

Women's Knowledge, Attitude and Practice of Abortion among IDPs in Benue State, Nigeria

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Abstract

It is estimated that about 73 million abortions are carried out yearly worldwide. Regrettably, 45%, which is more than half of the global estimates are performed unsafely and what is more, 97% of these unsafe abortions take place in developing countries. This study sought to examine knowledge, attitude, and practice of abortion among internally displaced women (IDW) in Benue state, Nigeria. The study examined the liberal, conservative and the natural law theory of abortion. A cross sectional study with a self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data from 560 displaced adults, and a total of 15 displaced elderly men and women as well as health workers were selected as key informants for the study. Findings of the study revealed that majority, 72.86% women had some knowledge of abortion. There was a general disapproval of abortion practice by IDPs women with a magnitude of 77.50% of the total population and the study however discovered that there was high practice of abortion among displaced women particularly the young girls in Benue State. The study concluded if proper education is not taken to IDPs; behaviour change is not modified and encouraged; contraceptive use is not introduced, abortion will one day hold sway among IDPs. Therefore, the researcher recommended adequate sensitisation about the implications of unsafe abortion. There should be more orientation to dissuade the use of abortion and rather encourage contraceptive use to reduce unintended pregnancies and their attendant need for induced abortion.

Keywords: Abortion, Attitude, Internally Displaced Persons, Knowledge, Practice.

Introduction

It is estimated that about 73 million abortions are carried out yearly worldwide¹. Regrettable, 45%, which is more than half of the global estimates are performed unsafely and what is more, 97% of these unsafe abortions take place in developing countries, where reproductive health is critical especially for internally displaced persons (IDPs)^{2 3}. More so, it is sad to note that unsafe abortion is a leading cause, though preventable, of maternal deaths and morbidities. It can lead to physical and mental health complications as well as social and economic burdens for women, communities and health systems⁴. Estimates by the United Nations statistics Division, show that, between 2015 and 2019, there were 2,170,000 abortions in Eastern Europe, 299,000 in Northern Europe, and 377,000 in Western Europe, and 464,000 in Southern Europe⁵. This shows that within the period 2015-2019, Europe recorded a total of 3.1 million abortions out of the 73 million global cases indicating a low incidence rate.

Internally displaced persons are people who have been forced to leave their homes, but have remained within the borders of their country of origin⁶.

The number of IDPs worldwide is 71.1 million as at the end of 2022, and three-quarters of the world's IDPs live just in 10 countries of the world. These displacements primarily are as a result of wars and violence due to ethnic conflicts and religious violence, as well as natural disasters such as famine and floods. More than half of the total people displaced globally in 2018 were women and girls, who experienced displacement and face

¹ Bearak Jonathan, Anna Popinchalk, Bela Ganatra, Ann-Beth Moller, Ozge Tuncalp, Cynthia Beavin, Lorraine Kwok, and Leontine Alkema. "Unintended Pregnancy and Abortion by Income, Region, and the Legal Status of Abortion: Estimates from a Comprehensive Model for 1990-2019". *The Lancet Global Health*, 8 no. 9 (2020). [https://doi.org/10.1016/s2214-109x\(20\)30315-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/s2214-109x(20)30315-6).

² "Abortion". World Health Organization, November 25, 2021. <https://www.who.int/news-room/factsheet/detail/abortion>.

³ Titiyos A. Kebede, Hailegebriel T. Shifarawsh, Habte M. Adeba, Adan A, Kassaw Jemail, Miller M., Agarwal Alek and Kathleen A. O'Connell. "Sexual and Reproductive Health Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices among Internally Displaced Persons in the Somalia Region of Ethiopia: Baseline Assessment". Washington DC and Addis Ababa: Engender Health: (2020).

⁴ "Unsafe Abortion: Global and Regional Estimates of the Incidence of Unsafe Abortion and Associated Mortality in 2008". World Health Organization. Accessed August 27, 2023. <https://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications-detail-/unsafe-abortion-2008/>.

⁵ Op. Cit., Bearak et al., p.1.

