

Are They Victims of COVID-19? The livelihood and quandaries of sex workers in the New Kuchingoro camp for internally displaced people in Abuja, Nigeria

Seun Bamidele

Abstract

In this paper, I examine the challenges faced by sex workers in the New Kuchingoro camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs) due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Previous studies on sex workers' activities in the camp have underscored their hardships, distress, and deprivation, as well as their general inability to cope with COVID-19. Through my research, I reveal that the government and other agencies failed to support sex workers' struggle to adequately provide for themselves and their families. I also explore the different strategies they employed in their efforts to survive during this period of hardship, which demonstrated their resilience.

Keywords: livelihood, sex workers, internally displaced people, internally displaced people's camps, Nigeria

Suggested citation: S Bamidele, 'Are They Victims of COVID-19? The livelihood and quandaries of sex workers in the New Kuchingoro camp for internally displaced people in Abuja, Nigeria', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 21, 2023, pp. 87-104, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201223216>

Introduction

People often assume that we want to improve living conditions in the camp through humanitarian aid, such as access to clean water. However, what we truly desire is to return to our homes and live in a situation where we can earn a living and not have to depend on aid.

This statement was made by one of the women leaders during a meeting with the women's association in the New Kuchingoro camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Abuja, Nigeria. She indicated that she not only wished to return to her home but also to live in a self-sustaining environment. I had the privilege of attending this meeting during my fieldwork research on internally displaced women (IDWs).

Since 2009, the north-eastern region of Nigeria has been ravaged by one Boko Haram assault after another, causing many inhabitants to flee from the affected areas to other states, including Abuja.¹ This insurgency led to the creation of various IDP camps, with housing ranging from tents or canopies to informal shelters within host communities, particularly in Abuja. The New Kuchingoro camp is one of many and the most significant, accommodating about 5,000 inhabitants from the Gwoza Local Government Area in Borno State.² Established in 2014, the camp began as an informal settlement but later evolved into a formalised camp, consisting of temporary scrap-material structures. Women comprised 78 per cent of the camp's population.³

The camp is located on privately-owned land within the business and residential district of New Kuchingoro in the Durumi area of Abuja. It was intended to serve as a temporary shelter for people fleeing from the politically and religiously motivated Boko Haram crisis. However, doubts were raised about the ability of these camps to provide adequate protection and care for the victims of the crisis due to their poor living conditions. Inhumane situations expose IDWs, in particular, to a range of threats, including overcrowding, inadequate shelter and sanitation facilities, limited livelihood options, gender-based violence, food insecurity, and health risks. Human Rights Watch reports that women in these camps suffer from limited access to food, water, and social services, as well as the constant threat of sexualised violence.⁴

¹ O Bamidele, 'Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) – A community security option: A comprehensive and proactive approach to counter-terrorism in Nigeria', *Journal of Deradicalization*, no. 7, 2016, pp. 124–144; S Bamidele, 'The Civilian Joint Task Force and the struggle against insurgency in Borno state, Nigeria', *African Conflict & Peacebuilding Review*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2017, pp. 85–98, <https://doi.org/10.2979/africonfpeacevi.7.2.04>.

² UNHCR, NHRC, and NEMA, *Protection Monitoring Report on IDP Sites in the Federal Capital Territory*, 2015.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ National Emergency Management Authority (NEMA), *Unpublished Bulletin*, NEMA, 2018; O Oladeji *et al.*, 'Sexual Violence-related Pregnancy among Internally Displaced Women in an Internally Displaced Persons Camp in Northeast Nigeria', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, vol. 36, issue 9–10, 2018, pp. 4758–4770, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260518792252>.

Moreover, before the emergence of the Boko Haram crisis in 2009, the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) and the National Commission for Refugees, Migrants, and Internally Displaced Persons (NCFRMI) were already responding to humanitarian crises in the country, including IDP camps in Abuja. Although responding to these crises was undoubtedly challenging for both agencies, given the severity of some of the events, they were increasingly tasked with managing displacement caused by natural disasters or violent conflicts. These agencies were responsible for providing humanitarian interventions and aid to IDPs in Abuja. However, in the context of the New Kuchingoro IDP camp, women often engaged in sex work out of desperation. They exchanged sexual services for food, cash, non-food items, or the freedom to move in and out of the camp, where there were no enclosures.⁵

Despite its growth in many African societies, sex work is still considered an aberration. Scholars across Africa, including Nigeria, have written about sex work as a vice and a threat to public health.⁶ During both normal and pandemic periods, sex workers were perceived as a source of disease, deviants, or helpless, weak women, and as liabilities to the household.⁷ Consequently, sex workers are often stigmatised, discriminated against, and subjected to various rights violations.

