

# Experiences of Gender-Based Violence among girls in IDPs camps in Northeast Nigeria

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## Abstract

This study is a desk review which seeks to assess gender-based violence (GBV) experiences among girls living in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps in North-Eastern Nigeria. Building on previous findings and existing literature, institutional and policy reports published between 2014 and 2024, the study examines the nature, causes, consequences, and gaps in responses related to gender-based violence in these humanitarian contexts. The study draws on existing empirical literature to highlight recurring patterns of vulnerability and structural inequality shaping the experiences of displaced girls. It further employs a sociological theoretical framework to explain how power relations and systemic deprivation reinforce these patterns of violence. Findings of the study reveal consistent sexual exploitation, forced or early marriage, violent physical treatment and trauma as the prevailing types of violence confronting girls in displaced camps. Factors contributing to this menace are deprived economic access, weaknesses in the protective institutions, prevailing patriarchal norms, and depletion in traditional protection system. The study also captures devastating mental, social, physical and economic implications for survivors. For the fact that there have been both humanitarian and government responses such as health services and legal framework, there remains gaps in the areas of funding, access, coordination and accountability. The study recommends improved services for survivors and upgrading the centres, legal re-enforcement, promoting equitable gender norms and investing in long-term protection systems to ensure the rights and dignity of displaced girls are upheld.

**Keywords:** Conflict; Coping strategies; Displacement; Gender-based violence; IDP camps.

## **Introduction**

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a pervasive and devastating consequence of armed conflict and displacement globally. It encompasses physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse rooted in gender inequality and power imbalance (United Nations Women, 2022). Armed conflicts disrupt social and legal structures, create insecurity, and displace populations, thereby heightening the vulnerability of women and girls to violence (Isihor, Adebayo, & Etuk, 2021). In humanitarian settings, such as refugee and IDP camps, the risks of GBV are significantly amplified due to overcrowding, lack of privacy, weak law enforcement, and limited access to justice (United Nations High Commission for Refugees, 2023; Bashir, Geidam, & Galadima, 2020).

In Nigeria, the protracted Boko Haram insurgency and recurring communal conflicts, especially in the North-East, have resulted in the displacement of over 2.2 million people (UNHCR, 2023). These conflicts have devastated communities and weakened institutional capacities, leaving millions in need of humanitarian assistance. A large proportion of those displaced are women and girls, who face heightened risks of GBV due to disrupted family structures, poverty, and the breakdown of community protection mechanisms (Ugwu, 2021).

IDP camps, which are intended as safe havens for displaced populations, often become breeding grounds for GBV. Reports from Human Rights Watch (2018) and Amnesty International (2018) document alarming instances of sexual exploitation, coerced survival sex, forced marriages, and abuse by camp officials, security personnel, and even humanitarian workers (Bashir et al., 2020; Isihor et al., 2021). The normalization of gender-based violence in such settings reflects broader societal gender inequalities and impunity for perpetrators.

This desk review aims to assess existing literature, reports, and policy documents to explore the nature, causes, and consequences of GBV experienced by girls in Nigeria's IDP camps. By examining these dynamics, the review seeks to contribute to evidence-based advocacy, policy formulation, and programmatic interventions aimed at protecting the rights and dignity of displaced girls.

## **Literature Review**

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) refers to harmful acts directed at an individual based on their gender or socially ascribed roles. It includes physical, sexual, psychological, and economic forms of abuse driven largely by entrenched gender inequalities and patriarchal norms that

position women and girls as subordinate within society (UN Women, 2022; Tadesse, Andualem, Rtbey, Nakie, Takelle, Molla, Abate, Kibralew, Kelebie, Fentahun, & Tinsae, 2024). Gender-based violence (GBV) represents one of the most pervasive human rights violations globally, especially within contexts affected by conflict and displacement (Kunnuji, Okocha, Adeleke, Nwanna, & Eshiet, 2024). In humanitarian settings, particularly in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps, the risks of GBV are significantly heightened due to instability, weakened institutions, and the erosion of community protection structures that ordinarily offer some degree of safety for vulnerable individuals (Olojede, & Brand-Jacobson, 2025).

