



Communicating for trust

Communication barriers to AAP and SEAH prevention and response in northeast Nigeria

Summary: What you absolutely need to know

Accountability to affected people (AAP) is fundamental in humanitarian efforts, aiming to ensure that the voices and concerns of affected people are not only heard but also taken into account in decision-making. In the context of northeast Nigeria, where conflict and displacement have created complex challenges, AAP is especially important. This study found that affected people in this region have varying levels of access to vital information, particularly concerning protection from sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (PSEAH), depending on their location and gender.

Understanding how PSEAH information is disseminated, reported, and acted upon is central to safeguarding vulnerable communities in this context. Effective communication, confidentiality, and the strategic use of technology are key components in addressing these issues and protecting vulnerable individuals. This is particularly true when it comes to conveying vital information in accessible languages and formats geared to the low literacy rates, especially among women, and language diversity of the affected people.

This study examined how information is communicated, reported, and acted upon in the context of PSEAH in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa States. It also explored the disparities in accessing information pertaining to PSEAH. The research builds and expands on findings from [CLEAR Global's previous research on AAP and community feedback mechanisms](#), which highlighted the potential of technology solutions to improve accountability and overcome language, trust and confidentiality barriers in Borno State.

- **People's information access depends on the language, format, and channels of communication used.** Both community leaders and community members said they struggled to understand the humanitarian information they received in English and in print. Women, marginalized language speakers and people living with disabilities face particular difficulties getting the information they need and being heard. Women who participated in the research expressed concerns about their inability to access information directly. Findings showed that meetings and gatherings are not well suited to providing information to most women and girls. To expand their access to information on PSEAH and other topics, humanitarians could for example play pre-recorded audio messages at sites where women often gather, such as water collection points, distribution centers, health clinics, and markets.
- **Some areas almost entirely lack information on PSEAH, and men's awareness is generally lower than women's; this may influence reporting.** In Ngala, women leaders were the only research participants who had any information on PSEAH. This is in contrast to Girei and Yola south, where information levels were high across all groups. In all areas, some participants were unclear about the distinction between sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH) and gender-based violence (GBV). On PSEAH, women's information levels were consistently higher than men's. While this reflects the fact that women and girls are more often at risk of SEAH, targeting men with information could help reduce the external pressures on women not to report abuse and raise awareness of risks to men and boys.
- **A complex set of factors discourages people from reporting SEAH.** A perceived lack of confidentiality and unresponsiveness in humanitarian complaint mechanisms amplifies the fear of stigma, of not being believed, and of reprisals which discourage many from reporting. The research also found that some individuals do not report SEAH because they are deriving benefits from it and do not see themselves as exploited or abused, highlighting a lack of understanding of what PSEAH encompasses.
- **Delays in responding to reports foster mistrust in the complaint and feedback system.** People want complaints channels to be more responsive, calling for humanitarians to act quickly, provide timely feedback and communicate any action taken to the individual and the wider community as appropriate. They also want complaints channels to be

confidential, especially for sensitive complaints such as reports of SEAH or GBV. Participants felt this would increase trust in the existing system.

- **Community members and humanitarian workers saw digital technology as a means of improving confidentiality and communication.** Participants in both groups felt communicating through devices might partially address concerns about confidentiality and allow more effective two-way communication. In all interviews, participants indicated that they had access to basic mobile phones. A smaller number, predominantly men between 18 and 55, reported owning smartphones and using the internet for information, communication, and social networking.

Recommendations to responding organizations

Communicate in easily comprehensible language and accessible formats

- Communicate PSEAH information in the community's preferred languages for the given location, using plain language for everyone to understand. Key informant interviews (KIIs) indicated that posters translated into location-specific community languages were effective for disseminating information.
- Hire and deploy bilingual or multilingual staff speaking the languages of affected people in each location to improve communication between humanitarian organizations and affected people and build the trust necessary for SEAH reporting.
- Limit the use of text in information, education and communication materials. Develop and field-test graphics-heavy materials like posters and post them prominently around the camps. In the camps visited, very few or no posters conveying SEAH messages were seen.
- Continue to build the knowledge and capacities of humanitarian staff and volunteers on the importance of using a language their interlocutor speaks and understands.
- Communicate clearly on the difference between SEAH and GBV to prevent misunderstanding. Confusion about the distinction was a recurrent issue for research participants.

