

Navigating Ethical Issues in Communicating Sensitive Messages in Northern Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examines the ethical and cultural considerations of conducting research and community theatre projects on sensitive issues in Northern Nigeria. Focusing on two field interventions, it explores designing a communication strategy for child sexual abuse in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) and utilizing Theatre for Development (TfD) to address out-of-school children and youth unemployment in Zaria, Kaduna State. In these communities, ethical landscapes are shaped primarily by Hausa cultural norms and Islamic practices, rather than a homogeneous regional identity. Negotiating these dynamics required strict ethical standards during data collection, field performance, and reportage. The study concludes that communicating sensitive topics through applied theatre must be culturally attuned and professionally executed to overcome community barriers. It recommends specialized training for practitioners to navigate complex ethical dynamics during theatrical performances without triggering cultural conflict.

Keywords: Ethics, Applied Theatre, Youth Unemployment, Out-of-School Children, Theatre in Education (TiE), Cultural Sensitivities, Child Sexual Abuse

Introduction

Northern Nigeria comprises 19 of Nigeria's 36 states, covering the Northeast, Northwest, and North Central geopolitical zones, and is home to more than half of the country's population. Scholarship on the region has consistently emphasised its considerable ethnic, linguistic, and

religious diversity, which includes substantial Christian and Traditionalist populations alongside numerous minority ethnic groups, particularly across the Middle Belt and North Central zones. While Hausa culture and Islam remain highly influential across much of the region and are especially prominent within the specific localities examined in this study, namely the Federal

Capital Territory and Zaria, Kaduna State, this local prominence should not be read as a claim to cultural or religious homogeneity across the north as a whole; the communities discussed in this paper are illustrative of, rather than representative of, Northern Nigeria in its entirety. Some of the

complexities facing the wider region include security and safety challenges, cultural and religious sensitivities, and linguistic and communication barriers. Within the specific communities engaged in this study, conservatism and Islamic belief systems, gender separation and roles, and a degree of caution toward unfamiliar outsiders emerged as recurring concerns shaping community engagement. One of the strategies of intervention in such contexts is Applied Theatre (Abah & Etherton, 1982).

The practice of Applied Theatre, popularly known in Nigeria as Theatre for Development or Community Theatre, began at the Northern premier university, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, in the neighbouring community of Samaru, under Michael Etherton, and became known as the Samaru Project (Abah & Etherton, 1982). It began as part of the university's Drama programme. Despite more than four decades of practice, sociocultural interventions in the region have not become markedly easier, as the conservative cultural fabric that shaped the original Samaru experience persists today. The two case studies discussed in Part Two of this article were conducted in Angwan Almajire and Angwan Garke, communities within the same broader Zaria area in which the Samaru Project was first situated. While the Samaru Project pioneered the use of street theatre to open dialogue between the university and a then largely unfamiliar host community, the projects discussed here extend that foundational approach: they retain its commitment to grounding performance in community realities and dialogic engagement. However, these projects respond to a markedly more formalised set of ethical demands, including informed consent, judicious redaction, and structured reporting protocols, that have become standard in academic and applied theatre practice in the decades that followed. The present fieldwork can therefore be read as both a continuation of the Samaru tradition of community-grounded performance and a departure from it, reflecting the tightened ethical expectations that now govern research-based theatre practice.

Therefore, ethical consideration in conducting community projects is crucial to the results. The end and the means must align to produce an acceptable ethical result. Afolabi (2021) offered the insight that "ethics in research is an ongoing interrogative, critical, and evaluative process that requires cultural, socio-economic, and political understanding of the researcher and the researched" (p. 111), and that "ethical questioning is an inquiry-driven process of reasoning, writing, and doing" (p. 110). The experience from the projects reflects imaginary walls constructed when sensitive issues such as sexuality and out-of-school children are front and centre. There is no manual for navigating such experiences, but understanding silence and cultural restrictions and evaluating the process encourage participation. For instance, the design of the child abuse communication strategies in the FCT met with silence from respondents until the school authorities and child psychologists suggested reframing the questions to elicit responses from the students. In the same vein, doing community theatre with the Almajiri students involved obtaining permissions, vetting the skits, redrafting the scripts in some cases, and adjusting directorial

approaches to deliver the message. The process of obtaining permission from gatekeepers is not set in stone; it requires an understanding of the culture, nuances, mores, and body language of the people.

