

Gender-Responsiveness Humanitarianism in Conflict Settings: Analyzing the Role of Non-state Actors in North-east Nigeria

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Abstract

The aim of the study paper is to examine the implementation of gender-responsive humanitarianism by non-state actors (NSAs) in the context of the protracted conflict in North-east Nigeria. It's against the backdrop of severe gendered impacts, including the strategic use of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and the reconfiguration of gender roles, the research addresses the critical gap between policy commitments to gender equality and their practical application in the humanitarian response. While a diverse ecosystem of NSAs including International NGOs (INGOs), Nigerian National NGOs (NNGOs), and Local Women-Led Organizations (LWLOs) forms the backbone of service delivery, significant questions remain regarding how these actors interpret and integrate gender-sensitive approaches. The study adopt qualitative case study design and guided by a Feminist Political Economy theoretical framework, this research investigates how these different NSAs interpret, operationalize, and influence gender-responsive humanitarianism on the ground. The findings reveal a stark divergence in approaches: INGOs adopt a technical, policy-driven model; NNGOs prioritize a relational, context-embedded approach; and LWLOs advocate for a holistic model of empowerment. The study concludes that without addressing these structural power imbalances, the potential of the localization agenda to advance gender equality remains unrealized. It recommends direct funding and meaningful inclusion for LWLOs, a shift from sub-contracting to equitable partnerships for INGOs, and strengthened

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government accountability mechanisms to ensure humanitarian action is both genuinely gender-responsive and sustainably locally owned.

Keywords: Gender-Responsive Humanitarianism, Non-State Actors, Northeast Nigeria, Localization, Feminist Political Economy, Boko Haram, Humanitarian Aid

Introduction

Growing share of the world's population now lives in countries affected by internal conflict and war, it is estimated that more than half of the global population living in extreme poverty will be concentrated in nations marked by fragility, conflict, and violence (World Bank Group, 2020). Since the end of the Cold War, the nature of conflict has changed considerably, with non-state actors (NSAs) playing increasingly significant roles in both domestic and international arenas. These actors often operate within fragile or failed states where government institutions are weak and the state's monopoly on the use of force has deteriorated. In Nigeria, the government's failure to effectively address issues such as economic marginalization, political exclusion, and environmental degradation has created conditions conducive to the rise and entrenchment of non-state actors. Specifically, the protracted conflict in North-east Nigeria, primarily driven by the Boko Haram insurgency and counter-insurgency operations, has created one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises, with millions displaced and in need of urgent assistance. Within this landscape of profound suffering, vulnerability is intricately shaped by gender, exposing men, women, boys, and girls to distinct risks and altering their social roles and capacities. The conflict has been marked by egregious human rights violations, including the strategic use of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) as a tactic of terror, the forced recruitment of men and boys, and the abduction of women and girls, as starkly exemplified by the Chibok schoolgirls (Amnesty International, 2020).

While International Humanitarian Law (IHL) provides a framework for protection, its application in Nigeria has often failed to adequately account for these gendered dimensions, leading to protection gaps. The concept of gender-responsive humanitarianism has thus become a critical imperative, demanding that aid moves beyond a generic model to actively recognize and address the different needs, rights, and capabilities of all individuals. This aligns with global shifts towards rights-based approaches and is guided by frameworks like the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, which Nigeria has domesticated through its National Action Plan (NAP). However, the implementation of these commitments is severely challenged in the complex and volatile environment of North-east Nigeria, where state authority is contested, and security remains a paramount concern. In this context of state fragility and immense need, Non-State Actors (NSAs) have become the backbone of the humanitarian response. The operational landscape is diverse, comprising international Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) like the International Rescue Committee and Médecins Sans Frontières, national NGOs such as the Future Prowess Foundation, and a multitude of local Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) and women-led groups like the Shehu Musa Yar'Adua Foundation's ViSION programme. These entities are often the primary providers of life-saving services, such as food, shelter, water, and healthcare within Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps and host communities where government presence is minimal (Adewuyi & Alfa, 2023).

Their operational advantages are frequently cited as their proximity to affected populations, cultural and linguistic fluency, and ability to navigate local power dynamics. This resonates with the Grand Bargain's "localization" agenda, which aims to channel more resources and decision-making power to local responders International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA, 2019). However, this heavy reliance on NSAs raises critical questions about the consistency, quality, and accountability of the assistance provided, particularly concerning complex, culturally-sensitive issues like gender equality. While local actors may possess deep contextual understanding, they may also operate within the very patriarchal norms that humanitarian action seeks to transform, potentially limiting their approach to challenging harmful practices like early marriage or women's political participation.