⁶ Op. Cit., Titiyos et al., p.1.

challenges differently from men and boys⁷. Relating to the above, Marlow, Kunnuji, Esiet, Buloye and Izugbara⁸ state that young women and girls in displaced settings are particularly vulnerable to unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortion, and gender-based violence as well as early forced marriage. These plights indeed call for investigation for possible solutions.

According to the Guttmacher Institute⁹, between 1990-1994 and 2015-2019, there were 886,000 cases of abortion in the United States, 97,500 The total cases in America were 6.3 million which were slightly higher than Europe. From 1990 through 2019, Central Asia had 705,000 unintended pregnancies and 560,000 were aborted¹⁰. Asia had 51.7 million cases which is significantly higher than that of America or Europe. Africa in total had a sum total of 10.2 million abortions performed that period which is moderate compared to the horrendous cases in Asia.

In Nigeria, abortion is illegal until when performed to save a woman's life. However, abortions are still common, and most are unsafe which may be due to lack of knowledge of the repercussions involved or because of the restrictions on abortion in the country coupled with the upsurge of unwanted pregnancies¹¹. In Benue State, many young girls have been forced to flee their homes and settle as internally displaced persons and keep risking their lives with unsafe abortions due to unwanted pregnancies¹² and probably because of poor knowledge and attitude towards the practice of abortion. Many young girls in IDPs encounter the challenge of absence of safe sexual and reproductive health services. Poor knowledge may likely lead to poor attitude and practice of abortion by women of reproductive age. It against this backdrop that this study is carried out.

⁷ "Women and Girls in Internal Displacement". IDMC - Internal Displacement Monitoring Center. March 1, 2020. <https://www.internal-displacement.org/publications/women-and-girls-in-internal-displacement>

⁸ Marlow Heather M., Michael Kunnuji., Adenike Esiet., Funsho Bukoye, and Chimaraoke Izugbara. "The Sexual and Reproductive Health Context of an Internally Displaced Persons' Camp in Northeastern Nigeria: Narratives of Girls and Young Women". *Frontiers in Reproductive Health* 3(2022). <https://doi.org/10.3389/frph.2021.779059>

⁹ "Global and Regional Estimates of Unintended Pregnancy and Abortion. Guttmacher Institute, 2022. The Guttmacher Institute, 501(3). <https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/global-and-regional-estimates-of-unintended-pregnancy-and-abortion>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ "Abortion in Nigeria". Guttmacher Institute, August 24, 2022b. <https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/abortion-nigeria>.

¹² Ibid.

Of course, few studies have been conducted about abortion in Nigeria. More so, the few that are carried out such as that of Lamina¹³ on “prevalence of abortion and contraceptive among women seeking repeat induced abortion in Western Nigeria”, did not cover knowledge and attitude of women especially those in IDPs camps in Nigeria and Benue state particularly. This study, therefore, specifically aims to assess knowledge, attitude and practice of abortion among women in IDPs camps in Benue State, Nigeria.

Although a study conducted in Lagos state, Nigeria on female students, shows that many of them had some knowledge of abortion, however, this knowledge seems to be inadequate which may hinder the utilisation of safe abortion services¹⁴. Similarly, Espinoza, Samandiri and Anderson¹⁵, revealed that although adolescents are cognizant of abortion as a service, their knowledge of legality, methods of termination and access points for abortion is low. Studies are increasing about abortion. Nevertheless, not much is done on IDPs. A study by Abioloa, Oke, Balogun and Olatona¹⁶, revealed that the attitudes of respondents which supported abortion were generally poor, only a few of the respondents had a supportive attitude towards abortion. In a similar trend, Omo-Aghoja, Omo-Aghoja, Okonofua, Aghedo, Umueri, Otayohwo, Feyi-waboso, Onowhalpor and Inikori¹⁷, found that culture and religion abhor abortion and the participants of their study demonstrated a disapproval towards abortion, as they stated that abortion is problematic, prone to complications, and can even lead to death. Contrary to the above assertions, Oshoding¹⁸ in a study in Bendel (now Edo)

¹³ Lamina Mustafa Adelaja. “Prevalence of Abortion and Contraceptive among Women Seeking Repeat Induced Abortion in Western Nigeria”. *Journal of Pregnancy* (2015): 1 – 7. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2015/486203>.

