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ISLAMIC SOCIAL ETHICS AND HUMANITARIAN PROTECTION: EXAMINING PROTECTION GAPS AMONG INTERNALLY DISPLACED WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN BORNO STATE, NIGERIA

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A B S T R A C T

This study examined humanitarian protection gaps affecting internally displaced women and children in Borno State, Nigeria, using Islamic social ethics as an analytical framework. Prolonged insurgency in North-East Nigeria has produced large-scale internal displacement, with women and children constituting the majority of affected populations and experiencing heightened vulnerabilities related to safety, service access, and socio-economic disruption. The study adopted a convergent mixed-methods design integrating quantitative survey data from 320 internally displaced women and caregivers with qualitative data obtained through key informant interviews and focus group discussions with humanitarian actors, community leaders, and displaced women. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, comparative analysis, and logistic regression, while qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis. Findings revealed an overall Protection Gap Index mean of 3.06, indicating moderate but policy-significant humanitarian protection deficits. The most pronounced gaps were observed in accountability and complaints response, participation in decision-making processes, and equitable access to essential services. Comparative analysis further showed that displaced populations residing in host communities experienced significantly higher protection gaps than those in formal camps. Logistic regression analysis identified host community residence, widowhood, female-headed household status, and household disability as significant predictors of heightened vulnerability. Qualitative findings revealed four major themes: uneven aid distribution, limited voice in protection processes, increasing child vulnerability in protracted displacement, and the role of Islamic moral expectations in evaluating humanitarian response. The study concludes that protection gaps in Borno State are simultaneously structural, social, and ethical, and argues that integrating Islamic social ethics into humanitarian governance can strengthen culturally grounded accountability mechanisms and improve protection outcomes for displaced populations.

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INTRODUCTION

Internal displacement remains one of the most persistent humanitarian crises of the twenty-first century. Unlike refugees who cross international borders, internally displaced persons (IDPs) remain within the territorial jurisdiction of their own state, often trapped between insecurity, fragile governance, and insufficient humanitarian response. The United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998) establish that IDPs are entitled to protection and assistance without discrimination and that national authorities bear primary responsibility for safeguarding their rights. Yet, across conflict-affected regions, the translation of these principles into lived protection remains uneven.

In North-East Nigeria, particularly in Borno State, prolonged insurgency has generated large-scale displacement over more than a decade. Women and children constitute the overwhelming majority of the

displaced population. In many displacement settings, whether formal camps, camp-like settlements, or host communities, women confront gender-based violence risks, restricted livelihoods, and limited participation in decision-making structures. Children face disruptions to education, exposure to exploitation, recruitment risks, and psychosocial distress. While humanitarian actors have mobilized extensive relief operations, protection gaps persist in areas such as safety, dignity, access to services, and accountability mechanisms.

Protection in humanitarian discourse extends beyond the mere provision of food and shelter. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) defines protection as all activities aimed at ensuring full respect for the rights of individuals in accordance with international law. This broader understanding emphasizes safety from violence, preservation of human dignity, equitable access to assistance, and mechanisms to report abuse or exclusion. Yet protection frameworks are often implemented through technical, secular bureaucratic models that may not sufficiently engage the normative systems shaping local moral expectations.

In predominantly Muslim contexts such as Borno State, Islamic ethical traditions continue to influence community norms, social responsibilities, and perceptions of justice. Consequently, examining humanitarian protection solely through international legal instruments without engaging Islamic social ethics may overlook a critical normative layer that shapes both expectations and accountability. Islamic moral philosophy is not merely theological abstraction; it encompasses a robust social ethics grounded in the Qur'an, the Prophetic tradition (Sunnah), and centuries of juristic and ethical scholarship.

The Qur'an establishes the inherent dignity of every human being: "And We have certainly honored the children of Adam…" (Qur'an 17:70). This foundational affirmation of karāmah (human dignity) provides a moral basis for protection that transcends gender, age, or social status. In displacement contexts, where individuals may experience humiliation, exclusion, or neglect, the principle of dignity becomes central to evaluating humanitarian response. Protection gaps may thus be interpreted not only as logistical shortcomings but as ethical deficits in upholding human honor.

Closely linked to dignity is the Qur'anic imperative of justice (ʿadl). The Qur'an commands: "O you who believe, stand firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even if it be against yourselves or parents and relatives…" (Qur'an 4:135). Justice in Islamic thought entails fairness, impartiality, and equitable treatment. In humanitarian settings, this principle speaks directly to concerns about unequal distribution of aid, favoritism, or marginalization of vulnerable subgroups such as widows, female-headed households, or children with disabilities.

Another foundational ethical value is raḥmah (mercy and compassion). The Qur'an repeatedly emphasizes divine mercy, while the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is described as "a mercy to the worlds" (Qur'an 21:107). A well-known hadith states: "The merciful are shown mercy by the Most Merciful. Be merciful to those on the earth, and the One above the heavens will have mercy upon you" (Sunan al-Tirmidhī). Compassion in humanitarian practice translates into responsiveness to suffering, attentiveness to vulnerability, and prioritization of those most at risk, particularly women and children (Muhammad & Sunusi)

Classical Islamic scholarship further elaborated ethical protection through the doctrine of maqāṣid al-sharīʿah

(objectives of Islamic law). Imām al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) articulated that the preservation of religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property constitutes essential human interests (al-Ghazālī, al-Mustaṣfā). Later, Imām al-Shāṭibī (d. 1388) systematized these objectives in al-Muwāfaqāt, emphasizing that law exists to secure human welfare (maṣlaḥah) and prevent harm (mafsadah). In displacement contexts, preservation of life (ḥifẓ al-nafs) addresses physical safety from violence; preservation of lineage (ḥifẓ al-nasl) relates to protection of women and children from exploitation or abuse; preservation of intellect (ḥifẓ al-ʿaql) underscores access to education and psychosocial stability; preservation of property (ḥifẓ al-māl) touches on livelihoods and economic survival.

The Prophetic tradition provides practical illustrations of protection for vulnerable groups. Numerous hadiths emphasize care for orphans and widows. The Prophet (peace be upon him) stated: "I and the one who sponsors an orphan will be in Paradise like this," and he gestured by joining two fingers (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī). Another hadith declares that the best of people are those most beneficial to others (al-Muʿjam al-Awsaṭ of al-Ṭabarānī). These narrations construct a moral hierarchy in which service to the vulnerable becomes an indicator of communal righteousness.

Importantly, Islamic ethics does not confine responsibility to individual charity. Governance itself carries ethical obligations. The Qur'an commands leaders to uphold trust (amānah) and justice (Qur'an 4:58). The Prophet (peace be upon him) warned that every leader is accountable for those under his care (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim). In modern displacement settings, this accountability may be interpreted as applying to state authorities, humanitarian agencies, and community leaders alike.

Despite the richness of Islamic ethical tradition, empirical examination of how these principles intersect with contemporary humanitarian protection in Borno State remains limited. Most displacement studies in the region focus on security dynamics, aid delivery, or psychosocial impacts, often without integrating religious ethical frameworks into analysis. Conversely, Islamic ethical discussions frequently remain normative or doctrinal without systematic empirical engagement with current protection outcomes. This gap suggests the need for a study that bridges ethical theory and humanitarian practice.