Generally, especially within the established international order, the legal framework governing non-state humanitarian actors is anchored in International Humanitarian Law (IHL), especially the 1949 Geneva Conventions and additional Protocol II, which apply to non-international armed conflicts like the one in North-East Nigeria. These instruments enshrined the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence, granting impartial humanitarian organizations the right to deliver aid to civilians, provided state consent is obtained (Geneva Convention IV, 1949, Art. 3; Additional Protocol II, Art. 18). The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) and agencies like the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) further reinforce these norms through operational guidelines, such as the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (CHS) and the Sphere Standards. The global consensus is that humanitarian actors should be protected from interference and allowed unimpeded access to vulnerable populations, regardless of the political or military context (Slim, 2015).

In the Nigerian context, while the government formally recognizes international humanitarian principles, national implementation is shaped by internal security dynamics and sovereignty concerns. The Terrorism (Prevention and Prohibition) Act, 2022 introduces safeguards to prevent aid diversion and mandates strict compliance procedures for NGOs, particularly in terrorism-prone areas. Additionally, national laws like the Companies and Allied Matters Act (CAMA, 2020) regulate the registration of NGOs, and agencies such as NEMA, the North-East Development Commission (NEDC), and the Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs enforce coordination mechanisms. While these frameworks legitimize operations and improve oversight, they can also create operational bottlenecks such as delayed access permits, movement restrictions, and surveillance particularly for international NGOs (Okeke, 2021). The Nigerian state seeks to balance humanitarian space with national security, which often places humanitarian actors in a complex operating environment where collaboration and negotiation are essential

This research is situated at the critical nexus of these two dynamics, the urgent need for gender-responsive interventions in the Nigerian conflict and the central role played by a diverse array of non-state actors in delivering humanitarian services which include Nutrition, shelter, health and others. The central objective is not just whether aid is delivered, but “how” different non state Actors (NSAs)

in North-east Nigeria interpret, integrate, and implement gender-sensitive approaches within their humanitarian Counterinsurgency operations. This requires a nuanced analysis that moves beyond viewing NSAs as a monolith. For instance, the gender policies of an INGO, shaped by donor mandates and global standards, may differ significantly from the approach of a faith-based CBO in Borno State, whose actions are guided by religious principles and community elders (Krause, 2018). Simultaneously, local women's organizations, which are often at the forefront of providing psych-social support and advocating for survivors of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, represent a vital yet often marginalized voice in the formal humanitarian coordination structure (UN Women, 2020). By examining these variations, this study aims to produce a fine-grained analysis of the mechanisms, both formal and informal through which gender is addressed, mainstreamed, or overlooked in the humanitarian response orchestrated by non-state actors in North-east Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

It is argued that all forms of collective and individual violence are gendered processes and that conflict dynamics influence and recreate masculinities and perpetuate women's disadvantage (OECD, 2013a). Understanding gender dynamics is vital for avoiding unintended negative consequences, or inadvertently doing harm to gender relations in situations of conflict OECD & Anderlini (2011). Despite a robust international and national policy framework, including the Nigeria Humanitarian Response Plan and the UNSCR 1325 National Action Plan, a significant disparity persists between the commitment to gender equality and its practical implementation in the humanitarian response in North-east Nigeria. Evidence consistently shows that the specific protection needs of women and girls, particularly regarding SGBV, remain critically underfunded and inadequately met, while the vulnerabilities of men and boys, such as arbitrary detention, forced recruitment, and stigma are frequently overlooked (Adewuyi & Alfa, 2022). The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC, 2018) Gender Handbook provides clear guidelines for mainstreaming gender, yet in the Nigerian context, compliance is hampered by acute insecurity, access constraints, and a chronic shortage of resources dedicated specifically to gender programming. In the daily triage of life-saving activities. In places like Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states, gender considerations are often deprioritized, perceived as a secondary concern to be addressed after immediate needs like food and shelter are secured (Mazurana & Proctor, 2019). This failure to systematically embed a gender lens not only renders humanitarian assistance less effective and inefficient but can also, paradoxically, reinforce harmful gender norms and expose vulnerable groups to further risk, thereby violating the core humanitarian principle of "do no harm."