Before the pandemic, many sex workers had low incomes, struggled to make a living, and experienced high levels of stress, neglect, and deprivation.⁸ In some cases, they even experienced starvation, particularly when there was a lack of customers and their business was not profitable. Despite these challenges, sex workers remained resilient and found ways to cope with their circumstances.⁹

Several agencies have supported the resilience of sex workers by helping them find ways to diversify their activities and become more profitable in their endeavours.¹⁰ Furthermore, the pandemic, although worsening the socio-economic circumstances of sex workers living in IDP camps, also helped them

⁵ NCFRMI, 'IDPs Crisis in Nigeria', National Commission for Refugees and Migrants and IDPs, Unpublished paper, 2018; D J A Orendain and R Djalante, 'Ignored and Invisible: Internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the face of COVID-19 pandemic', *Sustainability Science*, issue 16, 2021, pp. 337–340, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-020-00848-0>.

⁶ M W Ross *et al.*, 'Occupational Health and Safety among Commercial Sex Workers', *Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment & Health*, vol. 38, issue 2, 2012, pp. 105–119, <https://doi.org/10.5271/sjweh.3184>; Orendain and Djalante.

⁷ Interview, 13 June 2020.

⁸ Orendain and Djalante.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

expand their businesses.¹¹

In this paper, I investigate the challenges sex workers faced living in the New Kuchingoro IDP camp in Nigeria, as they tried to earn a livelihood amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. I demonstrate how the lack of access to basic resources, as well as the insufficient physical, human, and financial capital required to sustain a livelihood, contributed to the worsening of their situation in the camp. I posit that the strategies and mechanisms used by sex workers to address the challenging conditions in the camp resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic were largely influenced by their previous experiences at home and their need for fundamental necessities, such as food, shelter, and clothing.

Methods

The data presented in this article was collected during three months of fieldwork between May and July 2020. While the study did not engage in an in-depth ethnographical examination, it produced extensive knowledge about the camp. I accessed the sex workers with the support of sex worker leaders in the IDP camp after I had explained the purpose of the research. I conducted interviews with fifteen sex workers, five case studies of sex workers, and three key informant interviews with NGO staff who are working on anti-trafficking and sex workers' rights and welfare. In the interviews with sex workers, questions revolved around their livelihoods, the challenges they faced during the pandemic, and their relationships with others in the IDP community. Noting that most of the sex workers frequent bars to meet with their customers, I also conducted six interviews with community members to obtain an additional perspective on the sex workers' living conditions and how they managed to sustain themselves during the COVID-19 pandemic. I conducted most of the interviews either in the camp or in the bars. While I conducted the interviews in English, I engaged the services of a Hausa interpreter for interviewees who could not express themselves in English. I triangulated the field data with information obtained from relevant scholarly literature, media articles, and reports from the Nigerian Sex Workers' Association.

To analyse the data, I used the sustainable livelihoods framework.¹² This framework needs to be explained in detail to understand its value in uncovering the livelihood challenges in the IDP camp and particularly the ways in which

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² R Chambers and G R Conway, *Sustainable Livelihoods: Practical concepts for the 21st century*, Discussion Paper 296, Institute of Development Studies, 1991; O Serrat, 'The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach', in O Serrat, *Knowledge Solutions: Tools, Methods, and Approaches to Drive Organizational Performance*, Asian Development Bank, Mandaluyong, 2017, pp. 21–26.

sex workers obtained social support to enhance their quality of life and manage trauma.