The concept of IDPs refers to individuals forced to flee their homes due to violence or disasters but who remain within national borders (Sinha, 2022). In Nigeria's North-East, the Boko Haram insurgency and communal conflicts have contributed to the displacement of millions, with women and girls forming a disproportionately large share of those affected.

The causes of GBV in IDP camps are deeply interconnected. Displacement disrupts social networks and family structures that traditionally safeguard girls, leaving them exposed to exploitation by individuals who wield power, including camp officials, security personnel, and sometimes humanitarian actors (Olojede, & Brand-Jacobson, 2024). Poverty and scarcity of basic resources further exacerbate vulnerability, often compelling girls into survival strategies such as transactional sex or exposing them to coercive demands in exchange for food, shelter, or protection (Gidado, Musa, Ba'aba, Okeke, Nguku, Hadejia, Hassan, Bande, Onuoha, Ugbenyo, 2023). Cultural norms that perpetuate male dominance and female subordination also contribute to the normalization of violence, while inadequate security, overcrowding, and lack of privacy within camps create opportunities for abuse (Human Rights Watch, 2018). The consequences of GBV for displaced girls are severe and far-reaching. Physically, many face injuries, unwanted pregnancies, and exposure to sexually transmitted infections (Amnesty International, 2018). Psychologically, survivors often experience trauma, anxiety, and long-term emotional distress. Socially and economically, stigmatization, educational disruption, and diminished future opportunities limit their development (Koris, Steven, Akika, Puls, Okoro, Bitrus, Seff, Deitch, & Stark, 2022). The literature consistently shows that GBV in IDP camps is not an accidental outcome but a predictable result of structural inequalities intensified by conflict and displacement.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study employs the Feminist theoretical perspectives which argue that GBV originates from unequal power relations between men and women, embedded in patriarchal systems. These power imbalances are heightened in conflict and displacement contexts, where institutional oversight is weak (Connell, 1987). The experiences of GBV among girls in IDP camps can be interpreted through Gender Power Theory, which offers a deeper understanding of the structural and situational forces shaping vulnerability. Gender Power Theory, rooted in feminist scholarship, argues that GBV stems from unequal power relations that privilege men and subordinate women. These inequalities become more pronounced during conflict and displacement, where institutional oversight weakens and male-controlled structures dominate decision making. In IDP camps in Northeast Nigeria, men typically hold leadership and security roles, which grant them authority over resource distribution and protection mechanisms. This imbalance increases girls' dependency and reduces their ability to negotiate safety, thereby reinforcing cycles of domination and exploitation.

## **Methodology**

This study adopted a qualitative desk review methodology involving a systematic collection, evaluation, and a blend of existing literature related to gender-based violence (GBV) among girls in Nigeria's internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. The review focused on publications between 2014 and 2024 to ensure both relevance and currency, covering peer-reviewed academic journals, grey literature, and reports by international and national organizations.

Primary data sources included academic databases such as JSTOR, PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar, where relevant scholarly articles on GBV, displacement, and humanitarian response in Nigeria were retrieved. Key search terms included "gender-based violence," "IDP camps in Nigeria," "conflict and displacement," "girls and sexual violence," and "humanitarian crises and GBV." Boolean operators (AND, OR) were employed to broaden or narrow searches.

In addition to academic sources, the review incorporated reports and assessments by credible organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Human Rights Watch, International Organization for Migration (IOM), Amnesty International, and Oxfam. National reports from Nigeria's National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) and National Human Rights

Commission (NHRC) were also considered. Documents were selected based on their methodological rigor, credibility, relevance to the Nigerian context, and focus on gender-specific vulnerabilities.

Data were analysed thematically, identifying key patterns and trends related to forms of GBV, contributing factors, health and psychosocial impacts, and response mechanisms within IDP camps. Ethical considerations were maintained by relying solely on publicly available data and ensuring that all sources were accurately cited using APA 7th edition referencing.

This method enabled the collation of diverse insights and perspectives across humanitarian, legal, sociological, and psychological dimensions, thereby providing a holistic understanding of the challenges faced by displaced girls in conflict zones in Nigeria.

