

# **Shelters and Faith Based Organizations in Nigeria: Mitigating the Effects of Violence Against Women**

**By**

**Charity A. Angya**

## **I. History of Shelters in Nigeria**

### **Introduction**

In tracing the history of shelters in Nigeria, the work of urban missions cannot be ignored. Nigeria during the pre-colonial period practiced the extended family system that ensured that every member of the family belonged to a homestead. It was rare therefore to find people who needed any form of shelter outside of the homesteads or clan.

With the colonization and subsequent development of cities through the urbanization programme in Africa, so many issues arose that led to the need for shelters. Some of these factors include increasing nuclear nature of families, mass exodus to cities, economic problems and the need to cater for abandoned and orphaned children. Women shelters have had a shorter and more sporadic history in Nigeria. Apart from the work of a few NGOs concerned with providing shelter for women in crises situations, a few other shelters are owned by religious organizations. These shelters offer succor to women who are distressed or who decide to change from the life-style of prostitution. These shelters also provide women with skills needed to earn a living.

## **II. Sheltering: Benue Experience**

In Benue State, Nigeria, the scourge of HIV/AIDs has made many children orphaned and there are increasing demands for housing for these orphaned children. Even though many women face violence within both

the domestic and public sphere, sheltering needs of orphaned children have taken precedence. In Makurdi there are at least five well – established orphanages with government running two of these in the town. There are other orphanages strewn across the town in temporary shelters and there are a number of these orphanages run by NGOs and faith based organizations across the state.

It is interesting that in Makurdi township, sheltering of victims of violence is limited to the House of Mercy International, a faith based organization with a mission to reach out to the needy. This paper seeks to explore the challenges of providing shelters for victims of violence and destitute and the challenges faced both by those who run the shelters and those who are housed. The experience of HOMI therefore provides us with needed lenses with which to examine the critical issues that arise in providing shelters for victims of violence.

### **III. House of Mercy International and the Sheltering Experience**

House of Mercy International is founded by Evangelist Vero Enewa Aluma, a woman with a vision for reaching out to the needy. The organization is a Christian Ministry and has been operating for the past fourteen years. But the need to provide housing for women in distress came at a much later date. The Ministry began as a women’s ministry and was called ‘Abundant Life Sisters Ministry’. As the name suggests, the focus was on reaching out to women and bringing them to the Christian faith. As the Ministry began to expand, the outreaches now included youths and children. Currently the ministry reaches out to women, men, including the disabled and children. The name of the Ministry has broadened to keep up with the expanded targets of the Ministry. The Abundant Life Sisters still remains a key area of ministry within this broadened vision. The work of this arm of the Ministry therefore is

targeted at reaching out to prostitutes, distressed women and offering both spiritual and physical comfort, teaching them skills and giving them a new lease of life. For many of the persons who experience this sheltering experience, they are full of gratitude for the work of the Ministry. A number of women engaged in sex work had become tired of this line of work but were not able to breakout of the profession because they were not equipped to do anything else. The training in petty trading, hairdressing and tailoring offered by the Ministry therefore (in addition to shelter) provides a good alternative for these types of women.

Other women who have been sheltered include widows and their young children with nowhere else to turn. Widowhood practices in a number of African societies tend to be harsh to the widow and often times she needs help which the Ministry is available to provide. Many of these widows are left in penury with no source of income and unable to help themselves and their children. What the Ministry does is to help these women train to acquire skills in the areas such as petty trading, hairdressing, and tailoring. Where some form of waged labour can be organized, the Ministry helps the women to get established. Once they are well equipped to cope, they are helped to move to their permanent housing and to function within the society effectively. The orphaned children are enrolled in the excellent school that the Ministry operates at the primary level of education. Older children are helped to enter secondary school and funding of the education for most of these orphaned children is the responsibility of the Ministry.

#### **IV. Providing the Housing**

What kind of housing does HOMI provide? The Centre is referred to as House of Mercy Rehabilitation Centre and is located in Makurdi Township in the high-density area referred to as North Bank. The shelter

has been given on a temporary basis for housing these women in distress. The housing is a bungalow of five rooms with a boys quarters, which has also been converted to be part of the shelter. The bungalow has a large expanse of area, which is the living room and provides the common place where these women meet to share experiences or just relate to each other. There is a common kitchen equipped for cooking including a store and the outside also has a place for open fire cooking.