¹⁴ Mekuira Mulugeta, Dechasa Daba, Teka Girma, and Adamu Birhanu. “Assessment of Knowledge on Abortion Law and Factors Affecting it among Regular Undergraduate Female Students of Ambo University, Oromia Region, Ethiopia, 2018: A Cross Sectional Study. *Contraceptive and Reproductive Medicine* 5 no. 1 (2020): <https://doi.org/10.1AAAA186/s40834-020-00136-3>

¹⁵ Espinoza Cecilia, Ghazaleh Samandari, and Kathyryn Anderson. “Abortion Knowledge, Attitudes, and Experiences among Adolescent Girls: A Review of the Literature”. *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters* 28 no.1 (2020): <https://doi.org/10.1080/26410397.2020.1744225>

¹⁶ Op. Cit., Abiola et al., p.6.

¹⁷ Omo-Aghoja, L.O., Omo-Aghoja, V.W., Aghoja, C.O. F.E., OKonofua F.E., Aghedo O., Umueri, C., Otayohwo R., Feyi-waboso P., Onowhakpor E.A., and Inilori, K.A. “Factors Associated with the Knowledge, Practice and Perceptions of Contraception in Rural Southern Nigeria.” *Ghana Medical Journal* 43, no. 3 (2020): <https://doi.org/10.4314/gmj.v43j3.55326>.

¹⁸ Oshodin Osakyuki G. “Attitude towards Abortion among Teenagers in Bendel State of Nigeria”. *Journal of the Royal Society of Health* 105, no. 1 (1985): 22-24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146642408510500105>.

State, Nigeria, found that majority of the teenagers especially females who were 14-17 years old, generally strongly feel that abortion is desirable.

Consequently, though there is high restrictive law on abortion in Nigeria, it is estimated that 1.25 million induced abortions occurred in 2012¹⁹. This shows that a significant number of women especially the displaced may be practicing abortion in Nigeria probably due to unplanned pregnancies. According to Bankole, Adewole, Hussain, Awolude, Singh and Akinyemi²⁰, there are many cases of clandestine abortions, despite the restrictive abortion law in Nigeria, due to the country's low contraceptive prevalence which leads to a substantial number of women having unintended pregnancies.

This study examines the liberal theory, the conservative theory and the natural law theory on abortion in explaining knowledge, attitude and practice of abortion. According to the liberal view, abortion is a private activity which should be permissive by those who want to commit it²¹. This theory is liberal defense of a permissive abortion policy which rests in denying the moral standing of the fetus. This view justifies one of the objectives of the study stating the practice of abortion. The conservative theory states that abortion is synonymous with homicide and it should be restricted without levity²². Contrary to the liberal view, the conservatives ascribe full moral standing to the fetus. This theory relates to the objective of this study regarding attitude towards abortion and is in line with the stand of those who have a negative tendency towards the commission of abortion for whatever reason. The basic premise or assumption of the natural law theory is that we discover the highest principle of natural law by looking at aspects of our human nature. Therefore, natural law theory argues that abortion is morally wrong, and that it should not be allowed or permitted.

¹⁹ Op. Cit., Guttmacher Institute, 2022b, p.3.

²⁰ Bankole Akinrinola, Isaac F. Adewole, Hussain Olutosin Awolude, Susheela Singh, and Joshua O. Akinyemi. "The incidence of abortion in Nigeria". *International Perspectives on Sexual Reproductive Health* 41 no. 4 (2015): 170-181. <https://doi.org/10.1363/4117015>.

²¹ Sumner, L.W. (1981). *Abortion and moral theory*. Princeton University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ct7zvdmc>

²² Ibid.

