



Bridging The Gap: Evaluating Government Responsibility And Standard Operating Procedures (Sops) Compliance In Shelter Services For GBV Survivors In Arba Minch And Chench, Southern Ethiopia, Ethiopia

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Abstract

This study examines the provision and management of shelter services for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in Arba Minch and Chench, Ethiopia, with a focus on government responsibility, adherence to standard operating procedures (SOPs), and alignment with human rights frameworks. Adopting a qualitative approach guided by Creswell's framework, this research uses a case study design, drawing on observations, interviews, and document analysis to evaluate the effectiveness of these shelters. The findings reveal critical shortcomings in government involvement, resulting in a reliance on civil society organizations (CSOs) and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) for service delivery, which often proves unsustainable. The absence of updated national policies on women's rights and comprehensive SOPs further limits shelters' capacity to address survivors' needs, frequently leading to re-traumatization and re-victimization. Lessons from best practices in Uganda, Kenya, and South Africa emphasize the importance of adopting integrated legal and policy frameworks, enhancing professional training, and establishing robust support systems for SGBV survivors. This study highlights the pressing need for the Ethiopian government to fulfill its human rights obligations by implementing sustainable shelter services, strengthening policies, and ensuring continuous support for survivors.

Keywords: Gender-based violence, Shelter services, Standard operating procedures (SOPs), Government responsibility, Human rights frameworks, Policy implementation, Survivor support, Ethiopia.

Introduction

Crime profoundly impacts the physical, psychological, and economic well-being of its victims, often infringing on their fundamental human rights.ⁱ These violations obligate governments to uphold their duty to protect individuals' rights to life, liberty, and property. Victims deserve restitution when the state fails to fulfill these responsibilities.ⁱⁱ In Ethiopia, the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) Constitution recognizes the right to justice (Article 37) and equality (Article 25).ⁱⁱⁱ However, the country lacks an adequate legal framework to support crime victims and align with international standards, such as the UN's Basic Principles on Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power. Additionally, the Ethiopian government has not established sustainable funding mechanisms to address victims' needs.

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), a particularly egregious violation of human rights, encompasses a wide range of acts, including rape, forced marriage, and denial of reproductive rights.^{iv} Women are disproportionately affected, facing not only physical harm but also violations of their rights to dignity, freedom from discrimination, and the highest attainable standard of health.^v Despite Ethiopia's commitments under international human rights treaties, the response to the SGBV remains inadequate. Comprehensive shelter services covering health, legal, and psycho-social support are critical to addressing SGBV but are underdeveloped and poorly implemented.

The importance of survivor-centered shelter services is well recognized worldwide. These facilities provide safety, rehabilitation, and a path to recovery through tailored support systems, including case management, vocational training, and access to justice.^{vi} Best practices from countries such as Uganda, Kenya, and South Africa emphasize the need for gender-sensitive, integrated frameworks to ensure that survivors' dignity and rights are upheld. Despite the prevalence of SGBV, shelters in Ethiopia remain scarce, unevenly distributed, and largely reliant on non-governmental organizations. Only one government-managed shelter exists, reflecting a significant gap in state responsibility.^{vii}

In Arba Minch and Chench, the demand for shelter services far outweighs the supply. Survivors face barriers such as limited capacity, inadequate legal protection, and insufficient government involvement. Previous studies, including those by UN Women and Asalfew Kestela, have highlighted deficiencies such as poor complaint mechanisms and lack of accessibility, underscoring the urgent need for reform. While existing research provides valuable insights, there has been little focus on assessing government compliance with international standards and standard operating procedures (SOPs) or leveraging best practices from other countries.



This study seeks to fill this critical gap by examining the Ethiopian government's obligations under human rights treaties to provide comprehensive shelter services for SGBV survivors. It evaluates the compliance of shelters in Arba Minch and Chench with SOPs and benchmarks them against international models. The research also highlights the government's failure to establish a uniform legal and policy framework for shelter services, a fundamental step toward ensuring survivors' rights.