## **V. From the Street**

The bungalow that houses these women is just like any other houses that can be seen around the area. It is secluded only in the sense that a fence around the building keeps away any one just straying into the area. The shelter blends in with the rest of the environment. The shelter as earlier related remains temporary because the house has been given on a temporary basis for the operation of the shelter. The Ministry is committed to building a shelter that will support women and children who are facing different kinds of issues. A number of women who come to the shelter have left after either reconciliation with their families or having found some permanent housing elsewhere. The emphasis on sheltering is to try to provide for the women and the children, an environment that is friendly and meets the needs of women and children.

## **VI. Who are the Women?**

Identifying who needs shelter can be both an exhaustive task and a fairly simple procedure. Due to the pressure for shelter and the limited rooms available, the needs of the women who need urgent attention are those responded to promptly. Those whose needs can be accommodated at a later date are given appointments pending availability of shelter. Most of the women sheltered are widows who have experienced the

harmful traditional practices that women in a number of communities face on the demise of a spouse. A number of these women are rendered homeless by the relatives of their husbands and need somewhere to recoup while trying to plan another future for themselves and their children. A few of the stories of these women will give a better understanding of the challenges faced by women within the home which leads to the need to seek for shelter.

Alice was a drug addict and also peddled drugs in the local community. Several times police had raided her house in order to make arrests. Her neighbours became incensed and felt threatened both by the company around her house and continued police presence. They then set her house on fire but she escaped with her children. The eldest child, a girl of about fifteen was the person who located the Ministry. She came to ask for some menial jobs to do in order to sustain her family. Mrs. Vero Aluma, the President of HOMI then interviewed the girl and when she discovered that they were homeless and the children were out of school, offered them shelter at the Rehab Centre in addition to admitting the children into Heritage Academy, a school run by the Ministry. Alice is now rehabilitated from the drug addiction and would have been taught some form of trade except for her health status. She is living with HIV/AIDs and therefore needs a lot of rest and balanced diet. The Ministry also funds her treatment. Recently, her sister who was married to a drug addict died leaving the children orphaned. Alice has also brought in those children into the Rehab Centre. She is a changed person from the nervous wreck that entered the shelter with no belongings whatsoever. She has a positive outlook on life and has also embraced the Christian faith. Her children are also less insecure and are more open and playful than when they first came to the shelter.

Agnes is a widow with three children. She came to the Rehab Centre after her husband's death when her in-laws threw her out of the family home. The practice of depriving a woman of her inheritance is common among the Idoma speaking people of Benue State, Nigeria. When a husband dies, the family members dispossess the widow and children of the property, which is believed to belong to their deceased brother. Quite often, the woman has to vacate her matrimonial home. Agnes's case and that of a number of widows living in the shelter is a classic case of such deprivation.

Agnes stays in the shelter and because she is the longest shelter occupant has been given certain duties for which she is also paid some remuneration. She oversees the occupants and also carries out some administrative duties, overseeing residents of the shelters. Her children (just like the children of the other residents) attend Heritage Academy and the Ministry pays for the fees, and all incidental charges to the education of these children.

Recent additions to the shelter in terms of occupants, show a greater awareness of the role the shelter is playing in the community. A young girl of about sixteen who has a disability (her left hand is cut at the elbow level) recently came to the shelter and requested for help. Because of her disability, she has not been sent to school and the expectation is for her to get married. She felt that with little education and disability (which could render her useless in farm work) she would make a very poor choice for marriage. Her family has disowned her and are not ready to help with her education. She has now moved to the shelter requesting for housing and for help to go to school in order to make a career for herself.

The shelter espouses Christian living and members are encouraged to take active part in Christian counseling sessions and also be a part of the activities of the ministry.

## **VII. Shelter Design**

Shelter facilities at House of Mercy Rehab Centre reflect a homely atmosphere. The bungalow style building was designed as a home therefore the rooms within the main building are standard sized but extra bedding is provided for women with children. The living room serves as a common meeting point for the women to relax at the end of the day. The Ministry hope to develop a new shelter or move to a permanent facility when funding improves. A new shelter will demand for new specification to make the shelter comfortable for all who need sheltering. According to Dr. Aluma “we are praying for help to really reach out to these women who are suffering with their children by providing a conducive sheltering experience. A new and well designed shelter that takes care of the needs of these women has become inevitable”. Shelters built to specification to reflect the needs of women and children clearly help to support those who need sheltering. HOMI Rehab Centre is a converted home that offers amenities found within the home. In a specially designed shelter women and children would be assigned to a private room with enough beds to accommodate the woman and her children. Some shelters in other places outside our experienced are apartments with a private bath and kitchen. In HOMI Rehab Centre, there are shared baths, cooking and eating areas.

