

# THE INVISIBLE PLAYERS: EXAMINING GENDER DYNAMICS IN ARMED CONFLICT IN NIGERIA

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## Abstract

This paper explored the gender role dynamics in armed conflicts in Nigeria, with a focus on the roles women play in the Boko Haram insurgency. Contrary to the conventional view that women are merely victims of conflict, this study reveals that they are active participants, engaged in various roles such as logistics, intelligence gathering, and direct combat. Through quantitative analysis, it is evident that women's involvement is influenced by a combination of economic necessity, ideological commitment, and coercion. The findings show significant regional differences, with women in the Northeast more involved in combat and intelligence roles, while those in the Northwest are primarily engaged in logistical support and smuggling. The study also highlights the profound challenges these women face during post-conflict reintegration, including stigma, economic hardship, and mental health issues. The paper argues that addressing these challenges requires targeted reintegration programmes, stigma reduction campaigns, and gender-sensitive legal and security frameworks. Additionally, the study challenges the notion that crime is gender-specific, demonstrating that both men and women play complementary roles in sustaining armed conflicts. The paper concludes with recommendations for community-based reintegration initiatives, mental health support, and further research to deepen our understanding of the evolving roles of women in armed conflicts.

**Keywords:** Gender Dynamics, Women, Armed Conflict, Boko Haram, Insurgency.

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## **Introduction**

The Boko Haram insurgency began in 2009 in the northeastern region of Nigeria and has since evolved into one of the deadliest insurgencies in the world. Boko Haram, officially known as Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād, was initially founded as a fundamentalist Islamic group advocating for the establishment of an Islamic state in Nigeria. The group is most notorious for its violent campaigns against the Nigerian government, educational institutions, and civilians, particularly targeting communities that do not adhere to its strict interpretation of Islamic law. Boko Haram's attacks have included bombings, kidnappings, massacres, and destruction of infrastructure, with the group's most infamous act being the abduction of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok in 2014. The insurgency has devastated the northeastern states of Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa, causing widespread displacement, loss of lives, and severe disruptions to local economies and social systems.

In contrast, banditry is a more recent and widespread form of violence, affecting northwestern and central Nigeria, especially states like Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, Niger, and Sokoto. Unlike Boko Haram, which is ideologically motivated, banditry is predominantly driven by economic incentives and criminality. Banditry refers to the activities of loosely organized gangs engaging in armed robbery, cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom, and violent assaults on rural communities. The phenomenon has escalated over the past decade, partly due to the weakening of local governance structures and the proliferation of small arms. Bandits operate from remote forests, where they launch attacks on villages, steal livestock, and abduct individuals for ransom. In many instances, bandits have also engaged in clashes with local vigilante groups, resulting in protracted cycles

of violence and insecurity. Although banditry lacks the religious and ideological underpinnings of Boko Haram, it shares the same capacity to destabilize regions, displace populations, and cause significant human suffering.

While both Boko Haram insurgency and banditry involve the use of violence and disruption of societal order, they differ in their objectives, organizational structures, and methods of operation. Boko Haram is largely politically and religiously motivated, with an aim to overthrow the Nigerian government and establish an Islamic state. Banditry, on the other hand, is a criminal enterprise, more focused on economic gain through theft, kidnapping, and extortion. Despite these differences, both forms of violence have contributed to the complex security challenges facing Nigeria, particularly in terms of displacement, loss of life, and economic devastation in affected regions.

In the context of gender roles, much of the academic discourse around armed conflict has traditionally focused on men, portraying them as the primary actors, either as perpetrators of violence or as defenders of communities. This male-centric narrative has overshadowed the active roles women play in these conflict settings. However, a growing body of research challenges this view, highlighting that women are not simply passive victims in conflicts. As Sjoberg and Gentry (2015) emphasize, "women in armed conflict are not merely bystanders but active participants who engage in a range of activities that support or sustain violence" (p. 3). This shift in understanding calls for a reevaluation of the roles women occupy in the ongoing Boko Haram insurgency and banditry in Nigeria, where they are involved not only as victims but also as active agents, both in supporting and resisting violent actions. This perspective, however, has yet

to fully permeate mainstream discourse, which continues to emphasize men's roles in violence while marginalizing the diverse and complex experiences of women in conflict zones. As we move forward, it is crucial to critically examine the dynamics of gender within these conflicts to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the socio-political and economic impacts they have on both men and women.