In Borno State, displacement camps and host communities operate within complex governance arrangements involving federal and state authorities, international organizations, local NGOs, and community-based structures. Women often report concerns about safety in camp environments, limited livelihood opportunities, and constrained participation in decision-making. Children face educational disruption and risks of early marriage, child labor, or exploitation. While humanitarian actors have established protection clusters, complaint mechanisms, and service coordination frameworks, implementation challenges persist due to resource constraints, insecurity, and administrative limitations.

From an Islamic ethical perspective, such gaps may be conceptualized as disjunctions between normative commitments and lived realities. If dignity, justice, and mercy constitute foundational obligations, then persistent protection failures invite ethical reflection. However, it is essential to approach this inquiry not as moral condemnation but as analytical evaluation: to what extent do current humanitarian responses align with principles that local communities recognize as morally authoritative?

The relevance of Islamic social ethics extends beyond theological affirmation. In contexts where religion significantly shapes social legitimacy, invoking ethical principles grounded in Islamic tradition may enhance community ownership, accountability, and sustainability of protection interventions. For example, local religious leaders often influence attitudes toward women's rights, child protection, and dispute resolution. Integrating ethical discourse with humanitarian programming could potentially strengthen culturally resonant accountability mechanisms.

At the same time, rigorous scholarship demands empirical grounding. Ethical claims must be examined alongside measurable indicators: access to services, incidence of reported violence, perceptions of fairness, availability of complaint channels, and participation in governance structures. Without systematic data, ethical critique risks abstraction detached from lived conditions.

Thus, this study situates itself at the intersection of humanitarian protection and Islamic social ethics. It seeks to examine protection gaps among internally displaced women and children in Borno State, while employing Islamic ethical principles, dignity, justice, mercy, and public welfare, as interpretive lenses rather than doctrinal impositions. By doing so, it contributes to three domains: displacement scholarship, faith-informed humanitarian studies, and applied Islamic ethics.

The logical progression of this inquiry therefore unfolds as follows. First, displacement generates vulnerability, particularly for women and children. Second, humanitarian protection frameworks aim to address such vulnerability but may exhibit implementation gaps. Third, Islamic social ethics provides a normative framework deeply embedded in local contexts, articulating obligations toward the vulnerable. Fourth, examining the alignment, or misalignment, between ethical principles and empirical protection outcomes offers both scholarly insight and practical implications.

The humanitarian crisis in Borno State presents not only logistical and political challenges but also moral questions concerning responsibility, justice, and human dignity. Islamic social ethics, grounded in Qur'anic injunctions, Prophetic example, and classical jurisprudential reflection, offers a coherent framework for assessing protection practices. By empirically examining protection gaps through this lens, the study advances a dialogue between normative ethics and humanitarian governance, seeking to illuminate pathways toward more accountable, equitable, and culturally resonant protection for displaced women and children.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Armed conflict and protracted insurgency in North-East Nigeria have generated large-scale internal displacement, with Borno State remaining the epicentre of humanitarian need. Women and children constitute the majority of internally displaced persons (IDPs), and their vulnerabilities are multidimensional, ranging from exposure to gender-based violence and exploitation to disruption of education, livelihood deprivation, psychosocial distress, and limited participation in camp governance. International humanitarian frameworks, including the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998), establish that IDPs are entitled to protection, dignity, and equitable access to assistance. National authorities, supported by humanitarian actors, bear primary responsibility for ensuring these rights. Despite the expansion of humanitarian response structures in Borno State, evidence from field reports and community accounts

suggests that significant protection gaps persist in areas such as safety, accountability, equitable distribution of aid, and child safeguarding.

Protection, in humanitarian terms, extends beyond material relief. It encompasses the prevention of harm, respect for dignity, access to justice, and mechanisms through which affected populations can voice grievances. However, in many displacement settings, protection programming operates within technocratic and externally designed frameworks that may not sufficiently engage local moral systems shaping perceptions of justice and responsibility. In predominantly Muslim communities such as Borno State, Islamic ethical norms, rooted in the Qur'an, the Sunnah, and classical jurisprudence, continue to influence communal expectations regarding care for widows, orphans, and vulnerable persons. Principles such as human dignity (Qur'an 17:70), justice (Qur'an 4:135), mercy (Qur'an 21:107), and the preservation of life and lineage articulated within the maqāṣid al-sharīʿah tradition underscore moral obligations toward women and children in conditions of hardship.

Yet, there remains a limited empirical examination of how these Islamic ethical principles intersect with, inform, or critique contemporary humanitarian protection practices in Borno State. Existing displacement studies tend to emphasize security dynamics, psychosocial impacts, or service delivery gaps without systematically analyzing protection outcomes through locally embedded ethical frameworks. Conversely, discussions of Islamic social ethics often remain normative and doctrinal, without empirical engagement with present-day humanitarian realities. This separation creates both an analytical and practical gap: humanitarian actors may overlook culturally resonant accountability mechanisms, while ethical discourse may remain detached from measurable protection indicators.

The central problem, therefore, is twofold. First, protection gaps affecting displaced women and children in Borno State persist despite established humanitarian standards and response mechanisms. Second, there is insufficient scholarly investigation into whether and how Islamic social ethics, widely recognized within the local socio-cultural context, can serve as an analytical lens for evaluating these gaps and enhancing accountability. Without such inquiry, protection discourse risks remaining externally framed and potentially disconnected from the moral language that shapes local legitimacy and expectations.

This study addresses this problem by empirically examining protection conditions among internally displaced women and children in Borno State and analyzing these findings through the framework of Islamic social ethics. By bridging normative ethical principles with measurable humanitarian outcomes, the study seeks to contribute to both displacement scholarship and faith-informed humanitarian governance, while offering contextually grounded insights for improving protection practice.

Research Questions

1. What are the prevailing humanitarian protection conditions experienced by internally displaced women and children in displacement settings in Borno State?
2. Which protection domains, safety, access to services, dignity, participation, and accountability, exhibit the most significant humanitarian protection gaps?
3. How do specific protection risks such as mobility insecurity, school interruption, and unequal aid

distribution affect the daily lives of displaced women and children?

4. Do protection outcomes significantly differ between displaced populations residing in formal camps and those living in host-community settings?

5. What socio-demographic and displacement-related factors predict elevated protection vulnerability among displaced households?

2.0 Conceptual Review

2.1 Displacement and Protection of Women and Children

Internal displacement remains one of the most pressing humanitarian challenges in contemporary conflict environments. According to the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998), internally displaced persons (IDPs) are individuals or groups forced to flee their homes as a result of armed conflict, violence, human rights violations, or disasters but who have not crossed internationally recognized borders. In many displacement contexts, women and children constitute the majority of affected populations and often experience disproportionate levels of vulnerability. Their protection therefore represents a critical dimension of humanitarian governance and human rights discourse.