Objectives

This study seeks the following objectives:

- i. To assess if internally displaced women in Benue State have knowledge about abortion.
- ii. To find out attitude of internally displaced women towards abortion.
- iii. To assess whether internally displaced women in Benue State practice abortion.

Materials and Methods

This study was carried out in Benue State. Benue is located in North Central geopolitical zone of Nigeria and the state comprised of 23 local government areas. Although the exact number of displaced people in Benue state is unknown, there are not less than two million (2,000,000) persons displaced from their ancestral homes due to continued herders-farmers violent conflicts²³. Displaced people live not only in official and unofficial camp settings but also in uncompleted buildings, market squares, church premises and stay in houses of neighbours within the state.

The population of this study was all displaced adults. This population was chosen because men and women are involved in sexual and reproduction process. Also, the study selected 15 people including the elderly displaced men and women as well as health workers as key informants.

A multi-stage sampling was employed for the study, using probabilistic or scientific and non-probabilistic sampling procedures. First, a cluster random sampling was used to divide the 23 local government areas in Benue state into 3 clusters. They are Zone A which comprised all the local governments in Benue North; Zone B, consisted of all the local governments in Benue West and Zone C, covered the local councils in Benue South. Secondly, a purposive sampling was used to select 2 local governments in each of the clusters; Zone A: Logo, Kwande; Zone B: Guma, Gwer-West; Zone C: Okpokwu and Agatu, making it 6 clusters. The justification for the purposive sampling was because only the local governments that have IDPs were chosen. Thirdly, a systematic random sampling was used to select 100 subjects in each of the six clusters bringing a total of 600 subjects as sample

²³ Duru, Peter. "Benue Now Home to 27 IDP Camps, Close to 2m IDPs". Vanguard. April 1, 2022. <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2022/04/benue-now-home-to-27-idp-camps-close-to-2m-idps>.

size of the study. The study sample was determined by Taro Yamen's formula with a confidence level of 0.04.

A self-administered structured questionnaire and a key informant interview guide were used as method and instrument of data collection. Data gathered for the study were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively.

Results

The results of this study were based on the number of questionnaires returned by respondents to the researcher. A total of 600 copies of structured questionnaires were distributed to 600 IDP women and only 560 copies were returned valid for data analysis as presented below.

Table 1: Bio-data of respondents

Variable	Frequency (N=560)	Percentage
Sex		
Male	246	43.93
Female	314	56.07
Religion		
Christianity	335	59.82
Islam	105	18.75
Traditional	125	21.43
Age		
18-24	58	10.36
25-31	208	37.14
32-38	142	25.36
39-44	102	18.21
45 above	50	8.93
Marital Status		
Single	140	25.00
Married	102	18.21
Divorced	98	17.50
Separated	220	39.29
Educational Status		
None	02	0.36
FSLC	40	7.14
SSCE	242	43.21
NCE/ND	210	37.51
HND/Degree	60	10.71
Masters	0	0
PhD	0	0

Source: Field Study, 2022.

Data in Table 1 shows demographic variables of respondents. Regarding respondents' sex. More females than the men representing 314 (56.07%) participated in the study. This higher participation of female was due to the fact that females who carry pregnancy were more likely to experience abortion and have relevant opinions to issues of abortion than their male counterparts.

Religious affiliation shows that Christians 335 (59.82%) participated in the study more than traditionalists and Muslims. The predominance of Christian respondents stems from the fact that Benue is a Christian dominated state and more Christians are displaced and live as IDPs than other religions.

On age characteristics of respondents, data in Table 1 shows that those aged 25-31 participated in the study more than the other categories. Their predominance in the study could not be unrelated to being mature enough to have pregnancy and experience abortion. This age bracket is considered as the prime childbearing age and many fell within this category and participated more than the rest.

The marital status of respondents shows that, those who were once married but separated from their husbands 220 (39.29%) participated in the study more than the other categories. This could be because they were separated from their spouses due to the conflicts that pushed them out of their homes. They might have unwanted pregnancies that warranted induced abortions.

