Victims or Vanguards? Exploring the Females' Role in Boko Haram Insurgency and Banditry in Northern Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The paper explored the double role of women in insecurity in northeast (Boko Haram insurgency) and northwest Nigeria (Banditry), challenging the conventional belief that portrays females as only victims. Although several women and girls have suffered various exploitation, abduction and violence, others have equally played vital roles as vanguards of terror though their involvement in combat operations, intelligence gathering and logistics. This study explored how both coercion and voluntary alignment with armed groups' operations and ideologies drive females' involvement in the groups. The study also investigated the complex ideological and socio-economic motivations driving their involvement. Extensively anchoring on data from secondary sources, the paper examined how females' participation as both victims and vanguards influences the complexities of conflict and conflict resolution in northern Nigeria. It argued that understanding the complex roles of women and girls in these conflicts is essential in effective deployment of counterinsurgency measure and rehabilitation programs. Amongst others, the paper recommended gender-sensitive security policies, enhanced community-based support systems and improved socio-economic opportunities for women and girls to address the fundamental drivers of female participation in armed conflicts.

Keywords: Banditry, Boko Haram, Northern Nigeria, Vanguards, Victims.

INTRODUCTION

For centuries, violence and security have coexisted in almost all societies. But unlike in the past, in recent years, security challenges have become very pronounced. For instance, since September 11 2001, terrorism has continued to pose a global threat, impacting both developed and developing nations. In the past decade, modern nation-states have been engulfed in series of security crisis which are evidenced in wars (like the Russia-Ukraine war, the Israel-HAMAS war and the Israel-Iran war), conflicts, political instability, coups (in most parts of Africa), and other numerous security challenges stemming from climate change.

Across the continents of the world, Africa is the most affected by insecurity. Security challenges take various forms in the continent, such as armed conflicts, terrorism, banditry, coups, political instability, economic challenges, climate-induced insecurities, arms proliferation, kidnapping, etc. In Africa, Nigeria is one of the most insecure countries. The 2022 Global Terrorism Index (GTI) by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP, 2022) classifies Nigeria as the sixth most terrorized country of the world. The Institute's Positive Peace Index (PPI) also ranks Nigeria 135 out of the 163 countries and territories surveyed for the year (IEP, 2022). These records point to the awry state of national security in Nigeria today. Of particular concern is the recent growth in scale, spread and sophistication of violent armed non-state actors (ANSAs) in the country such as terrorists, insurgents, bandits, kidnappers, militants, separatists, pastoralists, ritual killers, and cultists, among others, whose activities have resulted in deadly casualties, forced disappearance, population displacement, destruction of property and reputational damage (Duerksen, 2021).

To be sure, no region of Nigeria is immune to security crisis. Since the last decade, every region has had its own share of security challenges. While the South West is plagued by a surge in cybercrime, armed robbery, kidnapping, domestic crime, extrajudicial killings, herder-farmer conflicts, and ritual killings, the South East is

a haven for ritual killings, commercial crime, secessionist agitation, kidnapping, herder-farmer clashes, and attacks by unknown gunmen. The South South remains threatened by militancy, kidnapping, and environmental agitation. The North Central is engulfed in ethno-religious crisis, climate-induced conflicts, resource-control conflicts and farmer-herder conflicts. The North East has been subject to a humanitarian crisis lasting over a decade and caused by the Boko Haram insurgency and the Islamic State in West Africa Province. Meanwhile, the North West is enmeshed in illegal mining, ethnoreligious killings, and banditry. It is, therefore, an axiom that insecurity in Nigeria has assumed a disproportionate geopolitical stance and that it has claimed thousands of lives and extensive damage and loss of property (Global Center for Responsibility to Protect Nigeria, 2022). In the context of the aforementioned security problems in northern Nigeria, Boko Haram insurgency and banditry have recently come to the fore with unprecedented gendered implications and complexities.

Traditionally, the role of females in violent conflicts has been framed within the binary of victimhood and passive suffering. This is particularly evident in Nigeria's protracted security crises in northeast and northwest Nigeria, where women and girls are often perceived solely as victims of Boko Haram insurgency and banditry. In other words, females bear the most significant burden of Boko Haram terrorism and banditry in northern Nigeria. Corroborating this, Zenn & Pearson (2014, p. 50) noted that "the Boko Haram insurgency, which began in 2009, has resulted in widespread devastation, with women and children bearing the brunt of its atrocities. The group has abducted thousands of women, using them as sex slaves, suicide bombers, and forced wives". Similarly, banditry in Northern Nigeria has escalated in recent years, characterized by mass kidnappings, gender-based violence, and economic destabilization (Amnesty International, 2020). In other words, the violent attacks of bandits and the continued expansion of their orchestrated conflicts indicate a major risk to the lives of females in the region. In both conflicts, females are subjected to extreme human rights violations, reinforcing their depiction as victims. However, a closer examination reveals that females play multifaceted roles that extend beyond victimization, including active participation, facilitation, and resistance (Matfess, 2017). Corroborating this, Warner & Hilary (2018) revealed that a nuanced understanding of their experiences suggests that some females have been coerced into active participation, while others have voluntarily aligned with these armed groups for various socio-economic and ideological reasons.

While many females suffer as victims of abduction, exploitation, and violence, others actively engage in insurgent activities, either through coercion or volition. There have been reports and allegations of females being involved in intelligence gathering, logistics, domestic supports, and even attacks, particularly as suicide bombers. According to Warner & Hilary (2018), the same pattern is evident in banditry, where some women serve as informants, arms smugglers, and negotiators in ransom transactions. These roles highlight the agency of females in these violent networks, complicating the conventional narrative that portrays them merely as passive sufferers. In other words, the increasing involvement of females as combatants, intelligence operatives, recruiters, negotiators, homecare providers challenge conventional gendered assumptions in conflict studies. While extant literature has predominantly examined females as victims of Boko Haram insurgency or banditry, with fewer literature examining their roles as vanguards in either conflicts, little to no scholarly attention has been given to the contrasting roles women play in these conflicts. Despite the significant areas of convergence between Boko Haram insurgency and banditry, the dual and often contradictory identities of women in these violent contexts remain underexplored, particularly in a single study.

Against this backdrop, this paper therefore seeks to interrogate the dual identities of females in Boko Haram insurgency and banditry in Northern Nigeria. The paper is organized into six sections. Following this introduction, section two will do the conceptual and contextual framing of Boko Haram insurgency, banditry, victims and vanguards. Section three will look at the historical context of Boko Haram insurgency and banditry in northern Nigeria, and section four will analyze females as victims in Boko Haram and banditry. Section five will illustrate females as vanguards in the conflicts, while the last section will conclude the study while providing actionable recommendations.

Conceptual and Contextual Framing

Given the tendency, particularly in the social sciences, for concepts to elicit varying interpretations, we will clarify our usage of these concepts – Boko Haram terrorism, banditry, victims and vanguards – to enhance a shared understanding of these concepts.