## **Problem Statement**

Despite the growing recognition of women's roles in conflict, there remains a significant gap in understanding how these roles manifest in specific contexts, such as the ongoing insurgency and banditry in Nigeria. This knowledge gap has led to oversimplified and often inaccurate portrayals of women as either coerced victims or mere adjuncts to male combatants. Evidence suggests that women are often deeply involved in the logistical, strategic, and operational aspects of these conflicts. As noted by Mahmud (2020), "in many cases, women's involvement in armed conflict is driven by a combination of coercion and agency, with their roles ranging from support functions to active participation in violence" (p. 156). This study aims to explore the multifaceted roles women play in Nigeria's armed conflicts, particularly in relation to aiding banditry and Boko Haram insurgency.

## **Objectives**

The objectives of this study are as follows

1. To explore the roles women play in armed conflict, particularly banditry in Boko Haram in North Eastern Nigeria
2. To investigate the extent to which women's involvement in these armed conflicts is a result of coercion or voluntary participation.

These objectives are aimed at providing a more nuanced understanding of gender role dynamics in armed conflicts, challenging the perception that such conflicts are exclusively male-dominated, and contributing to the development of more effective and inclusive counterterrorism strategies.

## **Research Methodology**

This study adopts a quantitative research design to examine the roles of women in armed conflicts in Nigeria, specifically focusing on their involvement in aiding banditry and Boko Haram activities. A quantitative approach allows for the measurement of the extent of women's participation and the impact of their roles on the dynamics of armed conflict. By utilizing numerical data, the study seeks to uncover patterns and relationships that inform our understanding of gender dynamics in these conflicts.

## **Data Collection**

Data for this study were gathered from multiple secondary sources to enable a thorough analysis of women's roles in armed conflict. Reports and databases from government and security agencies, including the Nigerian Ministry of Defense, the Nigerian Police Force, and the National Bureau of Statistics, provided quantitative insights into the profiles and roles of individuals involved in Boko Haram and banditry. Additionally, data from international organizations, such as the United Nations and Human Rights Watch, offered a broader context on gender-specific roles in Nigeria's armed conflicts. Academic studies and literature on women's roles in armed conflict were reviewed to supplement the quantitative analysis, and findings from previous research studies utilizing surveys and questionnaires contributed valuable empirical data on the complexities of women's participation in these conflicts.

The collected quantitative data were analyzed using statistical methods to uncover patterns and relationships between gender and armed conflict involvement. Descriptive statistics were applied to summarize the data, revealing key insights, such as the approximate 30% representation of women in Boko Haram and banditry roles, along with their specific roles and socioeconomic backgrounds. Correlation analysis assessed the strength of relationships between variables, such as economic status, involvement type (logistics, combat, intelligence), and outcomes like arrest rates and mortality. To deepen the analysis, regression techniques explored how different factors impact women's roles in armed conflict, providing a nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play.

### **Limitations of the Methodology**

While the quantitative approach provides valuable insights, it also has limitations. Reliance on secondary data may result in gaps or inconsistencies, and the findings may not capture the full complexity of women's experiences in armed conflicts. Additionally, the data may be subject to biases inherent in the sources used. However, the combination of multiple data sources and analytical methods helps to mitigate these limitations, providing a robust framework for understanding the gender dynamics in Nigeria's armed conflicts.

