



Published by the College of Social and  
Management Sciences (SMS), Afe Babalola  
University, Ado-Ekiti (ABUAD), Nigeria.  
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e-ISSN: 3043-4173

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## **Interrogating the Experiences of Women in the Conflict Process: Lessons from the Nigerian Terror War**

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### **Abstract**

While several efforts have been made to examine the Nigerian terror war, the experiences of women in the conflict process have not been adequately interrogated. This study is therefore aimed at investigating the different levels of women involvement in the conflict process with a focus on the Nigerian terror war. Explaining the roles and experiences of women in conflict could take place at three levels of analysis. First, women may be seen as victims who experience greater violations in conflict situations. Second, women may be seen as conflict perpetrators, even though this dimension is often ignored because of their soft psychology. Third, women could play a key role in mitigating conflicts through their participation in post-conflict policy formulations. This study is significant because it contributes to the expansion of knowledge on the experiences of women in the Nigerian terror war in particular, and contributes to building nuances and analytical frameworks for understanding the place of women in the conflict process in general. This study employed interview as an instrument of data collection and other secondary sources of data such as books, journals, reports by local and international bodies, and national dailies/newspapers. The data generated is analysed using thematic analysis.

**Keywords:** Conflict, Women, Terror War, Nigeria.

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## Introduction

The participation and experiences of women in conflict situations have attracted scholars from various fields in recent years, highlighting the roles women play and the unique impacts conflicts have on them. This study seeks to interrogate the experiences of women in the Nigerian Terror War, primarily characterised by the insurgent activities of Boko Haram and the resultant humanitarian crises.

The existing literature has been passive on the roles and experiences of women in the conflict process. While it is widely recognised that women are among the worst affected in conflict situations (Pillai et al., 2017), cultural and patriarchal restrictions often relegate them to the status of victims. This orientation ensures that other key roles that women can play as perpetrators of conflicts or during the post-conflict peace process are often not adequately explored. However, emerging discussions have begun to shift this narrative, acknowledging women as active agents in the conflict process (Ogunyemi, 2020; Amusan et al., 2019).

For instance, during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, women were not only victims but also played active roles in the acts of killing and sexual violence (Cohen, 2013). This evolving understanding is crucial for comprehensively examining the experiences of women in the Nigerian Terror War. Evidence suggests that women's engagement in conflict spans a spectrum of activities, including tactical operations, strategic planning, humanitarian assistance, and psychosocial support. The civil wars in Liberia and Somalia serve as compelling examples of women's active participation in various aspects of conflict, advocacy, and reconciliation. Their contributions have been extensively recorded in scholarly and advocacy literature.

This study examines the roles and experiences of women in the Nigerian terror war, highlighting their varied levels of participation in the conflict. It explores the ways in which conflict profoundly affects their overall well-being. Furthermore, the study provides a comprehensive overview of the challenges women encounter, including disruptions to their social structures and economic opportunities, which exacerbate existing inequalities and increase instances of gender-based violence. It aims to illuminate not only the suffering and vulnerabilities that women face as a result of the Nigerian terror war, it also investigates the roles that women play in perpetrating conflict and their possible roles in post-conflict policy formulation.

The primary data for this study were generated through the use of key-informant interviews. A total of six key-informants – with expertise on the subject matter – were targeted for interview. To maintain anonymity, these informants are designated by codes (KI-1, KI-2, KI-3, KI-4, KI-5, and KI-6). Important data were also

generated the secondary sources such as books, journal articles, and others. The method of data analysis is thematic analysis.

### **An Overview of the Boko Haram Terror War in Nigeria**

With the rise of Boko Haram in 2009, the resulting conflict has been marked by widespread violence, suicide bombings, abductions, and human rights violations. Insurgents have targeted armed men and civilians, particularly women and girls, employing methods that instill fear and perpetuate a cycle of violence. The Nigerian terror war has led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands and contributed to a humanitarian crisis of immense proportions.