Boko Haram Terrorism

In order to effectively conceptualize Boko Haram terrorism, it is logical that the concept of terrorism be first explained. Terrorism has been variously defined by the governments, security agencies, civil society organizations, media, and academia. As of 1994, Simon (1994) identified no fewer than 212 different definitions of terrorism in use, with 90 of them used by governments and other institutions. A few examples of these definitions would suffice at this point. Onuoha (2017), defined it as "the premeditated use or threat of use of violence by any of the actors in an asymmetric conflict to cause fear, destruction or death, especially against unarmed targets, property or infrastructure in a state, intended to compel those in authority to respond to the demands and expectations of the individual or group behind such violent acts" (p. 3). For Ganor (2002), terrorism is "the deliberate use or threat to use violence against civilians to attain political, ideological, or religious aims" (p. 288). It is as well the premeditated, threatened or actual use of force or violence to attain a political goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation (Sandler et al., 1983, p. 38).

Literature on terrorism is surfeited with various classifications of terrorism. However, the commonest classification refers to two main varieties of terrorism: domestic terrorism and international/transnational terrorism. Domestic terrorism refers to terrorist attack(s) that is home-grown and home-directed, with consequences for just the affected state, its institutions, citizens, property, and policies. For domestic terrorism, the perpetrators, victims, and audience are all from the host country. International terrorism comprises acts – instigated by a third party – that have clear consequences that go beyond the boundaries of the state that the actual attack took place (Okumu & Botha, 2009).

Going by their geo-operational reach, some terrorist groups can be classified as *global, regional* and *local*. Renowned terrorist organisations such as Al Qaeda Network (AQN) and Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or Daesh are perfect examples of global terrorist organisations. The second category is those that have a stronghold in a particular state, but with a proven capacity to plan and launch transnational attacks within a geographic region. Examples will include the Al Shabaab, Al Qaeda in the Land of Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and Boko Haram with its splinter faction the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP). The last category is those that are largely domestic in operational focus and reach. A good example is the Ansar Beit al-Maqdis (ABM's) which was founded in 2011 (Akogwu et al, 2024, p. 7).

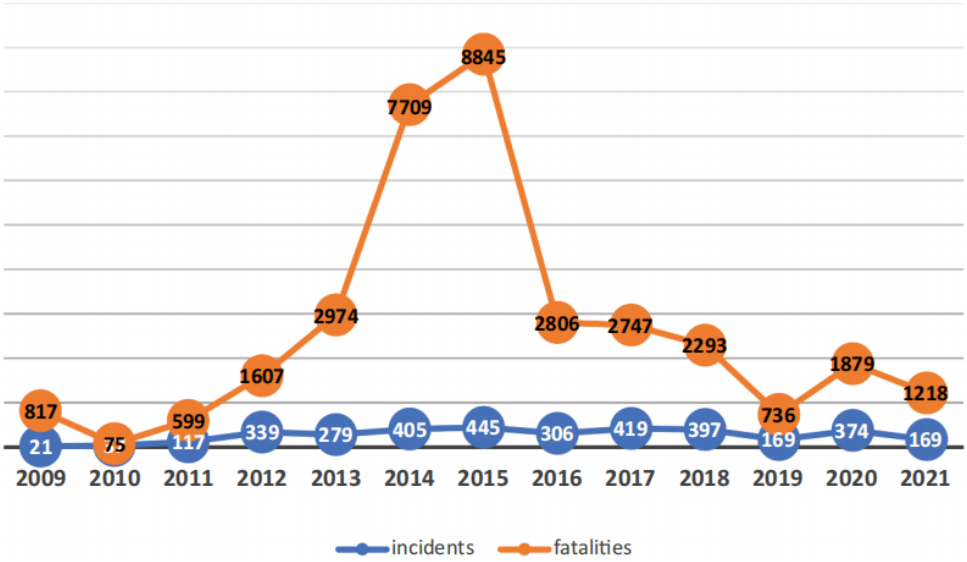
Irrespective of whether the group is classified as global, regional or local in focus, or it is described as domestic terrorism or international terrorism, one commonality is the use of violence as a weapon for expressing grievances or discontent over the status quo. The motive behind it could be politically, religiously, culturally, psychologically, economically, ideologically or racially motivated. Studies however have shown that for terrorist organizations to stay relevant and operate effectively, they need a regular supply of recruits (Ranstorp, 2006; Onuoha, 2014a; Onuoha, 2014b; Mentan, 2017; Rufai, 2017).

Regarding Boko Haram terrorism, it refers to the violent insurgency carried out by the jihadist militant group *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad* (commonly known as Boko Haram, or in other words 'People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad'), which has destabilized northeastern Nigeria and parts of the Lake Chad region since 2009. The group's activities include mass killings, bombings, kidnappings (such as the 2014 abduction of Chibok schoolgirls), and attacks on security forces, civilians, and government institutions (Comolli, 2015). The group's tactics have caused widespread humanitarian crises, displacing millions and exacerbating poverty and instability in affected regions (Campbell & Harwood, 2018).

Onuoha, Ojewale & Oluwole (2025, p. 6) noted that "attacks by Boko Haram terrorists (BHT) come first on the list of Nigeria's security threat profile." The insurgency by the group began in 2009 as a campaign against western education. The group's ideology is rooted in Salafi Jihadism. Boko Haram rejects the secularism of the Nigerian state and opposes western civilization and democracy (elections). For many years, the group has been conducting a lethal jihadist insurgency in a bid to establish an Islamic state in Nigeria. Attacks by the BHT have killed 350,000 people in northeast, displaced more than 2.6 million people, and cased about $9 billion worth of damage in Nigeria since 2009 (Mahmood, 2016). Its rise has been characterized by substantial infighting over the years, with factions sometimes seceding from the JAS; such as the *Ansaru al-Musulmina fi*

Bilad al-Sudan (Ansar) in 2012, and the Islamic State West African Province (ISWAP) in 2016 (Nextier SPD, 2018). Reference to BHT encapsulates militants belonging to any of the factions of the Boko Haram – Ansar, JAS and ISWAP.

Figure 1. Incidents and fatalities from the Boko Haram insurgency, 2009-2021.



Source: Onuoha, Ojewale & Oluwole, 2025.

The rivalry among the factions – has been a feature of the jihadisphere in Nigeria's northeast. Differences in ideology, the quest for territorial control or expansion, and the desire for dominance in membership recruitment underpin the rivalry. Despite internal schism, the BHT has continued to launch deadly attacks on military, civilian, and humanitarian targets, especially in the northeastern states of Adamawa, Borno and Yobe, resulting in fatalities (see Figure 1) (Onuoha, Ojewale & Oluwole, 2025).

A notable trend in Boko Haram's insurgency is the substantial decline in reported fatalities linked to the group since 2015, as illustrated in Figure 1. This reduction can be attributed to several factors, including intensified military offensives by a revitalized Nigerian army, successful joint operations by the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), and internal divisions within the group. Additionally, Boko Haram has lost control over most of the territories it once occupied, yet it continues to pose a serious threat to democracy, peace, and security in the region.

Banditry

The term banditry does not lend itself to a single universally agreed definition. In other words, it has been appropriated for diverse usage. Put simply, banditry involves violent criminal activities like armed robbery, kidnapping, cattle theft, and attacks on villages, typically perpetrated by organized criminal groups, particularly in rural and conflict-affected regions. According to Tade (2021), banditry in Nigeria is primarily characterized by the use of firearms to terrorize communities, extort money, and displace populations, with perpetrators operating in gangs that often evade law enforcement. This form of criminality has become widespread in parts of northern Nigeria, where weak security structures have allowed bandits to flourish. Similarly, Alistair (2021) defines banditry as the unlawful use of force by non-state actors to achieve economic or political objectives. Alistair argues that banditry is not just about crime but has evolved into a complex security crisis, where armed groups engage in systematic violence to control resources, demand ransom payments, and challenge state authority. Furthermore, Ikime (1980) defines banditry as **a** historical phenomenon rooted in socio-economic inequalities, where marginalized groups resort to criminal activities as a means of survival or resistance.