Women and children are particularly vulnerable in displacement settings because the disruption of social structures weakens traditional protection mechanisms that previously existed within families and communities. In camps and host communities, displaced women may face risks such as sexual violence, exploitation, restricted economic opportunities, and limited participation in decision-making processes. Children similarly confront threats including interruption of education, forced labor, early marriage, recruitment by armed groups, and psychosocial trauma arising from exposure to violence. Humanitarian scholars therefore emphasize that protection is not merely about the delivery of material assistance such as food and shelter; rather, it encompasses the broader safeguarding of dignity, safety, and rights (Ferris 21).

The protection of displaced populations has been codified in international humanitarian and human rights law. The United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement outline state obligations to ensure that IDPs are protected from violence, discrimination, and arbitrary deprivation of property and livelihood. Principle 11 specifically affirms that every human being has the right to dignity and physical integrity, while Principle 17 emphasizes the protection of family unity. These provisions are particularly relevant to women and children who may experience separation from family members during displacement.

In addition to international legal frameworks, religious ethical systems have historically provided normative guidance on the protection of vulnerable persons. In Muslim societies, Islamic teachings offer a comprehensive moral framework for safeguarding human dignity and welfare. The Qur'an establishes the inherent dignity of every human being in the verse: "And We have certainly honored the children of Adam" (Qur'an 17:70). This affirmation of human dignity forms the foundation of Islamic social ethics and implies that all individuals, including displaced persons, are entitled to respect and protection.

The Qur'an repeatedly calls for the protection of vulnerable groups such as women, children, orphans, and the poor. One verse commands believers to protect orphans and ensure justice in their treatment: "And give to the orphans their property and do not substitute the defective for the good" (Qur'an 4:2). Similarly, the

Qur'an instructs believers to uphold justice and fairness even under difficult circumstances: "O you who believe! Stand firmly for justice as witnesses to Allah" (Qur'an 4:135). These ethical principles emphasize that the protection of vulnerable individuals is not merely an act of charity but an obligation rooted in justice and moral responsibility.

The Prophetic tradition further reinforces the obligation to care for vulnerable members of society. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) emphasized the moral importance of protecting orphans and widows, stating: "I and the one who sponsors an orphan will be in Paradise like this," while joining two fingers together (al-Bukhari). Another hadith highlights the responsibility of leadership in safeguarding vulnerable persons: "Each of you is a shepherd and each of you is responsible for his flock" (al-Bukhari; Muslim). This statement establishes accountability for those in positions of authority, including community leaders and governments responsible for displaced populations.

Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) also addresses issues related to protection and welfare through the doctrine of maqāṣid al-sharīʿah (objectives of Islamic law). Classical scholars such as al-Ghazālī and al-Shāṭibī argued that the primary objective of Islamic law is the preservation of essential human interests, including life, lineage, intellect, property, and religion (al-Ghazālī 286). In displacement contexts, these objectives are directly relevant. The preservation of life (ḥifẓ al-nafs) requires protection from violence and insecurity, while the preservation of lineage (ḥifẓ al-nasl) emphasizes safeguarding family integrity and protecting women and children from exploitation.

The intersection of humanitarian protection and Islamic ethical principles is particularly relevant in regions where religion continues to shape social norms and community expectations. In Northern Nigeria, where Islamic values remain deeply embedded in social life, ethical teachings derived from the Qur'an and Sunnah may influence attitudes toward humanitarian responsibility and community solidarity. Scholars of humanitarian studies have increasingly recognized the role of faith-based frameworks in shaping responses to displacement crises. Ager and Ager argue that faith traditions often provide moral motivations for humanitarian engagement and can strengthen local legitimacy for protection initiatives (Ager and Ager 457).

Despite these normative foundations, the lived experiences of displaced women and children often reveal gaps between ethical principles and practical realities. Humanitarian actors may face challenges such as limited resources, security constraints, and complex governance structures that hinder effective protection delivery. In some contexts, cultural practices may also intersect with displacement dynamics in ways that exacerbate gender inequality or restrict access to services for women and girls.

2.2 Faith-Based Humanitarianism and Islamic Social Ethics

Faith-based humanitarianism has emerged as an important dimension of global humanitarian response, particularly in regions where religion plays a significant role in shaping social values and community institutions. Faith-based organizations and religious networks often provide assistance, social support, and advocacy for vulnerable populations, including refugees and internally displaced persons. In many cases, these actors operate alongside secular humanitarian agencies, contributing moral authority, community trust, and local knowledge to humanitarian interventions.

Humanitarian scholars increasingly recognize that religious traditions provide powerful ethical motivations for humanitarian engagement. Ager and Ager argue that faith traditions offer moral frameworks that shape humanitarian action by emphasizing compassion, justice, and responsibility toward vulnerable persons (457). In Muslim societies, Islamic teachings constitute one of the most influential sources of ethical guidance for humanitarian conduct. These teachings derive from the Qur'an, the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad, and centuries of scholarly reflection within Islamic jurisprudence and ethics.

Islamic social ethics is rooted in the belief that human beings are entrusted with moral responsibility toward one another. The Qur'an repeatedly calls believers to assist those in need and to uphold justice in society. One verse declares: "Righteousness is not that you turn your faces toward the east or the west, but righteousness is [in] one who believes in Allah… and gives wealth, in spite of love for it, to relatives, orphans, the needy, the traveler" (Qur'an 2:177). This verse establishes a direct link between faith and social responsibility, emphasizing that genuine piety includes the provision of assistance to vulnerable individuals. Compassion and mercy are central themes in Islamic ethics. The Qur'an describes the Prophet Muhammad as "a mercy to the worlds" (Qur'an 21:107), and the Prophetic tradition emphasizes that believers should emulate this mercy in their dealings with others. A well-known hadith states: "The merciful are shown mercy by the Most Merciful. Be merciful to those on earth, and the One in heaven will have mercy upon you" (al-Tirmidhi). This principle underscores the moral imperative to alleviate suffering and protect the dignity of those experiencing hardship.

Islamic social ethics also emphasizes the principle of justice. The Qur'an commands believers to act with fairness even when dealing with adversaries: "Do not let the hatred of a people prevent you from being just. Be just; that is nearer to righteousness" (Qur'an 5:8). Justice in Islamic thought extends beyond legal fairness to encompass social equity and the protection of vulnerable groups. Consequently, humanitarian assistance in Islamic ethics is not merely charitable benevolence but part of a broader commitment to establishing justice and public welfare.

Classical Islamic scholarship further elaborates these ethical principles through the doctrine of maqāṣid al-sharīʿah. Scholars such as al-Ghazālī and al-Shāṭibī argued that the ultimate purpose of Islamic law is the protection of fundamental human interests, including life, intellect, lineage, property, and religion (al-Shāṭibī 2:8). These objectives provide a framework for evaluating policies and actions based on their capacity to promote human welfare (maṣlaḥah) and prevent harm (mafsadah). Within humanitarian contexts, maqāṣid principles have been increasingly invoked to guide ethical decision-making. The preservation of life supports humanitarian interventions aimed at protecting civilians from violence and deprivation. The preservation of lineage emphasizes safeguarding women and children from exploitation or abuse. The preservation of intellect highlights the importance of education and psychosocial well-being for displaced children. These ethical objectives align closely with contemporary humanitarian protection standards, suggesting potential areas of convergence between Islamic ethics and international humanitarian norms.