Contextual Background to the Project

The projects cover the North Central and Northwest cities of the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), as well as Zaria, Kaduna State. Cultural and religious sensitivities were identified as core to the research problem. Part 1 of the project deals with Child Sexual Abuse (CSA), which remains a profound yet under-reported social crisis in Nigeria, particularly within the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). While the Child Rights Act (2003) provides a legal framework for protection, its implementation faces significant friction from deep-seated cultural undertones and religious interpretations in Northern Nigeria. In many communities, a culture of silence surrounds sexuality, rendering sex education a taboo topic. This systemic silence creates a knowledge vacuum, leaving minors vulnerable to both contact and non-contact forms of abuse. As private and public institutions struggle with disparities in educational resources, there is an urgent need to shift from mere awareness broadcasting to participatory, ethical, and strategic communication that empowers children and stakeholders alike.

Part 2 explores the intricate ethical landscape of applied theatre in Kaduna State, specifically focusing on the tension between academic disclosure and participant protection within the conservative communities of Zaria. The fieldwork was conducted in two communities that require a brief introduction for readers unfamiliar with the area. Angwan Almajire is an agrarian community bordering the university campus; it takes its name from the Almajiri — itinerant Qur'anic students who study, and in many cases reside, under the tutelage of local Mallams (teachers), following a long-standing tradition of Islamic education in the region. Angwan Garke is a rock-rich settlement whose local economy has historically depended on granite and gravel quarrying. By utilising fieldwork from these two communities, the project highlights how traditional research priorities, such as informed consent and transparency, must be balanced against local cultural sensitivities and judicious redaction. Ultimately, the project argues for a culturally informed, participatory approach that uses drama as a tool for advocacy while strictly adhering to ethical questioning protocols, to avoid stigmatising marginalised groups or disrupting established community social structures.

Part 1: Designing Communication Strategies for Child Sexual Abuse in FCT

The implementation of a sensitive project, such as one addressing Child Sexual Abuse (CSA), requires careful ethical consideration of approach in the Federal Capital Territory. The project focused on communicating about CSA to students at the study location. Multiple visits to the school, including informal interviews, revealed a gap in students' basic knowledge of sexuality and CSA. The culture of silence around sex education is due to it being one of the 'taboo topics' not openly discussed in public, especially in Northern Nigeria. Studies by Krahé and Knappert (2009), Kemer and İşler Dalgıç (2022), and May et al. (2021) all agree that various communication platforms, including drama and workshops in secondary schools, can aid in communicating about CSA.

CSA has become a challenging situation because of the grave impact it has on its primary victims, who are the future of any society. Understanding this means acknowledging the serious societal harm CSA causes, which warrants swift attention, especially in prevention, intervention, and support for victims, beyond treating it merely as a criminal act. CSA occurs in different forms, even when a child is not touched. Instances of sexual abuse include rape, penetration, forced oral sex, non-penetrative sexual contact such as inordinate touching or caressing of a child's body, kissing, rubbing, or masturbating, telling inappropriate jokes or stories, forcing or inviting a child to undress, exposing a child to sexual acts, flashing or exposing oneself to a child, encouraging sexually inappropriate behaviour, and grooming a child for future sexual contact, among others. When a child is exposed to or involved in any such acts, this constitutes Child Sexual Abuse. It is worth noting that the total legal and moral responsibility for any sexual conduct between an adult and a child rests with the adult; it is the adult's responsibility not to act on any response from the child (Haugaard & Reppucci, 1988). In Nigeria, the law supports this position, as clearly stated in Section 31 of the Child Rights Act (CRA) 2003, which is summed up thus:

1. No Consent: The law explicitly states that even if the child agreed to the act, this is not a defence. A child cannot legally consent to sex.
2. No Mistake of Age: It is also not a defence if the adult believed the child was 18 or older.