Expand information reach by:

- Integrating PSEAH awareness raising in all gatherings and meetings. Ensure that people are aware of their rights, available services and where and how to access them, and how they can report any SEAH-related concerns.
- Developing communication strategies that include people living with disabilities and other individuals with special needs such as pregnant and nursing women and older adults, who may otherwise be left without channels that cater to their information needs.

Communication strategies should be developed in consultation with communities to ensure they are culturally sensitive and respect cultural norms.

- Consider making use of megaphones and other public address systems, community outreach through house-to-house visits, and focus group discussions (FGDs) to share PSEAH information with women and girls especially and receive complaints and feedback.
- Establish robust and inclusive feedback mechanisms where individuals can comfortably report SEAH-related concerns anonymously, using diverse channels like mobile apps, suggestion boxes, and dedicated hotlines to be accessible to the widest possible section of the population.

Improve capacity for confidentiality

- Expand and strengthen the use of hotlines in community languages, and keep community members informed when toll-free numbers change or are discontinued.
- Position suggestion boxes where people can use them without being overlooked, check them regularly where possible and ensure timely feedback and action on complaints received. Explore other approaches that will provide confidentiality for people who cannot read and write.
- Respond to feedback in a confidential manner and in people's preferred languages to ensure that they understand. Take and communicate action on complaints to build trust in the system's transparency and accountability in preventing and responding to SEAH.
- Provide ongoing training for the community leaders who receive complaints to keep the information confidential and anonymous, to support victims using technology-enabled reporting systems and to encourage the community members to use any technology tool available.

Consider the use of technology for SEAH information relay and reporting

- 100% of FGD participants said they have direct or indirect access to a simple phone or a smartphone. This opens the possibility of establishing channels where community members can confidently report sensitive and SEAH-related concerns and obtain information on PSEAH by phone.
- Expand existing uses of technology for SEAH reporting, complaints and feedback (voice recorders, SMART RR, radio, etc.) to other locations and strengthen them to support information relay, awareness raising, complaints, and feedback.

Women and speakers of minority languages face barriers to accessing information

Accessing information in northeast Nigeria is still a challenge for people living in IDP camps. Participants across all locations said they lack information and need accurate and timely information about the available services and how to access them. They particularly mentioned the lack of information on the security situation in their home locations and whether it would be safe for them to return home. Community leaders and the radio are the main channels participants use to access information (64%), followed by humanitarian organizations (41%). Humanitarian workers share information either verbally or through printed materials at information desks, in community meetings, and with community leaders – who then pass the information to others. However, community leaders and humanitarian workers said often poor attendance at meetings prevents people getting direct, up-to-date information and giving feedback on community issues. Community members, especially those who speak a marginalized language, admitted that they are reluctant to participate in meetings due to language barriers. They are not confident that they will understand the information, since it is mostly provided in the dominant language. Women felt unable to participate in these meetings due to cultural norms. Some participants also found information desks less accessible and said they were mostly used by individuals who had received a formal education.

Women rely on “secondhand” information

Limited access to technological tools creates barriers to obtaining essential information, especially for women. Women acknowledged smartphones and radios as valuable sources for accessing trustworthy information. Most female participants with access to a phone said they called their relatives living outside the camps for local and international information. However, some also felt that *“phone information is not always true and [...] could be misleading”*. While all women said they have access to a simple phone, devices like radios and smartphones are predominantly owned by men. Men also obtain information directly from humanitarian workers when they attend meetings and gatherings, while women participate less often in these meetings. These access constraints leave most women dependent on their male relatives for what they view as “secondhand” and incomplete information.

