

Developing Entrepreneurial Strategy as Trauma Therapy for Displaced Boko Haram Female Victims in Northeastern Nigeria

Chinwe Beneditte Ogbonna

*Research Training Group 2571 "Empires: Dynamic Change, Temporality, and Post-Imperial Orders,
University of Freiburg, Germany
chinwe.ogbonna@grk2571.uni-freiburg.de*

Abstract: Displacement has become endemic in the ongoing conflict affecting northeastern Nigeria, with women and girls disproportionately impacted by the resulting humanitarian crisis. Many reside in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps, such as the Bakassi camp in Maiduguri, where they struggle with psychological trauma, social exclusion, and economic hardship. This research explores the coping mechanisms employed by displaced women and highlights the potential therapeutic benefits of entrepreneurial strategies in facilitating trauma recovery and psychosocial empowerment. The paper argues that while government efforts to hastily return IDPs to their original communities may appear to offer a solution, they often create additional challenges. Most of these women lack the necessary skills and support to manage mental health concerns or secure sustainable livelihoods upon return. Without carefully designed economic empowerment programs that engage high-risk youth in ways that reflect their interests and trauma-related needs, reintegration may inadvertently increase their vulnerability. Government agencies, NGOs, and researchers have paid insufficient attention to the adaptive strategies these women have developed through displacement. Using a qualitative research approach, the study draws on focus group discussions and interviews with female IDPs in Bakassi Camp. Findings reveal that entrepreneurial activities tailored to the women's capacities and aspirations can serve as effective trauma therapy, tools for empowerment, and participatory pathways to reintegration. The paper concludes by advocating for culturally sensitive, skill-based entrepreneurial mentoring programs as essential components of any long-term solution for women who suffer from trauma caused by insurgency.

Keywords: Displacement, Trauma, Coping Strategies, Entrepreneurship, IDPs, Boko Haram, Mental Health, Reintegration

Introduction

The long-running Boko Haram insurgency in Northeast Nigeria has precipitated one of the worst humanitarian crises in sub-Saharan Africa, uprooting more than two million people in the northeastern Nigeria, most of them women and children. Some of the worst affected are young girls who have been gang raped, lost family and been rejected by their communities. Many of these women currently live in IDP camps or settlements which are insecure, have poor psychosocial support and little access to education as well as sustainable livelihoods. Humanitarian interventions provide much leading support, but do not manage to penetrate the deeper trauma and empowerment needs of these women.

This paper suggests a new framing for addressing the needs of displaced women: entrepreneurship as trauma therapy. Based on the lived experiences of displaced women living in IDP camps in Maiduguri, Borno State, this article examines how engagement with entrepreneurship provides not only a medium for economic survival but also an avenue for meaningful restoration of agency, dignity and managing psycho-social recovery. By presenting entrepreneurship as a coping and sociological empowerment mechanism, this research attempts to drive it into the mainstream of trauma-informed interventions in post-conflict recovery.

Using Social Exclusion Theory and Sociological Entrepreneurship Theory, we study how entrepreneurial activities may respond to the multiple dimensions of exclusion that

dispossessed women experience economically, socially and emotionally. It also critically questions the potential of identity reconstruction and resilience building in this regard, focusing especially on women who are victims twice over as a result of both gender and displacement.

By drawing attention to the nexus of trauma recovery and economic agency, the article makes an argument for reimagining aid modalities in humanitarian contexts. And instead of viewing displaced women as passive victims, this approach focuses on their ability to innovate, adapt and rebuild even in the most extreme circumstances. The end game is to elevate entrepreneurial strategy into a livelihood enabling and rehabilitative by showing its power in terms of healing and reintegration.

Theoretical Framework

This paper builds on two related theoretical frameworks: Social Exclusion Theory and Sociological Entrepreneurship Theory. Collectively, they offer a multi-faceted lens through which to analyse the structural inequity of displaced women and the empowering possibilities that entrepreneurship can channel in efforts for both recovery and reintegration.

