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IMPEDIMENTS TO EFFECTIVE SOCIAL SERVICE DELIVERY IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED COMMUNITIES: AN ASSESSMENT OF TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT GAPS AMONG SOCIAL WORKERS IN GONGULONG COMMUNITY, JERE, BORNO STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the impediments associated with effective social service delivery in the Gongulong community, a conflict-affected area in Jere, Borno State, Nigeria. The paper focuses on training and development gaps among social workers in the Gongulong community. The paper adopted a survey design and collected data from 200 social workers who were randomly selected. These workers were selected from Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), government organizations, and independent practitioners. A structured questionnaire was utilized in the data collection, and the data was analyzed using descriptive statistics. The data identified the existing competencies, challenges, and professional development needs among social workers in the Gongulong community. Findings from the study identified significant gaps in key areas of social work practice, including counseling, ethical decision-making, case management, report writing and crisis intervention. Many of the participants reported low proficiency in these areas, which highlights a critical training and development need. Many limitations to accessing professional development and training were identified in this paper, including lack of organizational support, the existence of time constraints, and limited funding. The social workers expressed a strong interest in advanced degree opportunities, mentorship programs, and in-person workshops in terms of preferred training types. The relevance of continuous professional development and training that would enhance the skills and confidence of social workers in conflict-affected areas has been underscored by the paper. The paper's findings equally stress the institutionalization of context-specific professional development and training initiatives that may address peculiar community needs and emerging challenges in social work practice. The paper recommended targeted training and

context-specific capacity building, collaborative learning and technology-enhanced training, and organizational and financial support for professional development.

Keywords: Social service, social work, community development, training, development.

INTRODUCTION

The effectiveness of social workers lies heavily on their ability to access training and professional development opportunities (Ferguson, 2022), which has a high tendency to enhance their capacity and competence in social service delivery. This is even more pronounced and needed in challenging environments affected by certain disasters and conflicts, which stress the life of individuals offering the need for critical support (Manpaa et al., 2024; Norris et al., 2007). Working on these problems requires providing interventions on critical issues that would address challenges surrounding high poverty, healthcare, nutrition, education, unemployment, shelter, family, water, etc., which the social workers are supposed to be at the forefront of as their primary task in such environments during crises. This is only possible when the social workers have access to capacity-building training and professional development chances, which would prepare them better in their effort to provide social interventions or support that would ameliorate the pain and situation of people.

Despite the need for professional training and development chance, many social workers across conflict-affected communities face challenges in accessing capacity building, which limits their ability to provide effective and efficient social service delivery. The poor access to capacity building is often a result of poor access to training, lack of availability of technology and modern tools for the training, lack of adequate and accessible resources to be deployed for training, and poor organizational support and policies for training (Alamu, 2022; Amadasun, 2020). It is, therefore, timely to carry out this study because it has the potential to unveil the existing gaps in training and development that social workers are facing in one of Nigeria's conflict-affected societies.

Nigeria is one of the countries of the world that faces over a decade-long terror activity, which has led to deaths, destructions, and displacements of people and resources, especially in the North-East region where the Boko Haram crisis has lingered since 2009 (Abdullahi, 2019; Abdullahi & Chikaji, 2020). The situation the region found itself causes a high poverty rate, destabilizes family systems and causes other forms of socio-economic instabilities that signal a high demand for social support requiring the intervention of social workers in almost all the affected communities. This means that the social workers must be well equipped not only with resources but with the latest techniques, methodologies, approaches and tools to carry out social service delivery in an effective and efficient manner, which would prepare them for the challenge of responding to affected populations' concerns.

The limited access to capacity-building opportunities for training and professional development for social workers often limits their ability to carry out the required tasks they are supposed to do. Yet, the affected community under study is an area where efficiency and effectiveness in social work operations are in dire demand following the decade-long Boko Haram conflict experience (Abdullahi, 2023). The existence of multi-faceted challenges, such as the lingering terror conflict that distorted the livelihood system, calls for urgent help for the victims and survivors. Yet, available studies haven't established the existing weaknesses in terms of the capacity of the social workers available in the field, which this

research attempted to fill up in order for policymakers and development practitioners to understand its severity and implications for social service delivery.

