# A QUALITATIVE PERSPECTIVE OF COPING STRATEGIES OF FAMILIES IN POST-CONFLICT COMMUNITIES AND SERVICES OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN PLATEAU STATE

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**Abstract**

*The devastation caused by violent conflicts lead to significant psychosocial and socioeconomic challenges including loss of lives, property, livelihood, displacements, horrifying encounters and shattered communities. These adversities hinder families' abilities to develop effective coping strategies and fulfil their roles in socializing and nurturing their children. While some families manage to navigate these challenges, many others are overwhelmed by the consequences of conflict exposure. This study is to identify the coping strategies employed by families in post-conflict communities and assess how social workers' services can enhance these strategies through effective psychosocial services. Data was gathered through focus group discussions (FGD) with family members, including men, women and youth as well as key informant interviews with local government social welfare officers, community and religious leaders in post-conflict communities. The qualitative data, was analyzed through thematic analysis facilitated by the Nvivo computer application which aided in developing a comprehensive qualitative analysis. Findings revealed that families utilize negative coping including drugs and substance abuse, transactional sex, marital separations and divorce while positive coping involves family unity, collective income-generating activities and support from extended family members. The study recommends a multileveled evidence-based social workers' service framework that encompasses psychosocial, psychotherapy, vocational and community rehabilitation and interdisciplinary collaboration to bolster positive coping mechanisms at individual, family, group and community levels.*

**Keywords:** Coping Strategies, Families, Social Workers, Post-Conflicts, Psychosocial Support, Communities

## 1. Introduction

The family is a fundamental social unit responsible for children's socialization and development, providing secure environment that shapes individual identities and personality growth. Healthy families' dynamics strengthen communities, while dysfunctional ones can lead to vulnerable societies. Families globally, face challenges, including economic downturns, rising cost of living, substance abuse, high divorce rates (Ringler, 2024). Over 71.1 million internally displaced persons worldwide by 2022, 62.3 million due to violent conflicts threatening families, an additional 87 million as a result of disasters. Africa accounts for over one-third of global forced displacement populations (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2023, Yali & Zaggi, 2019).

In Nigeria, violent conflicts have affected all regions and highlighted the country's fault lines and Plateau state particularly, has experienced significant turmoil since 2001 (The Plateau Peace Building Agency, 2021). The situation has escalated to intermittent attacks from unknown assailants at night on communities, underscoring the urgent need for professional intervention (Uthman, 2023). Social workers can offer therapeutic support to families affected by these conflicts, enhancing their psychosocial and socio-economic capacities. This study aims to explore the coping strategies of families in Plateau state and emphasize the vital role of social workers in improving

families' coping through psychosocial support, addressing this gap in existing literature in Plateau State.

## 2. Literature Review

## 2.1 Empirical Review

**Psychosocial Effects of Violent Conflicts on Families**
A broad spectrum of consequences that violent conflicts impose on families include displacement, separation from family members and the breakdown of essential social structures like healthcare and education. These conflicts lead to increased mental health conditions such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), particularly affecting children who may exhibit aggression or withdrawal and disruption of normal developmental pathways for children. The extensive human and material costs of incessant violent conflicts can overwhelm individuals, families and communities, necessitating intervention aimed at ameliorating these adverse effects. This study emphasizes the importance of social workers' services in facilitating recovery and resilience among affected families, highlighting that targeted support, mitigates the impact of violent conflict on the well-being of victims. Research indicates that witnessing violent attacks in a community, even without being directly attacked significantly increases the likelihood of depression (Andersen, Rossi & Hubloue, 2022). This highlights the broader constituency of victims, affecting not only direct victims but also their families and communities, which can hinder social and economic development. This study focuses on traumatized families in Plateau state and the importance of strengthening their coping mechanisms and enhancing their roles and productivity. Additionally, it is crucial to address first-generation victims as studies show that their children and grandchildren often inherit the psychosocial and psychological consequences of conflicts, experiencing feelings of deep hurt and bitterness.