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on governmental accountability, its comparative approach to identifying actionable lessons from best practices, and its use of a human rights framework to propose a survivor-centered, standardized model for shelter services. By addressing these gaps, this research aims to contribute to the development of sustainable, accessible, and high-quality support systems for SGBV survivors in Ethiopia. Therefore, the objective of the present study is to evaluate the Ethiopian government's legal and policy obligations in providing shelter services for GBV survivors, assess the compliance of shelters in Arba Minch and Chench with SOPs and international best practices, and propose actionable recommendations to enhance survivor-centered frameworks.

Research methodology

Methodology of the Research

Approach

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, which aligns with Creswell's framework to explore the provision of shelter services for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in Arbaminch and Chench, Ethiopia.^{viii} The qualitative design is particularly suitable for investigating the complex social and human dynamics surrounding survivor support, allowing for a deeper understanding of their lived experiences and the operational efficacy of shelters. By employing case studies, this methodology enables a critical examination of shelter practices, focusing on the compliance of these facilities with established standard operating procedures (SOPs) and international best practices. The flexibility of this approach facilitates a dynamic, reflective analysis that accommodates the nuances of the research context. Multiple data sources including observations, interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials ensure a comprehensive and well-rounded exploration of the topic.

Furthermore, the research employs a sociolegal methodology, combining legal frameworks with social science perspectives to provide a holistic analysis of shelter services.^{ix} This interdisciplinary approach is essential for understanding both the legal obligations of the government and the social implications of shelter operations.

Methods of the Research

This research uses both primary and secondary data sources, which are gathered through a range of qualitative methods, to provide a thorough assessment of the shelter services in Arbaminch and Chench.

Sources of Data

- **Primary Data:** Data were collected through qualitative observations, in-depth interviews with shelter survivors and staff, and key informant interviews. The observational data were recorded in field notes, detailing the daily activities at the shelters. The interviews provided insights into the experiences of survivors and the operational challenges faced by shelter staff. Additionally, qualitative analyses of relevant policy and legal documents were conducted to evaluate the legal frameworks surrounding shelter services.
- **Secondary Data:** A comprehensive literature review was undertaken, including scholarly articles, reports, and comparative studies from international contexts, to examine best practices in shelter services and service provision models. This review provides a valuable context for understanding the broader landscape of SGBV survivor services.

Population and Sampling

Given the qualitative nature of this research, the sample size was guided by the principle of saturation, where data collection continues until no new information emerges. The participants were selected on the basis of specific criteria such as relevance, diversity, and feasibility. The research involved:

- **Key Informant Interviews (KIIs):** Nine key informants, including staff from the Women's and Children's Affairs offices and former shelter personnel, were selected for their expertise.
- **In-depth interviews (IDIs):** Six shelter staff members and four survivors were interviewed to gain a deeper understanding of the shelter's daily operations and the survivors' experiences.



Study Area Description

This study focuses on shelter services in Arbaminch and Chench, which are located in the southern region of Ethiopia. Arbaminch shelters are operated by EUREKA, a civil society organization, while Chench's shelters were established through the now-terminated MSCN project. Despite some challenges and resource limitations, both shelters remain operational. This research aims to provide a comprehensive evaluation of these shelters, including an analysis of their adherence to SOPs and a comparative assessment with international best practices.

Sampling Technique

The study used **purposive sampling**, selecting participants on the basis of their direct involvement with shelters, such as survivors, shelter staff, and management. This sampling method ensures the inclusion of individuals with relevant experiences, providing deep insights into the research topic.

Data collection tools

- **Observation:** A structured observation framework was used to document shelter operations and assess compliance with SOPs. This method allowed the researcher to observe the shelters' environment, service delivery, and survivor care, providing empirical data that reflected the true dynamics of the shelters.
- **Key Informant Interviews (KIs):** KIs were conducted with shelter management, staff, and professionals, offering expert insights into service delivery, policy challenges, and the operational environment of the shelters.
- **In-depth interviews (IDIs):** IDIs with survivors explored their personal experiences with shelter services, focusing on their needs, rights, and quality of care received. These interviews contributed rich, qualitative data that addressed survivors' perspectives on the shelter's effectiveness.

Document Analysis

A thorough document analysis was conducted on legal, policy, and operational documents relevant to shelter services. This analysis aimed to clarify the legal obligations of the government and to evaluate how these align with the actual practices in Arbaminch and Chench. Additionally, international documents and comparative studies were reviewed to benchmark shelter practices against global best practices.