Educational attribute of the respondents shows that secondary school certificate examination (SSCE) holders participated mostly in the study than the other levels of educational attainment. Perhaps, this category of respondents did not have advanced knowledge of contraceptives and experience unwanted pregnancies to seek for induced abortion.

Table 2: Knowledge of abortion by IDPs women

Items	Responses		Total
	Yes	No	
Are you aware of abortion?	408(72.86)	152(27.14)	560(100)
Do you know if women in this abode commit abortion?	420(75.00)	140(25.00)	560(100)
Do you know where or how abortion is carried out?	429(76.61)	131(23.39)	560(100)
Have you ever heard of abortion from friends, relatives and health officials?	398(71.07)	162(28.93)	560(100)

Source: Field Study, 2022. (Note: All figures in parentheses are percentages)

In Table 2 shows data about knowledge of abortion by internally displaced women in Benue State. From the data, majority 408 (72.86%) affirmed that they are aware of abortion, 470 (75.00%) respondents also agreed that they know women that commit abortion among the displaced. Furthermore, 429 (76.61%) respondents said 'yes' they know where and how abortion can be done, and 398 (71.07%) affirmed that they heard of abortions from friend, relatives and from healthcare practitioners.

Unwanted pregnancies have pushed young ladies to know what abortion is. They hear of it from friends, elderly women and they also know where or how it is carried out. (Source: KII, 10th March, elderly displaced woman, aged 52, Makurdi LGA, 2022).

Table 3: Attitude towards abortion by IDPs women

Attitude	Frequency	Percentage
Positive	126	22.50
Negative	434	77.50
Total	560	100

Source: Field Study, 2022.

Table 3 shows various responses towards abortion among IDPs women in Benue State. A very high number of respondents, 434 (77.50%) were not in support of the practice of abortion by women. This finding may not be unconnected with the fact that majority of women in the study were Christians and Christian teaching abhor and strongly preach against the practice of abortion and condemn those who indulge in such acts as not just profane but nefarious before man and God.

I have been here for 2 years since displacement. Although some people do abortion, it's rare for one to discuss the issue of abortion, in fact many women detest it because it's illegal and against morality here. (Source: KII, 25th March, male elder, Aged 68, Gwer-West LGA, 2022)

Table 4: Practice of Abortion by IDP women

Items	Responses		Total
	Yes	No	
Do you know women who have ever committed an abortion?	401(71.61%)	159(28.39%)	560(100)
Abortion is carried out with the use of herbal mixtures or visit to unqualified health officials.	365(65.18%)	195(34.82%)	560(100)

Young unmarried ladies	329(58.75%)	231(41.25%)	560(100)
commit abortion More			
Many women who commit abortion get sick or die.	450(80.36%)	110(19.64%)	560(100)

Source: Field Study, 2022. (Note: All figures in parentheses are percentages)

Table 4 presents responses concerning the practice of abortion by IDP women. The data show that 401(71.61%) practiced abortion. Also, 365 (65.18%) respondents confirmed that abortion is carried out using herbal mixtures or through unqualified health practitioners, 329 (58.75%) respondents stated that young women who are single commit abortion more than their married counterparts, and 450 (80.36%) nodded in affirmation that, many victims of abortion get sick or die.

This is my third year working as a health officer with displaced persons. Young ladies on getting pregnant resort to drinking of pawpaw leaves and start bleeding. Some go to towns and do it with health practitioners in secret. And sometimes complications arise because some of these people are not very skillful. Many of the victims hide and die because of shame to report for medical care. Some report and we manage their situations.

(Source: KII, 28th March, Female, Midwife, Aged 39, Guma LGA, 2022).

Discussion

Findings of this study reveal that many of the internally displaced women (IDW) in Benue State have known what abortion is. They know it from friends, relatives and other health officials. They also demonstrated some knowledge of how and where to abort. This finding is similar to that of Abiola, Oke, Balogun, Olatona and Adegbesan-Omilabu²⁴ who carried out research in Lagos and found that girls in secondary schools have some knowledge of abortion.

