

## Boko – Haram Insurgency And Trends In The Violent Victimisation Of Women By Security Forces In Northeast Nigeria

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### ABSTRACT

Boko Haram insurgency has caused the loss of many lives and untold suffering to numerous people in Northeast Nigeria. The violent victimisation of women is one of the devastating consequences of the conflict. This paper explored trends in the violence committed against women by security forces. The purpose is to contribute to the existing few studies in the extant literature detailing the violent atrocities of the security forces against women. There are already extensive studies on the nature of violence perpetuated against women by insurgents. This paper, underpinned by structural violence and radical feminism theoretical postulations, drew qualitative data from interviews published in grey literature on gender-centred violence and secondary data from academic studies. This paper adopted documentary and descriptive methods to analyse the relevant data. Since the emergence of the insurgency in 2009, civil society reports show that many women are victims of violence such as rape, forced detentions, torture, inhumane treatment and

restrictions, insecurity, murder and displacement perpetrated by security forces. This pattern of violence is consistent with available evidence of gender-related violent behaviour in most armed conflicts and underlines the perception of women as symbols and objects of war. The paper argued that entrenched structural patriarchy, poverty, illiteracy and institutionalised exploitation and oppression of women in Northeast aggravated the vulnerability of women to violence in the conflict. Many survivors of the violence have their health, social and economic prospects severely affected by the experience. The paper suggested, among others, adequate genderisation of government rehabilitation, deradicalisation, destigmatisation, resettlement and reintegration intervention programmes, investigation and prosecution of alleged cases of sexual and gender violence against security forces. Government empowerment of citizens is critical to tackle the underlying causes of Boko Haram insurgency and gender-related socio-economic and cultural, factors promoting the societal discrimination of women.

Keywords: Boko – Haram, Insurgency, Security Forces, Violence, Women

### **Introduction**

Boko Haram was founded by Mohammed Yusuf in Borno state, North-East Nigeria, in 2002. The religious preaching and advocacy on transforming society by the founder endeared the members to the group (EASO, 2021). The ultimate goal of Boko Haram when it began as an indigenous Islamic extremist group was to create an Islamic theocracy in Nigeria (Zainab, 2014). Boko Haram, under the leadership of the ruthless Abubakar Shekau, metamorphosed into an international Jihadist movement in 2009 following the murder of the founder while in police custody (EASO, 2021). The 2023 Global Terrorism Index Report ranks Boko Haram among the 20 deadliest terrorist groups worldwide (Premium Times, 2023). Boko Haram repudiates the Western education and governance system

and the attendant corruption, inequality, poverty and unemployment it produces in Nigeria. The group prides itself on the long-awaited political, spiritual and moral authority to eradicate the decadence in society (Liolio, 2013). At the height of its prominence, around 2009 and 2015, Boko Haram controlled a vast swath of territory in Northeast Nigeria (EASO, 2021).

Boko Haram insurgency is largely characterised by the perpetration of violent atrocities against civilians. It is instructive to note that when the insurgency began, security forces, high-profile politicians and religious leaders were the main targets of Boko Haram attacks. The group's modus operandi includes suicide bombings, kidnappings, forced marriages, sexual assaults, forced displacement and conscription of young men. The insurrection by Boko Haram has badly affected an estimated fifteen million people, caused the death of between 20,000 to 30,000 lives (Azad, Crawford & Kaila, 2018; EASO, 2021) and untold suffering to many people, especially women, children and youth in the North-East. Boko Haram attack in Baga town in January 2015 for instance, caused the death of about 2000 civilians (Yahaya, 2015). Besides, over two million people are internally displaced or have become refugees in neighbouring Chad, Niger and Cameroon due to the conflict (EASO, 2021). More so, the insurgency has led to the destruction of basic amenities, villages, residential buildings, schools, markets, media houses, farmland and worship centres, thereby deepening poverty and socioeconomic development crises in the North-East (Liolio, 2013; Zainab, 2014; Yahaya, 2015; Azad, Crawford & Kaila, 2018; Ukah, Ugboego & Okpo, 2020).