Social Exclusion Theory

In line with this call, Social Exclusion Theory offers a lens that allows understanding how individuals or people are excluded from rights, resources and opportunities essential to human development. Displaced women often face a triple layer of exclusion, economic impoverishment, mental stigma, and social isolation as survivors of conflict-related trauma. These exclusions are not only a consequence of poverty, but are also built on gender norms, cultural beliefs and institutional gaps that make these women invisible in policy and practice. And for those displaced by Boko Haram, social exclusion plays out in no access to formal education, health care, decent shelter and employment. Many face rejection in their communities, labelled as ex “wives” or “accomplices” of insurgents and bearing psychological wounds that only deepen their exclusion. The theoretical approach of Social Exclusion Theory contextualises women’s lived experiences within larger systems that promote inequality and counter reintegration.

Sociological Entrepreneurship Theory

If traditional approaches to entrepreneurship tend to focus on profit and market-based processes, Sociological Entrepreneurship Theory adopts a more holistic approach, examining the social roles of entrepreneurs, especially among those marginalized in society. It highlights how start-ups can become, for identity rebuilding, social inclusion and power re-elaboration. This is particularly pertinent in conflict zones where entrepreneurship becomes more than a source of income, it becomes a matter of resistance, agency and survival. “Through gaining experience in small businesses like tailoring, soap manufacture, processing food products, many displaced women living in IDP camps can re-find their identity and purpose in life by creating a network of friendly relations.” These initiatives also break the stereotype of displaced women solely as passive beneficiaries of aid, showing that they can create ingenious solutions and bounce back. Using these two theoretical frames concurrently, this paper emphasizes the need to understand entrepreneurship as not just an economic intervention but as a socially transformative process that counteracts the emotional, psychological and structural aspects of post-conflict trauma.

Problem Statement and Research Focus

After years of humanitarian support in northeastern Nigeria, including for forcibly and internally displaced women especially those who survived violent extremist insurgency, the life experiences have played out to continue embodying deep-rooted and institutionalised marginalisation, anguish and dereliction. Some of these women, following their abduction, abuse and displacement had

been temporarily accommodated in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) Camps at Maiduguri and environs. But instead of being safe spaces for recovery and reintegration, the camps often only reinforced cycles of dependency, marginalization, and psychological distress.

Recently, the Borno State Government controversially shutdown some IDP camps and ‘forcefully’ returned displaced persons to their alleged ancestral communities. Many women have been returned not to homes and sustainable livelihoods, but to drained and insecure villages robbed of infrastructure, social networks and economic prospects. The failure to implement trauma-informed reintegration strategies, coupled with the sudden cessation of humanitarian support, has left these women vulnerable to perpetuated violence, poverty and social exclusion.

Just as significantly, such forced returns underscore an enormous gap in Nigeria’s post-conflict recovery strategy: the absence of sustainable, empowering alternatives for displaced women to rebuild their lives with dignity. As aid efforts have concentrated on feeding, providing temporary shelter and a veneer of vocational training that ignores the psychological and economic reality faced by survivors, I am pretty sure that if we had any more status quo support, our brokenness will run us even deeper into hell.

This paper addresses that absence by examining the transformative potential of entrepreneurial strategy as a way of coping and engaging in trauma therapy. The research asks:

1. How can entrepreneurship work not only as an income-generating activity but as a psychosocial healing process for displaced women?
2. In what ways can entrepreneurship challenge the structural exclusions that define displacement and forced return?

By qualitatively examining the experiences of displaced women in Maiduguri and their post-camp trajectories, this study seeks to bring the notion of entrepreneurial agency forward as a road toward empowerment, resilient action and self-led recovery in settings where the resources offered by both the state and humanitarian efforts are often insufficient.

Methodology

This paper employs a feminist and trauma-informed qualitative research design to understand the lived experiences, resiliency strategies and agency of displaced women who are victims of challenges in Boko Haram affected communities. The study is based on fieldwork at the Bakassi IDP camp located in Maiduguri, Borno State, where women who were internally displaced by the conflict found temporary refuge before being returned to their places of residence prior to forced displacement.

