

# Exploring the Role of Social Workers in Delivering Psychosocial Support to Survivors of Conflict in North East Nigeria

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## Abstract

Globally, armed conflict and humanitarian crises have become issues of serious concern, particularly in Africa and Nigeria's North East region. This phenomenon has resulted in widespread displacement and exposed affected populations to numerous challenges such as psychological trauma, social dislocation, insecurity, disrupted livelihoods, and weakened community support systems. This study explores the role of social workers in delivering psychosocial support to survivors of conflict in North-East Nigeria. To achieve the study objectives, a qualitative research methodology using a phenomenological design was adopted and guided by Structural Functionalism Theory. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with thirteen purposively selected informants, while thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Consequently, the findings revealed that social workers provide psychosocial support through individual counselling, group therapy, community mobilization, and peacebuilding initiatives. Furthermore, the study further found that psychosocial interventions enhanced emotional recovery, coping strategies, resilience, and social reintegration among survivors. Additionally, the study discovered that social workers encounter significant challenges in delivering psychosocial support, including limited funding, insecurity, cultural barriers, inadequate professional training, high caseloads, and weak institutional support systems. Based on these findings, the study recommends increased funding for psychosocial programmes, strengthened security in conflict prone communities, regular professional training for social workers, improved institutional support mechanisms, and intensified community sensitisation to reduce stigma and improve access to psychosocial support services.

**Keywords:** Social workers, psychosocial support, conflict survivors, North East Nigeria, emotional recovery, social reintegration, peacebuilding.

## I. Introduction

Conflict remains a significant global challenge, affecting millions of people by disrupting social cohesion, causing psychological trauma, and undermining sustainable development. Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the incidence of armed conflict has increased worldwide, resulting in far-reaching humanitarian consequences (Wang et al., 2025). For instance, the ongoing conflict in Ukraine has intensified global food insecurity, leaving approximately 1.7 billion people experiencing hunger and about 276 million facing severe food insecurity worldwide (Agboklou, Özkan, & Gujrati, 2024).

In Africa, conflicts continue to shape the socio-political landscape and pose significant threats to national security and development (Omotola, 2025). Many of these conflicts unfold within fragile socio-economic environments, characterized by weak institutions and limited access to formal mental health services, which in turn amplify the psychosocial consequences for affected populations. Moreover, governance deficits in regions such as Nigeria's Niger Delta, Sudan's Darfur, and the Democratic Republic of Congo's Kivu region further exacerbate localized tensions, resulting in displacement, economic stagnation, and erosion of state legitimacy' (Folorunsho & Samuel, 2025).

Within Nigeria, extensive ethnic and cultural diversity spanning over 300 ethnic groups has historically been accompanied by ethnic, religious, and communal conflicts, including the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) (Abubakar, Ibrahim, & Ibrahim, 2025). In more recent years, this pattern has continued through conflicts such as the Niger Delta militancy and the ongoing herder-farmer clashes

in different parts of the country, both of which have continued to affect peaceful coexistence (Institute for Peace and Security Studies, 2018). Consequently, this escalating violence has displaced over 3.5 million people, with women and girls representing approximately 75% of the internally displaced population (Ali, 2025).

The situation is particularly pronounced in North East Nigeria, where protracted conflict has persisted since 2002 following the emergence of non-state armed groups such as Jama'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād (Boko Haram) and splinter factions including the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) and Ansaru (Eriamiatoe, 2025). This prolonged conflict has resulted in widespread loss of life, large-scale displacement, and the breakdown of social and economic structures, leaving survivors vulnerable to psychological trauma, disrupted social networks, and difficulties in social reintegration (Shimelash, 2023; Chaka & Madda Gatisso, 2025).

In response to these challenges, social workers play a critical role in providing psychosocial support to conflict-affected populations in North East Nigeria, thereby facilitating their capacity to manage the psychological, social, and emotional consequences of prolonged conflict. Despite the significance of these interventions, there remains limited empirical evidence documenting the specific activities of social workers, evaluating the effectiveness of psychosocial support services, and identifying the challenges encountered in providing support at the community level.

Against this backdrop, this study seeks to investigate the activities of social workers in delivering psychosocial support to survivors of conflict in North East Nigeria. Specifically, the study examines the approaches employed by social workers, evaluates the effectiveness of psychosocial support interventions, and identifies the challenges encountered in providing support to conflict-affected populations.