There are various approaches to understanding the sustainable livelihoods framework, but its fundamental component is social capital.¹³ This capital comprises social obligations or connections, although economic capital is at the root of all other forms of capital, and ultimately, every type of capital can be traced back to economic capital.¹⁴ Bourdieu's analysis offers a lens through which to examine the extent to which the social capital of the sex workers in the study enabled them to build networks and connections to access better livelihoods.¹⁵ Furthermore, Putnam's theory of social capital highlights the mobilising power of social networks as agents of coordinated action that enable the attainment of specific goals.¹⁶ Because individuals constitute groups and networks, they utilise social capital in three ways: bonding, bridging, and linking to capital.¹⁷

According to Serrat, livelihoods depend on the capabilities, activities, and assets of those who need to earn a living.¹⁸ Capital assets can be categorised as natural, physical, human, financial, and social. Examples of natural capital include water and land, whereas physical capital comprises basic infrastructure such as sanitation, housing, energy, and communication technology. Human capital refers to health, the ability to work and obtain skills; financial capital involves savings, credit, and debt; and social capital refers to networking, relationships, and group membership.¹⁹

Findings and Discussion

Challenges

Sex workers faced challenges related to their livelihood, personal life, and societal acceptance which I present below in more detail.

¹³ M Woolcock, 'Using Social Capital: Getting the social relations right in the theory and practice of economic development', *The World Bank Research Observer*, vol. 15, issue 2, 2000, pp. 225–249; R D Putnam, 'Social Capital: Measurement and consequences', *Canadian Journal of Policy Research*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2001, pp. 41–51; M Woolcock, *Using Social Capital: Getting the social relations right in the theory and practice of economic development*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2001.

¹⁴ Woolcock.

¹⁵ Putnam.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Woolcock.

¹⁸ Serrat.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Livelihood Challenges in the IDP Camp

The sex workers in the IDP camp faced various challenges such as insufficient access to humanitarian assistance, resulting in continued dependence on the Nigerian Sex Workers' Association (NSWA) and non-governmental agencies, whose support was also inadequate.

Despite their resilience, all the sex workers I interviewed looked back nostalgically on their lives before the crisis that led to taking residence in the camp. Especially after COVID-19, they also described their situations as inferior to their previous lives. Of particular concern was the loss of business, which would have brought in income for their needs. A young sex worker said:

If not because of the COVID-19 restrictions and the issue of social distance, I would be boasting of many customers now. My sex business was seriously booming before COVID-19, and now the business is just down because many of our sex customers have run away. They don't want to move near us because of COVID-19.... I have to pay for my rent and I have to buy clothes and also food.... If conditions were better at the border, I could have figured out how to help myself.²⁰

Another explained:

I have a lot of health challenges now and I have been going to the hospital but I cannot afford the money they are asking me to pay and drugs I am going to use. Before COVID-19, we really had enough money to pay them at the hospital, but now we do not have better access to better healthcare due to low numbers of sex customers travelling through the camp.... Although they're relatively inexpensive, I mean the hospital bills, but due to the COVID-19 situation, we cannot afford it.²¹

Sex workers acknowledged that engaging in sex work could lead to a better standard of living and a sustainable livelihood by using human capital with social capital to obtain physical and financial capital. However, the COVID-19 pandemic worsened the hardships in the camp and prevented them from working as they had in the past. During my fieldwork, sex workers shared their experiences of losing customers and feeling a sense of disruption. As one interviewee explained:

²⁰ Interview, 19 June 2020.

²¹ Interview, 3 May 2020.

*Before COVID-19, we experienced a better livelihood and peaceful life.... We were satisfied with our needs. Since the arrival of COVID-19, here in the camp, life has not been the same again. We never experienced this before.*²²

Most sex workers I interviewed lived in shelters that they had constructed themselves. Some resided in rented houses or hotels. Additionally, many had not recovered from the effects of the pandemic and felt ashamed and depressed about their current circumstances of not earning an income. Some had obtained access to humanitarian aid:

*I can say that till today, I did not even know non-government agencies were helping sex workers to survive here. Since COVID-19 started, I always sell cooked and uncooked rice, including some vegetable oil around the camp, and also help other marketers carrying their goods, and good people always come here to support me in the camp.*²³

*I had nothing less than 14 sex customers per week before the COVID-19 pandemic, and I used to sell all kinds of things like groceries by myself for sustenance. I am also doing home cleaning services which is giving me cool money, but the COVID-19 pandemic spoiled all that. I am now depending on the Nigerian Sex Workers' Association and non-government agencies for shelter bill and daily living because my source of livelihood was totally destroyed by the COVID-19 pandemic.*²⁴

Sex workers expressed dissatisfaction with the health delivery system in the camp, citing inadequate medication and a lack of ambulances. Critically ill patients require referral to government hospitals outside the camp. However, even in these hospitals, they did not receive adequate care and often suffered from social exclusion. Health centres in the IDP camp were either ill-equipped or poorly stocked, forcing sex workers to purchase their own medicine, including intravenous fluids, since NSW and other NGOs did not provide sufficient help.