Banditry, which has long afflicted northern Nigeria, has assumed a dangerous dimension mostly in Zamfara but also Kaduna, Katsina, Kebbi, Niger and, more recently, Sokoto and Taraba states (Mvnyi, 2021). The

violence began as farmer-herder conflict in 2011 and intensified between 2017 to 2018 to include cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom, sexual violence and wanton killings (Aina, 2021). Although particularly active in the North West geopolitical zone, they have gradually spread to other states outside the region like Adamawa, Benue, Nasarawa, and Plateau to some degree. Colonies of bandits operate from several forests located within or traversing contiguous states of Katsina, Kano, Kaduna, Zamfara, Sokoto, Kebbi and Niger. The commanders of these criminal groups cut across different nationalities and ethnic stocks – Babarbare, Fulani, and Hausa, among others. Concentrated mostly in the North West region and parts of its North Central region, bandits are pre-dominantly driven by economic opportunism, rather than political ideology, which differentiates them from terrorist groups sch as Ansar, JAS, and ISWAP. This also explains the prevalent kidnappings for ransom, cattle-rustling, and thefts that are often associated with these groups (Ojewale, 2021). However, there is increasing evidence pointing to collaboration between bandits and terrorist groups in Nigeria (Ademola, 2021).

The scale, frequency, and intensity of banditry is this a growing source of serious security concerns in Nigeria. For instance, while about "1,100 people were murdered in 2018 in the six states of North West Nigeria in 2018, over 2,200 were killed in 2019 and 1,600 killed between January and June 2020 (Omorogbe, 2021). At least there are almost 100 different bandit camps in Zamfara, Sokoto, Kebbi, Kaduna, Niger and Katsina, with no fewer than 300 bandits in each of these camps having sophisticated weapons with them (Altine, 2011). In Zamfara State alone, over 2,619 people were killed between 2011 and 2019. This is in addition to the 1,190 people kidnapped by the bandits, who collected some N970 million between 2011 and 2019 as ransom from the families of their victims (Onuoha & Akogwu, 2022). The federal government of Nigeria has responded to the threat through the deployment of military and police operations while the state governments have experimented with peace deals or granting of amnesty to bandits (Nwangwu et al, 2020). The failure of both approaches has led vulnerable communities in Kaduna, Katsina, and Zamfara states, among others, to rely on self-defense groups such as vigilantes. However, the rise of these groups has added complexity to the security landscape, inadvertently fueling the spread of arms and contributing to human rights abuses. These dynamics, in turn, perpetuate a cycle of violence, further deepening Nigeria's security crisis.

Victims

In recent time, the concepts "victims" and have gained wide usage in discourses on security and conflicts. According to Moffett (2014), the term victims in the context of conflicts refers to individuals or groups who suffer harm, injury, loss, or death as a direct or indirect result of violent confrontations. Victims in conflicts are not limited to those who experience physical harm but also include those who endure psychological trauma, economic hardship, and social displacement. The United Nations Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power (1985) defines victims as persons who have suffered harm, including physical or mental injury, emotional suffering, economic loss, or substantial impairment of their fundamental rights through acts or omissions that constitute a violation of national or international laws (UN, 1985). In the context of violent conflicts, victims may include civilians, combatants who are unlawfully targeted, and individuals who suffer from war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity (Green & Ward, 2009). The notion of victimhood in conflicts also extends to those who suffer structural violence, such as discrimination, poverty, and exclusion, which are often exacerbated by conflict situations (Galtung, 1969). In addition, victims in conflicts also include those who suffer from conflicts' consequences such as loss of livelihoods, displacement, and intergenerational trauma.

Vanguards

Unlike victims which has enjoyed some conceptualization in literature, the concept of vanguards in conflicts have been scarcely defined. However, Kalyvas (2006) noted that in the context of terror and conflicts, vanguards refer to individuals or groups that play a leading role in initiating, organizing, and directing acts of violence and ideological struggle to achieve political, religious, or social objectives. Vanguards in terrorist movements often consist of highly committed and ideologically motivated elites who provide strategic direction, recruit members, and frame the narrative to justify violent actions. Being specific to terrorism, Crenshaw (1981) stated that "terrorist vanguards act as catalysts, using propaganda, targeted violence, and psychological operations to instill fear, undermine state authority, and attract sympathizers. They frequently

employ asymmetric tactics, such as bombings, assassinations, and hostage-taking, to challenge conventional military forces and influence political outcomes" (p. 122).

In the context of this paper, we define vanguards as individuals or groups who are at the forefront of advancing the goals of violent non-state actors (VNSAs) through means such as intelligence gathering, logistical support, recruitment, and direct involvement in violent acts. Women vanguards in terror and conflicts are often tasked with carrying out high-stakes operations such as bombings, smuggling of small and light weapons (SALWs), and facilitating communication networks.

Historical Context of Boko Haram Terrorism and Banditry in Northern Nigeria

Terrorism according to Ndu, Nwosu & Okoli (2025), "has remained a key component of security conversation in Nigeria since the escalation of Boko Haram conflicts" (p. 1). According to Comolli (2015, p. 4), "Boko Haram emerged in the early 2000s in northeastern Nigeria under the leadership of Mohammed Yusuf. The group was founded in Maiduguri, Borno State, as a Salafi-jihadist movement opposing Western education, which it deemed un-Islamic. Yusuf's ideology was deeply influenced by Salafi fundamentalism and a rejection of secular governance, which he believed had led to corruption and poor governance in Nigeria." The group operated relatively peacefully at first, engaging in preaching and recruitment, but tensions with state authorities escalated, leading to a violent crackdown in 2009 (Thurston, 2018).

In July 2009, a clash between Boko Haram loyalists and security forces in Maiduguri resulted in a military operation that killed over 800 members, including Yusuf, who was extrajudicially executed while in police custody (Walker, 2012). This event marked a significant turning point, as the movement radicalized under Abubakar Shekau, the group's new leader. Shekau restructured Boko Haram into a violent insurgent group, targeting security forces, government institutions and civilians (Zenn, 2020). From 2010, Boko Haram intensified its violent attacks, using suicide bombings (and female suicide bombing from 2014), mass abductions, and assassinations to spread terror in northern Nigeria. To expatiate this, Ndu, Nwosu & Okoli (2025) noted that "Nextier's Nigeria Violent Conflicts Database showed that between January and December 2024, Nigeria recorded 43 incidents of terrorism with a total of 278 casualties" (p. 1).

The group's 2011 attack on the United Nations headquarters in Abuja was a clear indicator of its ideological shift toward global jihadism and it growing capabilities (Onuoha, 2012). This attack and other frequent bombings of military barracks, police stations, churches and mosques, positioned Boko Haram as one of the deadliest terrorist groups in the globe. Boko Haram terrorists later spread their attacks beyond Borno, attacking neighbouring Yobe State, Adamawa State, and some communities in Cameroon, Chad, and Niger Republic. According to Pearson (2018, p. 1), "Boko Haram's tactics also evolved, including kidnapping as a weapon of war, as demonstrated by the 2014 abduction of 276 Chibok schoolgirls, which drew international condemnation."