Data Analysis Techniques

- **Thematic Analysis:** Data from interviews and observations were coded and analyzed to identify key themes related to shelter operations, survivor experiences, and the compliance of the shelters with SOPs. This analysis helps uncover patterns and trends in service delivery and shelter practices.
- **Content Analysis:** For document analysis, content analysis was used to examine and quantify themes and concepts within policy documents, with a focus on legal obligations and operational standards.
- **Comparative Analysis:** A comparative approach was employed to contrast the shelter services in Arbaminch and Chench with international best practices, offering insights into areas for improvement and adaptation.
- **Data Triangulation:** Data triangulation was used to cross-verify information from different sources (observations, interviews, documents) to increase the validity and reliability of the findings.

Results and Discussions

Government responsibility

The Chench Shelter established in 2000 by Save the Children and later managed by the EFACE program, provided comprehensive services to support the rehabilitation and reintegration of survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). However, the findings of this study reveal that the government plays a minimal role in the creation and maintenance of shelter services for SGBV survivors. Most of the responsibilities fall on civil society organizations (CSOs) and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), leading to services that are often unsustainable and insufficient to meet the continuous needs of survivors. There is a notable absence of a national policy that addresses women's rights or the establishment of shelter services, indicating a failure of the government to meet its obligations. This gap results in the re-victimization and re-traumatization of survivors.

The study underscores the importance of proactive government measures to protect, investigate, prosecute, and compensate SGBV victims to fulfill their human rights obligations. Importantly, the government ensures the safety of survivors, particularly during the investigation and prosecution stages, as these processes can inadvertently exacerbate the risk to the victim's safety. Shelter services are vital for ensuring the safety and healing of survivors. The Chench Shelter provided a range of services, including psychosocial support, legal



assistance, medical care, and accommodation, all aimed at reintegration. However, after six years, the program was phased out, with responsibilities transferred to local authorities.

The Arbaminch Shelter, initially funded by the French Embassy and later supported by UNICEF, focuses primarily on child survivors of SGBV. It provides psychosocial support, legal services, and accommodation, but the government's involvement is limited to case referrals, initial medical care, and the initiation of legal processes.

Interviews with former staff at the Chench Shelter revealed that the government's involvement was largely restricted to financial oversight and ensuring compliance with the government's financial systems, with minimal engagement in shelter operations or staff mentoring. Similarly, at the Arbaminch Shelter, the government's role is confined to referrals and the initiation of legal proceedings, with the shelter taking on the responsibility of following up on legal cases and providing healthcare.

Document analysis has revealed a significant gap in the legal framework, particularly the criminal justice system, which does not adequately address the rights and needs of victims, focusing instead on offenders. The government's failure to engage stakeholders in the formation and dissemination of standard operating procedures (SOPs) further exacerbate noncompliance. There is also a lack of comprehensive policies on women's rights and victim support, as well as a compensation system for survivors of SGBV. Survivors should be entitled to claim compensation and shelter services as a matter of right rather than depending on the willingness of others.

Observations during the study confirmed that no shelters were funded by the government and that both centers lacked government-issued guidelines or SOPs. The shelters operate without government SOPs, relying on standards set by NGOs. The absence of national laws that align with international commitments, as well as the lack of standardized legal frameworks, further underscores the government's minimal involvement in supporting survivors.

Compliance with Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)

The study revealed that the Arbaminch Shelter did not adopt the updated SOPs introduced in April 2024. Instead, the shelter follows standards established by various NGOs, specifically the interagency minimum standards for gender-based violence in emerging programs. This indicates a lack of coordination with government-led initiatives and a heavy reliance on non-governmental standards.

The services at the Arbaminch Shelter are also time-limited, with survivors being reintegrated not on the basis of their readiness but rather the shelter's set duration of stay, which contradicts the need for survivor empowerment. Additionally, the shelter is restricted to accommodating child survivors and does not include male survivors, thus failing to adhere to principles of inclusivity and accessibility.

Like Arbaminch, Chench Shelter operates according to NGO-provided standards. The government did not engage significantly in the shelter's operation or in the creation of SOPs during the project's active years. This lack of collaboration between the government and NGOs in the SOP development process highlights a disconnect between national initiatives and the reality of shelter operations.