Language barriers remain a major problem for accessing information

Both community members and community leaders said they face language barriers that prevent them accessing and passing on information. This is especially the case when information is provided in English and in writing; participants reported that some field staff only speak English.

“There is a barrier in passing information to the people in the community. We cannot read written information, we can only trust the information we receive from the chairman, which we then forward to the women and children. We cannot understand information shared in English until someone interprets [it] for us.”

Male community leader, Ngala

Some participants reported that humanitarians also provide verbal information in Hausa, Kanuri, and Mandara. However, speakers of marginalized languages and those who have no formal education said they are largely reliant on interpretation by community volunteers, family, friends, or neighbors.

“There is no one that speaks our language [Kotoko and Mandara] among the organization staff and it is difficult to get information in our language. Sometimes they would just place written information in English, which not everybody can read.”

Male FGD participant, Yola south.

These language barriers seem to affect men and women alike, and community leaders as well as community members. For some members of the younger generation, information in English is becoming more accessible. A group of young men in Ngala said they preferred information and communication in English. They felt that interacting with humanitarian workers in English would help them to continue learning and understanding the language, which would compensate for the time they were not spending in formal education.

PSEAH information and reporting

Some community members and leaders are without any PSEAH information. Participants in 88% of KIs and FGDs said they had received information on PSEAH. This information was relayed in house-to-house visits (in Damaturu) and through routine meetings and gatherings, including FGDs with different protection partners. However, in all the research FGDs conducted in Ngala, with community members and *bulamas* alike, and in one female FGD in Girei, participants said they had not received any PSEAH information. As a result, they did not know where and how to report unacceptable sexual behavior by humanitarian workers, or what action would be taken if they did make a report. Most research participants stressed that they had not yet observed any improper

sexual behavior by humanitarians. In some female FGDs in Girei and Yola south, however, participants stated that they were aware of or had experienced SEAH by humanitarian workers. Some described how this had started as minor and subtle forms of misconduct and then escalated, but they were unable to report it for various reasons, outlined below.

Female participants say it is difficult to report SEAH confidentially

Female participants said they would rather report sexual abuse and exploitation by humanitarians to a woman leader, who would then forward their concerns anonymously to the proper authority or channel for action. They did not trust the *bulamas'* ability to keep issues confidential and were concerned that their complaints might become a topic of discussion among the *bulamas*. They described women leaders as understanding, trustworthy, and compassionate, not only receiving complaints, but also accompanying community members to hospital.

Not all women own mobile phones. They told us that they sometimes borrow a phone to call the hotlines to report an issue confidentially. However, there are instances where their calls go unanswered, or if they do get through and report their concerns, they are asked to wait for feedback. Some female participants in Girei said that in many cases, when the organization calls back with feedback or returns a missed call, they share the information with the owner of the borrowed phone. This compromises the confidentiality of the complaint. Another problem raised was that hotlines are only operational during the organization's working hours.

Barriers to reporting SEAH through humanitarian complaint mechanisms

"Shame, shyness or fear will [...] stop someone from complaining. The fear of being exposed that you are the person who reported such things, and they may decide not to give you [aid] again. [If] the perpetrator is a friend of a community leader, who then will I report such a thing to? Since I don't know the perpetrator's supervisor in that organization, I will be afraid of being sent out of the camp. [...] We will not report it to the perpetrator's colleagues because they may cover up for the offender. And if you report it to the camp leader, the camp leader may say 'Don't spoil the camp, it might affect our source of help here.' [...] You cannot report it to the leader if he or she is part of the problem. And sometimes when you call the culprit's colleague, they don't listen to you because they tell you that you have leaders. You should report it to your leaders, and if there is any problem they would hear about it from the leaders." Female FGD participants, Girei

We found that although most people know how to make a complaint if they suffer SEAH, they tend not to report such issues, mainly for the following reasons.