The deliberate and often brutal targeting of women by insurgent groups, coupled with the societal stigmatization faced by survivors of sexual violence, underscores the urgent need for immediate and structured responses. By interrogating these experiences, this study emphasises the significance of incorporating gender-sensitive perspectives into conflict resolution, post-conflict strategies, and humanitarian interventions. Thus, the study begins with a contextual overview, investigates the intricate dynamics surrounding women's participation in conflict, and concludes with an emphasis on the need for inclusive and empowering strategies in the aftermath of conflict.

### **The Burden of Victimization and Vulnerability**

The Nigerian terror war has dramatically transformed the lives of many, with women shouldering a disproportionate share of the ongoing and devastating effects of the Boko Haram insurgency. This section explores the complex patterns of victimization and vulnerability that characterise women's experiences within this conflict. Confronted with forced displacement and economic hardship, women face challenges that extend far beyond immediate physical threats. The consequences of the conflict are profound, breaking apart families, undermining social structures, and inflicting enduring wounds on future generations. Women are particularly susceptible in conflict situations due to entrenched gender norms and existing power disparities.

In the context of the conflict, women frequently experience violence not only as a byproduct of the disorder brought by war but also as a tactic aimed at destabilising community unity and exerting control. By documenting the extensive nature of violence in conflicts, we can gain insights into its root causes, encouraging proactive international interventions and enhancing responses in various arenas, including legal, political, medical, and social sectors.

This dynamic has not gone unnoticed by international organisations, which have initiated measures such as United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. This resolution advocates for the inclusion of women in peacebuilding and conflict resolution processes, recognising that they are affected by conflict in multiple ways (UN Women, 2015). The experiences of women in conflict as victims are rich and complex, shaped by the interplay of factors such as violence, displacement, and societal change that accompanies war.

While the narratives surrounding armed conflicts, particularly terrorism and insurgency, often focus predominantly on male experiences (Guarnieri & Tur-Prats, 2023), it is crucial to acknowledge that women also fulfill significant roles – both as victims and as active participants. Women bear the double burden of victimization and vulnerability, facing targeted violence such as abductions, sexual exploitation, and displacement. In addition, many women and young girls have contributed to armed conflicts as combatants, suicide bombers, spies, recruiters, mobilizers, and strategists. They also fulfill domestic roles, such as cooking and caring for property in camps (Amusan et al., 2019). These experiences highlight broader patterns of gendered vulnerability and resilience, offering vital perspectives on the impact of conflict on women's lives. As victims of gender-based violence, forced marriages, and economic deprivation, women endure profound physical and psychological trauma.

Boko Haram has gained notoriety as a leading source of violence in Nigeria since the country's transition to democracy in 1999 (Bloom & Matfess, 2016). The group's violent abuses against women (Yakubu, 2020) have drawn international attention, particularly with the abduction of 276 girls in Chibok, Borno State, in 2014, a pivotal moment that brought Boko Haram into the global spotlight. This incident signified a significant shift in the group's operational strategies and tactics. The consequent outrage sparked the #BringBackOurGirls movement, galvanizing support from NGOs and human rights organisations and prompting military assistance from Nigeria's international allies, including the United States. U.S. agencies provided drones and unmanned aerial vehicles to enhance intelligence gathering, reinforcing Nigeria's surveillance capabilities in the Sambisa Forest, a hotspot for Boko Haram activities (Oshewolo, Azeez & Jimba, 2023; Bloom & Matfess, 2016; McAllister, 2015).