## **II. Literature Review**

### **A. Concept of Conflict**

Conflict is commonly understood as a social process involving disagreement, incompatibility, or struggle between individuals or groups pursuing competing interests, goals, or values. Abreha and Zewdie (2020), defines conflict as a struggle over power, status, or scarce resources between opposing parties. Similarly, Ndeche and Iroy (2022), describe conflict as an interactive process characterized by disagreement within or between social groups. Gwanyo, Dickson, and Talatu (2020) further argue that conflict emerges when one party perceives that another has negatively affected something it values. In this study, conflict refers to persistent social, political, economic, or communal disagreements capable of disrupting social relations and generating psychological and social distress.

### **B. Conflict in the Global Perspectives**

Globally, conflicts are recognized as major sources of humanitarian crises and psychosocial distress. Krawchuk (2021), observed that contemporary conflicts such as the Russia-Ukraine war reflect historical patterns of political and religious division. Beyond political instability, armed conflicts continue to threaten food security, economic stability, and human well-being across the world. Agboklou et al. (2024), found that violent conflicts significantly disrupt agricultural production and food supply systems, thereby undermining global efforts to achieve Zero Hunger by 2030. Similarly, Shimelash (2023), noted that war and violent conflict inflict severe physical, social, and psychological consequences on affected populations. Furthermore, Manna (2026), emphasized that regional conflict systems are complex, involving multiple actors, territorial disputes, and structural factors that sustain instability.

### **C. Conflict in the African Context**

Conflicts in Africa are shaped by historical, political, and socio-economic factors, including colonial legacies, ethnic fragmentation, weak governance, and economic inequality (Chanda et al., 2023). Olanrewaju et al. (2020), in a comparative analysis of African conflicts, argued that violence across the continent is often linked to competition over natural resources, religious differences,

poverty, and environmental stressors such as drought. In fragile states such as Somalia, Adawe et al. (2025), demonstrated that limited access to mental health services increases psychosocial vulnerability among conflict-affected populations. Eshiet et al. (2025), in a study on conflict-induced displacement in Africa, found that prolonged violence frequently results in large-scale displacement and destruction of livelihoods. Furthermore, Jabal and Fox (2025), through research conducted in Ghana, revealed that children exposed to violent conflicts experience severe psychological distress, disrupted education, and weakened coping capacities.

#### **D. Conflict in Nigeria**

Nigeria has experienced persistent and multidimensional conflicts since independence. Scholars attribute these conflicts to poor governance, socio-economic inequality, unemployment, religious tensions, and competition over resources (Folorunsho & Samuel, 2025). Similarly, Adesina, Adesanya, and Olufadewa (2020), noted that conflict in Nigeria varies across regions, with the North Central zone largely driven by farmer-herder and ethno-religious tensions, while the South-South faces insecurity linked to oil-related environmental degradation, separatist agitations, unemployment, and criminal activities such as militancy and pipeline vandalism. Additionally, Obikwelu (2025), in a historical analysis of Nigeria's post-colonial state formation, argued that colonial administrative structures institutionalized ethnic divisions and uneven development, thereby resulting in violence, conflict, social fragmentation, and developmental setbacks. Consequently, Umesi (2022), Empirical evidence further indicates that conflicts in Nigeria have generated severe humanitarian consequences, including displacement, destruction of infrastructure, and psychosocial trauma among affected populations.

#### **E. Perspectives of Conflict in North East Nigeria**

The North East region of Nigeria remains one of the country's most conflict-affected areas due to the Boko Haram insurgency and its splinter factions. Since the late 2000s, the insurgency has caused widespread violence, displacement, and destruction across Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa States (Zenn, 2021). Adeodu et al. (2024), in a study on radicalization in Northern Nigeria, identified poverty, youth unemployment, political marginalization, and weak governance as major drivers of recruitment into insurgent groups. Similarly, Agbormbai (2021), states that civilians exposed to the insurgency frequently experience killings, abductions, sexual violence, and repeated displacement, resulting in long-term psychological trauma and social dislocation.

From a psychosocial perspective, the conflict has disrupted traditional family systems, communal support networks, and coping mechanisms. Empirical studies conducted by various scholars indicate that women and children remain particularly vulnerable due to increased exposure to exploitation, stigma, and gender-based violence (Taru et al., 2018). In a separate study, Abiama et al. (2022), further assert high prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal among survivors or victims of the insurgency such as internally displaced persons.

#### **F. Role of Social Workers in Delivering Psychosocial Support to Conflict Survivors in North East Nigeria**

Social workers in North-East Nigeria play a critical role in providing psychosocial support to survivors of conflict through counselling, advocacy, group therapy, community mobilization, and peacebuilding initiatives (Okoye, 2018). Adetola and Olawale (2025), in an empirical study on post-conflict rehabilitation, found that social workers contribute significantly through trauma counselling, child protection, prevention of gender-based violence, family reunification, and livelihood support. Similarly, Kolade et al. (2022), demonstrated that psychosocial interventions often extend beyond emotional support to include social and economic reintegration of displaced populations.