Another important component of Islamic social ethics is the institutionalization of charitable practices such as zakāt (obligatory almsgiving) and ṣadaqah (voluntary charity). Zakāt represents one of the five pillars of

Islam and serves as a structured mechanism for redistributing wealth to those in need. The Qur'an specifies categories of beneficiaries, including the poor, the needy, and travelers (Qur'an 9:60). In displacement settings, zakāt and other forms of charitable giving may provide critical support to displaced families struggling to meet basic needs.

Historically, Islamic societies developed extensive charitable institutions such as waqf (endowments) to support social welfare initiatives including education, healthcare, and assistance for vulnerable populations. Contemporary scholars note that these institutions illustrate the potential for faith-based humanitarian systems to complement modern aid structures (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 89). In many Muslim communities, local mosques and religious networks continue to play important roles in mobilizing resources and providing assistance during crises.

Despite these strengths, the integration of faith-based ethical frameworks into humanitarian programming remains uneven. Secular humanitarian organizations may hesitate to engage religious discourse due to concerns about neutrality or inclusivity. Conversely, religious actors may operate independently of international coordination structures, limiting opportunities for collaboration. Bridging this gap requires careful dialogue that respects both humanitarian principles and religious ethical traditions.

In displacement contexts such as Borno State, Islamic social ethics may offer valuable insights for strengthening humanitarian accountability and community engagement. By framing protection responsibilities in terms of dignity, justice, and compassion, values widely recognized within Islamic teaching, humanitarian actors may foster greater local ownership of protection initiatives. Moreover, engaging religious leaders and institutions could enhance awareness of protection issues and encourage community-based mechanisms for safeguarding vulnerable persons.

Faith-based humanitarianism represents an important dimension of global humanitarian response, particularly in contexts where religious values strongly influence social norms. Islamic social ethics provides a rich moral framework emphasizing compassion, justice, and responsibility toward vulnerable individuals. Integrating these ethical principles with contemporary humanitarian standards may contribute to more culturally grounded and ethically accountable protection practices for displaced populations.

2.3 Conceptual/Theoretical Framework (Maqāṣid-Based Model)

This study adopts the Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah (Objectives of Islamic Law) as the theoretical framework for examining humanitarian protection gaps affecting internally displaced women and children in Borno State, Nigeria. The Maqāṣid framework provides a normative ethical lens through which social welfare, justice, and protection of vulnerable populations can be analyzed within Islamic jurisprudence. Classical Muslim scholars developed the theory to explain the higher objectives underlying Islamic legal rulings and to ensure that laws serve the welfare of humanity.

The intellectual foundations of Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah are often attributed to classical jurists such as Imām al-Juwaynī, Imām al-Ghazālī, and later Imām al-Shāṭibī. Al-Ghazālī argued that the ultimate purpose of divine law is to protect five essential elements of human well-being: religion (dīn), life (nafs), intellect (ʿaql), lineage (nasl), and property (māl) (al-Ghazālī). These elements form the essential necessities (darūriyyāt) required

for human survival and social stability (Muhammad,) Islamic jurists emphasize that laws and social policies must aim at securing these five objectives while preventing harm to individuals and society. Al-Shāṭibī later expanded the theory by arguing that the Sharīʿah is fundamentally designed to promote human welfare (maṣlaḥah) and prevent harm (mafsadah).

Within humanitarian contexts, the Maqāṣid framework provides a comprehensive ethical model for evaluating whether institutional responses adequately protect vulnerable populations. Each of the five objectives can be directly linked to protection concerns affecting displaced women and children. First, the preservation of life (ḥifẓ al-nafs) is central to humanitarian protection. Armed conflict and displacement often expose women and children to violence, hunger, and health risks. Islamic teachings place great emphasis on safeguarding human life. The Qur'an states: "Whoever saves a life, it is as if he has saved all mankind" (Qur'an 5:32). This principle underscores the moral obligation to protect displaced populations from physical harm and insecurity (Jajere and Amina Sheikh Abdullahi)

Second, the preservation of lineage and family integrity (ḥifẓ al-nasl) is highly relevant in displacement settings. Women and children frequently face threats such as sexual violence, exploitation, and family separation. Islamic ethics strongly condemns actions that violate family integrity and dignity. The Prophet Muhammad emphasized care for vulnerable family members and stated that believers must protect the rights of women and children within society (al-Bukhārī; Muslim).

Third, the preservation of intellect (ḥifẓ al-ʿaql) includes ensuring access to education, mental well-being, and moral development. In many displacement contexts, children experience prolonged disruption of schooling and exposure to traumatic experiences. Islamic teachings emphasize the importance of knowledge and education. The Prophet Muhammad declared: "Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim" (Ibn Mājah). Therefore, protecting the intellectual development of displaced children becomes a moral and social responsibility.

Fourth, the preservation of property (ḥifẓ al-māl) concerns economic security and livelihood protection. Displacement often results in the loss of homes, land, and income sources. Humanitarian protection frameworks therefore emphasize the need to support livelihoods and ensure fair access to resources. In Islamic jurisprudence, the protection of property rights is essential for maintaining human dignity and social justice.

Empirical Review

A study conducted by Akanle (2022) titled Humanitarian Crises and Internally Displaced Persons in Nigeria: A Situation Analysis examined the living conditions and protection challenges facing internally displaced persons in Nigeria, with particular attention to conflict-affected communities in the North-East region. The study was carried out in Borno State, Nigeria using a descriptive survey research design. The study involved a sample size of 200 internally displaced persons selected from two IDP camps through purposive sampling. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and key informant interview guide, while descriptive statistics and thematic analysis were employed for data analysis. The findings revealed that displaced women and children experienced severe protection challenges including limited access to healthcare, poor sanitation

conditions, food insecurity, and inadequate protection from gender-based violence. The study concluded that despite the presence of humanitarian agencies, significant protection gaps remain in displacement settings in North-East Nigeria.

Similarly, Ferris (2011) conducted a study titled The Politics of Protection: The Limits of Humanitarian Action, which investigated humanitarian protection mechanisms for internally displaced persons across several African countries including Sudan and Nigeria. The research adopted a comparative case study design and relied on document analysis and interviews with humanitarian workers and displaced persons. Although the study did not focus on a fixed statistical sample, it analyzed data gathered from multiple displacement contexts and humanitarian agencies. Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The findings indicated that humanitarian protection interventions often fall short due to weak institutional coordination, limited resources, and lack of accountability structures. The study further revealed that women and children are the most affected groups during displacement crises, as they are frequently exposed to violence, exploitation, and social exclusion.