The attention garnered from these abductions may have reinforced Boko Haram's strategy of increasingly engaging female operatives. Although the Chibok incident was not the first of its kind, it illuminated the objectification and exploitation of women within the jihadist conflict in northeastern Nigeria (Bloom & Matfess, 2016). This was particularly significant considering the minimal international focus on both the overarching conflict and the plight of affected women. As observed by Bloom &

Matfess (2016) regrettably, while the global spotlight on the kidnapped girls mobilized international support, it inadvertently overshadowed the essential contributions of women and girls to the insurgency's strategies and ideology, limiting analysts' insights into the group's dynamics. Boko Haram's reliance on female operatives is notably distinct compared to other insurgencies (Osasona, 2022; Bloom et al., 2016). Furthermore, Boko Haram's unique approach including forced conscription distinguishes it from other terrorist organisations that often benefit from the voluntary participation of women. The group's ideologies and methods create a stark contrast to other Islamist movements in northeastern Nigeria, emphasising its claim to represent "true Islam" (Bloom & Matfess, 2016).

It can be argued that the Boko Haram insurgency disproportionately affects women, particularly as the group has increasingly embraced suicide bombing and female operatives (Nnam et al 2018). This development is situated within a broader context of escalating sexual violence against women in many African conflicts, where violence is frequently used to assert dominance, instill fear, and disrupt familial structures. Such violence can involve horrific acts targeting women's reproductive health, including the deliberate transmission of HIV, forcing women to bear children of their aggressors, and more. Sexual violence against women in war and conflict remains one of the most significant yet often unacknowledged issues in history, despite a growing awareness of its prevalence. Violence against women in conflicts is often systematic; many reports document the sexual assault of women and their suffering in the presence of loved ones (KI-1), underscoring the profound psychological and social impacts. Abducted women capable of bearing children are often coerced into pregnancy and childbirth (KI-3), and this strategy offers Boko Haram multiple benefits, such as increasing its number and fostering loyalty among the next generation of recruits.

As observed by Oriola (2017), the group intricately employs sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) against women as a calculated tactic. Women are often subjected to rape, coerced marriages, and other forms of sexual exploitation, creating significant terror and fracturing community bonds. Women abducted by Boko Haram often become "wives" of group leaders, enduring ongoing sexual violence and torture, reflecting a ruthless dynamic of dominance and exploitation. This examination of Boko Haram's gendered actions and its utilitarian approach to SGBV occurs within the broader context of Nigeria's political economy and entrenched patriarchal ideologies.

Moreover, Boko Haram's use of SGBV not only serves immediate operational goals but also resonates with its long-term view of women as integral to its future. This strategy includes systemic mass rape and coercion for breeding a new generation, often

leading to pregnancies and the kidnapping of children born from these atrocities (Oriola, 2017). In specific situations, militants may propose marriage to daughters or offer a bride price to families, creating an illusion of consent and legitimacy. Despite credible threats of violence, some parents oppose these unions (KI-6). With many men having fled ahead of Boko Haram's invasion, women often found themselves negotiating with fighters. This manipulation of marriage reinforced rigid gender roles, limited interactions between gender, and ultimately promote recruitment for the insurgents. The women and girls were offered a list of potential husbands (KI-2), allowing them a false sense of choice. Despite claims of consent, these arranged marriages limit options primarily to insurgents, often following the death or dissolution of previously imposed unions.

Finally, research consistently shows that women's sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) suffer significantly during wartime (Lancet, 2019). While much global health research focuses on systematic infrastructure issues as barriers to SRHR in conflict zones, various reports underscore how both state and non-state actors can exert control over women's reproductive choices, further restricting access to maternal and reproductive healthcare services (Hedström & Herder, 2023).

### **Beyond Victims**

The protracted conflict that has gripped Nigeria for over a decade, particularly the Boko Haram insurgency, often paints a grim picture of suffering and turmoil. While narratives surrounding the terror war typically emphasise violence and victimization, they overlook an essential layer of this story: the resilience, agency, and strength of women. To fully comprehend the implications of the Nigerian terror war, it is crucial to shift our focus beyond mere victimhood and recognise the diverse roles women play not only during the conflict but also in the post-conflict period.

The violence unleashed by Boko Haram has resulted in mass displacement (Barau, 2017), societal upheaval, and relentless insecurity, with women bearing a disproportionate burden. Although women are often targeted as victims of violence, they also navigate a complex dynamic within the insurgency, serving both as instruments of conflict and as agents of change (Dutta, 2018). This duality defies the simplistic binary narrative of oppressor versus oppressed and highlights the agency many women have demonstrated in the face of desperation.