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

#### **Gender**

Gender refers to the roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women. Unlike biological sex, which is determined by physical characteristics, gender is a social construct shaped by cultural, economic, and political factors. In the context

of armed conflicts, traditional gender roles often position men as combatants or protectors and women as caregivers or victims. However, these roles can be fluid and adaptable, particularly in conflict settings where societal norms may shift to accommodate the exigencies of war. In this study, gender dynamics are explored to uncover how both men and women participate in armed conflicts, challenging the assumption that crime and violence are gender-specific. Women in Nigeria's conflict zones are increasingly taking on roles traditionally assigned to men, including combat and logistical support.

Gender encompasses the social and cultural roles, behaviors, and expectations assigned to individuals based on their perceived sex within a society. Unlike biological sex, which is determined by physical and genetic traits, gender is a social construct shaped by various influences, including cultural, economic, and political factors. Gender roles can differ significantly across societies and are typically associated with what each culture deems appropriate for men and women. Traditionally, in many societies, men are positioned as protectors or combatants, while women are expected to fulfill caregiving roles. However, these roles can be fluid, especially in the context of armed conflicts where social norms may adapt to meet the demands of war. This adaptability is seen in Nigeria's conflict zones, where traditional roles are challenged as women increasingly take on positions typically reserved for men, such as direct involvement in combat or support functions like logistics, thus broadening the scope of participation beyond gendered stereotypes of violence and care.

## **Armed Conflict**

Armed conflict is defined as a contested incompatibility between organized groups, which results in the use of armed force and violence.

Such conflicts can be intrastate, involving government forces and non-state actors, or interstate, involving two or more states. Armed conflicts typically result in significant human, material, and infrastructural damage. In the Nigerian context, armed conflicts manifest primarily as internal strife, involving state security forces and non-state actors like insurgent groups or bandits. This study focuses on two forms of armed conflict in Nigeria: the Boko Haram insurgency in the Northeast and banditry in the Northwest and Central regions.

Armed conflict refers to situations where organized groups engage in violent confrontations, often resulting from incompatible goals that lead to significant human, material, and infrastructural losses. Conflicts can be classified as either intrastate—occurring within a single country and typically involving government forces and non-state actors or interstate, where state armies clash across national boundaries. In Nigeria, armed conflict primarily takes the form of internal strife, involving confrontations between state forces and insurgent groups like Boko Haram, as well as bandits in the northwest and central regions. This study focuses on the Boko Haram insurgency, which has sought to establish an Islamic state through violent means, and the widespread banditry that plagues rural regions. These forms of conflict reveal distinct motivations: while insurgency is often driven by ideological or political aims, banditry operates as a criminal enterprise motivated by economic gain. Each form introduces unique security challenges and impacts on the population, further emphasizing the diversity within Nigeria's armed conflict landscape.

### **Insurgency**

Insurgency refers to a rebellion or uprising against an established government or authority by non-state actors. Insurgents typically aim to



undermine the state's power and legitimacy, often through guerrilla tactics, including sabotage, ambushes, and acts of terrorism. Insurgencies may be driven by ideological, political, or religious motivations.

In this study, Boko Haram serves as the primary example of an insurgency. The group seeks to overthrow the Nigerian government and establish an Islamic state governed by Sharia law. Boko Haram operates primarily in northeastern Nigeria but has extended its activities into neighboring countries in the Lake Chad Basin. Insurgencies can take various forms, including *Guerrilla Warfare*, where small groups use irregular tactics to fight a larger, more traditional army, and *Terrorism*, where the insurgents may use fear and violence to disrupt daily life and governance. There is also a religious type of insurgency, where groups like Boko Haram driven by religious ideology, seek to impose their beliefs on a larger population.

## **Banditry**

Banditry is a form of organized criminal activity, typically involving robbery, extortion, kidnapping, and other acts of violence aimed at economic gain rather than ideological or political objectives. Banditry often thrives in regions with weak governance, porous borders, and minimal law enforcement presence. In Nigeria, banditry is most prevalent in the northwestern and central regions, particularly in Zamfara, Kaduna, Katsina, and Niger. Bandits operate in loosely organized gangs, launching attacks on rural communities, kidnapping individuals for ransom, and engaging in cattle rustling. Unlike insurgents, bandits are not motivated by political or religious ideology but by the pursuit of wealth and power through criminal means.