Others used only their human capital rather than rely on humanitarian aid:

*If you come to my place, we live in peace because we have everything and there is no problem. All I want from the Nigerian Sex Workers' Association and non-government agencies is good hospitals and medicine for our [...] health because our body is our tool for work. Before COVID-19, I never knew that the Nigerian Sex Workers' Association and non-government agencies were supporting us the way we are today.*²⁵

²² Interview, 7 July 2020.

²³ Interview, 4 May 2020.

²⁴ Interview, 17 May 2020.

²⁵ Interview, 25 May 2020.

Several sex workers welcomed me into their makeshift shelters, which were almost devoid of furniture, clothing, bedding, decent mattresses, and cooking utensils. One interviewee confirmed that ‘... many of the newly joined colleagues are sleeping on mats and rags donated to us’.²⁶

Sex workers resented the lack of independence and the need to rely on NSWA and other NGO aid:

*Our only problem is insufficient food and low numbers of sex customers in the camp here. As you can see, I stay with my colleagues (my business partners) here as a family and I cannot return to my community. Sex workers cannot even leave business partners due to lack of independence. I need a job to earn money to take care of ourselves. I should be able to support my friends here, but I cannot because as a person in the same situation with them I have to wait for the Nigerian Sex Workers’ Association to deliver food once a month. I am not happy with this at all.*²⁷

Personal Challenges

Personal challenges included difficulties in accessing basic hygiene, sanitation, and general well-being, as well as corruption amongst the leaders of the NSWA and the psychological trauma that many sex workers experienced. Personal hygiene was a significant challenge for them, although they did their best to keep their environment and themselves clean. Some, especially the younger ones, frequently bathed with soap and applied body lotion afterwards.

While the Nigerian Sex Workers’ Association and NGOs provided other aid, basic hygienic materials, such as soap and detergent, were not forthcoming and sex workers had to purchase them from their meagre earnings. Interviewees specifically mentioned the hygiene challenges posed by the menstrual cycle, which compromised their health and well-being.

The camp had a limited number of unisex toilets and bathrooms which were located in an open space and lacked privacy. The lack of cleanliness and hygiene was detrimental to everyone’s health, not just that of sex workers, as it led to disease:

The state of basic hygiene in this camp is unbearable, especially for us, sex workers. There is a need to improve those bathrooms because there are few and they’re not well maintained in most of the houses we rented. The bathrooms can make someone sick. Sex workers do not have disinfectants to eliminate

²⁶ Interview, 30 May 2020.

²⁷ Interview, 18 May 2020.

*germs and odours, and if you get sick and seek treatment, you will hardly find the right medication in this environment.*²⁸

It is unimaginable how sex workers could build resilience in such circumstances, which, as stated above, represented a failure on the part of the Nigerian government at both the federal and state levels to provide adequate basic service delivery. In addition to the lack of food and hygienic materials, there was also a shortage of non-food items, such as mosquito nets, blankets, mattresses, and medicines. I also observed that the camp was replete with mosquitoes, indicating a high risk of malaria. Even government officials expressed concern about the poor drainage system, which exposed sex workers to breeding mosquitoes and unhealthy conditions. Against this background of prevailing unsanitary conditions, one official of the camp's management said, 'The camp health centre only received 100 mosquito nets from the government and non-governmental agencies, which is not enough for the sex workers.'²⁹

All supplies from individuals and philanthropic and other organisations were given to NSWA leaders, who were expected to distribute them amongst sex workers. However, logistical problems arose owing to the leaders' inability to account for all the sex workers in the camp and the many who begged around the camp. Furthermore, as mentioned above, the distribution process was rife with favouritism, elitism, and corrupt practices. Given the neglect, stigmatisation, and discrimination by the aforementioned government agencies (NEMA and NCFRMI) in Abuja, it is not surprising that some sex workers were sexually exploited in exchange for physical and financial support. For example, some of the sex workers interviewed alleged that they were short-changed in the allocation of resources because they were not close relatives of the leaders, refused to bribe them, or would not engage in unpaid sexual relations with some of the leaders' male friends and relatives.