The dominant narrative frequently portraying women solely as victims of abduction enduring immense trauma neglects the broader spectrum of women's experiences in the Nigerian terror war. Many women have emerged as sole breadwinners, caretakers, and community leaders while navigating the chaos of



displacement and violence. They have forged networks of support and initiated programmes to provide food, shelter, and education for their children, all while striving to rebuild their lives amidst the devastation of the war. Additionally, women have come to represent not only survival but also immense strength, resilience, and agency. Even as they face a range of challenges including economic hardship, they have actively declined to be labeled solely as victims. Their narratives illustrate that conflict, though severely traumatic, can also foster significant personal and collective transformation (Naylor, 2021).

The ingenuity demonstrated by women during conflict is top notch and central to women's responses to terror and displacement. Many have faced the devastating loss of their homes and livelihoods yet have discovered innovative methods to rebuild their lives and communities within internally displaced persons (IDP) camps and host settlements. Amidst limited access to healthcare, education, and essential resources, women have taken on the responsibility of supporting their families, often engaging in informal trade, subsistence farming, or skilled labor (Ezeani & Ajayi, 2022). Their ability to swiftly adapt in challenging circumstances not only underscores their endurance but also demonstrates their capacity for innovation during times of crisis.

Also, the physical and psychological strength that women continue to exhibit is evident in their courageous resistance to the insurgency. Numerous accounts highlight their bravery, showcasing women who have escaped captivity, protected their children from danger, or rescued others during violent encounters (KI-5). Additionally, many of these women have participated in community defense initiatives, offering intelligence and support to local vigilante groups, all while confronting substantial risks (Ibrahim, 2022).

Moreso, women have demonstrated the ability to make decisions and take action even in situations often marked by powerlessness. They have established cooperative societies and savings groups, successfully negotiated access to humanitarian assistance, and, in some cases, served as informal mediators between their communities and security forces (KI-1). Despite the challenges posed by restrictive cultural norms, many women have managed to secure leadership positions within their communities, actively asserting their voices on critical issues such as safety, relocation, and reconciliation (Ogunyemi, 2020). Additionally, many women have turned their personal traumas into a source of collective action. The emergence of women-led organisations such as advocacy groups for missing persons, associations for widows, and community support networks highlights their dedication to influencing not only their own destinies but also the futures of their communities.

They have also been at the forefront of peace initiatives, acting as mediators and community organisers in their efforts to restore harmony within fractured communities (Arostegui, 2013). Their intimate understanding of local dynamics, combined with their unique experiences, position them as vital stakeholders in the peace process. However, the contributions of these women are frequently undermined by systemic constraints, including cultural norms and institutional barriers (Nnam et al 2019), which challenge their participation and impact. This activism not only disrupts patriarchal structures but also places these women at the forefront of grassroots efforts for peacebuilding and social cohesion (Okafor & Okwuosa, 2021).

Hence, recognising and amplifying women's roles in both conflict and peace processes are essential for fostering a more distinct understanding of the ongoing crisis in Nigeria. By acknowledging their resilience and contributions, pathways toward meaningful recovery and reconciliation are created. It will also necessitate a deeper understanding of women not just as victims of war but as active participants in resistance, recovery, and renewal. Their experiences urge a rethinking of policy and academic discussions, advocating for a shift from a focus on protectionism to one centered on empowerment. This reframing acknowledges the essential roles women play in sustaining and rebuilding societies affected by conflict (Abiola, 2023).

### **Moving Beyond the Stereotype, Women as Perpetrators of Conflict**

The discussion around women's roles in conflict often focuses on their portrayal as victims, neglecting their role as perpetrators. Many scholars and policymakers overlook women's involvement in terrorism, attributing this oversight to societal perceptions that depict women as inherently soft and innocent. In the complex realm of terrorism, there is little consensus on women's roles, especially in conflict settings where they are typically perceived as victims rather than contributors to violence (Carpenter, 2003).