## Forms of Banditry

*Kidnapping for Ransom:* One of the most common forms, where victims are abducted and released in exchange for money.

*Cattle Rustling:* The theft of livestock, a major source of wealth in rural communities.

*Armed Robbery and Looting:* Attacks on villages to steal valuables and terrorize the population.

## Theoretical Framework

This study employs one major primary theoretical framework to analyse the roles women play in armed conflict in Nigeria, and that is the **Social Role Theory**. This framework provides a comprehensive understanding of the gender role dynamics in conflict settings, particularly in the context of insurgency and banditry in Northern Nigeria.

### Social Role Theory

Social Role Theory, developed by Alice Eagly (1987), posits that the behaviors and roles individuals assume in society are largely determined by societal expectations and cultural norms surrounding gender. According to the theory, men and women occupy certain roles based on social expectations that are ingrained through cultural practices, institutions, and societal interactions. These roles are not fixed but are adaptable, especially in circumstances such as conflict, where traditional gender norms can be challenged or subverted. In conflict settings, Social Role Theory is particularly useful in understanding how women assume roles that deviate from societal norms of femininity. Traditionally, women are expected to take on caregiving or supportive roles, whereas men are viewed as the aggressors and protectors. However, during periods of armed conflict,

women may take on roles such as combatants, intelligence gatherers, and logistical coordinator roles that are typically reserved for men. This flexibility in gender roles demonstrates how social norms evolve under the pressures of conflict and violence.

### **Application of Social Role Theory in Conflict**

In the context of Boko Haram and banditry in Nigeria, Social Role Theory helps explain the shifting gender dynamics within these armed groups. Women in conflict zones are no longer limited to passive roles but are actively participating in violent and strategic activities. For instance, in Boko Haram, women have been used as suicide bombers and combatants, challenging the traditional view of women as non-violent actors. In banditry, women play significant roles in logistics, such as smuggling weapons or acting as intermediaries in ransom negotiations, roles that take advantage of the perception that women are less suspicious. This theory illustrates that women's participation in conflict is shaped by social expectations, but also highlights that women's roles can expand beyond these traditional boundaries when the context demands it. Women's involvement in Boko Haram and banditry is influenced by both coercion and the need for survival, as they navigate the complex realities of conflict.

#### *Relevance of Social Role Theory to this Study*

By using Social Role Theory, this study unpacked the complex gender dynamics in Nigeria's armed conflicts by focusing on how societal expectations shape and influence women's roles in both the Boko Haram insurgency and banditry. Social Role Theory allows for an exploration of how women, traditionally perceived as secondary or passive actors, assume critical roles that contribute to the operational success of these armed

groups. This framework is essential for challenging the notion that crime and violence are inherently male-dominated spaces, revealing the multifaceted roles women play in sustaining armed conflicts.

### *Critique and Strengths of Social Role Theory*

While Social Role Theory provides a robust framework for understanding the adaptability of gender roles in conflict, it has limitations. One criticism is that it can oversimplify the role of culture in shaping gender dynamics, assuming that societal expectations are static when in reality, they are fluid and influenced by multiple factors such as class, ethnicity, and religion. However, the strength of the theory lies in its ability to demonstrate how gender roles are not biologically determined but are socially constructed and can shift depending on the context.

In the case of Boko Haram and banditry in Nigeria, social role theory enables us to see how women, under certain conditions, transcend traditional gender expectations, actively engaging in roles that are traditionally seen as male-dominated. This is crucial in understanding the broader socio-political dynamics at play in Nigeria's armed conflicts and how these dynamics influence both male and female participants.