The problem is exacerbated by the complex and fragmented nature of the non-state actor ecosystem delivering the majority of humanitarian services in Nigeria. While the international UN/INGO system operates under certain accountability frameworks like the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS), the operational protocols, capacities, and accountability mechanisms for the wide range of national and

local NSAs are vastly more heterogeneous and less transparent (Stoddard et al., 2009). This creates a critical knowledge gap. An INGO may be accountable to its donors for demonstrating gender mainstreaming, but a local NGO or CBO may prioritize accountability to community leaders whose views on gender roles may be conservative. This tension between adhering to international gender standards and maintaining local legitimacy and access is particularly acute in Northeast Nigeria, where socio-cultural and religious norms heavily influence gender dynamics (Krause, 2018). While existing literature has documented the gendered impacts of the conflict, and separately, the operational challenges faced by NSAs, there is a scarcity of detailed, empirical research that systematically investigates and compares how these different categories of non-state actors like INGOs, LNGOs, and LWLOs conceptualize, operationalize, and ultimately influence gender-responsive humanitarianism on the ground in Nigeria, and what the tangible consequences of their varied approaches are for the crisis-affected populations they serve.

Research Objectives

1. To identify and critically analyze the distinct gender-specific challenges and manifestations of agency faced by women, men, girls, and boys affected by the conflict in Northeast Nigeria.
2. To assess and compare the programmatic approaches, interventions, and internal policies used by a diverse range of non-state actors operating in Nigeria to integrate gender considerations into their humanitarian work.
3. To evaluate the perceived effectiveness, limitations, and unintended consequences of NSA-led gender-responsive interventions from the perspectives of both implementers and affected communities in IDP camps and host communities.

Research Questions

1. What are the distinct gender-specific challenges and manifestations of agency faced by women, men, girls, and boys affected by the conflict in Northeast Nigeria?
2. How do the programmatic approaches, interventions, and internal policies used by a diverse range of non-state actors operating in Nigeria integrate gender considerations into their humanitarian work?

3. How effective, limited, and potentially consequential are NSA-led gender-responsive interventions from the perspectives of both implementers and affected communities in IDPs camps and host communities?

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

The Gendered Terrain and Humanitarian Architecture in Northeast Nigeria

The conflict in Northeast Nigeria, instigated by the Boko Haram insurgency, has created a profoundly gendered humanitarian crisis, where violence and vulnerability are strategically and disproportionately distributed. A substantial body of literature has meticulously documented the insurgents' systematic use of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) as a weapon of war, a tactic designed to terrorize populations, destroy social fabric, and enforce a brutal ideological order (Amnesty International, 2020; Matfess, 2017). This includes the widespread abduction of women and girls for forced marriage, sexual slavery, and domestic labour, epitomized by the 2014 Chibok schoolgirls kidnapping, which became a global symbol of this gendered terror. Simultaneously, scholarly and agency reports highlight that men and boys face a distinct set of grave risks, including summary execution, forced conscription into armed groups, and arbitrary detention by state security forces on suspicion of being militants, often leading to their disappearance and creating a cycle of male-targeted violence (Obiagwu & Freeman, 2021).

Beyond direct violence, the conflict has catalysed a dramatic reconfiguration of gender roles. With large-scale displacement and high rates of male mortality and detention, women have been thrust into non-traditional roles as primary breadwinners and heads of households within Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps, navigating immense economic pressure and heightened risks of exploitation. However, literature also cautions against a purely victim-centric narrative, increasingly highlighting the agency and resilience of women, who have formed vital support networks, engaged in informal economies, and acted as key informants and peacebuilders within their communities, demonstrating capacity amidst profound adversity (Pérez-Sánchez, 2021).