The violent victimisation of women is one of the damaging consequences of the Boko Haram insurgency. Women and girls are the main victims of systematic violence perpetrated by insurgents. There are grim accounts of women and girls being raped and forced to marry insurgents (Human Rights Watch, 2014). More so, women are often kidnapped and used as human shields and treated as war booties by Boko Haram. In some instances, women and girls were compelled to become suicide bombers and forced to change their religion (Human Rights Watch, 2014; International Crisis Group,

2016; Bloom, and Matfess, 2016). However, some women and girls, inspired by Boko Haram ideology willingly carry arms to fight for the group or accept marriage to insurgents despite the consequences of such decisions (International Crisis Group, 2016). Women and girls constitute a significant portion of the over two million internally displaced persons in Northeast Nigeria. The height of evidence of a deliberate and organised pattern of violence and terror committed by Boko Haram against women and girls occurred with the April 14, 2014 abduction of 276 young women in a secondary school in Chibok. It is instructive to note that the pattern of violence committed against women and girls by Boko Haram is similar to experiences in most conflict zones worldwide (Human Rights Watch, 2014; Yahaya, 2015).

This paper reflects the standpoints in Galtung's (1969) perspective on violence without attempting to indulge in the underlying nuances and complexities surrounding it. Violence refers to the pain, hurt, damage and destruction human beings suffer from the actions and inactions of individuals, groups and societal structures and conditions, constraining human activities and capacity to realise their best potential. The implication is that violence could be direct and physical or indirect and mental. The import of this position is that violence goes beyond the physical incapacitation and deprivation of basic needs by individuals or groups. It includes the role the character of societal structures and institutions play in depriving human beings of attaining physical and mental fullness. In essence, violence is not limited to the deprivation of physical health or death; it entails mental, psychological, emotional, cultural, social, and economic discomfort and pain. In the context of the Northeast, the torture, inhumane treatment, displacement, killings, trauma, detention, rape and sexual exploitation and attendant consequences women suffer at the hands of security forces are within the realm of violence. The implicated members of the security forces, either individuals or groups, are directly responsible for the violence. More so, the indirect role of the state in creating or promoting the enabling conditions that encourage, or in some cases, legitimise violence against women and failure

to perform its responsibility of adequately protecting women from harm cannot be ignored.

Boko Haram is not the only actor involved in perpetrating violence against women and girls in the Northeast. Security forces involved in the counterterrorism against Boko Haram have been implicated committing rape and gender based violence. The state security forces through their actions and inactions have been blamed for various forms of violent atrocities against women and girls in the North-East (Human Rights Watch, 2014; International Crisis Group, 2016). Civil society reports show that many women are victims of rape and sexual violence, torture and inhumane treatment perpetrated by security forces. Besides, women are forcefully arrested, detained, displaced and in worst case scenario killed by members of the security forces. This pattern of violence against women is compatible with available evidence of gender-related violent behaviour committed in most armed conflicts (Ishola and Tolulope, 2022). The violence underlines the perception of women as symbols and objects of war by actors in conflict situations. It is instructive to note that there are already extensive studies on the nature of violence perpetuated against women by Boko Haram insurgents. But, there are few systematic and specific studies in the extant literature detailing the violent atrocities of the security forces against women. This paper explores trends in the violence perpetuated against women by security forces to address the imbalance in the literature.

### **Methodology**

This paper explores trends in the violence perpetrated against women by security forces engaged in Boko Haram counterinsurgency in Northeast Nigeria. The paper adopts the documentary and descriptive research design. It relies on primary and secondary data. This paper draws qualitative data from interviews published in grey literature reports from Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and International Crisis Group on gender-centred violence in the conflict settings. This paper obtains secondary data from extant academic studies and reports

of nongovernmental organisations whose publications are on the Boko Haram Insurgency. This paper adopts documentary and descriptive methods to analyse the qualitative and secondary data.