## **Findings**

Findings of this review covers the forms, causes, consequences and responses on gender-based violence. From the various documents reviewed, sources reveal multiple forms of GBV experienced by girls within Nigeria's IDP camps.

### **Forms of Gender-based violence in IDPs**

Sexual violence is the most prevalent form of GBV in IDP camps. Reports indicate that girls are frequently subjected to rape, gang rape, and coerced transactional sex (Marlow, Kunnuji, Esiet, Bukoye, & Izugbara, 2022). According to Amnesty International (2018), some girls are forced to engage in sex-for-food or sex-for-shelter exchanges due to the absence of adequate humanitarian supplies. The United Nations Population Fund (2023) noted that over 60% of GBV cases reported in Nigerian camps involved sexual exploitation and abuse by persons in authority, including security forces and camp officials (Imoh Dongurum, Bolaji-Adegbola, Envuladu, Magaji, Osagbemi, & Imoh, 2025).

Girls are also subjected to physical abuses such as beatings, forced labour, and corporal punishment, particularly within households or in forced or early marriages. Oxfam Nigeria (2021) reported that physical violence often serves as a tool for controlling girls' mobility and enforcing compliance with traditional gender roles.

Emotional and psychological abuse: Studies also show emotional and psychological abuse girls in IDPs camp go through. These include intimidations, verbal threats, isolation, and constant surveillance. United Nations High Commission for Refugees (2023), reports show

that survivors often suffer from anxiety and depression which are rarely addressed due to inadequate mental health services in camp settings. Sheikh, Mohammed, Esegbe and Adekeye (2023) and Envuladu, Massar & Wit (2023) further corroborate these findings, showing that displaced adolescents experience extreme psychological distress, insomnia, and trauma due to repeated exposure to violence.

The practice of early marriage is widespread in displacement settings as families perceive it as a strategy for protecting their daughters or alleviating economic hardship. Human Rights Watch (2018) and Ugwu (2021) highlighted numerous cases where girls as young as 13 were married off to much older men, exposing them to lifelong cycles of abuse and social isolation. The lack of accountability and ineffective justice systems mean that perpetrators frequently go unpunished, while survivors are left to cope with physical and emotional trauma.

### **Drivers of Gender-based violence**

Acute poverty among displaced populations is one of the most significant drivers of GBV. IDPs often lose their homes, means of livelihood, and social networks, leaving them entirely dependent on humanitarian assistance (Bashir et al., 2020). In such situations, transactional sex becomes a survival strategy, particularly for adolescent girls and female-headed households. According to Amnesty International (2018), numerous cases have been documented where girls exchanged sex for food, security, and sanitary items due to inadequate relief supplies. This dynamic of economic desperation and resource control creates exploitative power asymmetries, especially in resource-scarce environments.

Girls who would typically rely on extended kinship support are left vulnerable (Bashir et al., 2020). In the camp setting, the absence of designated guardians, overcrowded living conditions, and the breakdown of communal oversight significantly heighten the risk of abuse (Oxfam, 2021). Additionally, the erosion of customary social sanctions against GBV during crises reduces accountability within displaced communities.

Deeply entrenched gender norms continue to frame women and girls as subordinate and property-like, which normalizes violence against them. In many cultures within northern Nigeria, early marriage is both a coping mechanism and a cultural practice. Displaced families may marry off young daughters to reduce household burden or secure temporary

protection, exposing girls to marital rape, domestic violence, and premature motherhood (Human Rights Watch, 2018; UN Women, 2022).

IDP camps often lack basic safety infrastructure such as sufficient lighting, secure shelters, and gender-separated sanitation facilities. This makes girls especially vulnerable to nighttime assaults and attacks in latrines or water collection areas. Reports by UNHCR (2023) highlight that unmonitored camp perimeters and communal sleeping arrangements expose girls to unwanted advances and sexual coercion, especially from older male residents or camp staff. Moreover, some camps have no complaint or redress systems, and where they exist, they are inadequately funded and poorly publicized.

Despite the presence of humanitarian actors, GBV prevention and response are often not prioritized in emergency responses. Inconsistent funding, fragmented service delivery, and lack of survivor-centered approaches hinder timely and effective interventions. Coordination lapses between camp managers, security personnel, health workers, and legal aid providers allow cases of GBV to fall through the cracks (Ugwu, 2021).