In 2015, Boko Haram pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (ISIS), rebranding itself as the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) under Shekau's leadership. However, internal divisions within the group led to a split, with ISWAP breaking away from Shekau's faction due to disagreements over targeting Muslim civilians (Zenn, 2020). This division to a significant extent weakened Boko Haram but did not eliminate its operational capacity, as both Boko Haram and ISWAP continued attacks in Nigeria and other countries of the Lake Chad. The Nigerian military, alongside regional forces from the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), launched multiple offensives to reclaim territories seized by Boko Haram (Felter et al., 2021).

According to Agbiboa (2013, p. 144), "the rise of Boko Haram must be understood within the broader context of Nigeria's socioeconomic and political challenges, including poverty, unemployment, weak governance, and corruption." The group exploited these conditions to recruit disaffected youths, promising them a sense of purpose and material benefits. Furthermore, the marginalization of northeastern Nigeria in terms of development and political representation contributed to the insurgency's endurance (Higazi, 2013). No doubt, the failure of the Nigerian government to live up to its responsibility of providing basic services and ensuring security of lives and property particularly in rural areas in the northeast, created a power vacuum that Boko Haram was quick to effectively fill.

Despite sustained military pressure, Boko Haram and ISWAP continue to pose serious security threats in Nigeria and the broader Lake Chad region. The insurgency has led to over 35,000 deaths and displaced millions (UNHCR, 2022). Additionally, their activities have severely impacted education, agriculture, and regional trade, deepening the humanitarian crisis in the area (International Crisis Group, 2020).

Regarding banditry, the origin of armed bandits in north-west Nigeria can be traced to precolonial era. The region was a major hub in precolonial international trade and migration, as Kano and Katshina were well placed in the trans-Saharan routes for trade and tourism, with further connection to Sokoto in the West, Borno and others in the East and Benin Empire in the South (Onodugo et al, 2021). Amidst these, armed bandits inhabited these routes, and constituted major threats to caravan trading, tourism, political stability, and territorial integrity of the precolonial states and societies in the region. In Zamfara, for example, (Auwal, 2021) Hilltops like Kwotarkwashi and Chafe were frequent destinations for criminals, where they performed their noxious acts, often causing severe security threats. During this period, the inadequate capacity of the affected African states and societies to effectively govern their territories and secure their trading routes are largely responsible for armed banditry. This trend endured till early colonial period. Jaafar summarizes the historical account of armed banditry as far back as 1930s in northern Nigeria as follows:

In those days, wayfarers and merchants travelling along our local economic roads usually faced the threats and dangers of ambush from nondescript bandits. Armed bandits and criminals were known to be targeting goods ferried on the back of donkeys, camels and ox carts. Those bandits on our trade routes would forcefully take those goods and disappear into the bush. That is just one dimension of the problem then. In other instances, the bandits would sometimes raid farming communities and villages with the intent of willful killing and wanton destruction of property. During such raids, the bandits would destroy virtually everything in their path, including valuables, farm produce, etc. This subculture has been in existence even before the coming of colonialists to the territories of northern Nigeria (Jaafar, 2018).

Despite the foregoing, the colonial order reinforced the capacity of the precolonial states in northern Nigeria and suppressed the activities of armed bandits, with considerable success (Ikime, 1980). The new order came with Atlantic oriented trade and socioeconomic system, Westphalia state structure and related policing and defense programs. These among others drove armed bandits to the underworld and minimized their threats in late colonial and early post-colonial Nigeria. However, political violence, ethnicity, militarization of the society, inadequate policy attention for human development and climate change, and weak institutional capacity of the state in governance and security increased the opportunities and motivations for armed resistance and criminal violence in post-colonial Nigeria. Amidst these, armed bandit groups proliferate across the country, with surge of armed robbery and ethno-communal clashes from 1980s.

In Northern Nigeria, and north-west specifically, this development further expanded to include cattle rustling, which became prominent in 2000s. Nevertheless, 2011 can be considered as a landmark in the contemporary reemergence of armed banditry in northwest Nigeria, as armed groups commanded by the Fulanis Kundu and Buharin Daji emerged. Although no one in the group was a young person, they named the group Kungiyargayu, the young guys' association. The group is known to the public as "KungiyarBarayin Shanu" (the cattle rustlers' association) (Auwal, 2021). In 2012, the manifestation of cattle rustling cases began to appear in the state, illuminating their underlying motive. It is considered a cultural group geared toward emancipating the Fulani from top-down oppression by security agents, politicians, and traditional rulers. Grazing areas in the state were being encroached upon and confiscated at a time when herders were migrating to neighboring states. Prior to the recruitment process in 2011, membership was limited to Fulani. A combination of instruments such as pledge of cash, cattle, sex, leisure, and intimidation were used to recruit Fulanis. Several herders joined the gang to escape harassment by its members after they discovered the gang was rustling livestock. There have been allegations that some prominent Fulani families in Zamfara, Sokoto, and Katsina states have demonstrated their support through donations and moral support to the gangs for fear of bitter consequences (Ojo, 2020).

Being very specific to the most affected northwest states of Kaduna, Katsina, Niger and Zamfara, which are the most affected states by armed banditry in the region, there are contextual differences in its origin,

evolution, and manifestations.Violence in Nigeria's northwest originated with communal clashes over access to land and resources — a phenomenon that has worsened with the suspected impact of climate change. On one side are predominantly Fulani herders and on the other mainly Hausa farmers.After years of conflict, and land ownership laws favoring farmers, some herders turned to violent criminal activities, boosted by illegal weapons flows from as far as Libya (TheDefensePost, 2021, para. 2).

In Zamfara state, at least 10,000 armed bandits and cattle rustlers operate in eight major camps. These groups, mainly comprising Fulanis but also Hausas and other ethnic groups, set up camps in Rugu forestin Zamfara state. This became the springboard for attacks in neighboring Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto, Kebbi, and Niger states (TheDefensePost, 2021, para. 3). Some narratives trace banditry's origin in Zamfara stateto poorly managed resource conflict between pastoralists and farmers. Others linked illegal mining as the origin of the armed phase of banditry, which is currently witnessed in the state. According to the former Inspector General of Police- Mohammed Adamu- there is "a strong and glaring nexus between theactivities of armed bandits and illicit miners" (Guardian, 2019). Those who sponsor illegal mining also fund banditry and cattle rustling in mining communities to incite violence among cattle breeders and rearers. In 2019, the Zamfara authorities estimated there were more than 10,000 bandits in 40 camps across the state (TheDefensePost, 2021, para. 2).

Niger state is the least affected state among the four states studied. The origin of banditry in Niger state is not directly traceable to farmers pastoralists conflict but rather the state's invasion by dislodged bandits from the Kaduna side of the vast Birnin Gwari forest, which connects Niger and Kaduna States in 2014. Essentially, banditry was imported into the state and has since spread to various communities in the state. About 18 local governments have witnessed attacks, with most attacks concentrated in Shiroro, Munyan, Rafi, Mashegu and Paiko. Bandits have reportedly killed 380 persons in the state, 71 persons kidnapped, and more than N79m paid as ransom (Vanguard, 2021).