HOMI Rehab Centre is at present in Benue State, the only place offering a sheltering experience to battered women. Emergency housing is not yet a possibility as rooms may not be readily available. For many women facing domestic violence leaving the marital home is not a ready solution therefore victims of domestic violence are few in terms of shelter needs. Most of those looking for shelter are women who are driven out of

their family houses for a number of reasons. The entry of the women into the shelter is seen as a transitional period before moving into permanent housing. The shelter serves therefore as both emergency and transitional housing. The woman can stay in the shelter for six months to one year (and even more) if there is difficulty in finding permanent housing.

The shelter provides skill-training programmes such as sewing, hair plaiting and petty job trading. Seed money is provided for the women to start the process of income earning. Practical, concrete skills of independent living are taught including literacy programmes. Therapeutic counseling is also offered to the women and children. Heritage Academy is a nursery and primary school, which belongs to HOMI. A number of the children living within the shelter attend Heritage Academy (a prestigious school) through scholarships offered by the Ministry. The Ministry further offers scholarships to other indigent children who are not in the shelter but need help to get a basic education.

### **VIII. Basic Chores**

Chores in the shelter include food preparation, washing dishes, sweeping and keeping the environment clean. At the HOMI Rehab Centre the women prepare meals for themselves and their children. The basic chores in the shelter are handled by the women and grown up children who also handle their laundry. Sometimes the women share their meals but for the most part each family takes care of the food preparation and other house chores. The Ministry is in the process of providing centralized cooking in order to encourage sharing and a more harmonious living environment.

The HOMI Ministry is responsible for providing the staple food these women need to cook and also for providing some part of the money needed for soup ingredients.

The staple food is usually made available to the Ministry through good will donations of members of the Ministry and from the purse of the Ministry. The fare offered therefore though nutritious is devoid of desserts and other cereals considered as not being cost effective.

## **IX. Administration**

Administration of the Centre is closely tied to the leadership of the Ministry. But to effectively run the shelter, the Ministry has put in place a coordinating body referred to as Missionaries of Mercy who also have elected officials that oversee the general running of the shelter and conduct monthly meetings of this coordinating body. The President and the Ministry and other staff remain closely involved in the shelter work and day to day administration of the shelter, which involves a good deal of caring for residents especially those who are sick.

## **X. Best Practices in Faith-Based Sheltering**

One of the key issues evidenced in faith-based shelters from our experience is that the women that come to these shelters are hurting emotionally, psychologically and in a number of cases, physically. While the shelter offers physical succour, the staff also seek to reach out to the wounds that are more deeply hidden – that is emotionally and psychological challenges confronting residents of shelter. In addressing these, experienced Christian counselors offer services, which include Christian teaching and also counseling. A number of the members of the Missionaries of Mercy are encouraged to be part of those counseling sessions.

The kindness the shelter occupants experience goes a long way to addressing the harsh realities they have left behind. Though work has been challenging in terms of responses to the shelter offered a number of

the residents are quite willing to be helped. Some of the ways of reaching out that we have found effective include:

1. A willingness to share all things physical, and spiritual
2. A non critical attitude that is a non judgmental approach to those coming for help
3. A willingness to listen
4. Availability to the constant stream of issues that need to be addressed within the shelter
5. Understanding the nature, causes and prevalence of violence within the community also provides a fresh perspective from which to engage the victims of violence.

## **XI. Conclusion**

For faith-based organization, sheltering remains a critical aspect of the work of the Ministry. To love, care and offer support to victims of violence, battered women and orphaned children is a major part of the work of the Ministry of HOMI. In reaching out to these women, the lives of the care givers are also enriched as they attempt to make a difference in the lives of a few less privileged women or women caught in difficult situation at certain points in life.

Faith-based shelters experience a lot of challenges in terms of funding. Most of the funds used for running these shelters come from free will donations. There is a need for greater involvement of government, civil society and international NGO's and donor bodies in shelter work to ensure sustainability of what has already been started.