### **Consequences of GBV**

Literature reviewed showed that girls who experience GBV often suffer severe physical injuries, especially in cases of rape or intimate partner violence. These injuries may include genital trauma, pelvic pain, and chronic reproductive health issues. More alarmingly, sexual violence often results in unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and increased vulnerability to sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS (UNFPA, 2023). Due to limited access to quality healthcare services in IDP camps, many survivors do not receive the urgent medical attention they require, compounding their trauma and risk of long-term disability.

Survivors often experience post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. The feeling of shame, guilt, and fear of stigma can lead to self-isolation and social withdrawal (Patel, Srivastava, Kumar, Chauhan, Govindu, & Dhillon, 2021). According to Human Rights Watch (2016), many girls develop deep-seated distrust in adults and authority figures, especially when the abuser holds a position of power.

Early marriage, often both a cause and consequence of GBV, further disrupts educational attainment (Marlow, et al., 2022; Human Right Watch, 2018). Oxfam (2021) found that

educational discontinuity among displaced girls leads to long-term socioeconomic disadvantage and reduces their ability to escape cycles of violence and poverty. Bashir et al. (2020) and Isihor et al. (2021) further found that GBV severely limits girls' educational attainment and economic empowerment.

In patriarchal societies, a girl's 'honour' is tied to her sexuality, and survivors of GBV are often considered 'spoiled' or unmarriageable (Ogunfowokan, Samson-Akpan, Arije, & Olawoyin, 2024). According to Ekine (2020), ostracized girls often end up in exploitative labour, sex work, or abusive relationships due to lack of support networks. In the long term, this entrenches poverty and contributes to intergenerational cycles of vulnerability (UN Women, 2022).

### **Responses to GBV**

Various stakeholders including government agencies, international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and community groups have initiated response mechanisms to address gender-based violence in Nigeria's IDP camps. These mechanisms aim to prevent GBV, protect survivors, and prosecute perpetrators (Isihor et al., 2021). However, numerous challenges hinder their effectiveness, resulting in significant service gaps.

Organizations such as the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) have established gender desks, safe spaces for women and girls, mobile clinics, and referral systems in some IDP camps. These services provide psychosocial counselling, medical treatment, legal aid, and livelihood training for survivors. The Nigerian government has also launched the National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security and integrated GBV response into humanitarian coordination platforms (UN Women, 2021). In collaboration with state-level emergency management agencies, some initiatives include gender focal points and survivor-centred intervention protocols. However, local academic studies point out gaps in coordination, survivor services, and cultural barriers to justice (Ogunfowokan et al., 2024; Isihor et al., 2021).

Grassroots and faith-based organizations have played critical roles in creating awareness and engaging community leaders to challenge harmful practices and attitudes. Community sensitization campaigns, boys' clubs, and peer-education programs have shown promise in

shifting social norms and reducing tolerance for GBV (Oxfam, 2021). These efforts often rely on trusted local actors, increasing their acceptance and sustainability.

There have been efforts to establish mobile courts and legal clinics within and around IDP camps, particularly in Borno and Adamawa states. The Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act of 2015 provides a legal framework to address various forms of GBV; however, its adoption and enforcement remain inconsistent across states. Where available, survivors often lack the means or support to navigate the legal system (Kunnuji, et al., 2024).

### **Discussion of findings**

The findings of this review underscore the pervasive and multidimensional nature of gender-based violence (GBV) experienced by girls in Nigeria's IDP camps. Sexual violence emerges as the most prevalent form, with rape, gang rape, and coerced transactional sex reflecting both opportunistic exploitation and structural power imbalances. The reports of sex-for-food or shelter exchanges highlight the intersection of economic deprivation and gendered vulnerabilities, illustrating how acute poverty drives exploitative practices within humanitarian settings. Physical, emotional, and psychological abuses further compound the harm, leaving survivors with trauma, anxiety, and depression, which often remain unaddressed due to limited mental health services.