One of the contentious issues is whether women's involvement in terrorism merits rigorous examination. Available data indicates that women actively participate in conflicts as perpetrators, engaging in crimes, intelligence gathering, and arms trafficking. As noted by a key informant, women can operate more discreetly due to societal perceptions that render them less suspicious, granting them easier access to certain areas, such as border regions (KI-2). This is influenced by gender norms portraying women as vulnerable and unlikely to engage in violent activities.

Moreover, much of the existing literature on terrorism conveniently overlooks female participants, perpetuating the notion that terrorism is predominantly a male



domain. This gendering of terrorism is so ingrained in everyday life that it often goes unnoticed by casual observers. Despite a historical trend where male terrorists significantly outnumber their female counterparts, this perspective has been particularly reinforced in the West since September 11, 2001. After this event, governmental and societal focus shifted disproportionately to male perpetrators, particularly within Islamic extremist groups like Al-Qaeda, thereby relegating women's roles to the periphery.

When scholars do address women's roles in terrorism, the narrative frequently simplifies their involvement, portraying them as victims manipulated into violence by male relatives or constrained by patriarchal societal norms. This oversimplification risks ignoring the complex motivations that drive women to participate in acts of political violence. It is essential to shift the narrative and recognise the multifaceted roles women play in terrorism, acknowledging their agency and impact in this global issue (Mathers, 2012).

To create effective policies and programmes that address the root causes of insurgency and enhance peace strategies, it is crucial to understand how women experience conflict – not just as victims but also as significant contributors. Recently, there has been a growing focus on women's roles in terrorism, particularly concerning suicide attacks, attracting significant attention from journalists and academics. However, this renewed interest often neglects the historical context of women's participation in terrorism, which has been well-documented.

Despite prevailing beliefs that women are primarily caretakers and homemakers, there is increasing recognition of their dual roles in conflict. Evidence suggests that women can be armed and actively participate in violence alongside men. Studies indicate that while women may sometimes assume roles as active combatants, their involvement in wartime sexual violence remains less explored, partly due to researchers' lack of focus on the gender of perpetrators (Cohen, 2013). Women's involvement in wartime violence often parallels the social pressures faced by male combatants; just as men may engage in violent acts under similar conditions, women can resort to violence when placed in comparable situations (Cohen, 2013).

For instance, women and girls within Boko Haram have participated in various roles related to violence, both directly and indirectly. Their involvement includes logistical support, such as transporting money and weapons to terrorist groups, and serving as recruiters who identify and enlist new members through family connections or personal relationships (Usman et al., 2014). Women have taken on numerous responsibilities within the organisation, such as persuading family members to join and

actively recruiting individuals from outside their immediate circles. They also educate new recruits about societal expectations.

In addition to these roles, many women fulfill tasks as informants, cashiers, and in domestic responsibilities like cooking and resource gathering. More directly, their engagement in violence may manifest through building explosives, participating in assaults on communities, and acting as suicide bombers (Nagarajan, 2017). For some women and girls, joining Boko Haram was seen as an act of defiance against enforced marriages. As observed by a key informant, young girls eager to escape predetermined unions would flee into the wilderness, aligning themselves with men of their choice (KI-4). Their decisions were shaped not only by a desire to avoid unwanted marriages but also by the allure of religious education and a sense of purpose that traditional society had denied them.

### **Empowering Voices: Breaking Barriers for Women in Post-Conflict Policy**

The trials of war have disproportionately affected women, whose resilience and strength in facing adversity are often overlooked. In the critical aftermath of conflicts, women possess the potential to significantly influence post-war policies; however, this potential is frequently stifled by deep-rooted patriarchy and cultural constraints (Nnam et al 2019). This systemic sidelining deprives women of the resources and authority that their male counterparts wield. Given that women represent 49.4% of the Nigerian population (Country Metres, 2025), their active engagement in peace and security efforts is not just advantageous but essential. Women are not merely passive victims of conflict; they stand as powerful peacebuilders and advocates (Okafor & Okwuosa, 2021; Arostegui 2013).