In response to this crisis, a complex humanitarian architecture has emerged, largely orchestrated and implemented by a diverse ecosystem of non-state actors (NSAs), yet it is fraught with its own internal tensions that impact gender outcomes. The international response, coordinated through the UN-OCHA led cluster system and articulated in the annual Nigeria Humanitarian Response Plan, has been critiqued for its initially top-down and slow nature, which often failed to rapidly integrate localized gender analyses. While Nigeria's domestication of the

Women, Peace, and Security agenda through its National Action Plan (NAP) on UNSCR 1325 provides a policy framework for gender mainstreaming, a significant body of evidence points to a persistent chasm between these policy commitments and their practical implementation on the ground (Krause, 2018). This policy-practice gap is driven by chronic underfunding for dedicated gender programming, a tendency to treat gender as a thematic “add-on” rather than a foundational programming principle, and the tokenistic inclusion of women in coordination mechanisms rather than in meaningful decision-making roles. The operational space is dominated by a typology of NSAs, including International NGOs (INGOs) like the International Rescue Committee, Nigerian National NGOs (NNGOs) such as the Allamin Foundation for Peace and Development, and local women-led organizations (LWLOs), each bringing different capacities, mandates, and understandings of gender to the response, yet operating within a system where power and resources are unevenly distributed (Schmidt, 2020).

The Ecosystem of Non-State Actors and the Localization Imperative

The landscape of non-state actors delivering humanitarian aid in Northeast Nigeria is characterized by a stark hierarchy and a critical struggle over resources and legitimacy, which directly impinges upon the efficacy of gender-responsive action. International NGOs often function as the primary intermediaries for donor funds, wielding significant influence over program design and strategic priorities. In contrast, national and local NGOs, particularly women-led organizations, are frequently positioned as sub-contractors or implementing partners, a dynamic that often sidelines their deep, contextual knowledge of local gender dynamics and power structures. This partnership model, critiqued by scholars and practitioners alike, perpetuates a system where INGOs are seen as bearing the technical expertise including on gender, while local actors are valued primarily for their access and community liaison capabilities, creating a dependency that undermines the sustainability and local ownership of interventions (Krause, 2018; Schmidt, 2020). The global “localization” agenda, a core commitment of the Grand Bargain, aims to address this imbalance by channelling more direct funding and decision-making power to local and national responders.

However, the literature reveals that in the Nigerian context, its implementation has been sluggish and often superficial, hampered by donor risk aversion, stringent due diligence requirements, and capacity assessments that favour international actors, thereby maintaining a gendered political economy of aid where the actors closest to the crisis, particularly women-led groups, remain the most financially starved and politically marginalized. This critical review of the literature reveals a significant and problematic gap. While extensive research exists on the gendered impacts of the conflict and, separately, on the operational challenges of the

humanitarian response, there is a scarcity of systematic, empirical studies that bridge these two domains. Few works provide a nuanced, comparative analysis of how the different categories of non-state actors like INGOs, NNGOs, and LWLOs interpret, operationalize, and ultimately influence gender-responsive humanitarianism in their daily practice. The lived experiences, strategic choices, and internal challenges of these actors in integrating gender within the specific cultural, religious, and security constraints of Northeast Nigeria remain underexplored.

This study seeks to fill this void by interrogating the micro-practices of these NSAs, moving beyond policy rhetoric to examine the tangible mechanisms through which gender is addressed or overlooked. It positions itself to answer critical questions about the divergent interpretations of “gender-responsiveness,” the power dynamics embedded in funding and partnerships, and the tangible consequences of these arrangements for achieving genuinely equitable and effective humanitarian outcomes for the crisis-affected populations of Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe states.

The Gendered Architecture of Funding and Partnerships

The operational landscape for non-state actors in Northeast Nigeria is fundamentally structured by a deeply hierarchical and gendered political economy of aid, which critically determines the scope and quality of gender-responsive interventions. International NGOs, with their established administrative systems and direct lines to Western donors, predominantly function as financial and programmatic gatekeepers, controlling the flow of resources and setting strategic priorities that often align more with donor mandates than with hyper-localized gender realities. In this model, Nigerian National NGOs and, to an even greater extent, Local Women-Led Organizations are frequently relegated to the role of sub-contractors, implementing pre-designed projects for a fraction of the overhead costs and with minimal influence over the foundational program design or the gender frameworks being applied (Schmidt, 2020).

This creates a paradoxical dynamic where the actors possessing the most intimate, context-specific understanding of gender dynamics—such as the intricacies of clan-based patriarchy, the role of religious leaders in shaping gender norms, and the informal support networks among displaced women—are systematically excluded from the decision-making tables where these interventions are conceived.