Shame and stigma: The fear of stigmatization and being shamed by others was highlighted as the main reason (51%) why women would not report cases of sexual exploitation and abuse. Young women particularly feared social stigma, being seen as “spoiled”, and rejection by their families. They felt reporting might spread rumors through the community that could damage their reputation and jeopardize a single woman’s chances or spark a family crisis for a married woman. One women’s group discussion in Girei described this as a cultural taboo: *“Culture forbids that you report it. If you report such things [...] you will be laughed at. Nobody will be interested in marrying you once you expose that.”* To break this culture of silence, humanitarian organizations should urgently establish safe and confidential avenues for individuals to come forward, ensuring that their identities and reputations are protected.

Lack of trust that action would be taken: Women have limited confidence that *bulamas* and humanitarian organizations would take fair and transparent action against SEAH perpetrators. They feel that reporting a case of sexual exploitation or violence would be ineffective, since the offender would never be punished. They also expressed fear that they would not be taken seriously or not be believed.

“They would doubt you when you complain. Like when you complain that a humanitarian worker is touching you in places that you don’t like, some would say that you have a problem, maybe the person was just trying to play with you. And some people will shout at the girls as if they are their parents, so that scares and discourages people from reporting.”
Older female FGD participant, Yola south.

“They don’t take action. At times if you’re not careful, you’ll be accused of defamation of character. [...] Some people feel too shy to report such cases.”
Female FGD participant, Gwoza.

Given the money and status of humanitarian workers, participants believed that they would not be held accountable for their actions but would be protected by their colleagues and organizations. A young woman in Girei said: *“We don’t know how to report such things, because it’s the staff of the organizations that are doing that, so you cannot report to the organization.”* Another participant thought that *“the organization will only transfer the perpetrator to another location and nothing more.”* Some participants said they lack access to powerful people within the community to whom complaints could be made as an alternative to reporting through humanitarian channels. Women said that if they were aware that actions would be taken against SEAH perpetrators, they would feel more confident to file complaints.

Fear of losing assistance: Fear of the potential consequences discourages people from reporting abuse, including fear of aid being withdrawn or of being evicted from the camp. One female participant said: *“When he abuses or exploits you in exchange for something, let’s say a food voucher, you won’t report him because you want to retain that voucher, you don’t want to lose it.”* Camp residents rely heavily on the aid provided within the camps for their basic needs such as food, shelter and medical care; most have nowhere else to go for shelter and safety. A male participant said, *“Some of the camp leaders will threaten to make you leave the camp after you have reported such issues”*. This fear of being evicted can be paralyzing.

Some participants also felt the *bulamas* lack the power to take action against a perpetrator of SEAH, for fear of losing humanitarian assistance for their camps. They thought if they were sexually exploited or abused by a humanitarian worker, the leaders would seek an amicable resolution outside any formal complaint system, to avoid the kind of report where action could be taken against the offender. *“They cannot handle it, because they would be the first people to say you are the only woman in the camp [experiencing abuse]. They would begin to insult you. People would hate you, [and say] that you talked too much, and when you report to them they would just ask you to be patient, because they don’t want anything that will affect their source of income.”* Female FGD participant, Girei.

Language and interpreting support: In one focus group in Yola south, participants expressed concern about humanitarian staff communicating with them in languages that they did not understand. They said they cannot report SEAH directly to humanitarian workers because field staff don’t speak their languages (Kotoko, Mandara and Marghi). Women in Ngala and Damaturu do not feel comfortable reporting through an interpreter. As most of the interpreters are IDPs who live within the camp and volunteer with humanitarian organizations, the women feared that they might not be able to keep their complaints confidential. Deploying humanitarian field staff who can speak the local languages could improve the people’s confidence to report SEAH directly to staff.