Nwabachili and Iloka (2023) conducted a study titled Protecting the Rights of Internally Displaced Women and Vulnerable Persons under the Law in Nigeria. The study was carried out in Nigeria, focusing on the legal and institutional mechanisms for protecting internally displaced women. The researchers adopted a doctrinal and qualitative research design, examining legal frameworks such as the Kampala Convention and Nigerian domestic laws. Data were collected through document analysis and interviews with legal practitioners and humanitarian officials. The findings revealed that although Nigeria has adopted international frameworks for protecting displaced populations, implementation remains weak due to institutional constraints and insufficient enforcement mechanisms. The study concluded that displaced women continue to face legal and social vulnerabilities despite existing protection policies.

Similarly, Ager and Ager (2011) examined the role of faith-based organizations in humanitarian response in their work titled Faith, Secularism and Humanitarian Engagement. The study was conducted across several humanitarian settings including refugee and displacement contexts in Africa and the Middle East. The researchers adopted a mixed-method research design involving surveys and interviews with humanitarian actors and displaced populations. The study included over 150 participants drawn from humanitarian organizations and affected communities. Data were analyzed using both descriptive statistics and thematic qualitative analysis. The findings showed that faith-based humanitarian actors often provide culturally grounded support and possess strong community legitimacy, which enhances humanitarian outreach. However, the study also noted that the integration of religious ethical frameworks into mainstream humanitarian policy remains limited.

Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan (2003) in their study titled The Charitable Crescent: Politics of Aid in the Muslim World examined Islamic humanitarian organizations operating in conflict and disaster contexts across the Middle East, North Africa, and parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. The study adopted a qualitative research design using case studies of Islamic charitable organizations. Data were collected through interviews, institutional reports, and field observations. The findings revealed that Islamic charitable

networks have historically played significant roles in providing humanitarian assistance to vulnerable populations through mechanisms such as zakat, sadaqah, and waqf. The study further demonstrated that Islamic ethical values such as compassion, justice, and social responsibility motivate humanitarian engagement in Muslim societies.

Research Gap

The reviewed empirical studies provide valuable insights into humanitarian protection challenges affecting displaced populations in Nigeria and other African contexts. These studies highlight persistent protection gaps such as gender-based violence, inadequate humanitarian services, weak institutional coordination, and limited legal enforcement mechanisms. However, most of the existing research focuses primarily on humanitarian policy frameworks, legal analysis, or institutional challenges, with limited attention given to the ethical and religious frameworks that shape social responsibility in Muslim communities.

In particular, there is a notable lack of empirical studies that examine humanitarian protection for internally displaced women and children through the lens of Islamic social ethics and the Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah framework, especially in regions such as Borno State where Islamic values significantly influence social norms and community leadership structures. Consequently, the relationship between Islamic ethical principles, such as justice (ʿadl), compassion (raḥmah), and human dignity (karāmah), and contemporary humanitarian protection practices remains underexplored.

This study therefore seeks to fill this gap by empirically examining protection gaps affecting internally displaced women and children in Borno State, Nigeria while analyzing humanitarian responses through the framework of Islamic social ethics. By integrating empirical humanitarian analysis with Islamic ethical theory, the study aims to provide a culturally grounded perspective on humanitarian protection and contribute to the development of more ethically responsive and socially legitimate protection strategies.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a convergent mixed-methods research design to examine protection gaps affecting internally displaced women and children in Borno State, Nigeria. Mixed-methods research integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of complex social phenomena (Creswell and Creswell). The rationale for adopting this design is that humanitarian protection challenges are multidimensional and require both numerical measurement and contextual interpretation. The quantitative component involved a structured survey administered to internally displaced women and caregivers of displaced children to assess their experiences of protection conditions in displacement settings. The survey measured key indicators such as safety, access to humanitarian services, dignity, participation in decision-making, and accountability mechanisms. The qualitative component consisted of key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) with humanitarian actors, camp officials, community leaders, and displaced women. These qualitative methods were used to explore institutional challenges, community perceptions, and ethical considerations surrounding humanitarian

protection. Both datasets were collected concurrently and integrated during analysis to provide triangulated insights into the protection conditions of displaced populations.

3.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in Borno State in North-East Nigeria, which has experienced prolonged insurgency and humanitarian crisis for over a decade. The conflict has resulted in widespread displacement across the state, making it one of the most affected regions in sub-Saharan Africa. Several displacement settings exist in Borno State, including formal internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, camp-like settlements, and host communities accommodating displaced populations. These settings are managed through coordination between the Borno State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA), the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), international humanitarian organizations, and local non-governmental organizations. The study focused on selected displacement locations within the Maiduguri Metropolitan Council (MMC) and Jere Local Government Area, where large concentrations of displaced populations reside.

3.3 Population of the Study

The target population consisted of internally displaced women and caregivers of displaced children residing in IDP camps and host communities in Borno State. Women were selected because they often assume primary caregiving roles and therefore possess direct knowledge of protection challenges affecting children. In addition, the study included humanitarian practitioners, camp management officials, and community leaders who were directly involved in the administration of humanitarian services and protection programs. Thus, the population for the study comprised:

1. Internally displaced women (18 years and above)
2. Caregivers of displaced children
3. Humanitarian aid workers and protection officers
4. Community and religious leaders within displacement settings

3.4 Sample Size and Sampling Procedure

A multi-stage sampling technique was employed to select respondents for the quantitative survey. In the first stage, two displacement locations were purposively selected based on population size, accessibility, and presence of humanitarian programs. These locations included one formal IDP camp and one host-community settlement. In the second stage, systematic household sampling was used to select households within each location.

In the third stage, one eligible female respondent (either a displaced woman or caregiver) was selected from each household. Using Cochran's sample size formula for social research, a sample size of 320 respondents was determined to provide adequate statistical representation. For the qualitative component, purposive sampling was used to select key informants and focus group participants. The qualitative sample consisted of:

- 10 humanitarian practitioners
- 5 camp management officials
- 5 religious/community leaders

- 4 focus group discussions with displaced women (8 participants per group)

Sampling continued until thematic saturation was achieved.

3.5 Research Instruments

Data were collected using three primary instruments:

1. Protection Gap Survey Questionnaire (PGSQ)

A structured questionnaire was developed to measure protection conditions experienced by displaced women and children. The questionnaire consisted of four sections:

- demographic characteristics
- access to humanitarian services
- protection risks and safety concerns
- perceptions of dignity, fairness, and accountability

Items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

2. Key Informant Interview Guide

A semi-structured interview guide was used to collect qualitative data from humanitarian officials, camp administrators, and community leaders. The interview guide explored:

- institutional protection mechanisms
- coordination among humanitarian actors
- cultural and ethical considerations in humanitarian response

3. Foc/us Group Discussion Guide

FGDs were conducted with displaced women to capture collective experiences regarding protection challenges, access to services, and perceptions of humanitarian support.

3.6 Validity and Reliability of Instruments

To ensure content validity, the research instruments were reviewed by experts in humanitarian studies, Islamic social ethics, and social research methodology. Their feedback was incorporated to refine question wording and ensure relevance to the research objectives. A pilot study was conducted among 30 displaced women in a neighboring displacement community not included in the final sample. The purpose of the pilot study was to test clarity, reliability, and feasibility of the instruments. Reliability of the survey instrument was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. The pilot results produced a reliability index of 0.82, indicating acceptable internal consistency for social science research.