Banditry in Katsina state was imported from neighbouring Zamfara State in 2010 (Ladan & Mutawalli, 2020). Seven Local Government Areas shared boundaries with Zamfara state, namely- Jibia, Batsari, Safana, Danmusa, Kankara, Faskari and Sabua (Desert Herald Newspaper, 2020). Bandits often use these locations to perpetuate their activities. The bandit groups utilise motorcycles to raid border communities and return to their forest dens (GJF, 2021, p. 23).

The origin and evolution of banditry in Kaduna State follow the orthodoxy of historical outof control conflicts between farmers and pastoralists over resources. Kaduna state has a long history of violent disputes between Fulani pastoralists and settler communities in southern Kaduna. Some of these events occurred in 2000 and expanded in 2013. There are reports that 33 vigilantes and community members in Dogon Dawa and Birnin Gwari Local Government Area were killed in 2013 (Alabelewe, 2021). Overall, banditry has necessitated thousands of deaths, displacements and destructions. For instance, Ndu, Nwosu & Okoli (2025) noted that "Nextier's Nigeria Violent Conflicts Database showed that between January and December 2024 alone, Nigeria recorded 1306 incidents of banditry with 253 casualties." (p. 1).

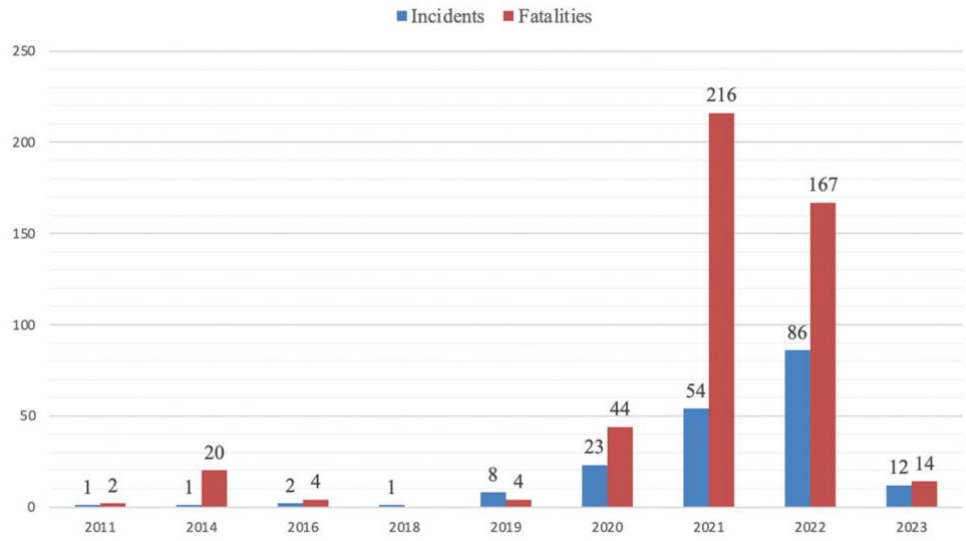
Females as Victims of Boko Haram Insurgency and Banditry

Since the emergence of VNSAs such as Boko Haram terrorists and bandits in northeast and northwest regions of Nigeria respectively, females in the regions have been profoundly impacted as they have been subjected to severe violence and exploitation. Corroborating this, Bloom and Matfess (2016, p. 105) noted that "women and girls have been among the greatest victims of Boko Haram's insurgency in Nigeria." Similarly, data collected by ACLED project revealed that violence against females by bandits have remained on the rise since 2019 in northwest Nigeria (Ojewale et al 2024, p. 16). Based on this backdrop, the subsequent paragraphs will in detail highlight the various ways females are victims of Boko Haram insurgency and banditry in northern Nigeria. The discussion will be subsumed under the following thematic headings: killing of females; abduction of females; rape and rise in sexually transmitted diseases; force marriage; decreasing enrollment in schools; displacement, loss of livelihood and collapse of local economy; and forced breadwinners and financial hardship

Killing of Females

Boko Haram terrorism and escalating banditry have claimed thousands of lives of females across northeast and northwest Nigeria. Since 2009, Boko Haram has frequently targeted females, resulting in deaths of women and girls who attempted to resist abductions or who refused to comply with their demands. For instance, Amnesty International (2021, online) noted that, "during violent raids, Boko Haram fighters have killed individuals attempting to flee, including women. There are reports of fighters shooting people who try to run away and evade capture. Some of these victims are old women who were unable to flee." Similarly, in northwest region, bandits who studies have found to be responsible for more deaths than Boko Haram and other non-state armed groups combined (Mac-Leva & Ibrahim, 2019; Osasona, 2024), have increasingly targeted females, killing and harming many of them in the process. Women and girls who refuse to be raped by Boko Haram insurgents and armed bandits have equally been killed. Reports from human rights organizations, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, document cases where victims who resisted sexual violence faced brutal executions. Boko Haram has executed women for refusing forced marriages, while bandits in the northwest have killed women who resisted sexual violence, sometimes even in public settings to instill fear in communities (Amnesty International, 2021; Osasona, 2024). According to the estimate drawn from ACLED, 471 deaths have been recorded due to attacks by bandits on women and girls from 2011 to May 19th 2023 (Ojewale et al 2024, p. 16)

Figure 2: Incidents and fatalities of violence against women and girls by bandits in the study area (2010 – May 2023).



Source: Ojewale et al (2024, p. 16)

From data in Figure 2, 2021 and 2022 recorded the highest fatalities as a result of violence against women and girls by bandits in northwest Nigeria. No doubt, these high fatalities recorded are as a result of proliferation of small arms and light weapons, increased collaboration between bandit groups and terrorist organizations, such as Boko Haram and ISWAP, economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic (Ojewale, 2024), and poor security governance (including inadequate law enforcement presence in rural areas, proliferation of ungoverned spaces, and failed Government's negotiations with bandits)

Abduction of females

Both Boko Haram insurgents and armed bandits have systematically targeted women and girls for abduction, subjecting them to severe human rights abuses. Since 2009, Boko Haram and bandits have abducted schoolgirls, female farmers and traders, married women and mothers, Christian women and converts, and female internally displaced persons (IDPs) (Amnesty International, 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2019; Amnesty International, 2021; Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, 2022; Ojewale, 2024, Amnesty International, 2024;).

Historically, Boko Haram has been notorious for abducting females, with over 500 women and girls kidnapped since 2009, including the infamous Chibok schoolgirls in 2014 (Human Rights Watch, 2014; Human Rights Watch, 2018). However, in recent years, armed bandit groups in Nigeria's northwest have escalated their kidnapping activities, increasingly targeting females. For instance, between 2019 and 2022, kidnappings surged in the northwest, becoming the primary income source for these groups, with an estimated 662 kidnapping-related events during this period (Risk Bulletins, 2024). Notably, in January 2025, bandits abducted at least 50 individuals, including women and children, in Zamfara State (AP News, 2024). This shift underscore that bandits have surpassed Boko Haram in the frequency of female abductions in recent times. Abductions of females serve multiple purposes for the VNSAs, including but not limited to sexual slavery, forced marriages, ransom payment, and coercing victims into participating in terror activities.