In-depth interviews and FGDs with IDP women who were formerly displaced to or from the camp after our study period comprised most of the data. The interviews were an occasion for respondents to recount trauma, displacement, exploitation and resilience. The FGDs facilitated communal deliberations and elicited common categories related to identity, marginalization, livelihood and recovery. Purposeful sampling was applied, where participants were purposefully selected based on their willingness to participate, being engaged in entrepreneurship activities formally or informally, and the heterogeneity of their displacement experiences. Overall, more than 30 participants were involved as part of both approaches and additional information from key informants was obtained using interviews with camp administrators, NGO staff and local women leaders.

To meet ethical requirements, all participants provided written informed consent, and their identity was anonymized. The study was performed respectfully of the mental status of participants, many of whom were severely traumatized survivors. Where appropriate, interviews were carried out in Hausa and Kanuri by the researchers and interpreted by trained female interpreters who were familiar with the camp life.

The data were also subjected to thematic content analysis to determine common trends, symbolic expression and coping narratives across interviews and FGDs. Analysis focused particularly on claims of self-sufficiency, business aspiration and emotional restoration, which it then linked to wider sociological understandings of social exclusion and entrepreneurialism. Locating women's voices at the centre and allowing their testimonies to direct, not just the analysis of data, but the development of theoretical and methodological strategies, ensures that research does not only talk about them but with and for them. This protocol reflects both the authors' broader aim in the paper to conceptualize entrepreneurship as a profoundly human and transformative reaction to trauma and our methodological choices.

Findings and Analysis

The stories from displaced women in Bakassi IDP Camp and host communities further indicate a complex convergence of trauma, alienation, resilience and unexplored capability. A total of four central themes were derived, each highlighting different aspects related to how entrepreneurship could be or is failing as a form of trauma work and empowerment.

Emotional Pain and Identity Deprivation

According to one of the respondents, she said that "as a result of abduction, sexual violence, displacement and the loss of children and husbands, most of the victims experienced severe psychological distress". Those traumas were only compounded in camp life, where overcrowding and lack of privacy as well as constant dependency stripped them of their sense of self. Some called themselves "invisible," others said they felt "useless" or "half-alive." The trauma was not just emotional, but existential; many found it difficult to find themselves in a future beyond survival. Anyone who has a career of any kind in entrepreneurship, no matter how small was mentioned over and over as a game changer. To the contrary: One participant who started frying bean cakes (akara) in a communal corner of the camp called it her "medicine." In her words, "*It was the first time I felt like I had a reason to wake up again.*" For so many, producing something, whether it was food, clothing or crafts created a space for self-healing and a sliver of an answer to identity formation.

Skill Acquisition Without Empowerment

There were several vocational trainings conducted by NGOs in Bakassi IDP Camp, including tailoring, cap-making and mat-weaving, pastries, making soap and other skills. But, among the women, one refrain kept surfacing: They didn't have support to turn these skills into livelihoods. Although the training sessions sounded promising, they seldom came with empowerment goodies like starter-kits, inputs or cash. "*They taught me how to sew, but left me with nothing. I became a tailor with no needle.*" This point raises a significant shortcoming of many aid efforts when all is said and done, training without empowering becomes a premium brand of forsaking. The emotional fuel that the new skill provides pales in comparison to the cold, cruel reality of navigating poverty and uncertainty without few tools at your disposal. In this case, entrepreneurship is not just a rational calculation, it also carries an emotional promise that, when broken, inspires despair.

Informal Economies of Resistance and Recovery

In a system that overlooked them, some women took matters into their own hands—getting together to start micro-enterprises with nothing more than scraps of material and pooled tools, or if they were lucky, borrowed money. These activities varied from hawking of food stuffs provided by NGOs to bead-making, transactional sex and petty trading. Economically marginal as these enterprises were, they were socially subversive. They allowed the women to network with each other, share resources, and purpose.