CSA violates children's rights and has significant and lasting psychological, emotional, and health effects on victims over time (Diraditsile & Nyadza, 2018, p. 4). A child is defined by the

African Child Policy Forum as a person under the age of eighteen (18). A child, who is considered a minor, is not held responsible for his or her own acts and is meant to be cared for and protected until he or she comes of age (African Child Policy Forum, 2013). The law determines the age at which an individual is deemed legally responsible and therefore no longer considered a child. Section 21 of the Child's Rights Act explicitly voids any marriage where a person is under 18 years of age. In Northern Nigeria, this provision has been the subject of ongoing debate, stemming from a fundamental legal conflict: the Child Rights Act (2003) expressly sets the age of consensual marriage at 18, while several Northern states have, through state-level legislation informed by interpretations of Sharia, set the applicable age of marriage at the onset of puberty, generally understood as falling between 12 and 15 years, rather than at a fixed chronological age. This divergence reflects a conflict between federal statutory law and state-level religious-legal frameworks, rather than a single uniform customary practice, and it remains a difficult topic to address without evoking anger or protest. It is a complex issue that merits further dedicated legal and anthropological study beyond the scope of this article.

There are various arguments about what constitutes a child's right as it pertains to sexuality. However, as evidence-based reports on issues affecting children, especially girls, continue to emerge worldwide, one may wonder whether children are truly free and safe in today's society. Adequate attention is often given only to contact abuse, neglecting the fact that non-contact acts frequently precede and give rise to the latter.

The project's pilot study received no responses due to ethical concerns about the questions being too direct. A meeting was convened with a child communication expert and psychologists to reconsider the research questions and reframe them in a more acceptable form for children to answer. The instruments initially developed to solicit responses from students (male and female) were rejected at the testing stage due to these ethical concerns. They were reviewed by a professional child psychologist and a communication expert, who deemed the first framing of the questionnaire inappropriate because it was too direct. It contained explicit questions that health professionals considered inappropriate for children, since the manner of questioning could limit responses and trigger respondents who were themselves victims of CSA. Sample initial questions included:

- i. Have you ever been sexually abused before?

- ii. Who abused you?
- iii. Can you recount how many times this abuse occurred?
- iv. Are your parents aware of this abuse?
- v. Have you reported this abuse to someone?

This is a clear example of an unforeseen ethical issue that called for reframing. Ethical concerns regarding respondents' dignity and confidentiality necessitated a change to more appropriate questions, such as:

Are you aware that the following constitutes Child Sexual Abuse?

- i. Touching a child on his or her private body parts.
- ii. Exposing children to pornographic images.
- iii. Kissing children on their lips.
- iv. Having sexual intercourse with a child.
- v. An adult undressing in front of a child.
- vi. Wrong sexual orientation or discussions in children's presence.
- vii. Do you know what to do when you are sexually abused?

This episode raises a broader question about practitioner preparation rather than indicating that ethically inappropriate questioning is commonplace within Nigerian theatre or research practice. The initial instrument had been developed without prior consultation with child psychologists or communication specialists, and its shortcomings only became apparent after piloting exposed the problem. This points to a structural gap in pre-fieldwork ethical training, rather than a failure specific to this project or evidence of a wider pattern across the field. Many practitioners receive limited formal preparation in trauma-informed or child-safeguarding communication before undertaking sensitive fieldwork, and institutional ethics review does not always extend to instrument-level scrutiny of question design. Understood this way, the episode functions less as a cautionary tale about individual misjudgment and more as a call for embedding

child psychologists, communication specialists, and ethics reviewers earlier in instrument design, particularly for projects addressing sexual abuse, trauma, or other highly sensitive subject matter.

The revised data collection process elicited more responses from students. Workshops and drama became helpful approaches for communicating about CSA at the study location. Training all CSA communication stakeholders became necessary to understand the phenomenon, propose better ways to communicate about CSA, identify the most appropriate channels for communication, and develop measures to ensure that parents, teachers, communication stakeholders, and students act proactively on CSA messages. The workshops and drama were designed not only to raise awareness of CSA by improving knowledge, but also to collectively develop sustainable ways to reduce the CSA crisis through strategic communication in secondary schools. The idea was to create an enabling environment in which participation in the decision-making process was given a level playing field, providing an opportunity for participants to express themselves, share their experiences, and proffer solutions.