The “localization” agenda, while rhetorically championed in documents like the Grand Bargain, has in practice done little to dismantle these entrenched power structures; instead, it has often manifested as a technical exercise in “capacity-building” where local partners are trained to comply with INGO and donor protocols, rather than a transformative reallocation of power and resources that would value and integrate their indigenous knowledge as critical expertise (Krause, 2018). This system not only stifles innovation and local ownership but also perpetuates a form of neo-colonial practice in the humanitarian sector, where gender is often framed as a technical problem to be solved by external frameworks, thereby marginalizing the very actors who are best positioned to navigate the complex socio-cultural terrain and facilitate sustainable, community-owned change.

Navigating Cultural and Security Constraints on Gender Programming

The implementation of gender-responsive humanitarian action in Northeast Nigeria is not occurring in a vacuum but is profoundly mediated by a complex web of cultural-religious norms and severe security constraints, which collectively shape and often constrain the operational space for all non-state actors. The region’s deeply entrenched patriarchal and religious structures present a formidable challenge to interventions aimed at transforming gender relations, as efforts to promote women’s economic empowerment, political participation, or sexual and reproductive health rights can be perceived as externally imposed, Western values that threaten local identity and social order. This often forces NGOs, particularly national and local ones, into a delicate balancing act: they must adhere to international gender standards to secure funding and legitimacy from the global humanitarian community, while simultaneously maintaining their local acceptance and access by negotiating with, and sometimes acquiescing to, traditional and religious authorities who may hold conservative views on gender roles (Krause, 2018).

For example, programs that seek to provide direct cash transfers to women or establish women-only safe spaces can face significant backlash from male community members, requiring extensive dialogue and confidence-building to proceed without inciting backlash or putting beneficiaries at risk. Compounding these cultural tensions are the omnipresent security threats from insurgent groups and the militarized nature of the response, which impose movement restrictions on humanitarian staff and dictate access to populations in need. These security

protocols, while necessary, often have unintended gendered consequences; for instance, constraints on female staff's mobility can limit their ability to access and support other women and girls in purdah or in areas where female beneficiaries cannot speak freely to male aid workers, thereby replicating the very gender barriers the response seeks to overcome and leaving critical protection gaps unaddressed.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by an integrated theoretical framework combining Feminist Political Economy (FPE) and a critical gendered analysis of the localization discourse. This dual lens provides a robust foundation for analyzing the power dynamics, material conditions, and ideological constructs that shape how gender-responsive humanitarianism is practiced by non-state actors in North-east Nigeria.

Feminist Political Economy serves as the primary analytical lens. That interrogate how global and local power relations, rooted in patriarchal and capitalist systems, structure the distribution of resources, labour, and authority within the humanitarian operation (True, 2012). It moves the analysis beyond policy rhetoric to examine the material and political-economic realities that determine which actors control funding, whose knowledge is validated as expertise, and how the division of humanitarian labour is gendered and racialized. This perspective is essential for understanding the hierarchical relationships between international and local actors. This (FPE) lens is then applied specifically to deconstruct the “localization” agenda, framing it not as a neutral technical process but as a deeply gendered power dynamic. The framework posits that for localization to be transformative for gender equality, it must involve a radical redistribution of power and resources to local actors, particularly women-led organizations, rather than merely subcontracting them to implement predefined, externally-validated models.

The second component of the framework involves applying a critical feminist lens to the prominent humanitarian agenda of “localization.” Rather than accepting localization as a neutral or inherently positive technical process, this study frames it as a site of gendered power dynamics. By integrating FPE with a critical gendered analysis of localization, this framework provides a cohesive logic for the study. The FPE lens exposes the hierarchical economic and political

structures that govern humanitarian action, while the localization critique analyzes how the prevailing response to these hierarchies often fails to address their gendered foundations.

This integrated framework guides the investigation to answer critical questions: How do the material constraints and power imbalances identified by FPE manifest in the partnership models between INGOs, NNGOs, and LWLOs? In what ways does the current implementation of the localization agenda challenge or reinforce the patriarchal and neo-colonial structures within the humanitarian system? Ultimately, it positions the study to argue that achieving genuine gender-responsive humanitarianism is contingent upon a fundamental transformation of the political economy of aid itself, moving beyond technical fixes to address core issues of power, resources, and epistemic justice.