Here, entrepreneurship was a form of resistance to being dependent, invisible, and socially dead. It was a counter-story to victimhood as displaced women were not passive victims but active agents of recovery. As one stated proudly, *“People began to call me ‘Mama Akamu’... not Boko Haram wife.* This retrieval of social identity was as therapeutic as any session.

Structural Injustice and Exclusion in the Gendered Sense

The overarching one is the systemic injustice suffered by displaced women. Patriarchal norms, institutional indifference and donor fatigue conspire to push them even further to the margins. Entrepreneurship, too, unsupported as it is, becomes a site of contestation where women must navigate unsafe environments, power asymmetries and institutional indifference. This recent push of IDP’s back to abandoned underdeveloped ancestral settlements without proper re-integration has made this a grim reality. Some of the women interviewed described sentiments of fear, insecurity and economic helplessness. *“They took us back to our village like goats, but there is no water, no school, no market or farmland for us to farm, only bush and memory,”* as recounted by one respondent. This underscores the importance of trauma-informed economic strategies that go beyond resettlement. It means that entrepreneurship isn’t a coping strategy; it is a lifeline. But it will be successful only if the critical math that’s good for our heads gets some support, not just teaching. The women’s narratives make clear that this support can turn entrepreneurship into a form of emotional recovery, social reintegration and political visibility.

Discussion

The results of this study highlight the need now, more than ever, to shift away from a charity-based approach to post-conflict humanitarian action and instead focus on programs that offer a sustainable empowerment for survivors. Central to this reframing is the realization that entrepreneurship is both a psychosocial and structural intervention for displaced women who have survived the multiple forms of violence, displacement, and social estrangement. From the perspective of Social Exclusion Theory, it is glaring that the social exclusion of objectified displaced women goes beyond material deprivation. It is symbolic, institutional and emotional exclusion that they experience in their day-to-day lives from families and communities rejecting them through scarce access to meaningful livelihoods and post-training support. Voices, suffering and labour aren’t even seen by the state or humanitarian agencies. Vocational training without material empowerment is averse not a paradigm change: when vocational skills are given in the absence of production machinery, they can only amount to tokenism rather than transformation.

Additionally, Sociological Entrepreneurship Theory provides an important antinarrative. It demonstrates how acts of entrepreneurship, however small they might be, can be modes of resistance, self-definition and healing. These women are not mere recipients of conflict; they are enterprising actors in the rebuilding of their lives, dignity and identity. The symbolic conversion from “Boko Haram wife” to “Mama Akamu”, represents more than just an economic transition, which mirrors the social and psychological re-entry into a globe that spat them out.

However, the study also cautions against romanticizing entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurial tactics, without solid infrastructure that facilitates safe environments and capital as well as further processes being backed up by reality, allude to a half-fulfilled promise to disillusion rather than empower. This is even more of a concern following recent forced return efforts by the Borno State Government, where women were returned from IDP camps to destroy ancestral villages in the absence of guarantees that these returnees would remain safe and have access to adequate resources.

Consequently, it is argued in this paper for a trauma-informed entrepreneurship model, one which recognizes the wounds of emotional and material conflict-responding institutions and offers tangible tools for change. This process would have organically redirected

humanitarian work from short-term aid to long-term empowerment, and from externally imposed interventions to those crafted by survivors.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The research has sought to understand the life courses of displaced women who are victims/survivors of Boko Haram insurgents and the extent to which entrepreneurship is not only a form of economic rehabilitation but also a therapeutic recovery mechanism in the transformational journey from trauma. A more thorough fieldwork at the Bakassi IDP Camp showed that, though as resistant and resourceful they may be, these women are perpetually caught up in cycles of exclusion, neglect and abandonment, especially with the evacuation of the IDP camps lately and their relocation to poorly serviced ancestral homelands. Although NGOs had provided them with vocational training, for most of these women, there were no resources, either material or financial, to apply their skills. Entrepreneurship, in this regard, became a broken promise, one that held out hope but not the structure for it to last. However, in instances where displaced women could begin micro-enterprises, the effect was more than financial; it also enabled dignity, restored identity, and provided emotional healing.