²⁴ Abiola, Adul-Hakeem O, Oluwabunmim A. Oke, Mobolanle R. Balogun, Foluke A. Olatona, and Maymunah A. Adegbesan-Omilabu. "Knowledge, Attitude, and Practice of Abortion among Female Students of Two Public Senior Secondary Schools in Lagos Mainland Local Government Area, Lagos State". Journal of Clinical Sciences no. 2 (2016): <https://doi.org/10.4103/2408-7408.179682>.

Secondly, the study found that majority of the respondents 77.50% to be precise displayed a negative attitude toward abortion. In essence, they disapprove abortion. This finding confirms that of Abiola, Oke, Balogun, Olatona and Adegbesan-Omilabu²⁵ who also found in their study that attitudes of many of their respondents toward supporting abortion were generally poor. Also, a study by Omo-Aghoja, Omo-Aghoja, Feyi-Wabosa and Esume²⁶ found that, culture and religion abhor abortion and in that regard respondents of their study frowned at the practice of abortion. On a different note, however, a study by Oshoding²⁷ found that female teenagers in a study had a positive attitude and strongly feel that abortion should be given green light to be practiced in Nigeria.

The study also found that the practice of abortion is high amongst internally displaced women in Benue state. This finding is akin to the findings by the Guttmacher Institute²⁸ that abortion practice is high in Nigeria with 27 per 1000 women of child bearing age in North Central Nigeria. This high rate of abortion is not unconnected to the lack of contraceptive use which triggers unwanted pregnancies among young unmarried women in IDP centres.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Abortion is regarded as one of the high factors of maternal complications and death, especially when performed by unskilled practitioners. Maybe because of this reason, there is stringent legislation prohibiting abortion in Nigeria. Again, many people hold abortion as a bizarre practice and detest it. Therefore, due to the legal and moral restraint on abortion, women who need abortion service carry it out clandestinely and mostly in the hands of quacks. Some, wrongfully self-administer abortion medications. This has brought a lot of complications, morbidities and death to women bearing children especially in low and middle-income populations. Internally displaced women demonstrated an average knowledge of abortion, have a

²⁵ Op. Cit, Abiola et al., p.8.

²⁶ Omo-Aghoja, L.O., Omo-Aghoja, V.W., Aghoja, C.O. F.E., OKonofua F.E., Aghedo O., Umueri, C., Otayohwo R., Feyi-waboso P., Onowhakpor E.A., and Inilori, K.A. "Factors Associated with the Knowledge, Practice and Perceptions of Contraception in Rural Southern Nigeria." *Ghana Medical Journal* 43, no. 3 (2020): <https://doi.org/10.4314/gmj.v43j3.55326>.

²⁷ Oshodin Osakyuki G. "Attitude towards Abortion among Teenagers in Bendel State of Nigeria". *Journal of the Royal Society of Health* 105, no. 1 (1985): 22-24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146642408510500105>.

²⁸ Op. Cit., Guttmacher Institute, p.2.

lukewarm attitude towards it but continue to commit it. Thus, this study concludes that, there is high rate of maternal morbidity and mortality due to inadequate knowledge on safe sex and reproductive health.

1. The study recommends that there should be an educational campaign about the dangers of committing abortion especially through unskilled practitioners and non-recommended medications, particularly among internally displaced persons. The relevant stake holders should consider the issue of unsafe abortion as a public health problem among women who are displaced and are vulnerable to circumstances that leads to abortion.
2. The attitude of internally displaced women generally is negative to the practice of abortion. Therefore, National Orientation Agency (NOA), Primary Health Care Centres (PHCC) and religious organisations should continuously engage Internally Displaced Women and teach them about abortion so that they can develop a more accommodating attitude toward abortion.
3. Contraceptives should be made easily accessible and affordable to unmarried women who do not want unplanned pregnancies to curtail the issue of seeking for induced abortion. On the whole, there should be improved provision of sexual and reproductive healthcare services to displaced populations to check unplanned pregnancies. Meanwhile, women who have developed complications in the course of abortion should not be left unattended to.

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