Time and again, experience reveals that, given the opportunity, children have views and perspectives that can help achieve developmental goals, and that their views can contribute positively to decisions affecting the realisation of their potential, protection, rights, and general well-being. In consonance with this, a Key Informant Interview (KII) respondent observed:

Children have been neglected over the years, especially in decision-making processes, as they are seen as vulnerable and clueless. The key driver of change is participation, if done properly and guided by ethical standards. Platforms such as Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meetings, general assemblies, and even workshops should be used effectively to bring everyone together to discuss this matter of grave concern (Key Informant 1, personal communication, September 16, 2026). In doing this, everyone is carried along, and issues of ethical concern can be addressed effectively.

It is worth noting that no single behaviour can be considered evidence of sexual abuse; however, a pattern of behaviours is of concern. Children can display a broad range of sexual behaviours even in the absence of any reason to believe they have been sexually abused. For these reasons, it is necessary to fully understand the determinants of CSA. Consequently, a problem tree analysis helped participants examine the components of CSA by identifying its causes, problems,

and effects. This process led to the identification of elements of contact and non-contact sexual abuse, enabling participants to understand CSA more effectively and to address these issues ethically within the school environment and society at large through a participatory process. The analysis of the situation was the first step in the problem tree. The researcher and participants agreed that CSA is on the rise despite several campaigns, and began analysing why the problem persists by collecting data to understand the situation. The next step was to identify the cause(s) of the problem, using a brainstorming technique to generate responses and ideas from participants. The researcher then determined the effects of the main problem by drawing the trunk of a tree, identifying causes (roots) and effects (leaves or branches), with the aim of going deeper into the causes and effects of non-contact sexual abuse to address the core problems. The existing problem must be interpreted in light of the views, needs, interests, and activities of the people concerned, to ensure that all participants accepted the plan, understood the process, and were committed to implementing it.

Following the workshop held at the study locations, a communication strategy was designed to bridge the communication gap on CSA in secondary schools, developed in line with the workshop's outcomes. This approach differs from others used in the campaign against CSA in Nigerian schools, as it combines workshops, drama, and IEC materials to improve students' knowledge of CSA. This method was tested at study sites and proved to be a workable and effective way to communicate about CSA in secondary schools, largely because the findings emerged democratically and participatorily, through the collective involvement of children, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders in children's education, rather than from the researcher alone.

The project found that sex education is not adequately captured in the school curriculum, contributing to a persistent gap in communicating about CSA in secondary schools, largely due to ethical concerns rooted in the region's cultural nuances. The study also found that the teaching of CSA is more inadequate in public secondary schools than in private secondary schools at the study location: 119 respondents (40.9%) in public secondary schools indicated that they had not been taught anything about sex education because teachers shy away from discussing it. The study further found that efforts to raise CSA awareness among children's stakeholders have been largely ineffective because they adopt a broadcast format focused on announcements rather than

knowledge-building. This poor dissemination of CSA messages creates a barrier that limits students' understanding of the phenomenon.

Child Sexual abuse, as one of the development challenges faced by many societies, including Nigeria, will continue to persist in secondary schools without comprehensive knowledge creation on CSA, better utilisation of communication platforms within the school environment, greater inclusiveness in decision-making processes, and stronger capacity-building for children's stakeholders. This study holds that efforts to raise awareness of CSA must aim to improve knowledge among vulnerable groups. The CSA awareness-creation campaign must therefore be inclusive of all stakeholders, using varied teaching forums, particularly in Northern Nigerian public secondary schools and society at large. Advocates against CSA, including teachers, school administrators, parents, religious leaders, government officials, security agents, media practitioners, and health workers, must be adequately trained. This capacity-building, aimed at helping stakeholders play their roles effectively, will ultimately serve to curb the CSA crisis and protect children.

