

WOMEN AND CONFLICTS IN NORTHERN NIGERIA, 2009-2019: A HUMAN SECURITY ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The Northern Nigeria conflict constitutes one of the many problems that presently beset Nigeria. The lingering turmoil persists because the suitable approach for resolution has not been employed. In situation where conflicts prevail, women mostly bear the burden of the problems. As a result, women suffer the confiscation of their means of livelihood such as housing, land and property (HLP), agricultural land, gender-based violence, rape and other inhuman assaults. The methodology employed for this paper is the qualitative phenomenological approach whereby data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. The findings from the essay show that, several critical studies have been carried out on the nature, causes and consequences of conflicts in Northern Nigeria. However, it is important to note that despite the involvement of women in the conflict; very scant attention has been given to their instrumental roles in abridging conflict or as peace ambassadors and nation builders. This paper therefore recommends women as a major stakeholders in conflict resolution processes because they are endowed with the natural inherent peace building ability that needed to be tapped. They also play active socio-economic roles in the hostile Northern Nigeria region.

Keywords: Women, Conflicts, Human, Security and Northern Nigeria.

Introduction

In Nigeria women institute approximately half of the population; they play an important role as mothers, producers, managers, community developers/organizers. However, they also contribute to the society, socially, politically, and economically, to the development of the nation. It is known that women performed double responsibilities in all the society compared to men by virtue of their dual roles in the industrious and reproductive domains.¹ While it is accepted that conflicts have devastating effects on society, some conflict situations are considered functional and productive. A conflict is functional or constructive when it improves the quality of decision stimulates creativity and innovation through which problems can be solved, tensions released, and an environment of self-evaluation and change is enhanced. Here,

conflict is perceived to be about positive change especially in the socio-political structures and institutions as well as in human relations and in the distribution of societal resources.² This clarification is important to understanding the challenge of conflicts in Northern Nigeria since the past two decades.

Northern Nigeria has emerged as a theatre for harvesting various forms of conflicts that provoke depopulation, devastation, and defoliation. This assertion is not unconnected with the rate of illiteracy, poverty, environmental hazards and rising wave of violence that have characterized intergroup relations in the region since the 2009. Sharp ethno religious divide, struggle for political space, and dwindling land and water resources have combined with divergent socio-cultural, economic, and political factors to stimulate and perpetuate armed conflicts and insecurity in the region. The implications of these conflicts to political stability, pursuit of development, and national security in Nigeria have provoked both policy and academic endeavours on the subject matter. It is against this background that this article interrogates the scourge of conflicts in Northern Nigeria since 2009. Efforts are made to analyse the human security of these conflicts in the region. At the centre of it all, the women in no small measure have played pivotal roles in the economic emancipation of the region. Precisely in Nigeria, the women had time and again employed protest, a potent weapon of drawing local, government and international attention to pursue their interest home. This is complemented by an investigation into the analyses of these conflicts as well as official measures at containing them.

Historical Overview

Northern Nigeria has a long history of conflicts, loss of lives and properties caused mainly by communal crisis, religious conflicts and political disturbance, most virulent being that of Maitatsine uprising in the 1980s, 2009 Boko Haram insurgency, and post-election violence in 2011.³ A critical analysis of the many conflict in Northern Nigeria since 2009 up till 2019 reveals that the displacement of women were mainly caused by Boko Haram terrorist group better known as Jama'atul Ahlus Sunnah Lid da'awati wal Jihad based in the north-east region of Nigeria with sub units across Nigerian borders.⁴

Conflicts in northern Nigeria have flared up periodically over the last three decades. Mainly in the form of urban riots, pitted Muslims against Christians vice versa and has seen confrontations between different Islamic fundamentalist. Although there have been some

successes in conflict management in the last decades, the 2009 upheaval in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe states involving the radical Boko Haram sect show that violence still may flare up at any moment. If the situation were to deteriorate significantly, especially on Christian-Muslim lines, it could have serious repercussions for national cohesion. To deal with the risks, community-level peace initiatives including women participation need to be reinforced, a more subtle security response be formulated and the management of public resources improved. While some in the West panic at what they see as growing Islamic fundamentalism in the region, the roots of the problem are more complex and lie in Nigeria's history and contemporary politics.⁵