**Socio-Economic Effects of Violent Conflicts on Families**
Millian, *et al* (2022) in their Alert 2022! Report highlight that Conflicts are a primary cause of humanitarian crises globally and significantly contribute to food insecurity. They noted that violent conflicts, extreme weather and the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbate the challenges for vulnerable populations in accessing food and basic needs. In 2020, an estimated 811 million people faced malnutrition which worsened in 2021. The UN Secretary General's annual report from May 2021 corroborated this, indicating high civilian casualties and destruction of essential infrastructure due to ongoing violent conflicts. Devakumar, *et al* (2021) revealed further that socioeconomic factors can escalate community-level conflicts and increase domestic violence, with intimate partner violence persisting at 24.4% for over a year post-conflict. Women and children in these settings are particularly susceptible to anxiety, depression and psychotic disorders, with significantly higher rates of PTSD (15.4%), depression (17.3%) and anxiety disorders (7.6%) compared to the general population. The findings underscore the urgent need for stakeholders to implement psychosocial, mental health and socio-economic interventions to support post-conflict victims in coping with their experiences.

**Post-Conflict Coping Strategies of Families**
A mixed study by Yali and Zaggi (2019) on Coping Strategies of Internally Displaced Persons in Kaduna Metropolis – Nigeria, found that many individuals resorted to multiple menial jobs to survive. They buttressed significant challenges including inadequate food and healthcare in quantity and quality, leading many to rely on herbal remedies. Most respondents reported that their coping strategies had minimal positive effects on their socio-economic well-being. Ejikeme and Ejikeme (2012) identified psycho-physiological factors that can exacerbate medical disorders among victims of violent conflicts, which include: Mental disorders (e.g., major depression); psychological symptoms (e.g., anxiety); personality traits or coping styles (e.g., denial of medical care); maladaptive health behaviours (e.g., drinking or overeating); stress-related physiological responses (e.g., tension, headaches); other psychological factors (e.g., cultural factors). They emphasized the necessity of mobilizing support for families in post-conflict settings

to prevent physical and mental health conditions. This study calls for psychosocial support to enhance coping strategies in post-conflict communities.

## Social Workers Intervention in Post-Conflict Communities

Wang (2022) emphasized the critical need for intervention, noting that people affected by hazardous situations often experience significant psychological psychosocial and psychological imbalances. Without proper intervention services, these victims may be at risk of self-harm or harming others. This study aims to explore how professional intervention can mitigate, prevent or alleviate the stress and suffering associated with various illnesses among traumatized victims.

The study by Kumswa and Best (2022) found that the volunteering social support available to victims of violent conflicts, particularly internally displaced persons (IDPs), often comes from poorly volunteers and charitable organizations, with minimal government assistance. Their research highlights the inadequacy of volunteer social workers in providing essential counseling and social services in the IDP camps and calls for improved support systems to address the welfare needs of victims. The authors advocated for enhance training and employment of social workers to better meet the needs of affected populations. This study identified the research gaps on the services of social workers, the coping strategies of victims and documenting their views and experiences, this qualitative study is an attempt to bridge this gap.

### 2.2 Theoretical Literature

The study employs two theoretical lenses to understand the causes of violence and intervention for victims. The frustration-aggression theory, initially proposed by Dollard, Doob *et al* (1939), and refined by Miller in 1941, posits that frustration leads to aggression, which can manifest against secondary targets when the primary source of frustration is inaccessible. This theory elucidates the violent attacks faced by families in communities in Plateau state from unknown gunmen. However, it lacks guidance on how victims can be supported to cope. The Crisis Intervention Model,

developed by Gerald Caplan in 1964, it focuses on helping individuals and families manage effects of violent conflicts more effectively. It emphasizes that timely, focused assistance is more beneficial than extensive help during less emotionally charged periods (Regehr, 2011). This model is applied by social workers in crises that overwhelm the coping mechanism of victims. The model outlined three considerations for a crisis: hazardous events posing threats, threat to current or past instinctual needs linked to past vulnerabilities and inadequate coping mechanisms. This model aids traumatized individuals, families, groups and communities in adopting healthier coping strategies and fostering resilience when faced with catastrophic events, ultimately promoting stable family dynamics and productive living.