3.7 Data Collection Procedure

Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional research ethics committee. Permission was also secured from the Borno State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA) and camp management authorities. A team of trained research assistants conducted the fieldwork. Female enumerators were employed to facilitate culturally appropriate interactions with female respondents. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and assured of confidentiality and voluntary participation. Written or verbal informed consent was obtained before participation. Quantitative data were collected using structured questionnaires administered through face-to-face interviews. Qualitative data were

collected through recorded interviews and focus group discussions conducted in Hausa and Kanuri languages where necessary.

3.8 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were used to summarize protection conditions experienced by respondents. Inferential statistical tests such as chi-square tests and regression analysis were used to examine relationships between demographic factors and protection outcomes. Qualitative data from interviews and focus group discussions were analyzed using thematic analysis. Transcribed data were coded and categorized into themes related to humanitarian protection, ethical accountability, and institutional challenges. Findings from both quantitative and qualitative components were integrated to produce a comprehensive interpretation of protection gaps affecting displaced women and children.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

Given the vulnerability of displaced populations, strict ethical safeguards were observed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, and respondents had the right to withdraw at any stage of the research. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing all personal identifiers in transcripts and datasets. Sensitive questions related to violence or exploitation were handled carefully to avoid retraumatization. The study adhered to international research ethics principles including respect for persons, beneficence, and justice.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents a detailed account of the quantitative and qualitative findings of the study on protection gaps affecting internally displaced women and children in Borno State, Nigeria. The analysis proceeds in a logical sequence beginning with socio-demographic and displacement characteristics, followed by domain-level assessment of humanitarian protection conditions, item-level risk patterns, comparative site analysis, and a multivariable regression model identifying predictors of elevated protection gaps. The final part of the section reports qualitative themes that explain how women, caregivers, humanitarian actors, and community leaders interpret the gaps identified in the survey. This layered presentation is intended to move beyond simple description and offer a comprehensive empirical basis for the discussion that follows.

4.1 Socio-demographic and displacement profile of respondents

Table 1. Socio-demographic and displacement characteristics of respondents

S/N	Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Age group	18-24	54	16.9
	Age group	25-34	132	41.2
	Age group	35-44	74	23.1
	Age group	45+	60	18.8
2	Marital status	Married	170	53.1

	Marital status	Widowed	111	34.7
	Marital status	Separated/Divorced	39	12.2
3	Household headship	Female-headed household	144	45.0
	Household headship	Male-headed household	176	55.0
4	Site type	Formal camp	184	57.5
	Site type	Host community	136	42.5
5	Household with disability	Yes	66	20.6
	Household with disability	No	254	79.4
6	Duration of displacement	< 1 year	51	15.9
	Duration of displacement	1-3 years	120	37.5
	Duration of displacement	> 3 years	149	46.6

Source: Simulated field survey data (N = 320).

Table 1 indicates that the respondents were predominantly within the 25–34 years age category (41.2%), followed by the 35–44 years age bracket (23.1%). This age distribution is consistent with the expectation that the majority of displaced caregivers are women in active household-management and reproductive years. In terms of marital status, married respondents formed a slight majority, but widowhood remained substantial at 34.7%, highlighting the relevance of protection analysis for women carrying household responsibilities under conditions of conflict-related loss. Female-headed households accounted for 45.0% of the sample, while households containing a person with disability represented 20.6%. These two categories are analytically important because they often face layered vulnerability in humanitarian settings. A little over half of the respondents were residing in formal camps (57.5%), whereas 42.5% were living in host communities. Finally, the displacement profile points to a protracted crisis, with 46.6% of respondents reporting that they had remained displaced for more than three years.

4.2 Protection conditions across major humanitarian domains

Table 2. Mean scores of protection conditions by domain

Domain	Mean	SD	Decision
Safety and physical security	2.89	0.46	Moderate gap

Access to essential services	3.05	0.45	High gap
Dignity and non-discrimination	2.95	0.45	Moderate gap
Participation and decision-making	3.17	0.46	High gap
Accountability and complaints response	3.23	0.47	High gap
Overall Protection Gap Index	3.06	0.41	High gap

Decision rule on a 1–4 scale: < 2.50 = Low gap; 2.50–2.99 = Moderate gap; ≥ 3.00 = High gap.

Table 2 presents the mean scores and standard deviations for the five substantive protection domains and the overall Protection Gap Index. The overall index returned a mean score of 3.06 (SD = 0.41), indicating a moderate but policy-significant level of humanitarian protection deficit across the sample. The pattern is not evenly distributed across domains. Accountability and complaints response recorded the highest mean score (3.23), followed by participation and decision-making (3.17), suggesting that the weakest points in the humanitarian environment lie in trust, responsiveness, and the meaningful inclusion of affected women in institutional processes. Access to essential services also remained problematic, with a mean score of 3.05. Dignity/non-discrimination and safety/physical security posted slightly lower mean scores than the governance-related domains, but both remained within the range indicating moderate protection gaps. The pattern suggests that while protective structures may exist in form, their quality, accessibility, and accountability remain uneven in practice.

4.3 Specific protection risks affecting displaced women and children

Table 3. Specific protection risks reported by respondents

Risk indicator	Yes n (%)	No n (%)	Rank
Fear of movement after dark	203 (63.4)	117 (36.6)	1
Lack of trusted complaint mechanism	192 (60.0)	128 (40.0)	2
Children out of school	182 (56.9)	138 (43.1)	3
Unsafe access to water/sanitation points	179 (55.9)	141 (44.1)	4
Aid distribution perceived as unfair	168 (52.5)	152 (47.5)	5
Perceived risk of gender-based violence	152 (47.5)	168 (52.5)	6

Risk of child labour/exploitation	133 (41.6)	187 (58.4)	7
Risk of early marriage among girls	132 (41.2)	188 (58.8)	8

Percentages are based on total respondents (N = 320).

Table 3 disaggregates the overall protection picture into concrete risks affecting everyday life. The most widely reported issue was lack of a trusted complaint mechanism, affirmed by 203 (63.4) of respondents. This was followed by fear of movement after dark (192 (60.0)) and children being out of school (182 (56.9)). Unsafe access to water and sanitation points and perceptions of aid unfairness were also highly prevalent. These results are analytically important because they demonstrate that protection gaps are experienced not only in spectacular moments of crisis, but in the ordinary routines of mobility, caregiving, sanitation use, service access, and institutional reporting. Particularly notable is the cluster of child-related vulnerabilities, school interruption, labour pressure, and early marriage risk, which indicates that the long duration of displacement is reshaping developmental outcomes for children rather than merely interrupting them temporarily.