### **Gender Roles in Armed Conflict: A Review of Literature**

A study by Chesney-Lind and Pasko (2013) provided an intersectional analysis of women's involvement in crime, challenging the traditional gendered perceptions of criminality. The researchers used a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data on crime rates with qualitative interviews with female offenders. Their findings showed that women are involved in a wide range of criminal activities, from drug trafficking to violent crimes, often driven by economic pressures, social

inequalities, and gendered expectations. The study also highlighted the ways in which women's criminality is often overlooked or minimized by law enforcement and the criminal justice system, leading to a lack of adequate responses to their involvement in crime. Chesney-Lind and Pasko argued that recognizing the intersectionality of gender, crime, and social structures is essential for developing more effective crime prevention and intervention strategies.

Similarly, a study by Sjoberg and Gentry (2015) on women's violence in global conflicts found that women who engage in violence are often portrayed as either victims or monsters, with little recognition of their agency. The researchers argued that this binary framing fails to capture the complexity of women's experiences in conflict and suggested that a more nuanced understanding of women's agency in violence is needed.

### **Gender Role Dynamics in Armed Conflicts: The Case of Boko Haram and Banditry in Nigeria**

Historically, armed conflicts have been framed through a gendered lens that emphasizes male dominance in violent roles, while women are often portrayed as passive victims in need of protection. In traditional settings, men are expected to serve as combatants, defenders, or aggressors, while women's roles are limited to caregiving and providing support. This dichotomy has long dominated both academic discourse and the understanding of gender dynamics in conflict zones.

However, recent studies have challenged these traditional perspectives, highlighting that women play far more complex roles in conflicts than previously acknowledged. In the context of Nigeria, particularly in relation to the Boko Haram insurgency and the rise of banditry, women are actively involved in a range of activities that both sustain and

support these violent groups. These roles include not only caregiving but also direct participation in violence, intelligence gathering, and logistical support.

## **The Role of Women in the Boko Haram Insurgency**

Boko Haram, a militant Islamist group in northeastern Nigeria, has been notorious for its brutal tactics, including mass kidnappings, bombings, and assassinations. Traditionally, Boko Haram's insurgency was perceived as male-dominated, but in recent years, women have become key players in the group's operations, and play diverse roles, which are examined below.

- **Combat and Suicide Bombing:** One of the most prominent roles women have assumed in Boko Haram is that of suicide bombers. Women, particularly young girls, have been increasingly used in this capacity, as they are often perceived as less threatening and can bypass security checks more easily. According to research, women carried out more than half of Boko Haram's suicide bombings between 2014 and 2017 (Pearson & Zenn, 2016). This strategy not only leverages traditional gender expectations of women as non-violent but also reflects the group's adaptability in exploiting gendered assumptions for tactical advantage.
- **Intelligence and Recruitment:** Women are also involved in gathering intelligence and recruiting other women into the insurgency. These women often play pivotal roles in radicalizing others, especially in rural areas, where they hold social sway due to their perceived moral and religious authority. For instance, women are often tasked with smuggling weapons, acting as spies, and organizing logistics to support combat operations. This role is a significant departure from the conventional view of women as mere passive supporters.

- **Logistical Support:** In addition to combat and intelligence roles, women are heavily involved in logistical support, providing food, shelter, and medical care to insurgents. These roles are crucial for sustaining the group's operations, particularly in remote areas where traditional supply lines are unavailable.

### **The Role of Women in Banditry in Nigeria**

Unlike Boko Haram, banditry in Nigeria is not ideologically driven but primarily economically motivated. The involvement of women in banditry takes on a different character, though it is no less significant. Women play a central role in the logistics of bandit operations, particularly in Zamfara, Katsina, and Niger states. They transport weapons, ammunition, and supplies to bandit camps, often taking advantage of their lower visibility to evade detection by law enforcement. Women involved in banditry typically use their social networks to move goods across regions, exploiting their perceived innocence to bypass security measures.