Coping strategies are specific behavioural and psychological efforts, individuals use to manage, tolerate, or minimize stressful events. Similarly, Jurji, *et al* (2018) defined coping as the cognitive and behavioural responses to internal and external demands perceived as stressful. These processes involve both thoughts and actions that evolve during stressful encounters, such as bereavement. Adequate coping aims to reduce the physical, psychological, or social harm from adverse events. Coping is categorized into two types: emotion-focused coping which regulates emotional responses and problem-focused coping which seeks to address and change the underlying issues. While individuals naturally respond to stressors in various ways, problem-focused coping is particularly important for interventions to aim at enhancing victims' problem-solving abilities. In this study, coping strategies encompass all intentional or unintentional actions, attitudes or behaviours employed by individuals, families, or communities to navigate the devastations posed by violent conflict and other distressing circumstances.

Post-conflict is a situation where open warfare has ended, yet underlying tensions may persist for years, which could potentially lead to violence. This concept is better understood as a process rather than a single event. In this study, post-conflict is defined as a cessation of intense fighting in a community, leaving

victims with physical, psychological, economic and social devastation that requires professional intervention for stability and resilience. These conditions can lead to helplessness, hopelessness and post-traumatic stress disorders, necessitating the mobilization of external resources to aid recovery. The Community level mental health psychosocial support (MHPSS) framework used by the International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC) for victims of violence is adopted for monitoring psychosocial interventions. It was launched in 15 countries with over 32,000 beneficiaries in 2020; MHPSS has been applied to victims in 32 communities in Nigeria, Mali and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to assess social functioning and psychological symptoms (Andersen, Rossi & Hubloue, 2022). The ICRC collaborates with local organizations and trains volunteers to conduct group sessions and peer support. Pre- and post-assessments indicate significant reductions in stress and anxiety levels among victims, with group sessions proving more effective than individual ones.

## 3. Methodology

The study utilized a case study descriptive, ex-post facto qualitative design, to explore post-conflict communities, focusing on events that have already occurred. This approach is well- suited for understanding the aftermath of conflicts, as it examines phenomena that have taken place. The case study method enables in-depth examination of individuals or groups, facilitating generalizations through detailed inquiry (Brownlee-Brewton, 2020). A multi-stage sampling technique was utilized to select senatorial zones in Plateau State, specifically, the northern and central zones due to their histories of violent conflicts lasting three to ten years. LGAs were chosen to ensure representation from both metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas. Jos North and Riyom LGAs were selected from the northern zone, while Mangu and Bokkos LGAs were chosen from the Central zone. Federal wards were selected from these LGAs for comprehensive coverage of conflict-related experiences: Jol-Kwi and Sopp wards in Riyom LGA; Jos Jarawa and Naraguta B in Jos North LGA; Mangu Halle and Kombun in Mangu LGA; and Daffo and Sha in Bokkos LGA. This strategy aims to yield rich data for a nuanced. Data collection involved FGDs to gather qualitative insights on beliefs, impressions and emotional concerns. FGDs were conducted separately for men, women and youth affected by violent conflict, allowing participants to express themselves freely within groups of similar backgrounds (Vasileiou, Barnett, Thorpe & Young, 2018). Additionally, Key Informants' Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with knowledgeable sub-sample including social welfare officers, community leaders and religious' leaders. These informants were considered "information-rich" sources due to their close interactions with the community (Seidman, 2019).

The audio recorded FGDs and KIIs were translated from Hausa to English before being transcribed verbatim into Microsoft Word document. Accurate transcriptions are crucial for valid analysis and interpretation of interview data. Thematic analysis was conducted using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), enhancing reliability and transparency. The combination of manual and computer-assisted method is believed to yield better results, with Nvivo software facilitating the identification of emerging themes, word query and the analysis process.