### **Theoretical Review**

This paper adopts structural violence and radical feminism as theoretical postulations underpinning the perpetration of violence against women by security forces involved in the counterterrorism against Boko Haram in Northeast Nigeria. The theory of structural violence was first proposed by the Norwegian Sociologist Johan Galtung in his thesis *Violence, Peace and Peace Research* in 1969. Structural violence refers to socially produced, sustained and reproduced oppression and inequality against human beings. It relates to the hurt and damage people suffer from unjust and biased social, economic and political institutions and structures, making it difficult for victims to fulfill their basic needs. Structural violence and direct violence are intricately interrelated and comprise institutionalised gender violence, police violence, state violence, terrorism and war (Dutta, Sonn, and Lykes, 2016).

The difference between structural violence and violence in its classical sense is central to Galtung's thesis. Classical violence involves direct physical harm perpetrated by some persons, while structural violence is ongoing violence, lacking no specific beginning and without any actor perpetrating it. To Galtung, this is structural violence in its purest form. Galtung lists structurally conditioned poverty, structurally conditioned repression and structurally conditioned alienation as constituting the first, second and third categories of structural violence. Structurally conditioned poverty involves institutionalised deprivation of basic human needs, while structurally conditioned repression includes institutionalised deprivation of human rights. Structurally conditioned alienation implies institutionalised denial of higher needs (Galtung, 1975).

The Northeast, even before its current atrocious condition was an area experiencing structurally conditioned poverty, repression and alienation in Nigeria. The presence of these conditions undoubtedly increases

and reinforces the weakness and vulnerability of women to exploitation, marginalisation and violence during conflict. More so, the entrenched culture of patriarchy - the belief in the superiority of men and inferiority and servitude of women is embedded in institutions and structures in Nigerian society. The theatre of conflict often provides security forces with the platform to execute the widely accepted, although flawed orientation of male dominance, to committee violence of all forms against vulnerable women under their protection. The violence women suffer in conflict zones, particularly in the hands of security forces, is produced, facilitated and replicated by societal structures and institutions that are biased and blind to their dignity and wellbeing.

Feminism condemns the exploitation, marginalisation and oppression of women. Feminism is rooted in the liberal philosophy of the 16th and 17th centuries (Aliu, 2010; Tenuche, 2023). The scholarly works of liberal feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill popularised feminist values and agendas (Usman and Abubakar, 2021). Feminism attempts to “develop a comprehensive account of the subordination of women, women’s oppression and develop effective strategies to liberate women” (Usman and Abubakar, 2021, p. 12). The fundamental goal of feminism is to eliminate the domination, subjugation and subordination of women in society.

The central thesis of feminism is that structures and institutions of society produce, sustains and replicates inequality and oppression of women (Lobber, 1999; Tenuche, 2023). Therefore, exploitation and marginalisation of women are rooted in the “organization of marriage and families, work and economy, law and criminal justice, politics, religions, the arts and cultural productions, and the language” (Usman and Abubakar, 2021, p. 12). The different strands of feminism includes liberal, socialist, post-modern, Marxist and radical feminism (Aliu, 2010; Usman and Abubakar, 2021).

The radical feminist theory provides a useful theoretical analysis of gender-centred violence in armed conflict settings. The focus of radical feminism is on the daily activities of women, such as house chores, satisfying

the sexual needs of men and childbirth. The repudiation of patriarchy is the theoretical standpoint of feminism. Patriarchy entails the entrenched societal perception that women are inferior to men. This belief reinforces the subordination, subjugation, marginalisation and exploitation of women in public and private spaces. The entrenchment of patriarchal dispositions in the structures and institutions of society makes it difficult for its elimination (Aliu, 2010; Usman and Abubakar, 2021).

Radical feminism contends that men are responsible for problems in society, ranging from poverty, war, and rape to gender-centred violence. More so, radical feminism argues that the capacity for men to use violence against women is usually high. The threat or use of violence by men makes the control of women possible. The protection of women victims of rape and violence and denunciation of sexual exploitation and prostitution are crucial to radical feminism (Evans, 1995; Usman and Abubakar, 2021).