Another critical role women play in banditry is serving as intermediaries in ransom negotiations. Due to their perceived trustworthiness and neutrality, women are often tasked with negotiating between the families of kidnapping victims and the bandit groups. This role is particularly significant in areas where women are seen as less likely to be involved in criminal activities, allowing them to operate with relative freedom compared to men. Women's involvement in banditry is often driven by economic necessity. In many cases, women are the primary breadwinners for their families and see banditry as a means of survival. The economic instability in northern Nigeria, coupled with limited access to education and employment opportunities, pushes women toward these criminal networks. Unlike Boko Haram, where ideological alignment plays a role, women in

banditry are often motivated by material gain and the need to support their families.

While both Boko Haram insurgents and bandits involve women in non-traditional roles, the nature of their involvement differs significantly. In the Boko Haram insurgency, women's roles are more ideologically driven, with a focus on suicide bombing, intelligence gathering, and indoctrination. In contrast, women involved in banditry are primarily motivated by economic factors and are more likely to engage in logistical support and smuggling operations.

The coercion factor is more prominent in the Boko Haram insurgency, where many women and girls are forced into roles through abduction or radicalization. In banditry, however, women often participate voluntarily, driven by the need for economic survival. This distinction highlights the different motivations and roles women assume in these two forms of armed conflict.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The findings of this study underscore the complex roles that women play in the armed conflicts of Nigeria, particularly within the contexts of Boko Haram and banditry. The analysis reveals that women are not merely passive victims; they are actively engaged in a variety of roles that significantly contribute to the operational success of these groups. Women's involvement ranges from logistical support to intelligence gathering and direct combat, challenging the traditional narratives that often depict them as sidelined or powerless.

This study highlights that poverty and lack of education, are significant drivers of women's participation in armed conflicts. The findings show that women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to engage in



these violent activities, often as a means of survival. The intersectionality of gender, economic status, and education plays a crucial role in shaping women's experiences and choices in conflict settings. This research supports the growing body of literature that challenges the conventional view of gender roles in conflict. Studies, such as those by Sjoberg and Gentry (2015) and Mahmud (2020), have similarly emphasized that women's involvement in armed conflict is complex and multifaceted, reflecting a blend of coercion, agency, and economic necessity. The findings of this study contribute to this discourse by providing empirical evidence from the Nigerian context, demonstrating the active roles women assume in both Boko Haram and banditry.

This study sheds light on the intricate dynamics of gender roles in armed conflicts in Nigeria. Women are not only victims but also critical players in the ongoing insurgency and banditry. The research reveals that their participation is driven by various factors, including economic necessity, ideological commitment, and social expectations. To effectively address the unique challenges faced by women involved in armed conflicts, several targeted interventions are necessary. First, the *initiation of economic empowerment programs is important*. The Federal Government of Nigeria should implement economic empowerment initiatives for women returning from conflict, providing vocational training and job placement opportunities to aid their reintegration into society. Second, the *development of Community-based reintegration campaigns*. Local governments should promote community-based campaigns to reduce the stigma surrounding women involved in armed conflicts, encouraging acceptance and support within communities. Third, strengthening of gender-sensitive legal frameworks. Law enforcement agencies need to adopt gender-sensitive

approaches in handling cases involving women who participated in armed conflicts, ensuring that they receive appropriate support and protection. Fourth, enhancement of *mental health services*. NGOs and community organizations should collaborate with the government to provide accessible mental health services for women affected by conflict, addressing issues such as PTSD and trauma. Fifth, the promotion of research and data collection on women and armed conflicts. Research is essential to monitor and understand the evolving roles of women in armed conflicts. Collecting gender-disaggregated data will help inform policy decisions and intervention strategies.

Overall, recognizing the active roles of women in armed conflicts in Nigeria is crucial for developing effective responses to insurgency and banditry. Further research is needed to deepen our understanding of these dynamics and to ensure that the voices and experiences of women are included in discussions on conflict resolution and peace building.

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