Conceptual Framework

In retrospect, the neglect of the Northern Nigerian region over the years coupled with uneven circulation of insecurity, eventual protests and conflict with women in the middle of it, has threatened human security in the region which calls for analysis. Therefore, the context of this research will provide a broad analysis of the women of Northern Nigeria, their means of livelihood and survival, their immediate environment and interaction with the Nigerian state. Consequently, Human security theory can actually be seen as an alternative to understanding the underlying causes of conflicts in resource endowed communities as it focuses on issues of deprivation of livelihoods which are often associated to exploration activities in resource endowed regions.

The UNDP 1994 reported that, 'Human security means the people should exercise their choices freely and safely. And they can relatively be confident that opportunities they have today will not be totally lost tomorrow'. The report sees human security from two different perspectives. The first perspective is safety from daily threats such as, disease, hunger and repression by the authorities.⁶

The second perspective is sudden protection and hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life-whether in jobs, homes and communities (freedom from fear and want). In reference to the report, 'The poor are not preoccupied with the loud emergencies of global warming or the depletion of the ozone layer. They are preoccupied with the silent emergencies-polluted water or degraded land, which put their lives and their livelihoods at risk'. The report states further that when people perceive any threat to their livelihoods, they often become intolerant as would have been the case in Northern Nigerian region. The Commission for Human Security (CHS),

defines human security as aim to ‘protect the vital core of all human lives in ways that guarantee human fulfillments and human freedoms.’⁷

In Northern Nigeria, the Norwegian Refugee Council NRC’s and Information, counselling and legal assistance ICLA team provides information, counselling and legal assistance on housing, land and property (HLP), they also train stakeholders on HLP, and conduct research into the barriers conflict-affected populations face as they exercise their legal rights and advocates on their behalf.⁸ Violent, whether riots or fighting between insurrectional groups and the police, tends to occur at specific flashpoints. Examples are the cities of Kaduna and Zaria, whose populations are religiously and ethnically very mixed, and the very poor states of the far north east, where anti-establishment groups have emerged. Many factors fuelling these conflicts are common across Nigeria: in particular, the political manipulation of religion and ethnicity and disputes between supposed local groups and “settlers” over distribution of public resources. The failure of the state to assure public order, to contribute to dispute settlement and to implement post-conflict peace building measures is also a factor. Economic decline and absence of employment opportunities, especially as inequality grows, likewise drives conflict. As elsewhere in Nigeria, the north suffers from a potent mix of economic malaise and contentious, community-based distribution of public resources.⁹

Women and Northern Nigeria Conflicts

Since 2009, the Boko Haram insurgency and the government’s military response has killed thousands and displaced more than three million people. Boko Haram has kidnapped thousands of adults and children. Both Christians and Muslims have been victims of Boko Haram’s brutality. The most well known kidnapping case in international media in recent years is from 2014, where 276 mostly Christian female students were kidnapped from the Secondary School in the town of Chibok in Borno State. Borno State is the epicentre of the Boko Haram conflicts, which has affected Northern Nigeria, Nigeria, Chad and Cameroon.¹⁰

The insurgency conflicts have dramatically affected the lives of women and girls living in Northern Nigeria north-east region. Over 2,000 women and girls are estimated to have been abducted since the start of the conflicts. Women and girls are forced to take on domestic service, including cooking and cleaning, sexual abuse through forced marriage or as sex slaves, according to Human Right Watch. They are also trained to take on conflict service tasks, such

as information gathering. Although men are more at risk of being killed, women and girls may also be killed as they are suspected to be security force collaborators or as insurgency combatants, including so-called ‘suicide’ bombers, many of whom are girls too young to consent, and women under coercion.¹¹

Around the world women face obstacles exercising their equal right to House, Land and Property (HLP) as well as tenure security. Both de jure restrictions on women’s property rights and de facto norms and practices limit women’s equal legal rights.¹² Women’s experiences during conflict and crisis compound this inequality. This report on displaced women’s housing, land and property rights (DWHLR) is part of Information Counselling and Legal Assistance’s (ICLA) global effort to document the situation of women’s HLP rights during displacement in their own words and from their perspective and to address the lack of specific remedies available to women and men in response to this issue.