Lack of trust in the confidentiality of the system in place: When an organization does not provide feedback on the process, even if they act on complaints received, people think no action has been taken. Research participants, especially women, echoed the need to maintain privacy and confidentiality by providing a safe and private space for reporting, preferably face-to-face with a trusted and trained individual, preferably a woman. They also asked for humanitarians returning missed calls and hotline operators calling back with feedback to make sure they’re talking with the

right person, who may not be the owner of the phone. In order to feel safe reporting SEAH, they asked for guaranteed confidentiality and protection from harm. Without these, they felt there could be no functional reporting system.

Motivations for reporting SEAH

Participants mentioned several factors that would motivate them to report instances of SEAH:

- **Commitment to transparency and accountability in addressing SEAH** was the most commonly reported motivation for speaking out, mentioned in 46% of the FGDs. Participants said they do not want perpetrators shielded from consequences by the organization: they want them to face appropriate legal and disciplinary action. Confidential and timely action on the complaint would boost their confidence in reporting relevant issues. It would also help to maintain the credibility and integrity of humanitarian efforts and the reporting system in place. *Bulamas* in Pulka suggested that if humanitarian workers know their actions will be investigated and publicized, they may be less likely to engage in exploitative or abusive behavior. *"We would be happy to report such an incident, because it is someone that deceived your daughter or your wife. When it is reported and acted upon, it will prevent future occurrences. That will be helpful."* Male FGD participant, Yola south.
- **Knowing that they can receive medical support** assures participants that their immediate health and safety needs will be taken care of, and can encourage them to come forward and report incidents. Maintaining awareness that this service is available is important to encourage reporting.
- **Assurances of privacy and confidentiality** reassure participants that their personal information will be kept private, allowing them to share their experiences without fear of retaliation, shame or stigma. Participants said they needed guarantees of confidentiality because they would not like what was discussed in private to be made public.

Suggestion boxes are often ineffective, and seen as unsuitable for reporting SEAH

Various organizations have set up complaint and suggestion boxes and many participants appreciated having access to them. However, typically slow response times make them unsuited for sensitive cases like SEAH reporting. Where boxes are used for confidential reporting, some male participants preferred the box to be placed in a visible location in the interests of transparency. Female participants were more concerned with confidentiality, and called for it to be in a less visible or hidden place with appropriate safety and security measures to allow for discreet reporting.

In the vast majority of cases, participants used the boxes to make requests for aid and complain about services received, particularly food distribution. However, both women and men identified practical barriers that made reporting through this channel less effective.

- In one FGD in Pulka, participants perceived a lack of response or delayed response as indicating that their complaints were not valid. They felt they had little understanding of what constitutes a valid or invalid complaint.
- A lack of clarity about how reports are processed and within what time frame impedes confidence in the system. Some participants said that complaint boxes are only opened once in a month, while others did not know when complaints are collected from the box, or how complaints received are processed.
- Participants were distrustful of suggestion boxes as a channel because those that had lodged complaints had not received feedback. In all group discussions, some participants reported that they had never received a response to any complaint made through this channel. It was therefore seen as unsuited to complaints that require prompt action and feedback.
- Literacy was also a challenge. Women were unable to use suggestion boxes for sensitive complaints because they were reliant on someone else to write complaints out for them.

Affected people want existing complaint and feedback mechanisms to be responsive and close the feedback loop

Existing complaint and feedback mechanisms need to function effectively and be responsive, not only to demonstrate humanitarian commitment to accountability but also to ensure that community members have a voice and feel heard throughout the process. By promptly addressing concerns, and communicating the outcomes to community members, humanitarians can foster trust and confidence in the systems.

Using toll-free lines

When asked about availability of functional hotlines in the camp, participants in 68% of FGDs reported that hotlines were available. They said they call these numbers to obtain information from humanitarians about aid services, submit complaints, and get referrals based on their complaints and information needs. One participant in Ngala shared her experience of calling a toll-free number to complain about the poor quality of food she had received during a general food distribution. She

reported that she was spoken to politely and assured of action, and within two days food was supplied to her. Female participants in particular said they are happy to lodge complaints via toll-free numbers because it allows them to express themselves without having to communicate in writing. FGD participants and humanitarian workers in Damaturu said toll-free numbers are widely distributed and attached to food vouchers. People are encouraged to call with complaints and feedback related to any assistance program or to obtain information. Research participants in Yola south and Girei said that most people trust the hotline because prompt action is taken on complaints, and will use it when they are in need of assistance or support.