Methodology

This research employed a qualitative, single-case study design focused on Northeast Nigeria to facilitate an in-depth, context-specific investigation. The study utilized a multi-method approach of data collection. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposively selected sample of 35 participants, including staff from International NGOs (12), Nigerian National NGOs (13), and Local Women-Led Organizations (10). Additionally, four Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were held with separate groups of male and female beneficiaries in Internally Displaced persons' (IDPs) camps in Maiduguri and Yola. Data collection was supplemented by a detailed analysis of key documents, including humanitarian response plans, NGO reports, and cluster meeting minutes. Thematic analysis, using a hybrid process of inductive and deductive coding supported by NVivo software, was used to analyze the transcribed data. Rigorous ethical protocols were maintained, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, and employing a trauma-informed approach to minimize the risk of harm to participants, with referral pathways to psychosocial support services made available.

Study Area

The selected area of research would focus on three states in Nigeria's North-East geopolitical zone Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe. These states have been significantly impacted by insurgency, primarily as a result of various activities of Boko-Haram and other militant groups.

The specific local government areas (LGAs) chosen for the study are, Bama, Jere, Konduga, Maiduguri (IMC), and Moguno in Borno. While Fufere, Girei, Songari, Yola North and Yola South in Adamawa. In these same vein Damaturu, Funai, Gujba, Nguru and Potiskum in Yobe State. Borno, at the epicenter of Boko Haram's insurgency, has been one of the most affected states in Nigeria. Bama, Jere, Konduga, Maiduguri (IMC) and Moguno, the selected LGAs, are notable for their strategic and historical importance in the insurgency. Bama, for example, was a major battleground and has faced large-scale destruction, while Jere serves as a key location for displaced populations and humanitarian efforts.

Adamawa, also located in the North-East, has faced insurgent activities, particularly in the northern part of the state. Fufere, Girei, Songari, and Yola North in Adamawa have witnessed attacks and occupation by insurgents in the past, making them critical areas for understanding the broader impact of insurgency. Yola South, though less internationally recognized, plays a key role in local dynamics and represents the broader rural challenge posed by insurgency. Yobe has similarly experienced substantial insurgency-related disruptions, particularly in the selected LGAs of Damaturu, Funai, Gujba, Nguru and Potiskum. These areas have faced both direct attacks from insurgents and have suffered from widespread displacement, with challenges to infrastructure, governance, and community resilience. The North-East geopolitical zone is generally characterized by poverty, high unemployment, and limited access to education and social services, conditions that have exacerbated the rise of insurgency in the region. The selected LGAs are representative of the broader challenges faced by the region, including the displacement of populations, destruction of livelihoods, and the breakdown of traditional governance structures. Each LGA provides a unique context in which non-kinetic counterinsurgency strategies, such as those outlined by Nwoli (2019) and Galula (1964), could be analyzed for their effectiveness in fostering peace and stability. The geopolitical relevance of these areas lies in their strategic importance to both local governance and national security. Understanding the dynamics in these LGAs is essential for devising policies that address insurgency and promote sustainable development and peacebuilding. The information required is presented in the table below and Appendix section for reference purpose.

Table 1. Study population

S/N	Respondent	population
1.	Staff from International NGOs	12
2.	Nigerian National NGOs	13
3.	Local Women-Led Organizations	10
	Total	35

Note. Author Compalation

Findings and Analysis

Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs (FMHA-01) took a positivist and policy-aligned view, asserting:

“The impact of our coordinated partners on displaced populations is evident nutrition levels have improved, and learning centers are functioning even in hard-to-reach centers.”

A program officer with a local NGO (KII-NGO-AD-03) emphasized; “If not for these actors, many people would have died silently. We go into areas the government abandoned years ago in order to revive people from such areas.” This resonates with Risse’s (2011) theory of “areas of limited statehood,” where humanitarian actors substitute for the state. This is especially visible in IDP camps across Borno and Yobe, where governance is often outsourced, informally, to INGOs and faith-based networks. These findings underscore the crucial role of non-state actors in bridging health service gaps within IDP camps, consistent with Adebayo (2022), who emphasized that access to health care and psycho-social support remains a cornerstone of humanitarian assistance in conflict-affected regions.