The objectives of the research are as follows:

- i. To assess the capacities and competencies of social workers in relation to their professional roles in the Gongulong community.
- ii. To find out the skills and knowledge that are needed to achieve effective and efficient social service delivery in the Gongulong community.
- iii. To find out the lingering training and development challenges considered by the social workers as disturbing in the Gongulong community.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Training and development are essential aspects of social work practice. For social workers to achieve their goals and objectives, they must be adequately trained and re-trained to meet the challenges of conflict or disaster-prone environments. Many organizations sometimes do not bother much about training social workers or pay little attention to training, often because of a lack of funds. However, no matter the reason given by employers concerning the inability to train employees, there is a need to train employees not only because of the gains of the training to employees alone but also because employers also benefit from the training (Aminu, 2020). If an employee receives good training, then there is a greater chance that he can perform better than before the training (Abdullahi & Jarma, 2023).

Professional training and development are central to social work across all fields of endeavors and contexts where various methods of building capacity, majorly on-the-job and off-the-job learning (Aminu, 2020). Although learning on the job is an important mode of learning, it does not always offer the opportunity to gain new insights because it often takes place in one's workplace. It is also not fully recognized or valued by social workers because of how tasks are designed, as learning is often not maximized (Ferguson, 2022). On-the-job learning often relies on existing organizational strategies, which invariably rely on direct, formal, topic-focused, and tangible training activities that are designed to meet perceived needs. Off-the-job training, on the other hand, offers social workers an opportunity to build their capacity outside their workplace environment (Aminu, 2020). It is sometimes referred to as a preferred method because social workers would have the opportunity to gain new insights in a different environment, often availing them the opportunity to concentrate, focus on the training schedule, and learn through formal and informal initiatives.

According to Ferguson (2021), the individuals tagged as social workers are supposed to be provided with detailed and rich evidence of learning in diverse workplace environments through a variety of learning practices which offer the whole human person an immersed impact. According to Gibbs (2014, p. 147), professional development is a concept of "our becoming" rather than "a curriculum for skills", which has the centrality of the whole human person being linked to the integration of learning into the person and individuals embodied experience (Jarvis, 2014). It is in close relation to their personal life that social workers' issues of professional identity formation and sense of readiness and motivation experience their learning (Webb, 2016).

The profession of social work is a dynamic one that requires its practitioner to remain up-to-date with inventions and ideas through the application of research, abiding by new regulations, participating in

capacity development initiatives, and maintaining and enhancing one's professional credentials in order to meet the needs of a changing world. In conflict contexts, for instance, social workers require expert capacity development, which prepares them for emergency response and managing the outcomes of the conflict, such as mental health and psycho-social support (MHPSS). Social workers in conflict or disaster-prone contexts engage with victims and survivors facing a wide range of challenges, including poverty, mental illness, drug and substance abuse, social injustices, and gender-based violence. This makes ongoing professional development necessary in conflict-ravaged communities in order to ensure social workers are equipped to provide relief and succor in response to the problems through effective social services to victims and survivors. In fact, Miller (2015) stressed that the problems become worse in such environments as the conflict lingers, which require more interventions in capacity development in order to cope with the recurring changes and social demands in the field of social work operation.

With increased opportunities for capacity development training, social workers become competent and skilled in their roles, making them experts who are both more committed and tend to achieve better results within short life-span (Graham & Fritsch, 2019). In another research by Mendes and Watson (2017), capacity development for social workers is required as a critical intervention because the social workers operating in conflict affected communities serve as frontline agents that offer immediate relief, and as a result become challenged in many ways including becoming victims themselves. This means that they could need different forms of support in order for them to effectively serve others. Graham & Fritsch (2019) further contend that it is only with regular professional and capacity development and support that social workers would be resilient enough to cope with the growing challenges of conflict-prone societies.

The knowledge and skills of the geographical location, socio-economic dynamics, peacebuilding and conflict management platforms, family and cultural systems and political factors influencing decisions and relationships in the communities are significant areas social workers knowledge needs to be enhanced while operating in disaster or conflict-prone environments (Sullivan & Daro, 2018). Additionally, the field of social work remains an incredibly challenging one because of its hot-desking challenges, probability of high-stress levels and excessive caseloads, which sometimes places the workers themselves on hospital beds or in a traumatic situation, forcing practitioners to suffer (Dillenburger, 2018; Dolman, 2020; White, 2015). Sometimes the practitioners cover for colleagues because of sickness and as a result of poor shifting or a shortage of skilled ones on the ground (Dolman, 2020). In spite of all these, there are largely poor insurance or health coverage systems especially for those working in less developed countries, in addition to other sister concerns related to poor welfare, difficulty accessing good transport systems, cultural barriers, extension of work hours, role conflicts and family obligations (Dolman, 2020).