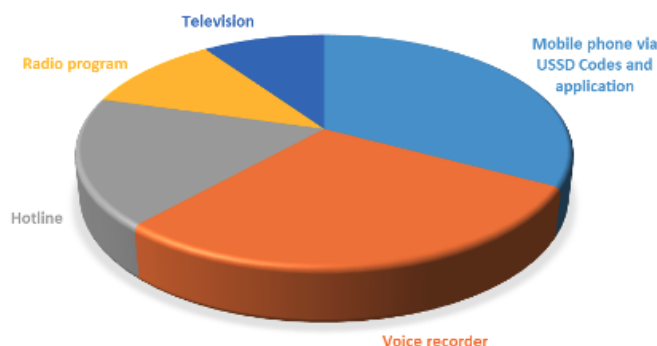
However, there are some barriers that prevent people using this channel. Hotlines are often left unanswered and sometimes they do not connect, although in contrast to the findings of earlier research in Borno State, participants did not report language barriers communicating with hotline operators¹. Overall, 55% of participants said they had a positive experience calling hotlines because their calls went through, they were able to speak with a humanitarian worker, and their problems were resolved. They suggested that humanitarians could withdraw non-functional toll-free numbers to prevent unnecessary calls and maintain trust in the channel.

Using technology-based solutions

Participants in 64% of both KIIs and FGDs reported that there was no technological device in the camp for information relay, complaints, and feedback. IOM’s voice recorders enabling people to record their comments in their own language inside a private booth were mentioned in only two FGDs in Ngala and Girei. Participants had either seen these in camps in Maiduguri or heard about them from friends and family staying in other camps where the voice recorders were in place. Participants in Girei also mentioned the SMART RR (smart reporting and referral) app. This application allows survivors, social workers and service providers to report and refer incidents of GBV from a smartphone or (using USSD) basic phone.

In 81% of FGDs, participants said they often use their phone radio app to listen to the news. In both KIIs and FGDs, mobile phones were said to be primarily used to stay connected to families. Young men indicated that they have access to smartphones, but women said few female residents own smartphones. Many own simple phones, however, and most have access to smartphones through their husbands, sons or other male family members.

In most FGDs with young men, participants described accessing the internet to use



¹ [https://clearglobal.org/resources/access-aap-northea:](https://clearglobal.org/resources/access-aap-northea)

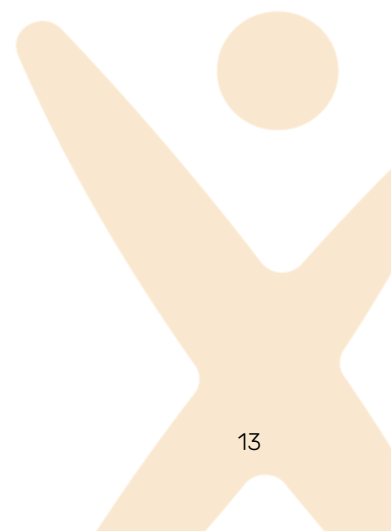
Facebook or WhatsApp and browse. However, most said they do not have money to purchase internet data to go online as much as they would like to stay informed.

When asked what other information and feedback channels they would prefer, most participants wanted either access to a voice recorder or a hotline or other mobile phone-based system. *Figure 1* illustrates participants' preferences for new channels in addition to those already in place. The main reasons given for these preferences were being able to report confidentially, reducing the need for written communication, easing social shyness in face-to-face interactions with service providers, and reducing reliance on interpreters.