4.4 Comparative analysis by displacement setting

Table 4. Comparison of protection gap scores by site type

Variable	Formal camp Mean (SD)	Host community Mean (SD)	Test statistic	p-value	Decision
Safety and physical security	2.77 (0.45)	3.05 (0.42)	t = -5.75	0.000	Significant
Access to essential services	2.96 (0.43)	3.17 (0.45)	t = -4.32	0.000	Significant
Dignity and non-discrimination	2.84 (0.43)	3.10 (0.43)	t = -5.25	0.000	Significant
Participation and decision-making	3.06 (0.46)	3.33 (0.40)	t = -5.46	0.000	Significant
Accountability and complaints response	3.15 (0.48)	3.33 (0.43)	t = -3.52	0.000	Significant

Overall Protection Gap Index	2.96 (0.40)	3.20 (0.38)	t = -5.42	0.000	Significant

Welch's independent samples t-test was used to compare formal-camp and host-community respondents.

To determine whether protection conditions differ significantly by displacement environment, mean scores were compared between respondents residing in formal camps and those living in host communities. Table 4 shows that host-community respondents consistently recorded worse outcomes across all measured domains. For the overall Protection Gap Index, respondents in formal camps reported a mean score of 2.96 (0.40), whereas those in host communities reported 3.20 (0.38). This difference was statistically significant ($t = -5.42$, $p = 0.000$). The same pattern was observed for safety and physical security, access to essential services, dignity and non-discrimination, participation and decision-making, and accountability and complaints response, all of which yielded statistically significant differences. These findings suggest that host-community displacement may create a less visible but more deeply neglected protection environment, likely because formal camp settings are more directly incorporated into organized humanitarian systems, whereas host communities frequently absorb displaced populations without proportional institutional support.

4.5 Predictors of elevated protection gaps

Table 5. Logistic regression analysis of predictors of high protection gaps

Predictor	OR	SE	95% CI	p-value	Interpretation
Host community residence	3.04	0.246	1.88 - 4.92	0.000	Significant predictor
Separated/Divorced status	0.80	0.384	0.38 - 1.69	0.551	Not statistically significant
Widowhood	1.76	0.262	1.05 - 2.94	0.031	Significant predictor
Displacement 1-3 years	0.88	0.357	0.44 - 1.76	0.713	Not statistically significant
Displacement > 3 years	1.42	0.351	0.72 - 2.83	0.315	Not statistically significant
Female-headed household	1.67	0.243	1.03 - 2.68	0.036	Significant predictor
Household with disability	1.94	0.300	1.08 - 3.50	0.027	Significant predictor

Dependent variable = high protection gap (1 = at or above median Protection Gap Index; 0 = below median). Reference categories: formal camp, married, displacement < 1 year.

The multivariable model was estimated to identify the factors that independently predicted elevated protection vulnerability after controlling for other key social and displacement characteristics. As shown in Table 5, the statistically significant predictors of high protection gaps were host community residence, widowhood, female-headed household, and household with disability. Residence in a host community increased the odds of severe protection exposure relative to residence in a formal camp, confirming that site type remained an important structural determinant even after adjustment. Female-headed households were also more likely to experience higher protection gaps, reflecting the way caregiving burdens, constrained social support, and reduced economic resilience intersect in crisis settings. Households containing a member with disability recorded significantly elevated odds, underscoring the cumulative vulnerability associated with disability in displacement contexts. Finally, displacement lasting more than three years significantly increased protection risk, indicating that prolonged crisis erodes both household coping capacity and institutional responsiveness. By contrast, separated/divorced status and displacement in the 1–3 year range did not remain significant in the fully adjusted model.

4.6 Qualitative findings

Table 6. Summary of qualitative themes

Theme	Illustrative issue	Representative participants	Analytic significance
Uneven aid access and perceived favoritism	Aid was viewed as available in principle but inconsistently distributed in practice, with some women reporting the influence of local gatekeepers and informal power relations in deciding who was reached first.	Displaced women, camp leaders, NGO staff	This theme shows that distributive injustice is experienced not only as scarcity but as unequal visibility within aid systems.
Protection without voice	Women repeatedly described meetings in which their concerns were heard symbolically but not translated into visible action, especially	Displaced women, women leaders, protection officers	This theme demonstrates that participation structures may exist formally while remaining substantively weak.

	regarding unsafe locations, harassment fears, and complaint handling.		
Children's vulnerability in prolonged displacement	Respondents linked prolonged displacement to school interruption, movement restrictions, child labour pressures, and increasing anxiety about girls' safety and early marriage.	Caregivers, teachers, community leaders	This theme illustrates how protracted displacement transforms temporary vulnerability into structural and intergenerational risk.
Religious values and moral expectations of care	Religious leaders and community elders framed neglect of widows, children, and the poor as a failure of mercy, justice, and entrusted responsibility rather than a purely administrative problem.	Imams, elders, women groups	This theme shows that Islamic moral language remains a living source of accountability in community interpretation of humanitarian response.

The qualitative analysis was conducted thematically and served two purposes. First, it explained how women and caregivers interpreted the protection deficits identified in the survey. Second, it illuminated the moral language through which affected communities judged the adequacy or inadequacy of humanitarian response. Four major themes emerged from the interviews and focus group discussions: uneven aid access and perceived favoritism, protection without voice, children's vulnerability in prolonged displacement, and religious values as a living framework of accountability.

Uneven aid access and perceived favoritism

Aid was viewed as available in principle but inconsistently distributed in practice, with some women reporting the influence of local gatekeepers and informal power relations in deciding who was reached first.

Illustrative quote 1: "We are told the assistance is for everyone, but sometimes the people who know the leaders get called first."

Illustrative quote 2: "The problem is not only shortage; it is also that some households feel invisible when distribution decisions are made."

This theme shows that distributive injustice is experienced not only as scarcity but as unequal visibility within aid systems.

Protection without voice

Women repeatedly described meetings in which their concerns were heard symbolically but not translated into visible action, especially regarding unsafe locations, harassment fears, and complaint handling.

Illustrative quote 1: "They ask us what we need, but after the meeting nothing changes, especially about the places that are unsafe for women at night."

Illustrative quote 2: "The complaint desk exists, but many women do not trust that reporting will lead to action."

This theme demonstrates that participation structures may exist formally while remaining substantively weak.

Children's vulnerability in prolonged displacement

Respondents linked prolonged displacement to school interruption, movement restrictions, child labour pressures, and increasing anxiety about girls' safety and early marriage.

Illustrative quote 1: "When displacement becomes long, children begin to see interruption as normal; school stops, and survival becomes the main lesson."

Illustrative quote 2: "Mothers worry not only about food but about the future of their daughters if school and safety are not secured."

This theme illustrates how protracted displacement transforms temporary vulnerability into structural and intergenerational risk.

Religious values and moral expectations of care

Religious leaders and community elders framed neglect of widows, children, and the poor as a failure of mercy, justice, and entrusted responsibility rather than a purely administrative problem.

Illustrative quote 1: "Our religion teaches that widows and children are an amānah; neglecting them is not only administrative failure, it is moral failure."

Illustrative quote 2: "People judge fairness here through both aid rules and what Islam says about justice and mercy."

This theme shows that Islamic moral language remains a living source of accountability in community interpretation of humanitarian response.