Informant Interviews (KIIs). The North-east Development Commission NEDC (NEDC-04) admitted the gap-filling impact of HNSAs in the post-conflict reconstruction phase:

“They don’t just offer relief they train returnees, support trauma healing, and enable economic reintegration. In his statement he buttress that majority of the service rendered and needed by the Internally Displaced Person in the camp site are often health related”

Similarly, Adebayo (2022), emphasized that access to health care and psycho-social support remains a cornerstone of humanitarian assistance in conflict-affected regions as majority of the people in the IDPs camps suffers from one sickness or the other due to open environment and poor hygiene from over congestion.

further through the Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs (FMHA-01) took a positivist and policy-aligned view, asserting; “The impact of our coordinated partners on displaced populations is evident nutrition levels have improved, and learning centers are functioning even in hard-to-reach centers.” In another findings by Musa (2021), who emphasized that humanitarian education programs are critical not only for continuity of learning but also for fostering resilience and stability among children affected by conflict.

the Key Informant Interviews (KIIs).An official at the National Commission for Refugees, Migrants, and IDPs (NCFRMI-01) shared:

“We’ve developed MoUs and joint frameworks with some NGOs. That reduces conflict and improves accountability. Going further he said that social tension as being one of the most often problem inflaming peaceful coexistence has people leaves in panic all there days in the camps”

The finding highlighted that peace-building dimension of humanitarian action, supporting the view of salvaticci (2020), who noted that beyond material aid, the activities of non-state actors play a vital role in strengthening social cohesion and mitigating conflict in fragile communities.

The analysis of the data revealed three central themes characterizing the implementation of gender-responsive humanitarianism by non-state actors in Northeast Nigeria.

First, interpretations of “gender-responsiveness” diverged significantly across actor types. INGOs demonstrated a policy-driven, technical approach focused on integrating gender markers into donor reports and sectoral programming. In contrast, NNGOs emphasized a relational and contextually-embedded approach, prioritizing community acceptance and navigating traditional power structures. LWLOs articulated a holistic model of empowerment, viewing gender as inseparable from trauma healing, social cohesion, and grassroots advocacy, rooted in shared lived experience.

Second, the findings exposed a gendered architecture of funding and partnerships. A clear hierarchy was evident, with INGOs acting as financial gatekeepers, while NNGOs and LWLOs were predominantly subcontracted as implementers with minimal influence over program design. This created a “capacity-building paradox,” where local actors were trained on international gender frameworks while their deep contextual knowledge was systematically undervalued and underutilized.

Third, all NSAs navigated a complex terrain of cultural and security constraints. Programs promoting women’s economic empowerment or participation often faced backlash from conservative community leaders, forcing organizations into delicate negotiations. Furthermore, security protocols and movement restrictions often had unintended gendered consequences, limiting female staff’s access to vulnerable women and girls and thus replicating the very barriers the response sought to overcome.

Recommendations

I) Donors and Policymakers should create a dedicated, simplified funding stream with tailored capacity-building for Local Women-Led Organizations to access resources directly. It is also important to mandate and fund their meaningful participation in all levels of humanitarian coordination, including sector cluster meetings.

II) The international NGOs transition from sub-contracting to equitable partnerships, involving local actors in joint needs assessments, program design, and budgeting should implement mentoring and co-facilitation models for gender programming that formally integrate the contextual expertise of LINGO and LWLO staff.

III) There is need for Nigerian Government to strengthen the accountability mechanisms for the UNSCR 1325 National Action Plan by formally monitoring and reporting on the gender-responsive performance of all humanitarian actors operating in the Northeast.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the role of non-state actors in gender-responsive humanitarianism in Northeast Nigeria is critically shaped by a hierarchical and gendered political economy of aid. The concept of gender-responsive humanitarianism has thus emerged from feminist practice as a critical corrective, demanding the aid interventions move beyond a one-size fit all model to actively recognize, and respond to, the distinct needs, rights, and capabilities of women, girls, men,

and boys. The divergent approaches of INGOs, NNGOs, and LWLOs, coupled with inequitable partnership models and significant operational constraints, reveal that without addressing the structural power imbalances in funding and decision-making, the full potential of the localization agenda for advancing gender equality will remain unrealized. Empowering Local Women-Led Organizations through direct resourcing and inclusive governance is not merely an operational shift but a fundamental prerequisite for humanitarian action that is both genuinely gender-responsive and sustainably locally owned. Therefore, this research work finding, articulated a holistic model of empowerment, viewing gender as inseparable from trauma healing, social cohesion, and grassroots advocacy, rooted in shared lived experience and also the findings exposed a gendered architecture of funding and partnerships which are applicable in any conflict settings.

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