Women are victims of violence in armed conflict zones like the Northeast not because of their weak nature but also due to the prevailing socially legitimised culture of male dominance. The perception that it is the duty of women to satisfy the sexual pleasure of men exposes them to rape and violence during peace and wartime. The interplay of these sociocultural constructions, reinforced by institutional failure provides a logical explanation of the sexual exploitation and rape of women in Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) camps in the Northeast by security forces. There is a deep link between patriarchy, culture and the sustenance of structural violence against women in Northeast Nigeria (Usman & Abubakar, 2021; Isola & Tolulope, 2022).

Structural violence and radical feminism bring to the fore the socio-cultural, political, economic, historical and institutional forces that produce, sustain and reproduce inequality, exploitation, oppression, marginalisation, suffering and subordination of women (Aliu, 2018a; Aliu, 2018b). The theories enhance a deep analysis of the various and overlapping conditions that shape inequality and discrimination on persons and society; and facilitate the nuanced analysis of various forms

of violence committed against women in the Northeast by security forces.

### **Northeast Nigeria**

There are six states that makeup Northeast Nigeria. They are Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Taraba, and Yobe states. The Northeast is the worst affected by conflict in Nigeria. Boko Haram is responsible for the majority of violence in the zone. About 49% of family in the Northeast encountered at least one form of violence against a member from 2010 to 2017. The Northeast states most badly affected by the Boko Haram insurgency are the BAY states - Borno, Adamawa and Yobe (Azad, Crawford & Kaila, 2018).

About 49% of the people in the North East are literate. The number of men that have never attended school is 29% while 44% of women have never enrolled in school. The Northeast has a young population, with 50% of the population between the ages of 8 and 33 (Azad, Crawford & Kaila, 2018). But, about 2,001,038 million out-of-school children are in the Northeast (Dataphyte, 2022).

The region was one of the poorest in Nigeria before the Boko Haram insurgency. Many years of conflict and destruction have resulted in severe humanitarian, human rights and development problems (UNDP, 2020). The Nigeria Multidimensional Poverty Index for 2022 shows that 20.4 million poor people live in the Northeast. The main cooking fuel for about 93% of the households in the zone is firewood, with about 52% of the people getting drinking water from a secure source (Azad, Crawford & Kaila, 2018).

The Boko Haram insurgency was projected to lead to the death of 350, 000 persons in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe states in 2020, with 314, 000 deaths due to indirect causes. The region continues to witness decreasing agricultural production and commercial activities, with the income of households on the decline. Also, many people are displaced from their homes and have lost their sources of income too (UNDP, 2020).

Besides, most people in North-East are Muslims and are culturally conservative. The culture of patriarchy is endemic in the Northeast. The resulting power imbalance

and poverty partly explain the high rate of early girl-child marriages, out-of-school girl children and illiteracy in the Northeast (International Crisis Group, 2016). These prevailing social, economic, cultural and development conditions increase the vulnerability of women to exploitation and oppression perpetrated by men either as individuals or groups.

### **State Security Actors**

Several State-armed actors are engaged in the Boko Haram counterinsurgency in the Northeast. EASO's (2021) comprehensive review of the structure, operational activities and challenges of state security forces is germane to this paper. The Nigerian Police Force is the chief law implementing organisation in Nigeria. The Nigeria Police Force maintains law and order, secures the border and sea and engages in anti-terrorist operations across Nigerians. The Nigeria Police Force has a history of human rights abuse, corruption and brutality.

The Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) was disbanded in October 2020 following widespread protests against the culture of impunity among its personnel. It was a police unit established in 1992 to control armed robbery in the country. The officers of SARS are implicated in rape, extortion, torture, illegally arrest, detention and murder of innocent civilians.

The Nigerian Armed Forces comprise the army, navy and air force. The army, as the land component of the armed forces, is the biggest and the main actor confronting most security challenges in the country, including the Boko Haram counterinsurgency. The Nigerian military was ranked the 35th most powerful globally in 2021.

The Nigerian Intelligence Service comprises three separate security services created by the Degree Number 19 of 1986. The tripartite security entities are the Department of State Services (DSS), the National Intelligence Agency (NIA) and the Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA). The DSS gathers intelligence locally and protects public officers like the president and state governors. The operatives of the DSS often act arbitrarily and violate the human rights of citizens (EASO, 2021).

The Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC) is a paramilitary agency established in 2003 to support the military prevents domestic security attacks and manage natural emergencies. The personnel of NSCDC often are deployed to secure camps with internally displaced persons.

Nigeria established the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) in 1994 to fight trans-border crimes in the Lake Chad Basin. The MNJTF expanded to include Cameroon, Niger and Chad in 1998, and Benin became a member in 2015. The joint operation by MNJTF has been helpful in the counterterrorism against Boko Haram despite the problems of rivalry, corruption, poor intelligence gathering and funding facing the force (EASO, 2021).

The overwhelming security demand on the police and military and national security challenges contributed to the mobilisation of self-defense militias and the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) to manage security threats in communities given the perceived absence of government protection. In the Northeast, several local militia groups were established by state governments and integrated into the CJTF to fight alongside the military in the counterterrorism operations against Boko Haram. Some personnel of the CJTF were involved in human rights abuses, torture of civilians and crimes (EASO, 2021).

The abovementioned State armed actors participate in conflict situations in Nigeria. All the State armed actors are engaged in the counterinsurgency against Boko Haram in the Northeast. The review of the structures and operational activities of security actors reveals commendable acts of dexterity and efficiency in service. However, the involvement of personnel of the state security institutions in human rights abuses, arbitrariness, torture and corruption is a sad reminder of institutional and governance failures and absence of accountability. So, given this reality, and amid the prevailing socioeconomic, structural and cultural supporting conditions, it is not surprising that the human rights, well-being and plight of women in the conflict zone of the Northeast are repeatedly compromised by the actions and inactions of some rogue

elements the security forces since the insurgency began in 2009.

### **Trends in the Violent Victimisation of Women by Security Forces in the Northeast**

The government in Nigeria has been engaged in counterinsurgency against Boko Haram violence since 2009. The Nigerian state armed security forces are involved in the operations. The security forces comprise elements of the armed forces, police, and intelligence officers, also known as the Joint Military Task Force (JTF), and the government-established militia groups integrated with the security forces called the CJTF, among others. The counterinsurgency by security forces, confirmed in well-documented reports, resulted in the perpetration of violent atrocities against the civilians in general and women in particular. The various forms of violence perpetrated against women by security forces since the commencement of the counterterrorism operation against Boko Haram includes torture and inhumane treatment, rape and sexual violence, extreme use of force, forced eviction, enforced arbitrary arrests and detentions, and extrajudicial murder (Human Rights Watch, 2014; Human Rights Watch, 2012; International Crisis Group, 2016; Amnesty International, 2018; Amnesty International, 2021).

### **Rape and Sexual Violence**

Women in the Northeast are victims of rape and sexual violence committed by Nigerian security forces. There are documented reports of women compelled, threatened and raped by soldiers and members of the CJTF. The women became the “girlfriends” of the security forces under this circumstance, thereby enhancing their subsequent sexual exploitation (Amnesty International, 2021). There were cases of starving women and girls in camps forced to have sex with security forces to access food and survive. The confession of a rape victim of the security forces in an interview with Amnesty International went thus:

They will give you food but in the night they will come back around 5pm or 6pm and they will tell you to come with

them... One [Civilian JTF] man came and brought food to me. The next day he said I should take water from his place [and I went]. He then closed the tent door behind me and raped me. He said I gave you these things, if you want them we have to be husband and wife (Amnesty International, 2018, p. 5).

Human Rights Watch (2016) documented a report on rape and sexual exploitation of women in IDPs camps in Maiduguri, Borno State. The responses revealed a pattern of sexual violence and trading of sex for survival opportunities like food and comfort. The experience of an 18 years old woman from Kukawa, raped by a Civilian JTF, went thus:

The man started with preaching, telling me to be a good Muslim girl and not to join bad groups in the camp. He then sent his mother to propose to me, which convinced me that he was serious. He allowed me to go outside the camp when necessary. When he asked me to visit his newly allocated room in the camp, I didn't see any reason not to go because I felt safe with him. He gave me a bottle of Zobo [locally brewed non-alcoholic drink] and I immediately felt dizzy and slept off. I don't know what happened thereafter but when I woke up he was gone and I was in pain and felt wet between my legs. For three days I could not walk properly. Some weeks later I fell very ill, and was told at the hospital that I was pregnant. Then everyone turned away from me: [He] refused to help me, and my step-mother who I lived with in camp pushed me out, saying I was a disgrace. I reported [him] to the police in camp several times but they have not done anything to him because they work together. Whenever I see him, I wish something terrible will happen to him. It is because of him that I have lost everything. I don't even think the baby will last because she is always crying and I can't cope. I pray that God will forgive me for neglecting the baby but I am helpless (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

Meanwhile, the narration by a woman from Bama on how she was sexually exploited goes thus:

The soldier showed his interest by bringing me food and clothes. He used to wear the green army uniform and carried a gun. I accepted him because I needed help to take care of me and my four children. Feeding in the camp is only once a day so you have to accept any help that comes. We started having sex in my camp tent – my sister who was sharing it with me left – or at night in the open field where soldiers stay in the camp. Five months later when I realized I was pregnant and told him, he stopped coming. I have not seen him since then. I feel so ashamed because my neighbors talk and stare at me. I cry whenever I think about him. I delivered the baby two months ago but he is also suffering – I eat once a day so [am] not producing enough milk to breast feed him well. Things are so bad in the camp, there is not enough water or food (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

It is worth stating that the war setting and hostilities make it difficult for women to reject the demand of the security forces for sex. Besides the possibility of losing their lives, the likelihood of being branded wives of insurgents makes women vulnerable to rape and other sexual violence. About nine (9) women, including five (5) victims, narrated instances of rape by soldiers and the CJTF in Bama Hospital/Secondary school camp in 2015 and 2016 to Amnesty International. It is instructive to note that rape is a war crime (Amnesty International, 2021).

The rape and sexual violence appear to follow an organised and deliberate pattern. The soldiers openly visit the camps for sex, while members of the CJTF visit the camps to select women they consider attractive to soldiers. The perpetuation of sexual violent crimes by security forces is usually known to supervising officers and brazenly done without any show of fear of sanctions by offenders (Amnesty International, 2018). This experience seems consistent with the general perception in conflict settings that women as rewards or trophies of war are expected to satisfy the sexual needs of male combatants. More so, this development reveals the likelihood of a prevailing culture of impunity and lack of accountability in the security forces.

### **Forced Arrests, Detentions, Torture, Inhumane Treatment and Restrictions**

Many people, including women who escaped from Boko Haram territory to government-controlled areas were illegally arrested and detained for many months by security forces. The security forces detained the women based on the suspicion that their husbands and sons were insurgents. Most people, including women, were held in Giwa Barracks, regarded as the worst imprisonment facility in the Northeast because of its inhumane conditions. So, women endure separation from their husbands and families, hunger, overcrowding, lack of water and healthcare, terrible hygiene conditions and harsh high temperatures (Amnesty International, 2021). Women who complained of ill-treatment are reportedly beaten and subjected to physical torture during interrogation by soldiers and CJTF while some died in the camps (Amnesty International, 2018). The arrest and detention of women on allegations of marriage to Boko Haram members violate Nigerian law, and the violent victimisation of women in detention negates their rights to humane treatment.

There are instances arrested and detained women were considered symbols of revenge by security forces. The wives and children of Boko Haram leadership were targeted for arrest by the military to encourage the insurgents to surrender. The wife and three children of Boko Haram radical leader Shekau, for instance, were arrested in an ambush by the security forces in 2012 (Botha, 2021).

Meanwhile, the responses of Human Rights Watch (2016) documented report on the restriction of women in IDPs camps in Maiduguri, Borno State, reveal the atrocious conditions women suffer. The statement of a 32-year-old woman from Damasak goes thus:

Life is terrible here in this camp. For the past three days we have not eaten because there is no firewood to cook the food. To make it worse, they will not even allow us to go out to fend for ourselves. Most times you have to beg the camp officials to intervene with the guards before they will give you the pass to go out. Why will you refuse if any of those people ask you for marriage? You have to survive.