Part 2: (Re)presenting Community: Ethical Considerations in Play Devising and Reporting Dynamics in Applied Theatre Practice in Two Zaria Communities of Kaduna State

In another project implemented in two northern communities of Zaria, Kaduna State, we explore the complex ethical challenges of reporting on and discussing applied theatre fieldwork, particularly regarding data gathered through community engagement (Gjaerum, 2013). While researchers often prioritise informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality, the sensitive nature of information collected can create dilemmas regarding full disclosure in both play devising and academic publication (Taquette & Borges da Matta Souza, 2022). Using two community theatre projects as case studies, this research demonstrates a correlation between data sensitivity and the likelihood of withholding key information in reporting (Brooks et al., 2024). We argue that the very nature of participant-provided data can necessitate judicious redaction (Ross et al., 2018). We conclude with a call for enhanced training for both lead researchers and field assistants on ethical questioning and reporting protocols within applied theatre practice, emphasising the nuanced balance between transparency and participant protection (Afolabi & Llewellyn, 2022).

It is worth clarifying the scope of this discussion at the outset. The ethical questions explored below concern situated, field-level negotiations between researchers and communities:

consent, redaction, and the framing of sensitive material for performance and reporting. These are distinct from, though related to, the broader institutional question of whether Nigerian universities and research institutions currently possess the ethics review infrastructure and procedural rigour needed to adequately oversee sensitive applied theatre projects of this kind, and whether practitioners are prepared to meet the demands of such processes. That institutional question, concerning the readiness of ethics approval procedures and professional accountability structures, is significant in its own right and merits sustained, dedicated treatment that falls outside the scope of the present article. We flag it here as an important direction for future research rather than attempting to resolve it within the present discussion, which remains focused on field-level ethical negotiation.

Case Study 1: The Almajiri Community

This case study details the initial community engagement undertaken by the Department of Theatre Arts at the Federal University of Education, Zaria, in Angwan Almajire, a community bordering the university campus. Our approach began with securing official permission from the school management before contacting Mai Anguwa, the community head. He diligently verified our legitimacy by cross-referencing our request with the university and inspecting staff and student identity cards, emphasising the importance of upholding the community's reputation, and gave us written permission to carry out the project in his domain. Strict protocols were enforced, notably prohibiting male team members from entering homes without the homeowner's explicit permission, while female members were permitted entry. Although the class adopted a non-residential approach, with no members sleeping in the community, daily visits involved engaging with diverse groups, including women, youth, men, farmers, and traders. Due to the community's proximity to the school, and because some students actually resided there, the class was aware of the community's problems, chief among which were frequent cases of theft allegedly attributed to the Almajiri. Our initial questions were accordingly:

1. Why do the Almajiri steal from members of the community?
2. How do you think the community can address the issue of stealing?

After undertaking a mapping exercise, taking a guided tour of the community and asking general questions along the way, the data collected indicated that the community was deeply

agrarian and Islamic, and highly accommodating, as evidenced by the number of off-campus students residing there due to its proximity to the school. A significant point of interest was the long-standing Makaranta Alo, a traditional Qur'anic school that has operated there for over three decades.

An ethical dilemma arose when our preconceived notions of the community's problems, derived from students' feedback about the Almajiri (Qur'anic school students) engaging in theft, contradicted the community's own stated priorities. Random interviews revealed that stealing was not a top concern. This discrepancy led to a critical reassessment of our questioning methods, and we instead asked the Almajiri and adults in the community the following:

1. Tell us how you came to this community.
2. What is the major challenge in this community?

Students were instructed to approach the community with an open mind, leading to the discovery that its primary concerns were:

- i. Voter education.
- ii. Primary healthcare facilities.
- iii. Welfare of the Almajiri.

Our revised approach involved asking the Almajiri to tell their stories, which yielded emotional data, that is, narrative accounts that captured participants' affective experiences of dislocation, uncertainty about their own origins, and daily hardship, rather than encounters that were themselves distressing to conduct. Many shared experiences of having been enrolled at the school without full knowledge of who their parents were or where they came from. We observed their challenging living conditions and feeding practices firsthand. While the Mallams (teachers) provided free education, they were not on any payroll and were therefore not obliged to provide food and clothing for the students, who largely relied on community generosity and begging for sustenance. To adhere to community rules, the project avoided direct questions about participants' names, origins, or well-being, focusing solely on their stories.