Thus, this article concludes that entrepreneurship strategy grounded in trauma-informed practice and driven by empirically based empowerment instruments can provide a realistic and profoundly human response to the post-conflict recovery needs of displaced women. But this is a possibility that can never be manifested without deliberate, participatory and survivor-controlled support systems.

Recommendations

Employ a Trauma-Informed Approach in Livelihoods Programming

Humanitarian and development agencies need to design interventions that acknowledge the psychological wounds of displacement. That means adding mental health support into programs focused on economic empowerment.

Integrate Vocational Training with Instant Empowerment Packages

They should then be provided with practical support perhaps in the form of startup kits, supplies, seed grants or microloans to help them put that knowledge into practice.

Support Survivor-Led Initiatives

Displaced women need to be not just recipients of aid, but drivers and co-creators of programs that affect them. It is essential they use their voice and local expertise to design contextualised solutions.

Ensure Provision of Sustainable Reintegration Support for Returnees

Government-sponsored relocation policies should invest in infrastructure, markets, security and psychosocial support to prevent re-traumatization of women sent back to vulnerable areas.

Enhance NGOs' Monitoring and Evaluation Interventions

Donor agencies ought to build in monitoring components of the impact of livelihood programs post-training, so that women aren't being left at the halfway turn on empowerment.

Promote Research and policy dialogue on Gendered Displacement

Greater academic and policy attention is needed to consider these gendered dimensions of displacement, with an emphasis on how economic empowerment intersects with healing, identity, and long-term resilience.

References

- Al-Dajani, H., & Marlow, S. (2013). Empowerment and entrepreneurship: A theoretical framework. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour & Research*, 19(5), 503–524. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEER-10-2011-0138>
- Amnesty International. (2015). *“Our job is to shoot, slaughter and kill”: Boko Haram’s reign of terror in northeast Nigeria*. Amnesty International Publications.
- Cohen, R. (2000). *Reintegrating refugees and internally displaced women*. Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/on-the-record/reintegrating-refugees-and-internally-displaced-women/>
- Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM). (2021). *Nigeria — Displacement report 36*. <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/nigeria-%E2%80%94-displacement-report-36-may-2021>
- International Labour Organization (ILO), & United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2017). *Guide to market-based livelihood interventions for refugees*. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---emp_ent/---ifp_seed/documents/publication/wcms_550036.pdf
- Ismail, O., & Nte, N. D. (2016). Boko Haram and the Nigerian state: On a terrorist's trail. *African Security Review*, 25(2), 119–132.
- Jacobsen, K. (2002). *Can refugees benefit the state? Refugee resources and African state building*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women’s empowerment. *Development and Change*, 30(3), 435–464.
- Kett, M. (2005). Displaced populations and long-term humanitarian assistance. *BMJ*, 331(7508), 98–100. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.331.7508.98>
- Martin, S., et al. (2017). *Environmental resource management in refugee camps and surrounding areas: Lessons learned and best practices*. Georgetown University.
- Meagher, K. (2010). *Identity economics: Social networks and the informal economy in Nigeria*. James Currey.
- Oluwatobi, S., Afolabi, A., & Ibekwe, C. (2021). Entrepreneurship as a tool for economic recovery in conflict-affected communities. *Journal of African Development*, 23(4), 101–118.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. M. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Sage Publications.
- United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), International Organization for Migration (IOM), & United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2018). *Policy guide on entrepreneurship for migrants and refugees*. <https://unctad.org/publication/policy-guide-entrepreneurship-migrants-and-refugees>
- UN Women. (2018). *Turning promises into action: Gender equality in the 2030 agenda for sustainable development*. United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.
- World Bank. (2020). *Supporting displaced women in fragile contexts: A global framework*. World Bank Publications.