More so, a 47-year-old mother of eight from Abadam who was staying in the camp said that:

We used to get food at least twice a day when I first arrived at the camp in 2014. But now, sometimes we get nothing at all. We can't even buy food ourselves because they will not let us go out. My relatives in the town have to plead with camp officials for hours before the officials will agree to let them give us some money or foodstuff from the little they have (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

Meanwhile, Reuters (2022) claimed in a special investigation that the military carried out a clandestine, organised and unlawful abortion programme in Northeast Nigeria. The women raped by Boko Haram insurgents had their pregnancies terminated by the military in Nigeria without their consent. The military has denied the report, but the history of impunity and failure to hold security officials accountable appears to undermine the denial by military authorities in Nigeria.

### **Lack of Security, Killing and Displacement of Women**

There are confirmed reports that security forces are sometimes ill-prepared and unavailable during attacks by Boko Haram. This exposes civilians, including women, to violent atrocities like abductions, killings, kidnappings and sexual violence from insurgents. It is worth noting that the civilians and women in this circumstance are not the direct victims of violence from the security forces. But, the inaction and incompetence of the security forces exposed the women to the violence unleashed by Boko Haram. The successful Kidnapping of more than 200 young women in a secondary school in Chibok was attributed to the lack of physical presence of adequate security to avert it (Botha, 2021).

Many civilians, including women, were killed by security forces during counterinsurgency in the Northeast. Many people reportedly died during attacks by security forces in Baga town in April 2013 (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). Also, there are cases of women's deaths while detained by security forces (Amnesty International, 2018). It is worth noting that many women radicalised by the violence they experienced from Boko Haram sought revenge by joining the Civilian JTF as fighters or

volunteering to gather intelligence on Boko Haram (International Crisis Group, 2016).

The attacks by Boko Haram and counter-attacks by security forces often force civilians, women inclusive, to flee, resulting in the displacement and mass exodus of civilians who eventually settled in IDPs camps. The displacement of millions of persons, mostly women and children, in the Northeast is due to this development (International Crisis Group, 2016). Women, like other civilians, are victims of indiscriminate and extreme use of force, mass shootings and burning of villages by security forces and Civilian JTF (Botha, 2021).

The costs of the violence perpetrated against women in the Northeast by security forces on victims and society have been immense. The health of survivors has suffered different forms of damage. The physical problems include injuries and unplanned pregnancies, while the emotional issues include feeling guilty, ashamed and stigmatised. The psychological problem victims suffer includes depression, low self-esteem, conflict-related trauma, ostracism, and mental and stress disorder. The victims of sexual violence and exploitation sometimes get affected by sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS. The economic advancement and social integration of survivors suffer decline, when these health problems are not well managed.

The climate of fear, anger and alienation among victims in affected communities breeds mistrust in individuals and the government. The experience of supposed protectors turning out to be tormentors after probably going through hell in the hands of Boko Haram undermines victims' faith in security forces and institutions of government. The violent victimisation of women by security forces promotes a culture of violence in society. This happens when victims, who are hurting and seeking vengeance, are not properly deradicalised and reintegrated into the community. The presence of many radicalised, traumatised, and stigmatised women threatens the socio-economic and security development of any society. Interestingly, the deradicalisation and reintegration processes often take their toll on scarce economic

resources competing for attention from other sectors of the economy.

The violence committed by security forces against women blatantly violates Nigeria's government obligations and commitments to international protocols and domestic laws. It is instructive to note that Nigeria signed several international agreements on human rights and specific women's rights to complement domestic laws. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, for example, forbid the illegal denial of the rights to life, torture and indiscriminate arrests and imprisonments. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of Women in Africa protect women from torture, inhumane, degrading and cruel acts. The rights to life, and the right to human dignity, which prohibits torture, are enshrined in the 1999 Nigerian constitution, as amended, as parts of the fundamental human rights of citizens (Human Rights Watch, 2012).