Many social workers have certain degrees before they get recruited for a social work position, thus signaling some level of competence or capacity. However, the knowledge gained by the workers often from social science disciplines, is difficult for them to apply as they struggle with it in the field, which tends to limit their ability to address a variety of social problems encountered by victims and survivors like trauma that is often common in conflict-affected societies (Bogo & McKnight, 2006). It is in this regard that Banks (2016) emphasizes the need for social workers to build their capacity beyond their degrees or academic qualifications to include field activities that offer more practical and realistic experiences, which also tends to impact the work they do directly in conflict-prone environments.

The integration of technology is another emerging issue that social work and contemporary citizenship give high regard as it offers great value in social service delivery (Cheri & Abdullahi, 2018), which

experts see as necessary for practitioners to be adequately acquainted with. According to Abdullahi and Lawan (2024), technology offers both learners and workers the opportunity for ease of doing business from wherever one intends to operate. The same applies to social workers who intend to acquire skills but are unable to access such opportunities due to the poor availability of physical engagement training programs. Therefore, failure to provide training to social workers in technology can result in the social workers failing to meet the specific needs of the community or conflict-affected individuals.

METHODOLOGY

This is a survey research that adopted a quantitative approach to engage social workers in order to identify their capacities, competencies, skills, knowledge and challenges in relation to social work professional practice in the Gongulong community of Jere local government area of Borno State, Nigeria. The research utilized a semi-structured questionnaire to obtain data from 200 participants who are all social workers serving with government organizations (often termed Ministries, Departments and Agencies [MDAs]), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), or civil society organizations (CSOs) and as independent practitioners (IPs) providing relief and succor to the victims and survivors of the conflict. The 200 targeted participants of the research were randomly sampled and broken down into 72 GOs, 108 NGOs/CSOs, and 20 IPs. Data for this research was analyzed using frequency distribution tables with supporting narrative explanations and interpretations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Existing Capacities and Competencies

This sub-section of the research highlighted the various capacities and competencies existing among the social workers operating in the Gongulong community. The current skill levels of the participants have been measured using certain indicators as shown in the table.

Table 1

Results of the Existing Capacities and Competencies

S/N	Variables / Indicators	Responses	Frequency (%)
1.	Case management	Not proficient	16%
		Slightly proficient	26%
		Moderately proficient	32%
		Very proficient	19%
		Highly proficient	07%
2.	Counseling skills	Not proficient	38%
		Slightly proficient	25%
		Moderately proficient	20%
		Very proficient	10%
		Highly proficient	12%

(continued)

S/N	Variables / Indicators	Responses	Frequency (%)
3.	Community engagement	Not proficient	08%
		Slightly proficient	26%
		Moderately proficient	34%
		Very proficient	20%
		Highly proficient	10%
		Not proficient	38%
4.	Crisis intervention	Slightly proficient	27%
		Moderately proficient	17%
		Very proficient	08%
		Highly proficient	10%
		Not proficient	41%
		Slightly proficient	12%
5.	Report writing	Moderately proficient	25%
		Very proficient	12%
		Highly proficient	10%
		Very confident	14%
		Somewhat confident	13%
		Neutral	39%
6.	Confidence in Handling Ethical Dilemmas	Somewhat unconfident	23%
		Very unconfident	11%

Source: Field Survey (2025)

Table 1 presents data on existing capacities and competencies measured using case management, counseling skills, community engagement, crisis intervention, report writing, and confidence in Handling Ethical Dilemmas. In terms of case management, the responses indicate a moderate level of proficiency overall, but with noticeable gaps. A significant portion of participants, 32 percent, consider themselves moderately proficient in case management, suggesting that most social workers in the community have a basic but functional understanding of the process. However, a substantial proportion (26%) who report being slightly proficient, and 16 percent who feel they are not proficient at all. These numbers reflect an opportunity for improvement in this critical area. Only 7 percent of participants rate themselves as highly proficient, indicating that advanced skills in case management are not widely present.