Within Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) frameworks, Amedari (2020), through a systematic review of interventions for internally displaced persons, identified social workers as central actors in addressing both pre-existing and conflict-induced mental health conditions.

Specialized trauma-responsive interventions have also emerged in response to the realities of conflict in North-East Nigeria. Vandi (2023), for example, developed integrative trauma counselling approaches for women survivors of Boko Haram insurgency in Adamawa State. In

#### **G. Effectiveness of Social Work Psychosocial Support to Conflict Survivors in North East Nigeria**

Accordingly, Kano and Tukur (2021), in a study of psychosocial interventions in conflict settings, found that social workers provide both emotional and practical support that strengthens survivors' coping capacities. Ventevogel and Whitney (2023), further highlighted the effectiveness of holistic community-based and clinical care in addressing emotional distress and trauma among displaced populations. Similarly, Amadasun (2020) emphasized the effective role of social workers in humanitarian response and protection of vulnerable populations affected by violence and displacement. Additionally, in North Eastern Nigeria, Margaret (2025), study highlights that social work training particularly in trauma-informed care, conflict resolution, and community-based interventions has a significant impact on reintegration and psychosocial recovery in rural communities affected by insurgency. Conversely, Umesi (2022), further observed that collaboration among NGOs, community leaders, and local authorities enhances the effectiveness and reach of psychosocial interventions in conflict-affected communities.

#### **H. Challenges Faced by Social Workers in Delivering Psychosocial Support to Survivors of Conflict in North East Nigeria**

Despite their significant contributions, social workers in North-East Nigeria face numerous challenges in delivering effective psychosocial support. Adebayo and Akinyemi (2021), stated that many social workers migrate out of the country in search of better opportunities due to inadequate funding or poor welfare conditions and unfavorable treatment of employees by the government. Similarly, Okonkwo (2025), in a study on social work practice in crisis environments, found that occupational stress, weak institutional frameworks, and inadequate professional development opportunities limit effective intervention. Furthermore, Scholars argued that the absence of strong legal and institutional recognition weakens the professional authority of social workers and restricts their influence in policy implementation and crisis response (Agwu et al., 2022). Research conducted by Ratcliff (2024), pointed out that social workers often provide services with compassion and empathy while working under demanding conditions that may lead to burnout during their careers. The study further noted that burnout can negatively affect social workers, the people they serve, their families, and their professional careers.

#### **I. Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on Structural Functionalism Theory, developed by Émile Durkheim (1893) and later advanced by Talcott Parsons (1951). The theory views society as a system of interrelated parts that work together to maintain stability and social order. When one part of the system is disrupted, it affects the functioning of the whole society. In the context of North East Nigeria, armed conflict represents a major disruption that weakens social institutions such as families, communities, and traditional support systems, leading to psychological distress, displacement, and breakdown of social cohesion among survivors.

In application to this study, social workers are understood as key actors within the social welfare system who help restore balance in society through psychosocial support interventions. Activities such as counselling, group therapy, community mobilisation, and peacebuilding initiatives function to address both individual trauma and collective social disintegration. While counselling supports emotional recovery at the individual level, group and community-based interventions help rebuild trust, strengthen relationships, and promote reintegration. However, the effectiveness of these interventions depends on the strength of supporting institutions, as challenges such as insecurity,

inadequate funding, and weak institutional coordination limit the ability of social workers to fully restore social stability.

### III. Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach using a phenomenological design to explore the activities of social workers in delivering psychosocial support to survivors of conflict in North East Nigeria. Thirteen informants were purposively selected, comprising four professional social workers, three community leaders, and six conflict survivors. Snowball sampling was employed to identify survivors with direct experience of psychosocial interventions.

Data was collected through semi-structured face to face interviews, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and themes through systematic coding and synthesis. To ensure trustworthiness, strategies such as member checking, triangulation, and external auditing were applied. Ethical standards were upheld through informed consent, the use of pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality, and participants' right to review their interview transcripts.

### IV. Results and Discussion

The study presented the following themes and sub-themes, which are derived from the primary data collected through semi structured interviews with informants.