## 4. Results and Discussion

**Table 1: Socio-demographic Characteristics of FGD Respondents**

| Demographics Respondents | Frequency (f) | Percentage % |
|---|---|---|
| Men | 105 | 31 |
| Women | 113 | 34 |
| Youth | 118 | 35 |
| Total | 336 | 100 |

**Age**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 14-35 | 166 | 49.4 |
| 36-55 | 125 | 37.2 |
| 56 and above | 45 | 13.4 |
| Total | 336 | 100 |

**Education**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Primary | 130 | 38.7 |
| Secondary | 110 | 32.7 |
| Islamiya | 15 | 4.5 |
| Tertiary | 42 | 12.5 |
| Nil | 39 | 11.6 |
| Total | 336 | 100 |

**Occupation**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Farmers | 174 | 52 |
| Livestock | 31 | 9 |
| Business | 76 | 23 |
| Artisans | 14 | 4 |
| Others | 41 | 12 |
| Total | 336 | 100 |

**No. of children**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1-6 | 159 | 72.94 |
| 7-10 | 39 | 17.89 |
| 11 and above | 16 | 7.34 |
| None | 4 | 1.83 |
| Total | 218 | 100 |

**Religion**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Christianity | 285 | 85 |
| Islam | 51 | 15 |
| Total | 336 | 100 |

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**Source:** FGDs Field Notes, 2023

The socio-demographic characteristics of respondents with respect to age, education, occupation, religion and number of children, 336 respondents participated in the FGDs. Table 1 showed majority of respondent were the youth, age bracket 14-35 (49.4%), followed by age 36-55 (37.2%). Most respondents' educational levels are primary (38.7%), secondary (32.4%), Islamiya (12.5%) and only 11.6% had tertiary education. To validate the responses from the FGDs, KIIs held for 40 (10.6%) community leaders, religious leaders and LGs social welfare officers who closely interact with the victims. The leaders in the communities were dominated by the males. However, significantly both genders were reasonably represented as respondents for the study and provided rich data for the study. Total respondents were 376.

**Table 2: The Results of the Study**

| Main Themes | Sub-themes | Research Questions |
|---|---|---|
| Coping strategies | Psychoactive substance use Transactional sex Improved family bonding Adoption of social safety nets Attempts at rebuilding and peace-keeping | What are the coping Strategies of families in post- Conflict communities in Plateau state? |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Social Workers Roles | Inadequate distribution of relief Materials, no psychosocial Support and other intervention Lack of healthcare services Deepening division Calls for assistance NGOs and government in recovery | How can the intervention of social workers be effective in managing and supporting families' coping in post-conflict communities in Plateau state? |

**Source: Field FGDs and KIIs, 2023**

## 4.1 Discussions of Findings

People respond to life challenges in various ways; employing both positive and negative coping strategies. This study defines coping as the actions, attitudes, or behaviours that victims of violent conflicts adopt to navigate stress and adversity. The findings reveal that respondents utilize a mix of positive and negative coping strategies. Notably, many victims, including parents and children resort to harmful behaviours. Common negative strategies include increased alcohol consumption even among minors, illicit drug use, risky sexual behaviours and criminal activities such as theft, "*Some of them have gone into taking drugs, armed robbery, while the females are into prostitution...*" (KII, Religious leader, Sopp, Riyom LGA).

The present study sheds light on the tragic circumstances faced by families in post-conflict settings, particularly where social control and stability have diminished. A study by Idris, Najmudeen and Omaku (2022) identified the status of being an IDP as a significant source of vulnerability. IDPs face numerous challenges, including insecurity, food shortages, inadequate sanitation and poor healthcare, which exacerbate feelings of helplessness. Furthermore, incidents of sexual violence, such as rape and other forms of exploitation, are prevalent in affected communities. The research also found that some security personnel assigned to protect lives and property pose additional threats to families and children. Respondents reported an increase in teenage pregnancies attributed to interactions with security personnel. "*About five girls I know have gotten pregnant to the security personnel sent to help tackle the situation.*" (KII, Religious leader, Sopp, Riyom LGA).