Interviews with former Chench Shelter staff revealed that they did not participate in the creation of SOPs, relying instead on the interagency guidelines for service provision. Furthermore, observations revealed a lack of adherence to SOPs, resulting in survivors not receiving services tailored to their specific needs. In Arba minch, reintegration decisions were made by shelter staff rather than being based on the survivor's readiness.

Document analysis revealed the absence of sufficient or specific SOPs for shelters, with the new SOPs not being communicated to relevant stakeholders. This lack of engagement and dissemination of SOPs has led to varying standards of operation across shelter centers, complicating the assessment of service quality and the establishment of minimum standards for operation, staffing, and qualifications.

Compliance with Best Practices

The study also sought to draw lessons from best practices in other countries addressing SGBV. The document analysis of Uganda's Kampala Declaration on SGBV (2011), which includes multiple African nations, revealed three key themes: united efforts to prevent SGBV, ending impunity for perpetrators, and providing support systems for survivors, including a special fund for victim support. The study revealed that Ethiopia lacks a similar declaration, with no clear mission, objectives, or principles for shelter provision, particularly in Arbaminch.

The Ugandan model highlights the importance of legal and policy frameworks, professional training programs, and the elimination of impunity in addressing SGBV. In contrast, Ethiopia's survivors must independently preserve evidence, and the criminal justice system often re-traumatizes victims. There are no



special prosecution or investigation procedures for SGBV cases, and bail decisions do not adequately consider the harm that may be caused to survivors by offenders.

In Kenya, specialized bodies investigate SGBV cases via forensic evidence and provide special protection for vulnerable victims and witnesses, including relocation and witness protection measures. However, in Ethiopia, the lack of specialized investigation procedures and victim support mechanisms means that SGBV survivors are left unsupported.

South Africa provides an example of an effective support system for survivors, with a National Policy Guideline for Victim Empowerment, a Domestic Violence Act, and a Victim Charter. The Department of Welfare issues minimum standards for shelters, emphasizing a restorative justice approach that holds offenders accountable and empowers victims.

The findings of this study indicate that Ethiopia lacks comprehensive legal and policy frameworks to address SGBV and provide support for survivors. There is no special fund or government compensation for victims, and the lack of a reliable government funding system makes NGO-led shelter services unsustainable.

The study concludes that effective intervention in SGBV cases requires more than just SOPs; it demands strengthened legal and policy frameworks, better professional training, and reliable support systems. The government must fulfill its duty to assist victims rather than relying on the offender's ability to provide compensation.

Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight significant gaps in the provision and management of shelter services for survivors of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) in Arba Minch and Chench, where the government's role remains minimal, resulting in unsustainable services that fail to meet the urgent needs of survivors. The absence of a comprehensive, updated national policy on women's rights and shelter services for SGBV survivors reflects the government's noncompliance with its human rights obligations, leading to inadequate protection, investigation, punishment, and compensation for victims. Both shelters rely on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for guidelines rather than government-mandated standard operating procedures (SOPs), leading to inconsistent service quality. The study also revealed that Ethiopia lacks a cohesive legal framework for addressing SGBV, in contrast to best practices in other African countries, such as Uganda, Kenya, and South Africa, which have specialized systems for investigating, prosecuting, and supporting victims. To address these deficiencies, the government must adopt a national policy on women's rights that specifically addresses SGBV prevention, provides compensation mechanisms for survivors, amends legal frameworks to better protect victims, and ensures that shelters and legal services are adequately funded and supported. Additionally, Ethiopia should introduce restorative justice practices, establish specialized investigation and prosecution units, and allocate specific budgets for SGBV services. By improving coordination between government bodies, NGOs, and local authorities and by involving stakeholders in the creation and dissemination of SOPs, Ethiopia can ensure a more effective, survivor-centered response to SGBV, fulfilling its human rights obligations and ensuring the safety and empowerment of survivors.

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Authors' contributions

HD was the principal investigator and conceptualized the study and manuscript, writing and contributed to the data analysis. Sam significantly contributed to the funding acquisition and data collection. All the authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Availability of data and materials

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available owing to research ethics board restrictions but are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Ethics approval and consent to participate



The study was approved by the Research Ethics Boards of Arba Minch University,

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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