Rape and Rise in Sexually transmitted Diseases

Women and girls are occasional victims of rape by terrorists and bandits. They also bear direct physical harm, trauma, and social ostracism as a result of that (Mohammed, 2023). In the northeast Nigeria, Amnesty International (2018) and Amnesty International (2021), noted that rape has been a devastating tool of violence used by Boko Haram, particularly against women and girls. The insurgent group has systematically abducted and sexually assaulted women as part of their broader strategy to instill fear, exert control, and punish communities that resist their ideology. Oyewole (2020) stated that victims, including schoolgirls and women from rural communities, are often forced into sexual slavery, subjected to forced marriages, and exploited as child bearers for insurgents. According to Bloom & Matfess (2016), the availability of women for sexual purposes became a means of satisfying insurgents and cultivating loyalty" (p. 109).

In the northwest region, Yaba (2021) observed that women and girls are directly affected by the indiscriminate sexual violence routinely used by bandits against rural communities. One of the dominant trends in almost all reported attacks by bandits on rural communities in the region is the repeated incidents of targeted abduction and rape of women and girls. According to a victim of rape:

On that fateful day, they kidnapped 10 women, including those who had infants. […] I followed the other women into the forest and we were held for two days. […] They made sure all the women abducted were raped. So, we all watched as they raped every one of us in our presence. They were two men, each of them had their way with me twice. They had told us before we left the village that they came for the wives. They didn't demand ransom; the abduction was only for sexual gratification (Abdullahi, 2022).

Another victim narrating her ordeal stated:

They came and asked me […] where is my husband and I told them that he has gone to the farm, and the next thing, two of them just dragged me inside and asked me to remove my cloth. […] I started begging them and one of them hit me with a gun and I fell down and he began to rape me, his second also did the same thing […] they told us that they would kill any woman who refused to obey them (Adam, 2021).

According to various reports by the police, arrested bandits across the region confessed to raping victims multiple times and across different locations, highlighting a pattern of targeting women and girls for sexual gratification (Nathaniel, 2021; Sahara Reporters, 2022). Also, bandits weaponise sexual violence against communities to exact compliance. In one community, bandits randomly raped women as punishment for not paying the levies imposed by the group (Ogalah, 2021). Another media report stated that no fewer than five communities in Zamfara state fled their homes after bandits resorted to raping women and children for not paying levies imposed on their respective communities (Ahmed, 2022). No doubt, sexual violence has been weaponized by bandits as tool for extortion, and any form of resistance is usually met with killing or maiming.

Women are increasingly, and sometimes deliberately being infected with HIV through rape by bandits. For instance, in the remote villages of Sokoto State where the government has failed to end the decade-long violence unleashed by the armed groups, women and girls have become the unseen victims of rape and other sexual assaults by bandits. The consequence of the barbaric act is the rise in incidents of unwanted

pregnancies, and sexually transmitted diseases. Those carrying the unwanted pregnancies end up in dangerous health complications during childbirth (Mohammed, 2023).

There are also reported instances of sexual molestations involving minor. For instance, there was a 13-year-old girl raped by bandits and she tested HIV positive after she was released. These are some of abuses that children including students abducted go through (Oyewale, 2025, p. 18).

Rape cases are usually underreported (Koziel, 2014, Sani, 2022, Mohammed, 2023). This can be as a result of fear of repercussions, stigma and various sociocultural practices. For instance, Koziel (2014) remarked that beyond the trauma of sexual violation by bandits, women and girls in the regions suffer additional disadvantages as a result of various sociocultural practices. These cultural practices range from traditions that girls are not bearers of family names, unlike their male counterparts, and are therefore expected to marry young, to cultural and religious practices that demand chastity from women and have more pronounced roles in domestic life. In addition, Mohammed (2023, online) noted that "rape is becoming a death sentence for many women and girls." It is, therefore, not surprising that those victims are stigmatised in their respective communities. It has been suggested that some husbands are seeking divorce on the suspicion that bandits have violated their kidnapped wives (Sani, 2022). Marion & Leah (2004) observed that the effects of rape and mutilations cut deeper into the social fabrics of the society. The extreme brutality committed with impunity during wave after wave of armed occupation result in social stigma as large numbers of rape victims and children born of rape are often rejected by their families and communities.

Forced Marriage

Another victimisation of females in northeast and northwest Nigeria as a result of Boko Haram insurgency and banditry in the regions is the forced marriage of kidnapped girls, particularly to men within their ranks. Boko Haram, in particular, has abducted thousands of women, compelling them into marriage with insurgents as a means of control, ideological enforcement, and population replenishment for their ranks (Amnesty International, 2018). Victims, often schoolgirls and young women from rural areas, face brutal subjugations, including rape, forced conversion to extremist ideologies and domestic servitude (Zenn & Pearson, 2019). Many of these marriages are mechanisms to reward fighters, in order to ensure their loyalty while advancing the group's long-term objectives of establishing a radical Islamist state.

Similarly, armed bandits operating in the Northwest have increasingly adopted forced marriage as a tool of coercion and territorial dominance. Reports indicate that these groups abduct women during raids on villages, and later demanding ransom from families or forcibly marrying them off to fighters (International Crisis Group, 2020). In many cases, victims suffer prolonged captivity, sexual violence, and isolation, with little to no chance of rescue or reintegration into society due to stigma and lack of government intervention (Okoli & Ugwu, 2021). According to Vanguard (2022), sometimes, kidnapped girls are forcefully given out in marriages to fighters when parents or relatives of the victims are unable to pay ransom.

Decreasing enrollment in schools

The insurgency of Boko Haram in the Northeast and the increasing activities of banditry in the Northwest have significantly contributed to decreasing female school enrollment in Nigeria. Boko Haram has deliberately targeted schools, abducting female students and attacking educational institutions to discourage girls' education (UNESCO, 2021). For instance, the infamous Chibok and Dapchi kidnappings by Boko Haram, created widespread fear, causing many parents to withdraw their daughters from school to prevent them from falling victim to abductions and forced marriages (Okeke, 2022). The sect's violent activities against western education have caused closure of numerous schools, and has exacerbated the educational gap between male and female students in the region.

Similarly, the rise of banditry in Northwest Nigeria has equally worsened girl school attendance. As a result of bandits frequently raid of villages and schools, and kidnapping students for ransom, especially girls (International Crisis Group, 2020), many families, fearing for their daughters' safety, prefer to keep them at home rather than risk sending them to school in insecure areas (Eze, 2023). These attending consequences of

these include reduced literacy rates among females, limited economic opportunities, increased child marriages, poverty, and gender inequality. Already, in the northwest region a study by UNICEF (2022) found that only 29% of women in the region are literate. In addition, girls suffer more than boys in terms of missing out on education, with around 47% of eligible girls in the region receiving primary education.

Displacement, Loss of Livelihood and Collapse of Local Economy

The violent of activities of Boko Haram and banditry have led to widespread displacements which have forced several females into extreme hardship. Because communities and villages come under frequent attacks, families are compelled to flee, abandoning their homes and economic activities. Many displaced women end up in the IDP camps where they face several excruciating conditions such as limited access to food and water, lack of adequate healthcare services and overcrowding. Accordingly, Onyenike (2020) noted that there are 9% more women than men who are internally displaced persons in the northwest region.