The likelihood of transactional sex as a survival strategy increases due to poverty from violent conflicts, creating a vicious cycle that impacts families and undermines human dignity and socioeconomic development. The presence of social workers can help alleviate suffering, reduce exploitation and foster connections to support systems. Reports indicate that displaced women often face sexual advances even from extended family members while seeking assistance, further eroding their dignity and rights. The study stresses the need for psychosocial services for vulnerable groups, particularly those who have been sexually exploited. Implementing vocational training and community rehabilitation efforts, such as skill acquisitions and soft loans, can empower and improve coping mechanisms (Taft, Blyth & Murphy, 2016; Para-Mallam, 2017).

**Family Disorganization/Disintegration**
This study found that the distortion in family dynamics and values also occurs with the losses incurred thereby exposing many families to significant marital tension and disorganization. The increasing socio-economic difficulty experienced is found to reduce the resilience of families, leading to separations and divorce cases. "*No money to pay for basic needs, we lost so many things that some of us are either separated or divorced from our husbands and all these are related to the hardship being experienced.*" (FGD, Jol, Riyom LGA). Another respondent confirmed that the loss of a patriarchal matriarch can disorganize the stability of families said "*When my husband was alive my children did not stay up late hours*" But now no matter how I talk to them they still keep late hours so it has been difficult. Some of them have started taking drugs and other illicit substances...*" (R2, FGD, Daffo, Bokkos

LGA). The loss of a significant figure in the family like a father can change the narrative and affect other members of the family. Gradually, the pain leads to anger then frustration and aggression, except adequate coping mechanisms are mobilized to assist and support the victims. They will desire to retaliate either on real or perceived enemies who are seen as those responsible for the gains or losses.

## Positive Coping Strategies

This study revealed that positive coping strategies were also adopted by victims in post-conflict situations in Plateau State. Interestingly, there are indications that conflict may improve some relationships and strengthen family ties, a respondent reported that the conflict and separation had improved the relationship between her and her parents, "*the conflict strengthened our relationship with my parents, they are in a safe place and most times we call each other to know how we are doing*" (Youth FGD, Naraguta B, Jos North LGA). A female respondent in this study confessed they are experiencing better relationships, care and unity with her husband and children since after the crisis "*He is closer to us in the family than before. We do things together; he is always concerned about us since after the conflict*" (Female FGD, Sopp, Riyom LGA). The study by Devakumar et al. (2021) found high incidence of intimate partner violence, persisting for over twelve months or more after violent conflicts at a rate of 24.4%. In contrast, the current study reported dissatisfaction with partners regarding family needs leading to separations and divorces. This further emphasized the need for psychosocial support to assist families cope with socioeconomic needs and reduce marital tensions. Interestingly, some respondents noted

improved family relationships, which is uncommon in post-conflict situations.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Families in post-violent communities are suffering severely and struggling to recover, three to ten years later. This study underscores the need for psychosocial support and social workers' services to help these victims and families to strengthen their coping strategies. Social workers, trained and equipped with principles, methods and models like crisis intervention model can assist victims in developing healthy coping mechanisms, enabling them to manage distress and post-traumatic stress disorders to function more effectively. However, many families continue to experience trauma across physical, economic, emotional, psychological, and social dimensions. As a result, some resort to negative coping strategies, including substance abuse and alcoholism, involving minors, transactional sex and increased teenage pregnancies linked to security personnel deployed for peacekeeping in these communities. Recommendations emphasize the need for training and retraining security personnel on enhanced sense of responsibility and adherence to human rights. Interventions should provide basic physical and emotional support for sexual victims regain their sense of security. Social workers and interdisciplinary teams should address the needs of families holistically, focusing on psychosocial support, mental health, resilience, and harm prevention. Rehabilitative efforts should specifically target drug users, alcoholics and individuals engaging in transactional sex for survival. Additionally, social workers should advocate for rehabilitation centers to support victims that are addicted to drugs and other substances.

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