All sex workers who participated in the research spoke about neglect, stigmatisation, and marginalisation as factors that affected their daily lives, both inside and outside the camp, owing to the insensitivity and attitudes of NGOs and government agencies. Additionally, most people in the camp were religious, and their religions forbade sex work, which exacerbated the rejection of sex workers.

Psychological Stress

Sex workers reported a lack of access to welfare despite the presence of the Nigerian Sex Workers' Association and NGOs. The aim of supporting sex workers in the camp was to meet their basic needs, but this had not been fully

²⁸ Interview, 14 June 2020.

²⁹ Interview, 8 June 2020.

achieved. If sex workers had not used social networking to survive and access physical, human, and financial capital, which the aid agencies were not providing, they would have been unable to recover from the shocks and stress caused by their internal displacement and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rehabilitation of the sex workers also proved a challenge because of the extent of their psychological trauma. My research revealed that all sex workers, especially the young ones, experienced considerable psychological trauma due to the COVID-19 pandemic. An interviewee narrated her pain as follows:

As a result of COVID-19, some [members] of my household have been killed.... I suffered severe pain.... My household is no longer together ... my life is nowhere. I lived on petty drugs in the psychiatric health centre, but now I have taken to looking after myself in the New Kuchingoro camp for IDPs.³⁰

Another detailed her trauma as follows:

I am also traumatised by the experiences I had during COVID-19 that I do not want to think or talk about. I arrived here without my household ... now I no longer have my family. None of the organisations in this camp provided me with any special care, treatment, or rehabilitation.³¹

Sex workers recounted the difficult experiences they went through during the COVID-19 pandemic on the one hand, and their fear for the future, on the other. Some had to beg for days without food or drink before receiving aid at the IDP camp. There was also the fear of being kidnapped, as some of their friends had been abducted while going about their daily activities. Some feared being sexually assaulted in the camp because of the inadequate security provided, and there had been reports of attacks on women in the nearby bushes. In addition, some had developed mental health challenges while others had died.

A representative of NSW narrated horrific experiences:

A woman was psychologically affected after consuming her own waste. I do not understand why but I think it all started after the death of her family member. Some even went crazy because their husbands were murdered in their presence.³²

Most sex workers acknowledged that stress was one of the causes of their psychological state. By speaking about their trauma, the women might have obtained relief and even help. However, a culture of silence prevailed, as the

³⁰ Interview, 11 June 2020.

³¹ Interview, 16 May 2020.

³² Interview, 13 June 2020.

causes of shock and trauma were considered too sensitive to discuss. It seemed that sex workers in the camp felt a responsibility to stay strong, but they often did not know what could help them deal with their psychological wounds.

The challenges of stress and trauma cut across all sex workers. Therefore, any form of assistance, whether livelihood, personal, or psychological intervention, would have had to be sensitive to be effective. However, interventions by NSWA as well as government and non-government agencies were few, owing to operational constraints. These constraints were blamed on the protracted pandemic, legal restrictions to operational mandates, corruption, and limited funding.

Nutrition amongst the Sex Workers in the Camp

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, sex workers in the camp had relied on non-state welfare and, in some cases, on the little income generated from their sex work for their nutritional needs. However, they still faced challenges obtaining food and other basic amenities.³³ This situation highlights the absence of functioning policies on the part of the Nigerian state in providing humanitarian relief. The life histories and interviews revealed a pervasive sense of insecurity and uncertainty among the sex workers, who struggled to meet their basic needs. Many expressed concerns about how they would feed themselves and their families without support from the state:

How will we feed ourselves as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and without support from the state?

From where will we get basic amenities?

How do we get food for ourselves?³⁴

Documents from the Abuja branch of the Nigerian Sex Workers' Association indicated that the IDP camp provided between 2,010 and 2,400 calories per day in the form of cereals like sorghum.³⁵ However, interviews with NSWA staff in Abuja revealed that the actual amount was much less, with a more realistic figure being between 1,230 and 1,400 calories and usually closer to 1,300.³⁶ The protein intake of sex workers was also insufficient, ranging from 25.4 to 30.4 grams a day if they were lucky. The main staple foods were rice and millet, which resulted in a

³³ Interview, 16 May 2020.