**Table 1: Emerging themes and sub-themes**

| S/N | Theme                                 | Sub-theme                                                                                                                                                |
|-----|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| (1) | Activities of Social Worker           | (1) Individual Counseling<br>(2) Group Therapy<br>(3) Community Mobilization<br>(4) Peacebuilding Initiatives                                            |
| (2) | Effectiveness of Psychosocial Support | (1) Emotional Recovery<br>(2) Social Reintegration<br>(3) Coping Strategies                                                                              |
| (3) | Challenges Faced by Social Workers    | (1) Limited Funding<br>(2) Insecurity and Cultural Barriers<br>(3) Inadequate Professional Training<br>(4) High Caseloads and Poor Institutional Support |

This systematic categorization and thematic analysis provide a structured framework for understanding and interpreting the key insights derived from the interview data. Each main category encapsulates overarching themes, further broken down into specific sub-themes, facilitating a comprehensive exploration of the research questions.

#### A. Activities of Social Workers

The results demonstrated that social workers in North-East Nigeria undertake multiple activities to provide psychosocial support to survivors of conflict. These activities include individual counselling, group therapy, community mobilization, and peacebuilding initiatives aimed at helping survivors manage trauma and rebuild social cohesion. Informants highlighted that counselling assists survivors in coping with grief, anxiety, depression, and emotional distress by providing a supportive environment for emotional expression, while group therapy promotes peer support, social interaction, and collective coping strategies. Community mobilization and peacebuilding activities, including dialogue forums, reconciliation programmes, and sensitisation initiatives, were also reported to foster

trust, strengthen relationships, and promote reintegration within conflict-affected communities. To corroborate this perspective, informants I, III and VII said:

*“Social workers engage survivors through one-on-one counseling and group sessions, which allows them to share experiences, receive emotional support, and rebuild connections. They also organize community forums to mediate disputes and promote reconciliation, which strengthens social cohesion and communal trust.”*

To validate this, informant XI added:

*“Through counseling sessions, I learned strategies to manage my anxiety and communicate better with neighbours who were affected by the conflict. Group discussions made me feel less isolated and helped me rebuild my social networks.”*

Another informants X and XII further explained:

*“From our experiences as survivors, social workers supported us through counselling and community programmes that helped rebuild trust within the community. We were encouraged to share our experiences, and over time people began to accept us again, making it easier to participate in community activities without fear or stigma.”*

## **B. Effectiveness of Psychosocial Support Provided by Social workers to Survivors of Conflict**

The findings revealed that the psychosocial interventions provided by social workers were effective in improving the emotional well-being and social integration of survivors of conflicts. Informants reported reduced trauma-related symptoms, improved coping strategies, and increased engagement in community activities. Informants highlighted that survivors developed confidence, resilience, and the ability to participate actively in communal life. For instance, informant VI added:

*“I commend the efforts of social workers because many survivors, as a result of their interventions, who were previously withdrawn and emotionally distressed, have become more active in community life. They now show improved confidence and are able to share their experiences without fear, which has greatly enhanced their recovery process.”*

Validating this view, informant II explained:

*“Our counseling and support group programs have helped survivors regain emotional stability, manage stress, and rebuild relationships within the community. The programs provide practical tools for coping and have fostered a sense of belonging among participants.”*

Similarly, informants III, IV, VIII, and IX noted:

*“Survivors are now better able to interact with neighbours, participate in community projects, and support each other emotionally. The structured approach of counseling, combined with group discussions, has strengthened their resilience and improved social harmony in the community.”*

Another informant V, XIII further stated:

*“The interventions have not only reduced emotional distress but also restored hope among survivors. Through continuous engagement with social workers, they have learned coping skills that help them manage trauma and reintegrate effectively into society.”*

## **C. Challenges Encountered by Social Workers in Providing Psychosocial Supports to Survivors of Conflict**

Despite the positive impact of their interventions, social workers face significant challenges in delivering psychosocial support. The major obstacles include limited funding, insufficient professional

training, insecurity in conflict-prone areas, cultural barriers, and high caseloads. Accordingly, three informants I, III and IV emphasized that ongoing communal tensions, lack of coordination with other agencies, and weak institutional support further constrain their ability to provide sustained and effective psychosocial services. Commenting this, informant IV, V and VII stated:

*“Sometimes, survivors are hesitant to engage due to cultural beliefs or fear of stigmatization. Combined with limited resources and high numbers of clients, it is challenging to provide individualized support to all in need. In many cases, these factors also limit the depth and continuity of the support.”*

Informant I added:

*“Working in insecure environments makes it difficult to consistently reach survivors. Despite our efforts, funding limitations and inadequate professional development restrict the scope and sustainability of our programs. At times, insecurity forces us to suspend activities, which disrupts continuity of care and affects trust with survivors.”*

Informants II and VI further explained:

*“High caseloads and limited staff capacity make it difficult to give each survivor adequate attention. We often have to prioritize urgent cases, which means some individuals do not receive the level of support they need. This imbalance affects the overall effectiveness of psychosocial interventions.”*

Informants III also noted:

*“Cultural barriers and stigma remain major challenges in our work. Some community members still see psychosocial support as unnecessary or shameful, which discourages survivors from participating fully in counselling and group sessions. This reduces the impact of our interventions and slows down recovery processes.”*

#### **D. Discussion of the Findings**

##### **(a) What are the activities carried out by social workers in delivering psychosocial support to survivors of conflict in North-East Nigeria?**

The findings revealed that social workers provide psychosocial support to survivors of conflict in North East Nigeria through individual counselling, group therapy, community mobilization, and peacebuilding initiatives. Individual counselling helps survivors manage trauma, grief, anxiety, and emotional distress in a safe environment, while group therapy promotes shared experiences, peer support, and collective coping strategies. In addition, community mobilization and peacebuilding activities such as dialogue forums, reconciliation programmes, and cultural sensitisation strengthen trust, social cohesion, and reintegration in conflict-affected communities.

These findings align with the work of Ekpo (2025), who observed that social workers play a significant role in mitigating the psychological and social consequences of armed conflict through structured psychosocial interventions. Similarly, Kagee (2018), indicated that social workers in conflict settings provide psychosocial support, trauma care, counselling, community mobilisation, rehabilitation, social reintegration, and support for displaced populations. Supporting these, Adegbite (2024), revealed that 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.

##### **(b) How effective are the psychosocial support interventions provided by social workers in meeting the psychological and social needs of survivors of conflict in North East Nigeria?**

The results showed that psychosocial interventions improved survivors' emotional well-being and social integration, reducing trauma symptoms and strengthening coping strategies. Survivors regained confidence and resilience, participated more in community life, and benefited from

counseling and support groups that included relaxation exercises, role-playing, and peer mentoring, which helped them manage stress and rebuild relationships.

These findings corroborate with the results of previous study conducted by Bosqui and Marshoud (2018), which stated that structured psychosocial interventions improve emotional stability, coping capacity, trauma recovery, cognitive restructuring, and caregiver relationships among adolescents affected by war and armed conflict. Andersen et al. (2022), observed that psychosocial support interventions in conflict-affected communities help reduce psychological distress and improve daily functioning among victims of violence.

### **(c) What challenges do social workers face in delivering psychosocial support to survivors of conflict in North East Nigeria?**

The study found that social workers face substantial challenges in delivering effective psychosocial support. Key obstacles identified include limited funding, insufficient professional training, insecurity in conflict-prone areas, cultural barriers, and high caseloads. Informants reported that survivors sometimes hesitate to engage in therapy due to cultural beliefs, fear of stigmatization, or community resistance. Moreover, social workers highlighted that insecurity, and logistical constraints often prevent consistent program delivery.

These challenges are consistent with findings from Elsana et al. (2023), who observed that psychosocial support in conflict zones is often hindered by insufficient resources, inadequate training, and security risks. Similarly, Gruner et al. (2020), reported that cultural norms, traditions, and mental health stigma can hinder participation in psychosocial interventions, thereby reducing the effectiveness of therapeutic support among conflict-affected populations. Supporting these results, previous study indicates that despite the critical role play by social workers, 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 Northern Nigeria (Aliyu & Musa, 2018).

## **V. Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study examined the role of social workers in delivering psychosocial support to survivors of conflict in North-East Nigeria. The study concludes that social workers play a vital role in addressing the psychological, emotional, and social consequences of conflict through interventions such as individual counselling, group therapy, community mobilisation, and peacebuilding initiatives. These interventions significantly contribute to emotional recovery, improved coping mechanisms, and the social reintegration of survivors within affected communities. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these efforts is constrained by persistent challenges, including insecurity, limited funding, cultural barriers, high caseloads, and weak institutional support systems. The findings underscore that although social work interventions remain essential in supporting conflict-affected populations, their impact is often limited by structural and operational constraints within the service delivery system.

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- i. Government and relevant humanitarian agencies should increase funding support for psychosocial programmes targeting conflict-affected populations to enhance service delivery and sustainability.
- ii. Security measures should be strengthened in conflict-prone areas to ensure safe and continuous access for social workers and service providers.
- iii. Regular training and capacity-building programmes should be organized to equip social workers with updated skills in trauma-informed and culturally sensitive interventions.
- iv. Institutional frameworks for social work practice should be strengthened to improve coordination, professional recognition, and effective service delivery.
- v. Community sensitisation programmes should be intensified to reduce stigma, cultural resistance, and improve acceptance of psychosocial support services.

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