Counseling skills represent a significant area for improvement, with 38 percent of participants reporting they are not proficient at all. Additionally, 25 percent of social workers feel only slightly proficient, while 20 percent consider themselves moderately proficient. This indicates that more than half of the participants (63%) have a limited ability to provide effective counseling services, which is a core responsibility of social workers. Only 12 percent rated themselves as highly proficient, suggesting that there is a considerable gap in advanced counseling skills. The data highlights the need for focused training and development programs to enhance counseling proficiency, particularly for those at the beginning stages of their careers or those with limited experience in this area.

Community engagement is an area where social workers perform relatively better than other competencies. A majority, 34 percent, consider themselves moderately proficient, and 30 percent (combining very proficient and highly proficient) rate themselves as competent in engaging with the community. Only 8 percent of participants feel they are not proficient in community engagement, which

is a positive sign of the social workers' ability to connect with the community and facilitate collective action. However, there is still room for growth, especially for moderately proficient students.

Crisis intervention appears to be a significant challenge for social workers in the Gongulong community. A large proportion, 38 percent, report that they are not proficient in this crucial skill, and 27 percent are only slightly proficient. This highlights a substantial gap in the ability of social workers to intervene effectively in high-pressure, emergency situations. Only 18 percent of participants consider themselves very or highly proficient in crisis intervention, underscoring the need for targeted training programs to build capacity in this vital area. Crisis intervention skills are essential in managing emergencies and providing support during times of crisis, therefore making it a priority for future training and development initiatives.

Report writing is another area of concern, with 41 percent of participants indicating that they are not proficient in this critical aspect of social work practice. Additionally, 12 percent rate themselves as slightly proficient, which suggests that many social workers may struggle with creating detailed, accurate, and well-structured reports. Only 12 percent of participants are very proficient, and 10 percent are highly proficient in report writing, indicating that there are considerable gaps even in this relatively fundamental skill. Effective report writing for documentation, communication, and case tracking is important, as it is an area where focused training could significantly improve social work practices in the community.

The data regarding social workers' confidence in handling ethical dilemmas reveals a mix of responses. While 14 percent of participants express confidence in their ability to navigate ethical issues in their work, a significant portion (39%) remain neutral, suggesting uncertainty or ambivalence about their ethical competence. A combined 34% (23% somewhat unconfident and 11% very unconfident) express concerns about their ability to manage ethical dilemmas effectively. These results indicate that ethical decision-making is an area where many social workers may feel underprepared or insecure, underlining the need for ethical guidelines and framework training.

Skills and Knowledge for Effective Service Delivery

Section 2 outlines the skills and knowledge deemed essential by social workers for effective service delivery in the Gongulong community. The data reflects participants' key skills and areas of knowledge that the social workers believe are critical for addressing the unique needs of the community. The responses provide valuable insights into the specific capabilities that social workers require to enhance their effectiveness in service delivery and contribute to addressing the challenges faced by the community.

Table 2

Results of the Skills and Knowledge for Effective Service Delivery

S/N	Variables / Indicators	Responses	Frequency (%)
1.	Additional Skills	Communication skills	46%
	Considered Essential for Effective Social Service Delivery	Conflict resolution skills	60%
		Cultural sensitivity skills	60%
		Advocacy skills	58%

(continued)

S/N	Variables / Indicators	Responses	Frequency (%)
	Emotional intelligence skills	55%	
	Trauma-informed care skills	46%	
	Leadership skills	54%	
	Resource mobilization skills	60%	
2. Areas of Knowledge Considered Crucial for Effective Social Work	Knowledge of local resources and services	60%	
	Understanding socio-economic issues in the community	60%	
	Understanding cultural diversity and practices	60%	
	Legal and ethical standards in social work	25%	
	Knowledge of social work policies and procedures	54%	
	Knowledge of psychological theories and therapeutic practices	25%	
3. The Importance of Continuing Education	Very important	55%	
	Important	26%	
	Neutral	04%	
	Not important	12%	
	Not important at all	03%	

Source: Field Survey (2025)

In Table 2 above, the survey highlights that cultural sensitivity, conflict resolution and resource mobilization were considered highly important as 60 percent of participants recognized them as essential. These skills are fundamental in community work where addressing diverse needs and promoting collaboration are key to driving progress. The significance of leadership skills was emphasized by 54 percent of participants, which calls for the need for strong direction and guidance in social service delivery, especially in conflict-affected environments; 58 percent of participants considered advocacy as significant, and another 55 percent saw emotional intelligence as important, which signals social workers' competence in advocacy for positive change, as well as the ability to connect with clients on an emotional level. Another 46 percent of participants considered care and communication for trauma-affected people as an area that is important. This isn't surprising because of the nature of their work that has to do with vulnerable individuals.