³⁴ Interview, 14 June 2020.

³⁵ Unpublished documents from the Nigerian Sex Workers' Association, 20 May 2020.

³⁶ Interview, 27 May 2020.

starch-heavy diet that was seriously deficient in protein, vitamins, and minerals.³⁷ Some sex workers had not received sufficient food. One interviewee explained:

Because the majority of us doing this sex business are living together, once a month, or within a space of 50 days, we buy food. We always buy rice, at times two bags each for beans and rice weighing 25 kg. The food runs out within three weeks, and we sometimes sell it to purchase other food we need for survival because rice is very cheap and the most common food at the camp.³⁸

The sex workers in the camp typically ate two meals per day when possible and relied on leftovers from the previous day for breakfast.³⁹ However, the number of meals varied considerably, with some sex workers living on just one meal a day during the pandemic. Cereals were the primary food source and they were acquired by household members and then either sold or consumed. Vegetables were sometimes available, but they were usually obtained from neighbours or through sex work outside the camp.⁴⁰

Cereals like rice and wheat are associated with income elasticity, with daily per capita consumption ranging from 922 grammes for better-off households to 212 grammes for poorer households.⁴¹ For about 25 per cent of the time in the camp during the pandemic, millet and sorghum were replaced with rice and wheat, which are less expensive.⁴² Cereal consumption was so high that some sex workers would rather go hungry than consume beans, which were unfamiliar to them. Groundnuts and other nuts were consumed in small quantities.⁴³

Akombi-Inyang has pointed out that malnutrition, which is highly prevalent in Nigeria, is closely linked to poverty.⁴⁴ Forty-seven per cent of Nigerians (98 million people) experience multidimensional poverty, including deprivation, poor living standards, polluted environments, and the threat of violence.⁴⁵ The

³⁷ Interview, 1 June 2020.

³⁸ Interview with sex worker, 21 June 2020.

³⁹ Interview with sex worker, 8 June 2020.

⁴⁰ Interview with camp official, 3 June 2020.

⁴¹ Interview with camp official, 14 May 2020.

⁴² Interview with camp official, 19 May 2020.

⁴³ Interview with camp official, 2 July 2020.

⁴⁴ B Akombi-Inyang, 'Malnutrition among Children is Rife in Nigeria: What must be done', *The Conversation*, 22 July 2021, <https://theconversation.com/malnutrition-among-children-is-rife-in-nigeria-what-must-be-done-164496>.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

conditions in the New Kuchingoro camp for IDPs and COVID-19 have made the situation even worse.⁴⁶

Livelihood Mechanisms in the New Kuchingoro IDP Camp

Most of the sex workers in the camp were unmarried or divorced with little family support. During the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the lack of customers or state welfare, many had to generate income using skills that required little or no formal education or training.⁴⁷ In many cases, sex workers did housework for people in their social network, using their social and human capital to acquire the financial capital needed to meet their needs. However, the income earned was barely enough to meet their food and health needs, rendering this means of support unsustainable.

In addition to housework, sex workers in the camp earned a livelihood through social networking, including trading, shopkeeping, livestock management, agriculture, and collective enterprises.⁴⁸ However, they spent considerably more than the income they earned in the camp.⁴⁹ Despite these efforts, most sex workers did not have the patronage of well-to-do individuals both inside and outside the camp, credit, or other opportunities such as begging. They were denied credit because they lacked permanent residences and a stable income. Additionally, residing in the camp served as a disadvantage as it confers a low socio-economic status on its residents.

Sex workers did not sell their labour to employers but preferred to work independently, which in some cases helped them obtain more money compared to others during the pandemic. The problem was that they could not engage in large-scale trading due to insufficient capital, forcing them to sell goods from door to door.⁵⁰ As discussed below, earning income through trade appeared to be one of many strategies employed by the sex workers in the camp, which posed significant challenges.

⁴⁶ Interview with sex worker, 7 May 2020.

⁴⁷ Interview with NSW representative, 19 June 2020.

⁴⁸ Interview with NSW representative, 5 June 2020.

⁴⁹ Interview with camp official, 21 June 2020.

⁵⁰ Interview with NSW representative, 3 June 2020.