This shift in perspective revealed underlying deficits in basic amenities at the Qur'anic school as potential drivers of the Almajiri's survival-driven behaviours, including begging and, in some cases, stealing. However, incorporating this directly into our play devising was deemed ethically problematic. Naming individuals or overtly criticising Almajiri schooling practices could offend and disrupt community relations, since the community views child begging and the Almajiri school structure as part of its established way of life and curriculum. Consequently, our devised skit addressed malnutrition, primary healthcare, and voter education, subtly linking these issues to community accountability by encouraging residents to demand a primary healthcare clinic from political leaders in exchange for votes, and reminding community members of their religious obligation to care for the poor and hungry, including the Almajiri. This indirect approach allowed us to address critical concerns without offending their sensibilities, while effectively inspiring community action.

Case Study 2: The Rock-Rich Settlement of Angwan Garke

This case study details our second community engagement, conducted in Angwan Garke, Zaria. The community was selected through a class selection process finalised by majority vote, resulting in formal approval from the school management and the Mai Angwa, the community head. We met Mai Angwa at his market stall, where we clarified our role as students from a government-owned institution of learning and made clear that we were not politicians. Our objective was to manage expectations and emphasise our goal of learning from and empowering the community by dramatising their challenges and fostering self-reliance in problem-solving. For this engagement, we adopted a homestead approach, with students and lecturers spending several nights in the community; men stayed at Mai Angwa's palace, while women in the community hosted female students.

Our initial observations on entering the community centred on a collapsed bridge, suggesting a flood-eroded structure affecting mobility. Some of the questions we were prepared to ask community members were:

1. How did the bridge collapse?
2. How do you intend to reconstruct the bridge?

After engaging community members with these questions and analysing all responses, it became clear that the bridge was not the community's primary concern. This raised an ethical question for us: should we set aside an evident physical problem in favour of the issue the community itself identified as most pressing? We restructured the questions accordingly:

1. What is the major attraction in this community?
2. What is the source of problems in this community?

Attending closely to the community's own stories, we discovered that its main challenge was the government's ban on rock blasting, a significant source of livelihood for many men in the rock-rich community who sold granite and gravel. This ban had disrupted the community's economic balance, forcing men into less productive occupations. We adjusted our approach accordingly, focusing on this existential threat rather than imposing our own perception of the community's needs.

During data collection, the community's oldest member shared its history with us, linking the community to the legendary Queen Amina of Zazzau, a female warrior whom they believe traversed the area during her expeditions, and recounting a legend of ancestors described as giants capable of sitting on the Kufena mountains and sharing meals across vast distances. While students regarded this as an evident exaggeration, we emphasised the importance of listening respectfully and acknowledging that local history often intertwines with myth and legend. This legend, though noted in our field report, was not featured in our performance, as it reflects the community's own belief system, and we were not positioned to rewrite their shared histories and legends.

Instead, our devised play addressed the consequences of youth unemployment stemming from the rock-blasting ban. We situated the government's temporary ban on blasting activities within the context of recent bomb attacks on communities and government installations, in which rock-blasting chemicals had featured as a component of improvised explosive devices. The play depicted how continued economic disruption could spiral into negative outcomes such as anarchy and theft within the community, and it encouraged collaborative efforts to repair the eroded bridge ahead of government intervention. Ultimately, three key themes emerged from our community engagement: a plea to government officials to reinstate rock blasting while strengthening regulation of the sale and use of explosives; a call for collective action to repair the bridge; and the

continued importance of community support for the Qur'anic school in sustaining the moral education of local youth in accordance with Islamic teaching.

Conclusion

The three case studies, spanning Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) awareness in the FCT to community-based theatre in Angwan Almajire and Angwan Garke, collectively illuminate the delicate balance between research objectives and human-centric ethics. Together, they demonstrate that communication in sensitive environments is not a linear transmission of facts but a negotiated process that requires practitioners to be as much listeners as advocates. These case studies also show that the most effective communication strategies are democratic in nature, built through participation rather than imposed from outside. As this article has noted, the field-level ethical negotiations examined here sit alongside a broader, unresolved question about the institutional readiness of Nigerian universities and research bodies to support this kind of sensitive practice; addressing that question fully will require dedicated future research. In the meantime, practitioners of Applied Theatre should remain open to continuous training and attentive to the lived experience of the community, so that the resulting interventions, whether a skit on voter education or a workshop on CSA, become sustainable, culturally resonant, and ethically sound.

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