Generally, females are in northern Nigeria rely on farming and trading. According to Kabir (2022), sometimes, women participate as house heads in farming- fending for their families in which the husbands have been killed or incapacitated through violent attacks by bandits. But, when they are displaced as a result of activities of VNSAs, they lose their livelihoods, leading to food insecurity and financial instability. In addition, Eze (2023) noted that bandits impose levies on local farmers and traders, making it nearly impossible for women to engage in economic activities without fear of extortion or violence. As a result, many women are pushed into extreme poverty, increasing their dependence on humanitarian aid and reducing their ability to support their families.

Forced Breadwinners and Financial Hardship

The activities on VNSAs in northeast and northwest Nigeria have forced many women into the role of primary breadwinners under difficult circumstances. With husbands being killed, abducted, or incapacitated due to violence, wives often have no choice but to assume financial responsibility for their families (UNHCR, 2021). However, with limited access to education and vocational skills, many displaced women struggle to secure stable employment, leaving them vulnerable to poverty and exploitation (International Crisis Group, 2020). In internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, for example, women often resort to informal and poorly paid jobs, such as petty trading or domestic labor, just to survive. The psychological burden of being the sole provider in such hostile environments takes a significant toll on affected women. Without financial security, many struggle to provide food, healthcare, and education for their children, perpetuating cycles of poverty and vulnerability (UNDP, 2022).

In northwest Nigeria, the people of the region have subjected to varying degree of security challenges. Chief among them is the resurgence of militancy and other multifaceted security challenges.

Women as Vanguards in Boko Haram Insurgency and Banditry

While females are often victims of Boko Haram insurgency and banditry in Nigeria, they are also active participants and vanguards in these terror operations. The subsequent paragraphs will demonstrate females are vanguards in the terror perpetrated by Boko Haram insurgents and armed bandits. The discussion will be subsumed under two main thematic headings which are forced participants in terror and voluntary participants in terror.

Forced Participants in Terror

In northern Nigeria, Boko Haram fighters and armed bandits have forcibly involved women and girls in their terror activities, and by this, have increasingly subjected them to various human rights abuses. In other words, women and girls have been used by the VNSAs as both instruments and symbols of terror. Bloom & Matfess (2015) observed that "women and girls have become "swords" mobilized and weaponized to carry out attacks while also being used as powerful "symbols" of Boko Haram's ideology" (p. 106). It is critical to note that the vast majority of women within Boko Haram are not participating of their own volition. Boko Haram's reliance

upon women and girls is a part of an organizational shift that includes forced conscription as a means to ensuring easier penetration of targets, easier concealment of rifles and improvised explosive devices, and generation of wider support (Bloom & Matfess, 2016; Sadiq & Ojewale, 2023).

According to European Union Agency for Asylum (2021), between 2009 and 2016, Boko Haram abducted approximately 2,000 women and girls, compelling them into roles such as suicide bombers, combatants, and spies. These abductees were also subjected to rape, forced marriages, and forced labor, with some sold as 'war booty' in markets. Corroborating this, Amnesty International (2015, online) observed that "young women and girls are abducted, imprisoned and in some cases raped, forcibly married and made to participate in armed attacks, sometimes on their own towns and villages. Notably, the group has trained abducted girls in the use of firearms and explosives. Survivors have recounted being trained to shoot guns, use bombs, and participate in village attacks." According to Bloom & Matfess (2016, p. 105):

In June 2014, a middle-aged woman riding a motorcycle approached the military barracks in the North Eastern Nigerian city of Gombe. While being searched at the military checkpoint, she detonated the explosives strapped to her body, ending her life and killing a soldier in the process. With this act, a new chapter in the destructive history of Boko Haram began: the group joined the ranks of terrorist groups around the world that have incorporated women into their organizational profiles. Since the first attack, women and young girls (between the ages of 7 and 17) have been coerced into targeting civilians at markets, bus depots, and mosques.

The adoption of female suicide bombers is not especially surprising as an operational adaptation to increased state surveillance of the group's activities; it has been a tactic adopted by secular and religious terrorist groups from Sri Lanka to Syria. However, Boko Haram depends on female operatives disproportionately, relative to similar insurgencies; for example, the Tamil Tigers used 46 women over the course of 10 years, whereas Boko Haram has deployed more than 90 women in a little over a year and a half, between the Chibok abductions in 2014 and October 2015 (Steward, 2015). To be sure, the attention that the group garnered following the 2014 abductions of Chibok girls, which facilitated the spread of its propaganda domestically and internationally, emboldened the group to rely more heavily on female operatives (Rhodan, 2015).

In addition, parents in Nigeria's northeast states and some other Northern states willfully donate their girls to Boko Haram to be strapped with improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and blown to pieces in suicide missions. These parents see this act as their contribution to Boko Haram and their support to the cause the sect is fighting. Omonobi & Erunke (2017) reported that a former Army Public Relations Director, Brigadier-General Sani Usman, stated that many of the girls used for suicide bombings who were arrested or who were lucky that the IEDs planted on their bodies failed to detonate confessed that they were donated to Boko Haram by their parents.

Aljazeera (2014, online) noted that "reports of this began emerging late 2014, when a thirteen-year-old girl told investigators she was donated to Boko Haram by her father. Militants then threatened to bury her alive if she didn't bomb a market- though she later managed to escape and turn herself in." In corroboration, some reports suggest that family members coerced the girls to join the organization; in July 2014, a 10-year-old girl accompanied by her older sister and an older man was arrested while wearing a suicide bombing vest (Alfred, 2015). On December 10, 2014, a 14-year-old Muslim girl volunteered by her parents to Boko Haram was caught in an attempt to bomb the Kano market. The girl was caught with explosives strapped to her little body and she told journalists that her parents donated her to Boko Haram to take part in a suicide attack. The girl who was identified as Zahra'u Babangida was arrested in Kano on December following a double suicide bombing in a market that killed 10 people. She said her father and mother, both Boko Haram sympathizers, took her to an insurgent hideout in a forest near the town of Gidan Zana in Kano State and gave her to Boko Haram soldiers (Umoh, 2015). One 13-year-old girl detained by the state reported that her father, a supporter of the insurgency, had encouraged her to join (The Associated Press, 2014).

Similarly, in Northwestern Nigeria, this is emerging evidence of armed bandits coercing women into supporting roles within their criminal networks. Sadiq & Ojewale (2023, online) revealed that "bandits co-opt women into their criminal activities by copying Boko Haram's methods in the north-east." Reports also indicate a growing trend of women's active involvement in arms trafficking, and weapons and ammunition

transportation to bandit groups. Research shows that beyond their victimization, some women are forced into roles that support or directly engage in bandit operations. This coerced involvement ranges from logistical support to active participation in violent acts. Such coercion often stems from threats to their safety or that of their families, leaving them with little choice but to comply (Iwara & Ayandele, 2024; Sadiq & Ojewale, 2023).