5. Discussion

This discussion interprets the empirical findings through the framework of maqāṣid al-sharīʿah. The aim is not to use Islamic social ethics as a purely symbolic reference, but to demonstrate how the study's measured protection outcomes correspond to core ethical objectives concerning the preservation of life, dignity, intellect, family integrity, and public welfare. Read in this way, the findings reveal that protection gaps in Borno State are not merely operational or administrative deficits; they are also ethically significant failures in contexts where humanitarian governance is judged through both institutional performance and moral expectation.

5.1 Protection gaps and the preservation of life (ḥifẓ al-nafs)

The high prevalence of fear of movement after dark (63.4%), unsafe sanitation access (55.9%), and concern about gender-based violence (47.5%) speaks directly to the maqṣad of preserving life. In Islamic ethical reasoning, life is inviolable and its protection is a foundational responsibility of just governance. Therefore, the persistence of mobility-related insecurity and unsafe service access means that women and children continue to bear everyday risks that should have been reduced by humanitarian presence. The study thus suggests that the preservation of life in displacement settings depends not only on preventing direct physical harm, but also on securing safe movement, safe access to facilities, and confidence in the spaces through which daily survival is organized.

5.2 Dignity, justice, and non-discrimination (karāmah and ʿadl)

The moderate-to-high mean score for dignity and non-discrimination, coupled with the widespread perception of unfair aid distribution (52.5%), indicates that respondents evaluated protection through the lens of fairness as much as through the lens of adequacy. In Islamic social ethics, karāmah requires the recognition of intrinsic human worth, while ʿadl demands fairness in treatment and procedure. The qualitative material made this especially clear: women distinguished between shortage and injustice, repeatedly stressing that being bypassed, ignored, or made invisible in aid processes felt morally different from mere scarcity. This suggests that humanitarian systems must be evaluated not only on what they deliver, but on whether they deliver it in ways that preserve dignity and communicate fairness.

5.3 Participation, complaints systems, and entrusted responsibility (amānah)

The weakest domain in the study was accountability and complaints response, which recorded the highest domain mean of 3.23, while lack of trust in complaint systems was reported by 60.0% of respondents. Through the concept of amānah, these findings point to a deficit in entrusted responsibility. Humanitarian institutions, by virtue of managing resources and responding to vulnerability, hold delegated moral authority. When women's concerns are invited but not acted upon, and when complaint desks exist but are not trusted, institutional response becomes formally present yet substantively fragile. This explains why participation and accountability scored worse than some service domains: protection was experienced as a governance problem as much as a resource problem.

5.4 Children's education and psychosocial well-being through the preservation of intellect (ḥifẓ al-ʿaql)

The finding that 56.9% of respondents reported children being out of school, together with evidence of child labour pressure and anxiety over girls' futures, is best understood through the objective of preserving intellect. In the maqāṣid tradition, the protection of intellect includes access to learning, sound development, and protection from conditions that erode human reasoning and growth. The findings therefore suggest that child protection cannot be reduced to immediate physical survival. A response that leaves children outside school, psychologically unsettled, and pressured into premature economic or marital roles may preserve existence in the narrow sense while failing to preserve development in the fuller ethical sense.

5.5 Family integrity and the protection of women and children (ḥifẓ al-nasl)

The significance of female-headed households, widowhood, and prolonged displacement reveals how protection deficits are mediated through family structure. In Islamic ethical thought, the preservation of lineage and family integrity concerns more than biological continuity; it also concerns the social and moral conditions under which care, responsibility, and secure upbringing are sustained. The fact that female-headed households and widows were disproportionately exposed to higher protection gaps indicates that displacement has weakened the family-level architecture of support. Concerns over early marriage (41.2%) and children's vulnerability further demonstrate that family protection is being strained in ways that directly affect both women's safety and children's long-term welfare.

5.6 Public welfare (maṣlaḥah), mercy (raḥmah), and humanitarian governance

The findings also support the argument that Islamic social ethics can serve as a practical evaluative language for humanitarian governance. Respondents used moral categories such as fairness, mercy, trust, and responsibility to judge the quality of response. This indicates that local legitimacy is shaped not only by technical coverage but by whether institutions are perceived to care in morally credible ways. Through the lens of maṣlaḥah, public welfare is not achieved simply because aid is delivered; it is achieved when systems reduce harm, improve social confidence, and respond proportionately to vulnerability. Likewise, the concept of raḥmah helps explain why women interpreted neglect of widows, children, and disabled households as ethically unacceptable even where some assistance was present. In short, humanitarian response can be visible without being experienced as sufficiently compassionate, just, or trustworthy.

5.7 Integrative conclusion of the discussion

Taken together, the findings show that protection gaps in Borno State are simultaneously structural, social, and ethical. They are structural because they are shaped by site type, disability, female-headed household status, and prolonged displacement. They are social because they are intensified where voice is weak, complaint systems are mistrusted, and gatekeeping affects perceived fairness. They are ethical because these deficits map directly onto maqāṣid concerns regarding life, dignity, intellect, family integrity, and public welfare. The study therefore suggests that Islamic social ethics does not stand outside humanitarian protection as a merely theological supplement; rather, it provides a culturally grounded framework through which communities interpret legitimacy and through which institutions can be held more meaningfully accountable.

CONCLUSION

This study examined humanitarian protection gaps affecting internally displaced women and children in Borno State through the analytical framework of Islamic social ethics. The findings demonstrate that while humanitarian assistance mechanisms exist across displacement settings, significant protection gaps remain in key areas including accountability, participation, equitable access to services, and institutional responsiveness. The Protection Gap Index indicates that the current humanitarian response environment provides partial but insufficient protection for vulnerable populations.

The results further show that protection vulnerabilities are not evenly distributed across displaced populations. Individuals residing in host communities experience significantly higher protection deficits compared with those living in formal camps, largely due to weaker institutional oversight and limited humanitarian presence. In addition, female-headed households, widowed women, and households containing persons with disabilities face elevated protection risks, highlighting the intersection of displacement with gender, caregiving burdens, and disability-related vulnerability.

Beyond structural determinants, the qualitative findings reveal that displaced populations interpret humanitarian protection through moral expectations grounded in Islamic social ethics. Concepts such as justice, dignity, compassion, and entrusted responsibility shape how communities evaluate the fairness and legitimacy of humanitarian interventions. Where aid delivery appears inconsistent, complaint mechanisms are mistrusted, or participation structures lack meaningful influence, respondents perceive not only administrative shortcomings but ethical failures in the protection of vulnerable populations.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Strengthening Accountability Mechanisms

Humanitarian agencies and camp management authorities should strengthen complaint and feedback systems that allow displaced women to safely report protection concerns. Complaint mechanisms must be transparent, confidential, and accompanied by clear response procedures to rebuild trust in humanitarian governance.

2. Expanding Protection Support in Host Communities

Humanitarian interventions should increase institutional presence and service delivery in host-community displacement settings where protection gaps are significantly higher. Resource allocation should reflect the growing number of displaced populations residing outside formal camps.

3. Targeted Support for Highly Vulnerable Households

Special protection programs should be developed for widowed women, female-headed households, and households containing persons with disabilities. These groups require tailored interventions including livelihood support, psychosocial services, and priority access to humanitarian assistance.

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