Early marriage emerges as both a cultural practice and a coping mechanism within displaced communities, often justified as protection or economic relief. While intended as a solution to vulnerability, early marriage exposes girls to further abuse, including domestic violence, marital rape, and social isolation. The interrelation of multiple forms of GBV, as indicated in the findings, demonstrates that these harms are cumulative and mutually reinforcing, creating cycles of trauma that extend beyond immediate physical injury.

The drivers of GBV in IDP camps are complex, encompassing socioeconomic, structural, and socio-cultural factors. The disruption of family and community protective networks, combined with insufficient safety infrastructure, weak legal enforcement, and entrenched gender norms, creates an environment where abuse is normalized and perpetrators frequently escape accountability. The findings highlight that transactional survival strategies, stigma, and patriarchal attitudes exacerbate girls' vulnerability, limiting their agency and social mobility.

The consequences of GBV are extensive, affecting health, education, and economic participation. Survivors face physical injuries, reproductive health risks, and persistent psychological distress. Education disruption, often due to pregnancy or trauma, constrains future opportunities and perpetuates cycles of poverty and dependence. They are frequently blamed or rejected by their families and communities, particularly in cases of rape or pregnancy outside marriage. This stigma and family rejection further marginalize survivors, reducing access to support and reintegration opportunities. These findings illustrate the interconnectedness of GBV outcomes and emphasise the need for comprehensive, multi-sectoral interventions.

Responses to GBV, while present, are inconsistent and fragmented. Humanitarian actors, government initiatives, and community organizations have implemented services ranging from psychosocial support to legal aid; however, gaps in coordination, funding, cultural acceptance, and service accessibility undermine effectiveness. The discussion reveals that addressing GBV in IDP camps requires not only immediate protective interventions but also systemic reforms that tackle underlying social, economic, and institutional drivers of vulnerability.

The findings demonstrate that GBV in Nigeria's IDP camps is a pervasive, multifactorial problem. Interventions must be survivor-centred, culturally sensitive, and integrated across health, education, legal, and protection sectors to mitigate harm and break cycles of abuse.

## **Conclusion**

This desk review underscores the urgent need to address the gendered impacts of conflict and displacement in Nigeria. Girls in IDP camps experience multiple, intersecting forms of violence, including sexual violence (rape, gang rape, coerced transactional sex), physical abuse (beatings, forced labour, corporal punishment), emotional and psychological abuse (intimidation, verbal threats, isolation, trauma), and early or forced marriage, rooted in systemic inequality, weak institutional safeguards, and socio-economic marginalization. These forms of GBV result in severe consequences, such as physical injuries, reproductive health complications, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, social stigma, educational disruption, school dropout, loss of economic opportunities, and long-term cycles of poverty and vulnerability. Despite some response efforts, critical gaps persist in prevention, protection, and accountability mechanisms. A holistic and inclusive approach is required to transform IDP camps from zones of vulnerability into spaces of safety and

dignity. Such transformation depends on multi-sectoral collaboration, sustained funding, cultural sensitivity, and survivor leadership. Ensuring justice and support for girls affected by GBV is not only a human rights imperative but also essential for Nigeria's long-term peace and development.

### **Recommendations**

To effectively address gender-based violence in Nigeria's IDP camps, a multi-pronged, survivor-centred strategy is essential.

- i. First, stakeholders should strengthen the legal framework by ensuring full domestication and implementation of the Violence against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act across all states, with clear mechanisms for enforcement and accountability.
- ii. Second, government and humanitarian actors must expand access to holistic support services such as healthcare, psychosocial counselling, legal aid, and education particularly for adolescent girls.
- iii. Third, community-based interventions should engage men, boys, traditional leaders, and religious institutions to challenge harmful gender norms and promote a culture of zero tolerance for GBV.
- iv. Fourth, investment in GBV prevention should prioritize safe spaces, secure infrastructure, and adolescent-friendly reporting channels within camps.
- v. Fifth, sustained funding and coordinated action among humanitarian agencies, local NGOs, and government institutions are vital for programme continuity and scalability.
- vi. Lastly, improved data collection, survivor anonymity, and participatory monitoring can help evaluate progress and ensure that responses remain context-specific and effective.

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