Also, as some communities negotiate with bandits to spare them of attacks, there are instances where they are voluntarily offering women and girls to bandits in what has been described as 'sex for protection' in northwest Nigeria. Amid these attacks, women and girls bear the most significant burden of banditry in the region. In many instances, women are frequently commodified by families who are forced to exchange their daughters and wives for protection (Ojewale & Balogun, 2022)

Voluntary Participants in Terror

Even though majority of female involvement in Boko Haram and banditry stem from coercion, there have been instances where females voluntarily joined the groups. Motivations for voluntarily involvement include support for ideologies, economic conditions, pursuit for empowerment in a patriarchal society, and personal grievances. Regarding Boko Haram for instance, some women and girls have joined voluntarily. Matfess (2017) has observed that "not all the girls involved in Boko Haram are victims. Many decided to marry into the group, often against their parents' wishes. In a region where just 4% of girls finish secondary school and many women do back-breaking farm work, life as a stay-at-home Boko Haram wife receiving Quranic education can appeal." Failure to improve the lives of girls and women trapped in poverty and domestic drudgery in the northeast Nigeria have driven women into the ranks of Boko Haram. Some women in the Muslim northeast, frustrated by poverty, gender discrimination and deep-rooted patriarchy, have chosen to join Boko Haram voluntarily in the hope of a better life. For these women who chose to join Boko Haram, the power and freedom afforded them means they are more difficult than men to de-radicalize and reintegrate into their communities (Reuters, 2016). Shockingly, some of the Boko Haram wives were told to kill their parents as a condition for joining the group. All of them witness atrocities and regular beheadings. They see the killing of prisoners so often they just get used to it. Some of these women opted to become suicide bombers. They want to please Allah and get safe passage to paradise (Amnesty International, 2024).

In June 2017, reports emerged that Aisha, the wife of Boko Haram commander, had fled her home in Maiduguri. The 25-year-old reportedly escaped the city to rejoin her husband Mamman Nur and other insurgents in the Sambisa Forest (Matfess, 2017). Matfess (2017) noted that a girl who voluntarily joined Boko Haram confessed:

There was 100% better treatment as a wife under Boko Haram. There were more gifts, better food and a lot of sex that I always enjoyed.

Another girl who married into the insurgency said:

In contrast with my much more intermittent access to schooling outside the group, I was happy in the group and enjoyed the sect's mandatory near-daily Quranic education. I was happy because I was meeting with my friends and getting learning (Matfess, 2017).

According to a former wife a Boko Haram fighter, Aisha Askira:

I married the Boko Haram fighter when he was still in our society. When my husband was chased out of the community, I followed him. I followed him voluntarily for I believed in the war he was fighting (Vanguard, 2016).

There have been stories of young girls and women escaping from IDPs camps and giving themselves voluntarily to Boko Haram soldiers as their wives. Such women and girls believe in the cause Boko Haram is fighting and feel that their lives will be better as wives of the dreaded terrorists (Matfess, 2017).

Women have joined Boko Haram because of the material improvement it brought. Many women said they were drawn to Boko Haram because brideprices are paid directly to women rather than their family and because Purdah- the practice of wife seclusion that's associated with the socio-economic elite in northern Nigeria- is practiced widely in the group. Also, Boko Haram fighters' wives, daughters, relatives and friends most times voluntarily join the sect because they believe in their Boko Haram relations or friends are doing the work of Allah or that they are pursuing a right cause (Matfess, 2017).

One source cited by Awford suggested that, of the women that have participated willingly, some might have been homeless or beggars who had been banned from Kano, where many of the bombings occurred. The source asserted that such women and girls 'are easy to recruit and [may] have fallen prey to Boko Haram members who have lured them with a few naira notes. They may also be ignorant of what they are being asked to do' (The Associated Press, 2014).

Interestingly, some women have joined Boko Haram for revenge of husbands or relatives killed by State's security forces, particularly the military. Revenge-motivated female participation in terrorist activities is a well-documented phenomenon globally. Regardless of motivation, there is evidence that women have indeed willingly participated in Boko Haram's activities for revenge. For example, several Nigerian soldiers were shot by women in the Sambisa Forest while rescuing the women, suggesting that some of the women have developed allegiance to the terrorists. Additionally, a soldier posted in Adamawa State, in North East Nigeria, confirmed reports of female fighters, 'wearing burqas and guns' (Matfess, 2015).

In respect to banditry, the surge in banditry has seen women voluntarily engaging in bandits' criminal activities. Outstanding of them is arms trafficking. Sadiq & Ojewale noted that between December 2022 and February 2023, several female gunrunners were arrested by police in Nigeria's Zamfara State for allegedly supplying arms and ammunition to bandits. Several news reports on arms trafficking in north-west Nigeria between 2021 and 2023 involve women arms traffickers. In October 2021, a 30-year-old woman who specialised in supplying arms and ammunition to bandits in Zamfara, Sokoto, Kebbi, Kaduna, Katsina and Niger states was arrested with 991 rounds of live AK-47 ammunition. She was trafficking the ammunition from Dabagi Village in Sokoto State to a notorious bandit kingpin responsible for terrorising Zamfara and neighbouring states. Also, in March 2022, Nigerian police arrested a 38-year-old female suspect over arms and ammunition smuggling from Plateau State to different bandit camps in Kaduna, Katsina and Zamfara. Eight locally made AK-revolver guns, submachine guns and 400 rounds of live AK-47 ammunition were recovered from the suspect (Sadiq & Ojewale, 2023).

No doubt, societally-induced marginalization, limited livelihood opportunities, economic hardships and lack of education drive women in northwest Nigeria to join bandits' criminal activities.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Females' involvement in Boko Haram insurgency and banditry in northern Nigeria reveal a dual role as victims and vanguards. While many women and girls have been found to be killed, abducted, sexually exploited and subjected to inhuman violence; others have equally been found to be active participants (voluntarily and involuntarily), playing the roles of recruiters, logisticians, informants, and combatants. Their involvement is driven by such factors as ideological alignment, economic incentives and social structures. Recognizing this dual role of women in Boko Haram and banditry in northern Nigeria challenges the conventional victim narrative and calls for a more comprehensive understanding of women's roles and dynamics in conflicts. Based on the findings of the study, the paper recommends the following:

1. **Comprehensive Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programs**: Government and non-governmental organizations should develop targeted rehabilitation and reintegration programs for women and girls affected by Boko Haram insurgency and banditry. These programs should include psychological counseling, vocational training, and educational opportunities to help survivors rebuild their lives and reintegrate into society.
2. **Enhanced Security and Intelligence Operations**: Security agencies should adopt gender-sensitive counterterrorism and anti-banditry strategies, including intelligence-driven operations that focus on

disrupting recruitment networks, identifying female combatants, and providing protection for at-risk women and girls.

3. **Community-Based Prevention and Awareness Campaigns**: Grassroots awareness campaigns should be launched to educate communities on the roles of women in insurgency and banditry. Religious and traditional leaders, educators, and civil society groups should work together to prevent female recruitment and encourage community support for victims.
4. **Economic Empowerment and Livelihood Support**: Economic hardship drives some women into insurgency and banditry. Government and development partners should create job opportunities, financial grants, and entrepreneurship programs specifically tailored for women in conflict-affected regions to reduce their vulnerability to extremist groups and criminal networks.
5. **Strengthening Legal and Policy Frameworks:** The government should strengthen laws and policies to address gender-based violence, forced participation in terrorism, and the exploitation of women in conflicts. This includes ensuring effective prosecution of perpetrators, improving victim protection services, and enhancing the role of women in peacebuilding efforts.

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