The majority of the participants emphasized the importance of knowledge of the local context's services and resources, which signals the need for understanding socio-economic issues and cultural diversity and practices, with 60 percent of participants identifying these areas as crucial for effective social work in the community. These findings underline the significance of contextual awareness in social work practice. While a solid foundation in legal and ethical standards and knowledge of social work policies and procedures was recognized by 25 percent and 54 percent of participants, respectively, these areas were not as highly rated compared to practical, community-based knowledge. Only 25 percent of participants highlighted the importance of psychological theories and therapeutic practices during the research, which suggests that these areas might be seen as secondary to community-specific knowledge in spite of its importance.

The aspect of the importance of continuing education for social workers in the community showed that the majority of participants (55%) considered it as 'very important' which highlights a broad recognition of the need for ongoing professional training and development to stay current with evolving community needs and practices. Another good percent (26%) considered continuing education important based on the response, which further suggests that a general agreement on ongoing learning is necessary for improving service delivery. However, some participants expressed less enthusiasm such as the 12 percent that marked it as not important and 3 percent that indicated it as not important at all. This suggests that there may be a small subset of social workers who feel confident in their current competencies and are less inclined to pursue further education in the study location.

Challenges in Training and Professional Development

Sub-section 3 of the study presents social workers' challenges in accessing training and professional development opportunities in the community. The data collected in this section reflects the various obstacles hindering social workers' participation in continuous professional development. Participants were asked to indicate the challenges they experienced. The responses provide insight into the difficulties social workers encounter in pursuing opportunities for growth and skill enhancement, which may ultimately affect their ability to deliver effective social services in the Gongulong community.

Table 3

Report of the Challenges in Training and Professional Development

S/N	Variables/Indicators	Responses	Frequency (%)
1. Challenges in Accessing Training and Professional Development Opportunities	Inadequate of funding	63%	
	Limited availability of training programs	77%	
	Time constraints, workload and job responsibilities	77%	
	Limited support from the organization	63%	
	High cost of training programs	63%	
	Inadequate skilled trainers or facilitators	40%	
	Language barriers	55%	
	Lack of policies supporting professional development	52%	
	Difficulty in balancing training with personal commitments	40	
2. Frequency of Participation in Professional Development Training	Never	42%	
	Rarely	30%	
	Occasionally	19%	
	Frequently	08%	
	Always	01%	

(continued)

S/N	Variables/Indicators	Responses	Frequency (%)
3. Types of Training Most Beneficial for Professional Growth	In-person training sessions	77%	
	On-the-job training	77%	
	Conferences and seminars	56%	
	Mentorship programs	65%	
	Leadership and management development programs	45%	
	Online courses / Webinars and virtual workshops	45%	
	Personal development and self-care workshops	56%	
	Advanced degree programs	70%	
	Peer learning or group discussions	27%	

Source: Field Survey (2025)

The data presented in Table 3 highlights several challenges faced by social workers in accessing training and professional development opportunities in the Gongulong community where the most commonly reported challenge happened to be the limited availability of training programs as 77 percent of participants indicated it as a barrier. In the same vein, workload, time constraints and job responsibilities were also considered by the participants as significant obstacles by 77 percent of participants. Based on these, the result suggests that social workers struggle to find the time and resources to engage in professional development as a result of the demanding nature of their work. Another 63 percent also pointed out the high cost of training programs as a barrier, further reinforcing the financial challenges faced by social workers.

Again, language barriers were identified by 55 percent and lack of policies supporting professional development by 52 percent, were also highlighted as significant challenges. These suggest that there may be structural or systemic barriers within the community and organizations that hinder access to professional growth. Additionally, inadequate skilled trainers or facilitators (40%) and the difficulty in balancing training with personal commitments (40%) were cited as less common but still noteworthy obstacles. In addition to these challenges, 63 percent of participants reported concern with inadequate funding and limited support from their organization to undergo professional development training. This indicates that financial constraints, coupled with a lack of organizational commitment to professional development are significant factors preventing social workers from accessing essential training.

The frequency of participation in professional development training among social workers was relatively low. A significant portion (42%) of participants indicated that they never participated in professional development training, while 30 percent reported doing so rarely. Only 19 percent of participants engage in training occasionally, and even fewer (8%) reported engaging frequently. A minimal number (1%) of participants reported participating in professional development training always. These findings suggest that, despite the recognition of the importance of training, there is a lack of regular participation, possibly due to the challenges identified earlier, such as time constraints, funding challenges, and poor organizational support.

