases

stress on children and families and helps them to feel safe and supported.

A multidisciplinary approach is particularly important regarding linking peace-building with mental health and psychosocial supports for conflict-affected children and families (Hamber & Gallagher, 2015; Hamber, Gallagher, & Ventevogel, 2014). Peace-building efforts may reduce the intergroup tensions and violence that harm children and families both physically and psychologically. Also, steps toward peace may bring with them new opportunities for education, employment, and the ability to meet one's basic needs, thereby reducing everyday distress and building hope for the future. Conversely, because psychological wounds of brutality and violence frequently become warrants for retaliation and ongoing fighting (Königstein, 2013), the reduction and management of children and families wounds of terror attacks, kidnapping, banditry and displacement may help to break cycles of violence and to prepare the groundwork for peace.

- v. **Tailoring of Interventions according to Families Status:** Because the category “affected children and families” is far from homogeneous, it is essential to tailor interventions to meet the characteristics and circumstances of the child and family. A tailored approach is particularly important in supporting affected children and families who differ according to their age or developmental stage, vulnerability status, and gender (Wessells, 2017).
- vi. **Policy Supports:** Although policy and practice are typically viewed as different worlds, they are richly interconnected regarding intervention on behalf of conflict-affected children and families. Appropriate policies can set the stage for and provide a mandate for quality intervention on behalf of conflict-affected children and families. For example, a government mental health plan and related policies regarding supports for children and adults can help to enable the comprehensive supports that conflict-affected children and families are entitled to. Also, policies related to non-discrimination can, if they are enforced, help to reduce the stresses associated with

discrimination along lines such as gender, ethnicity, or religion (Wessells, 2017). It is a high priority, then, to enable appropriate policies related to conflicted-affected children and families as part of the social work practical efforts to enable the children and families well-being.

- vii. **The importance of culture and context:** Culture describes a shared social system of knowledge, beliefs, values, and assumptions continuously guiding and shaping our behaviour and our interrelations (Baldwin et al., cited in National Association of Social Worker, 2015). Culture gives meaning to the physical experience, acting as a prism through which we not only perceive but also make sense of the world around us. As such, culture plays a prominent role in how individuals psychosocial challenges and cope. In their review of the mental health and psychosocial well-being of war-affected Syrians, Hassan et al. (2015) demonstrated that services aimed to mitigate experiences of illness and promote psychosocial well-being must be tailored to the particular culture and context of clientele to have effective and sustainable impacts. In their work with war-affected Syrians, careful consideration was given to individual expressions and idioms (e.g., of distress, of "the self," of well-being/health) specific to the Syrian context; for example, this included more generally the interconnectedness of somatic (body) and psychological (soul) symptoms, the use of specific metaphors to explain and express suffering, and a "sociocentric" and "cosmocentric" conceptualization of the self. Granting specific considerations to cultural systems of knowledge and contextualized explanatory models of psychosocial challenges is essential in social work, as they have critical implications for help-seeking behaviour, treatment expectations and concerns, and coping.

Although many scholars have highlighted the dangers of privileging individual, trauma-focused approaches, particularly with conflict-affected children and families (Miller, Kulkarni, & Kushner; Miller & Rasco cited in Wessells, 2017; Yohani, 2015; Montero, Ibrahim,

Loomis & Newmaster, 2012; Wade, Sirriyeh, Kohli & Simmonds, 2012), social work practice and education continue to over-rely on approaches premised on these same assumptions (Fennig & Denov, 2018; Houston, 2014). These examples highlight how social work assessments must be grounded in cultural and social contexts; they must include an effort to interpret what clients' expressions of distress and coping mean within their particular context. Understanding these idioms and explanatory models of "(un)wellness" can better tailor design interventions to galvanize the child and family resilience, strengths, capacities, and resources identified. It is imperative that social work practitioners and educators actively reflect on their professional explanatory models and cultural idioms and how this might differ from their clients or students.

### **Conclusion**

It is imperative to note that social work practice can impact immensely in addressing children and family psychosocial problems and needs resulting from security challenges in the country. Ultimately, this contextualized knowledge can help improve the scope and reach of social work practice, curriculum development and pedagogy, by informing adaptations that ensure they are culturally relevant, appropriate and sensitive to the realities of conflict-affected children and their families. However, this is attained only and if, vibrant, experienced and qualified social workers are employed to render quality and efficient services to the affected population.

### **Recommendations**

To provide quality and efficient services to conflict and security challenged children and families in the country. The following are worthy of note:

1. Government all levels should overhaul Social workers by reviewing the practice to align to current needs and issues of children, youths, families and the general public as well as global best practices.

2. Refresher courses should be mounted for in-service Social Workers to upgrade their knowledge and competence to enable them to employ the needed skills, methods, techniques and approaches in solving problems of children, youths, families and the general public in the country.
3. Social Work Educators and Practitioners should collaborate to cajole in frontiers of powers to enable speedy passage of the social work bill in Nigeria. This will enable the professional practice of social work and as well bolster training in the country.
4. Qualified Social Workers should be employed by the government, Non-Government Organisations and relevant humanitarian agencies to render professional services to children and families affected by security challenges in the country. This will help reduce the current hardship faced by the victims by making a comprehensive need assessment and reporting to the appropriate authority for pragmatic action.
5. The traditional social welfare system which emphasizes the principle of collectivism helping style for children and families should be re-institutionalized in the country.

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