### **Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to explore the violence and atrocious abuse committed against women in the North-East by security forces engaged in Boko Haram counterinsurgency. It has shown that women are also victims of sexual and gender-centered violence resulting largely from violent action (force) and inactions (negligence) of security forces. More so, the paper found that the intersection between the prevailing structurally conditioned poverty, depression and alienation in the region and the endemic culture of patriarchy permissive in society and institutions encourage exploitation, marginalisation and oppression of women in the current conflict situation. The seeming openness with which the violent atrocities are committed and the lack of records on the discipline of erring officers by the government are pertinent considerations in this context. The violence has seriously affected the health, social and economic welfare of victims. The Northeast appears to currently have a large community of traumatised, radicalised and stigmatised

women partly because of the violence and atrocities of security forces. This has dire implications for the social cohesion and security of the Northeast and the legitimacy of government institutions, particularly the security forces.

The Nigerian government appears not to have taken the plight of women seriously, as part of its policy responses to terrorism. The word gender or women, for example, was not included in the Terrorism Prevention Act of 2011. This omission was addressed in the 2013 amended Act. Also, gender concerns were not acknowledged in the National Security Strategy (NSS) of 2014 and the National Counter-terrorism Strategy (NACTEST) of 2014. NACTEST aimed at the deradicalisation of convicted terrorists, a societal approach to counterterrorism, capacity building of military and security forces to counterinsurgency and formulating an all-inclusive comprehension of the economic cause of terrorism in the North. Meanwhile, the 2017 National Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (the P/CVE Action Plan) recognised the evolving roles of women as suicide bombers and recruitment agents for Boko Haram (Botha, 2021).

The widespread nature of sexual and gender-based violence committed by security forces in the Northeast violates domestic and international legal frameworks. However, only a few security officers have been implicated and prosecuted by the government (Human Rights Watch, 2014). This development appears to be consistent with allegations that the Nigerian government hardly investigate reports of alleged sexual violence and abuses in IDPs camps against security forces (Amnesty International, 2018) and always failed to punish security officials for atrocities perpetrated against civilians, including women (Amnesty International, 2022). This was the case in September 2020 when the Nigerian government refused to publicise the long awaited report of the Presidential Panel to Review Compliance of the Armed Forces with Human Rights Obligations and Rules of Engagement presented to the President in 2017 (EASO, 2021).

The recommendations of this paper are anchored on the imperative of the government giving adequate consideration and actions to the plight of women at the levels of policy and accountability in the prosecution of implicated security officials. Therefore, the paper recommends the following:

- i. The plight of women suffering sexual and gender violence committed by security forces should be adequately integrated into the reintegration, rehabilitation, deradicalisation, de-stigmatisation and resettlement programmes of the government in the Northeast. So, the government should provide adequate and well-equipped specially designed medical and mental healthcare for survivors. The Healthcare and social service providers should be trained specially in handling victims.
- ii. The socioeconomic, cultural, structural and historical context of the exploitation and oppression of women in the Northeast needed to be understood to facilitate comprehensive and effective delivery of assistance from government and international donors. The empowerment of victims in education, skill acquisition, and politics should therefore be founded on an analysis of the gender issues underlying the Boko Haram Insurgency. The need for women to be empowered to take charge of their lives, and also participate actively in governance should be the thrust of government reconstruction in the North-East.
- iii. Nigerian government should make concerted efforts to investigate reports of alleged cases of sexual and gender-centered violence against security forces in the Northeast. The reports of cases investigated should be made public by the government in line with the spirit of transparency in the administration of justice. Security officials implicated should be prosecuted in accordance with the laws of the land and global best practices.
- iv. Government and international partners should organise periodic capacity building and training of security forces on gender-centred protection for

civilians. Also, a concerted programme of action that allows only security officials with high disciplinary records to provide protection at IDP camps should be put in place by national and state ministries in emergencies.

- v. Government needed to identify and tackle the governance and development challenges at the root of the Boko Haram insurgency. The failure of the government to address widespread unemployment, poverty, illiteracy, bad healthcare and other social, economic, political, security and religious problems fuels discontentment with the system and easily provides recruitment channels to agents of destabilisation. There is a high prospect of peace and reduced conflict-induced sexual violence against women with improvement in governance and development indices in the Northeast.

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