Regrettably, women's involvement in formal peace discussions is still significantly restricted. As societies struggle with the challenges of reconstruction, addressing not only physical and economic infrastructure but also the cultural cohesion that unites communities, the perspectives of women are frequently overlooked in the narratives of post-conflict recovery. Historically marginalized, women endure the most profound impacts of war's devastation, yet they offer invaluable insights and skills essential for cultivating authentic peace and recovery. Enhancing women's participation in these critical processes is not merely a matter of equity; it is essential for achieving enduring stability and sustainable development.

Extensive research underscores the advantages of including women in peace processes. For instance, a 2017 United Nations report found that peace agreements incorporating women's perspectives are 35% more likely to endure for at least 15 years, additionally, De Oliveira Schuck & Brito (2019) noted that incorporating gender

perspectives in post conflict peace building will help address the problem of women marginalisation in post conflict policy formulations. This durability results from the rich diversity of experiences that women contribute, enhancing policymaking and nurturing inclusivity. Women often play key roles as mediators within their communities, facilitating dialogue and reconciliation. Their involvement in governance during post-conflict periods ensures that critical issues – such as healthcare, education, and social infrastructure – are prioritised, thereby laying a stronger foundation for lasting stability.

Despite these clear benefits, significant barriers persist. Cultural norms and entrenched societal structures often impede women's participation in political and public life. In the wake of conflict, these challenges can reinforce traditional gender roles, limiting women's ability to engage fully. Institutional frameworks frequently lack mechanisms to support women's recruitment and retention in decision-making roles. Additionally, escalating gender-based violence in post-conflict environments severely hampers women's contributions to recovery efforts. Limited access to education and economic opportunities further restricts their potential for leadership and agency.

To overcome these obstacles, targeted policy interventions are imperative. These should focus on dismantling structural barriers, promoting gender-sensitive governance, and ensuring active women's participation in post-conflict recovery. A gender-inclusive approach to peacebuilding fosters social cohesion and enhances the resilience of communities emerging from conflict (De Oliveira Schuck & Brito 2019). In the context of the ongoing Nigerian terror war, amplifying women's voices is vital. Their experiences and insights should not be viewed as mere footnotes in the narrative of recovery; rather, they are integral to building a future that is equitable, stable, and resilient. As we pursue healing and reconstruction, we must commit to empowering women, recognising that their involvement is essential for achieving enduring peace

## Conclusion

The Nigerian terror war provides critical lessons on the resilience and agency of women in conflict. In examining the experiences of women in the context of the Nigerian terror war, it becomes clear that while contemporary armed conflicts have inflicted immense suffering subjecting women to violence, displacement, and losses, they have also paradoxically opened avenues for transformation and empowerment. Amidst the chaos of crisis, women's roles have evolved significantly, surpassing traditional boundaries. With many men killed, abducted, or displaced, women increasingly find themselves bearing the responsibility of sustaining their households and communities, becoming breadwinners, decision-makers, and leaders in both private and public spheres.

Conflict, despite its destructive nature, often acts as a catalyst for substantial shifts in gender dynamics. Through the shared trauma of war, many women have formed strong networks of solidarity, leading to the establishment of self-help groups and grassroots organisations that provide emotional support, practical assistance, and a sense of collective identity. These experiences have, in some cases, motivated women to engage in activism, whereby they advocate for peace, justice, and long-term resilience within their communities. Hence this study highlights the urgent need for policies that not only protect women from violence but also empower them as central actors in peacebuilding and post-conflict development. Recognising and harnessing the transformative potential of women's experiences in conflict is not only a matter of justice, it is a prerequisite for sustainable peace.

### Funding

This research was supported and funded by the Nigeria Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFUND) under the Institutional Based Research (IBR) grant intervention, Federal University Lokoja, Lokoja, Nigeria.

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