When asked about the types of training that would be most beneficial for their professional growth, social workers indicated a preference for in-person training sessions and on-the-job training, both of which were selected by 77 percent of participants. These results suggest that hands-on, practical

learning experiences are considered the most effective way to develop skills and knowledge. Additionally, mentorship programs (65%) and conferences and seminars (56%) were also seen as valuable options for professional growth. These forms of training likely provide opportunities for networking, knowledge exchange, and professional guidance, which are key to enhancing the expertise of social workers. While leadership and management development programs and online courses/webinars and virtual workshops were each selected by 45 percent of participants, these options reflect a growing interest in both leadership development and flexible, online learning platforms. Advanced degree programs were also considered highly beneficial (70%), indicating that social workers are keen on further education to improve their professional standing and competencies. On the contrary, peer learning and group discussions constituted 27 percent and it is the least favored option, which suggests further that social workers may prefer structured and formal learning experiences over informal ones.

Discussion of Major Findings

Gaps in Core Competencies

The findings of this research highlight significant gaps in the main competencies of social workers in the community under study. Indicators such as crisis intervention, case management, report writing, ethical dilemmas and counseling are all with flaws based on the findings. A large portion of the participants reported feeling either not proficient and/or slightly proficient in key areas, signaling a clear need for focused training and professional support. Case management for instance is an essential skill for social workers that requires effective coordination of services for clients with complex needs. It is concerning that many participants felt they lacked proficiency in this area, as research by Klein et al. (2017) shows that insufficient case management skills can result in inefficiencies and poor outcomes for clients. Social workers must therefore be equipped in such a way that they can assess client needs, devise appropriate interventions and collaborate effectively with other service providers.

The study also found that many social workers expressed a lack of confidence in navigating ethical dilemmas, a finding that aligns with Banks' (2016) work. Banks stresses that ethical decision-making is a cornerstone of professional practice, as social workers often face tough moral decisions such as balancing client autonomy with the necessity for intervention. The ability to resolve these ethical challenges is crucial for maintaining ethical standards in practice. Similarly, Dillenburger (2018) notes that ongoing training and reflection on ethical decision-making can help enhance social workers' confidence and competence when dealing with these complex situations.

The gaps in counseling and crisis intervention are particularly concerning, as social workers working in communities prone to crises frequently find themselves responding to highly emotional or traumatic situations. Walsh (2016) points out that social workers trained in crisis intervention are better equipped to help individuals cope with immediate distress ensuring better long-term outcomes. However, the finding that the majority of social workers in this study feel "not proficient" or "slightly proficient" in this area supports the concerns raised by Miller (2015), when he emphasizes that under-training in crisis management leads to social workers feeling ineffective and overwhelmed. Additionally, Barker (2017) highlights that insufficient preparation in managing crises not only reduces the ability to deliver quality service but also increases the emotional toll on social workers themselves.

The study also unveiled gaps in report writing as the participants confirmed their inability to write reports in social work practice. Yet, reporting is considered a skill often undervalued despite its essential

role in documentation, advocacy and case follow-ups. Barker (2017) argues that social workers' report writing must be clear, concise, accurately reflect client circumstances, and progress because these documents are often used in legal settings and inform policy decisions. Poor report-writing skills can jeopardize the effectiveness of interventions and reduce the ability of social workers to advocate for clients. This finding aligns with the position of Sullivan & Daro (2018), who state that poor documentation can contribute to poor accountability and transparency in social work practice. With a good report, it is easier to measure program effectiveness. As such, a lack of good report writing skills is a serious challenge.

Importance of Practical Skills and Local Knowledge

The participants highlighted a number of very important skills they considered essential for effective social work including sensitivity to cultures, conflict resolution and resource mobilization skills. These findings align with Sue's (2016) assertion that cultural competency is crucial for addressing the specific challenges faced by diverse communities. Conflict resolution is another critical skill for social workers especially in communities that experience socio-economic challenges, terror activities and intergroup tensions. According to Sue et al. (2018), social workers who are skilled in conflict resolution can effectively mediate disputes and foster community unity which in turn strengthens the social fabric.