Social Networking and Sustenance in the Camp

Sex workers indicated that they used social, human, and financial capital to survive, even though their efforts were unsustainable and usually short-lived. To cope with the stress and hardship brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, sex workers in the camp relied on one another and various agencies, creating a support system that came at a significant cost in terms of time and resources, but which they deemed essential. They created reciprocal relationships with other sex workers, for example, by sharing extra food or lending money to one another.⁵¹

Sex workers also used social networking to find work in the streets of low-income estates in Abuja, although these jobs were seasonal and few and far between. Since there was a surplus of sex workers seeking work, good relationships with men of low socio-economic status in Abuja were essential to finding work.⁵² Low-status men also gave moral and financial support above and beyond the support sex workers received from other members of their social networks. Therefore, because of social networking, sex workers could find the support they needed during the pandemic.

Likewise, networking with members of the Nigerian Sex Workers' Association provided a source of social capital that helped to boost women's human and financial capital. Despite issues related to corruption, the NSWA also helped them meet their basic needs, such as food, labour, shelter, and financial support, in a way that reflected shared responsibility and group membership.⁵³ In general, NGOs, philanthropists, and faith-based groups provided more support to sex workers than state welfare organisations. This highlights the importance of non-state actors in aiding marginalised communities during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sex workers in the camp engaged in various subsistence activities to enhance their resilience and improve their quality of life. For instance, they generated income by buying and selling items within and outside the camp. Since most sex workers lacked sufficient capital and lived in poverty, they could not trade in regular markets; they relied on social connections, which were often from humanitarian agencies as well as past or current sex work, to obtain their supplies. One interviewee said:

Look at me. I am 45 and not lazy in my sex work. I have been in the sex business for the past 23 years now. Before COVID-19, I was into professional sex business here, as I could feed myself, send money to my siblings, and buy

⁵¹ Interview with sex worker, 13 July 2020.

⁵² Interview with NSWA representative, 1 July 2020.

⁵³ Interview with NSWA representative, 26 June 2020.

*beautiful clothes that can attract my customers. When COVID-19 started, I gave up everything. The Nigerian Sex Workers' Association and government assistance is not enough. I am now engaging in a small-scale business, selling goods in the New Kuchingoro camp for IDPs.*⁵⁴

Sex workers also prepared food for sale for people transporting goods to the camp. Food preparation was a major source of income for some, as demand was constant and involved cooking rice, spaghetti, and beans, for example. One sex worker said, 'I sell rice and beans for other people [in the camp] ... to generate more income that will support my family'.⁵⁵

Sex workers often bartered their labour in return for a meal or specific types of food or other goods. As mentioned, some were engaged in other forms of labour, such as doing laundry and loading goods, working as domestic workers for the marketers and buyers in the camp,⁵⁶ and even begging.⁵⁷

Some sex workers lent small amounts of money to others from their savings at minimal interest rates. They also often had to borrow necessities like food and items for maintaining their shelters. They borrowed money for emergencies but also to meet immediate household needs.

Interest rates were minimal or non-existent when borrowing from friends and acquaintances. Without social networks, they would have been forced to borrow at high-interest rates from informal money lenders. Nevertheless, some sex workers who sought loans, ranging between NGN 10,000 and 50,000 (USD 15 and 80), to finance businesses using formal and informal networks usually managed it well because of their entrepreneurial skills. Therefore, access to credit emphasised the value of social relationships as channels for reducing poverty and accumulating assets, which could act as security for bigger loans and lead to a sustainable livelihood if managed well. For instance, those who sold goods often borrowed from neighbours who were subsequently repaid in cash or kind.

State Welfare in the Camp

Sex workers told me that they were unable to sustain their livelihoods without some assistance from state and non-state agencies, despite the alternative income-generating activities they pursued during the pandemic. They expressed concerns about the lack of financial capital needed to expand their non-sexual businesses and the challenges of achieving financial independence.

⁵⁴ Interview with sex worker, 9 May 2020.

⁵⁵ Interview with sex worker, 22 July 2020.

⁵⁶ Interview with NSWA representative, 5 May 2020.

⁵⁷ Interview with NSWA representative, 14 June 2020.