Closing the feedback loop

Participants preferred to receive feedback through the same channels in which the complaints were made. Male and female participants differed on how feedback to community-wide complaints should be received. Male participants said they would like feedback to these complaints to be recorded and played using loudspeakers because not everyone attends meetings where such feedback is shared. Women said it was better to make face-to-face complaints with humanitarian workers or through the *bulamas* or women leaders because it enabled quicker feedback and increased trust that humanitarian workers act on complaints. Younger and older women both preferred to receive feedback to complaints from the women leaders, through house-to-house visits.

Figure 2 shows participants' preferred information flow for complaints in the camp.



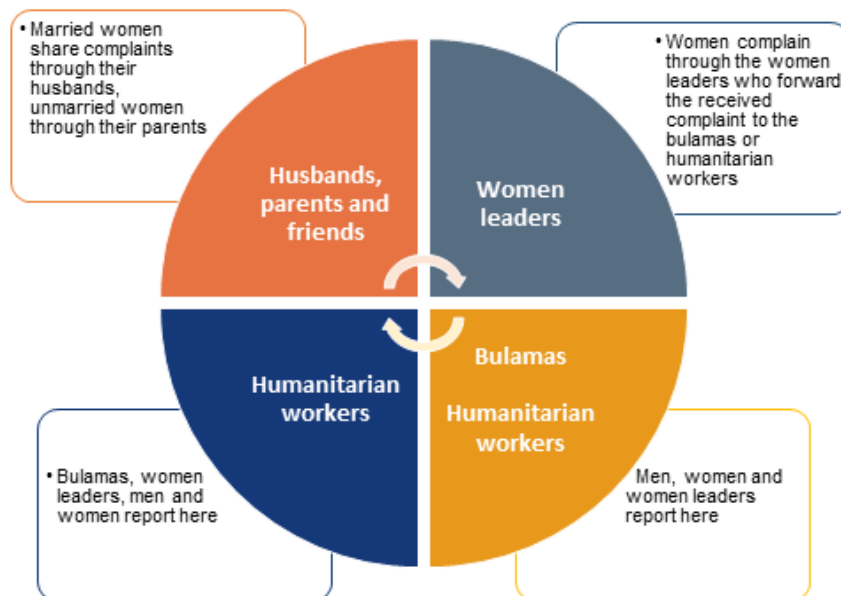


Figure 2: Community members' preferred channels and information flow for complaints

Methodology

We conducted 31 FGDs and 28 KIs with a diverse group of 281 participants. These included internally displaced individuals, humanitarian workers (specializing in Protection and Camp Coordination and Camp Management) and volunteers, State Emergency Management Agency staff, community leaders, people living with disabilities, and community members. FGDs and KIs were conducted in five locations in Borno, Yobe and Adamawa States: Camp 1 in Pulka, Malhohi camp in Yola south, Damare camp in Girei, Mohammed Gombe camp in Damaturu, and ISS IDP camp in Ngala. FGDs and KIs were conducted in Hausa, Kanuri, Mandara and Shuwa Arabic. The research was conducted between May and July 2023.

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How CLEAR Global can help

CLEAR Global's mission is to help people get vital information and be heard, whatever language they speak. We help our partner organizations to listen to, and communicate effectively with, the communities they serve. We translate messages and documents into local languages, support audio translations and pictorial information, train staff and volunteers, and advise on two-way communication. We also work with partners to field test and revise materials to improve comprehension and impact. We deliver research, language mapping and assessments of target populations' communication needs, and develop language technology solutions for community engagement.

Existing resources to support effective two-way communication are available on our [website](#):

- AAP research on [improving access and trust in humanitarian complaints and feedback system in northeast Nigeria](#), [Developing effective complaints and feedback mechanisms](#) and [How effective communication is essential for true accountability](#).
- [Language data for northeast Nigeria](#), including interactive maps; you can also find our curated language use data on [Humanitarian Data Exchange](#).
- CLEAR Global's [Library](#). This library collates all the language resources designed to help humanitarian staff, interpreters, and translators working with crisis-affected people in northeast Nigeria.

For more information, contact us at info@clearglobal.org.