Sensitivity to cultures is another area that plays an important role in understanding the values of a community and engaging with clients in a way that respects their beliefs, especially in areas prone to conflict or resource scarcity, such as Gongulong. This skill is particularly important in post-conflict or recovering communities where social workers help to rebuild relationships and promote peace. In addition, knowledge of local resources and the socio-economic environment is critical for social workers, as understanding what services are available and how to mobilize them can significantly enhance their effectiveness. Sullivan & Sze (2018) emphasized that community-based practice is most effective when social workers are familiar with the local context and can connect clients to relevant resources such as healthcare, education and housing.

The research also stresses the importance of ongoing education for social workers because the participants expressed a strong desire for continuous professional development. This is in line with Mendes & Watson's (2017) view that continuing education is essential for social workers to stay current with best practices, legal changes and new intervention strategies. Lifelong learning is particularly important in the field of social work due to the constantly changing nature of social issues and interventions. Furthermore, Graham & Fritsch (2019) advocate for a continuous professional development approach that not only focuses on technical skills but also encourages reflective practice, ensuring that social workers grow both intellectually and personally.

Barriers to Training and Professional Development

Financial challenges, poor organizational support and limited time were identified in this research by the participants as significant obstacles to accessing training and professional development. This aligns with Miller's (2015) findings, which suggest that social workers in economically challenging environments often struggle to access professional training which affects their growth and the quality of services they can provide. Similarly, both Sullivan and Daro (2018) and Abdullahi and Umar (2023) highlighted that the lack of funding is another challenge that often prevents social workers in such environments from attending needed training programs which also limits their professional development.

As regards the preferred type of training the research determined, the participants expressed a strong preference for in-person sessions, mentorship programs, seminar sessions and conferences. These preferences mirror Miller's (2015) argument that face-to-face learning is particularly effective for building technical skills and fostering personal connections which creates a sense of community among professionals. Additionally, Barker (2017) observed that social workers with advanced degrees tend to have a better understanding of complex social issues that social workers handle and have a better chance of securing a higher-paying position within the field of social work. O'Connor (2014) also noted that mentorship programs offer valuable and personalized guidance which helps social workers address professional challenges and enhance their social work practice abilities. Many participants also expressed a high interest in pursuing advanced higher degrees which reflects the growing culture of social workers seeking higher qualifications as a way of enhancing their career prospects.

The study also revealed that many participants had limited engagement with training activities as many participants indicated that they attended training sessions not frequently or even not at all. This low participation rate supports the findings of Johnson & Stewart (2016) when he argued that time constraints, heavy workloads and limited access to training opportunities are significant barriers to social workers' involvement in professional development. These barriers not only affect immediate service delivery but also have long-term implications for career progression and job satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

In conflict-affected communities, social workers are faced with multi-faceted challenges that require continuous learning and improvement such as specialized training and development opportunities. Unfortunately, such opportunities are still lacking in many contexts, leaving the social workers poorly equipped to handle the challenges or effectively respond to the social problems of the victims and survivors of conflict. The social workers are therefore supposed to be better equipped and prepared to meet the needs of conflict-affected communities through capacity development. As such, having training in line with the specific challenges facing social workers and their environment is critical to enhancing the effectiveness of social workers and improving service delivery.

The result of this study unveiled gaps in both the competencies and opportunities available to social workers in the study location. Despite the study's clear recognition of the importance of local knowledge and practical skills, social workers face significant barriers to accessing training. The findings suggest that practical and flexible training programs are necessary to enhance professional development and address the challenges of social workers in Gongulong. The findings of the research contribute to the existing literature on social work training in conflict-affected communities which highlights the need for regular, accessible, contextual training which aligns with the challenges facing social workers. Therefore, for social workers in Gongulong to be better equipped, it is necessary to address these training and professional development needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and analysis presented in the study, the following recommendations are made to address the training and professional development gaps among social workers in the Gongulong Community, Jere, Borno State, Nigeria:

- i. The government, civil society, and development partners working in Gongulong should implement training programs tailored to the challenges faced by social workers and the communities they serve. These programs should focus on key areas identified in the study, including cultural competency, trauma-informed care, case management, and crisis intervention.
- ii. Government and non-governmental organizations operating in the community should provide ongoing support for social workers' professional development. This can be achieved by increasing opportunities and funding for training and allowing social workers to dedicate some time to learning.
- iii. Community authorities should further facilitate the creation of an environment that encourages social workers to pursue career advancement through continued education, mentorship, and leadership development.

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