State agencies, politicians, and various charitable organisations provided a significant portion of the relief that sex workers received. However, this aid was insufficient, and in some cases, did not arrive on time,⁵⁸ especially during the peak of the COVID-19 health crisis. This reflected poorly on the government, as it negatively affected the well-being of sex workers. Moreover, this frustration was compounded by the expectation that the state would take care of them, provide support, and help them reintegrate into their communities. This expectation was particularly high among those who had previously held formal employment before turning to sex work.

Overall, sex workers faced many challenges during the pandemic, including inadequate financial support, limited opportunities for income from sex work or other work, and societal stigma. Government and non-government organisations need to do more to ensure that sex workers receive adequate support, especially during times of crisis, to improve their overall well-being and long-term prospects.

Conclusion

Humanitarian relief and support programmes in the camp were targeted at IDPs in general and not just sex workers. However, prejudice and discrimination against sex workers meant that government agencies overlooked them. Sex workers constituted the most marginalised population when it came to the distribution of supplies or help to those who were stressed and stigmatised.

Although some sex workers benefitted from humanitarian interventions, the support provided was insufficient and did not even cover half of those in the camp. Moreover, at the time of my research, the number of sex workers in the camp was likely to increase given the prevailing negative economic situation. Thus, humanitarian interventions need to be increased not only for sex workers in the camp but also elsewhere in the country. In addition, as indicated in the literature, urgent attention from the Nigerian government in the form of policy adjustments is required to increase security and welfare in the IDP camps.

A 2018 study found that access to affected populations, security concerns, and coordination amongst actors were major challenges facing humanitarian interventions in the New Kuchingoro IDP camp.⁵⁹ The authors recommended increased efforts by humanitarian actors and the government to address the infrastructure and welfare of the women in the camp, provide them with palliatives

⁵⁸ Interview with camp official, 6 June 2020.

⁵⁹ T F Ajayi, 'Women, Internal Displacement and the Boko Haram Conflict: Broadening the debate', *African Security*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2020, pp. 171–194, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392206.2020.1731110>.

in the form of cash and free food to cushion the effect of COVID-19, and build hospitals. Other studies have also explored the need for increased humanitarian aid in Nigeria.⁶⁰

The New Kuchingoro IDP camp saw a variety of humanitarian interventions, including training in entrepreneurship to help sex workers become self-sufficient and less dependent on aid. But if conditions in the camp had been favourable, sex workers could have used their resourcefulness to make money. For instance, they had already demonstrated their ability to trade various goods, which became a popular coping mechanism and enabled them to sustain their livelihoods. However, the modest sums of money they received from non-government organisations and benefactors were used to cover their daily expenses, leaving them with no money to invest in their own businesses. Sex workers frequently render their services at extremely low prices to make just enough money to buy food for themselves and some additional commodities to sell.

Many of the sex workers living in the camp preferred receiving financial assistance to support profitable activities that could generate additional income, which would help them expand their businesses by purchasing more raw materials, machinery, and household tools. Furthermore, they obtained goods from wholesalers, bypassing the retailers, so as to increase their profit margins. Some sex workers were also able to purchase items like rice and chicken, which were smuggled into the camp, and sold them for a profit.

Sex workers in the camp displayed resilience and resourcefulness and managed multiple income streams. In addition, as they demonstrated a range of skills and abilities, they were successful in earning money with the right support. However, this does not mean that they did not require humanitarian assistance. Rather, I believe that government organisations could encourage the independence of IDPs, like sex workers, by providing greater assistance than was available to those in my study, as they could generate income with even a small amount of support. Therefore, by exploring the coping mechanisms of resilient IDPs, government and non-government organisations could develop humanitarian assistance programmes that not only alleviate suffering during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic but also support livelihood restoration, income recovery, and sustainable employment.

⁶⁰ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 'Humanitarian Response Plan: Nigeria', 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/nigeria/nigeria-2021-humanitarian-response-plan-february-2021>.

Dr Seun Bamidele is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Humanities, University of Johannesburg, South Africa. He holds a Ph.D. in Development Studies from the University of Pretoria, South Africa, and a Ph.D. in Peace and Security Studies from Ekiti State University, Nigeria. His research interests are multidisciplinary, covering African affairs, peace and conflict studies, forced migration, internal displacement, coping and survival strategies of women refugees, development studies, and environmental politics. He facilitates peacebuilding programmes in several African countries. Email: oluwaseun.bamidele@gmail.com