The report finds that both local customary and religious institutions create the conditions for women and men to perceive women to be of a lesser value within the household in Northeast Nigeria. As a result, women exercise many fewer rights over HLP compared with men. While women are not forbidden from owning property, in practice, participants in this research report that only relatively wealthy women do so and that this is beyond the reach of most women.¹³

The essay also shows that the social norms that structure relationships within the household are critical for women’s enjoyment of HLP rights. Women enjoy rights through their husbands and fathers, and if they have positive relationships then they are better able to participate in decision-making and are less vulnerable. Women on their own, including divorced women, are vulnerable within the current property rights framework.

The research also shows that social norms that shape relationships between men and women, including whether women have the right to work outside the household, or participate in household decisions, are changing rapidly. It is not yet sure whether changes in norms as a result of the conflict and displacement will be permanent, but it is clear that both the conflict and the humanitarian intervention are changing power dynamics and women’s enjoyment of HLP rights. Future interventions should consider how to prevent backlash, generate buy-in, and find durable shifts towards a more inclusive property rights system for women and men.¹⁴

Women and Peace Protest/Initiative in the Northern Nigeria

Surprisingly, when it comes to peace initiative, the most vulnerable victims have been ignored or marginalised especially where key policy decisions are made and resource allocation are decided. Basically, due to the conservative nature of the northern region and the irony of lack of experience in peace and conflict resolution doom. Historical antecedents have showed that women participation in peace initiatives or movement often as honest broker by negotiating worry parties or seek for justice compared with men. The first recorded history of women movement for peace protest and initiative in the world took place in 1916 after the First World War known as Women Peace Crusade held in Glasgow Scotland.¹⁵

This has set in motion the involvement of women in the informal peace process across the world. The informal peace process embarked by women takes place wholly outside formal government institution. These include meaningful dialogue participation or reconciliation processes, protest and formation of associations to voice out for peace.

Protest/movement: the killings of their husbands, force recruitment of their children, sudden abduction of their daughters, forced marriage and used as suicide bombers have organised women in the north and across the country to protest and seek for peace against war of any kind. We have seen the powerful role women played through protest in Liberia that brought an end to the war and outtakes Charles Tylor. This led to the rise of African first female head of State Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.¹⁶ It was said; the role of Ellen in leading Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace Movement prompted her election as the Liberian President and the Nobel Peace Prize.

At the height of the insurgency, women in Borno protested at the Shehu of Borno Palace demanding for an end to the crisis. They also protested at the gate of Maimalari military base in Maiduguri to stop their husbands going to fight Boko Haram in 2014 on a claimed they were ill-equipped to take on the insurgents.¹⁷

The popular and wide spread protest #Bringbackourgirls# stimulate both Christian and Muslims across the country for daily protest demanding for the release of the abducted school girls numbered about 276 from Government Secondary School Chibok on April 2014. The protest also engulfed international and national uproar. In October, 2016 first batch of 21 of the abducted school girls were released. Subsequently, about 83 in 2017 also regained their freedom following a negotiation.¹⁸

Dialogue: participation of women in a peace table improves the quality of agreement reached and enhances the likelihood of implementation because of the unique skills sets women possess

in peace initiatives. For instance, in the pre-Igbo traditional society, women were politically and security important. The first woman of a polygamous marriage is the chief peace mediator in the family.¹⁹

At the height of Boko-Haram insurgency, Aisha Wakili Alkali and Hamsatu Al-Amin are known to have involved in the process of interactions between the state and Boko-Haram in cease-fire agreement and release of abducted school girls. Aisha also known as Mama Boko-Haram was in 2013 appointed by President Goodluck Jonathan into a committee of dialogue and peaceful resolution of security challenges in the north. Aisha who always appeared in her impenetrable black veil was in 2016 declared wanted by the Nigerian Military in alleged connection with the abduction of the Chibok school girls.

Formation of Association: The Women without Walls Initiative plays key role in securing the release of few abducted school girls. It was the first female association to have visited the school after the incident. Their action brought to light national and international other women networks to speak against the miscreant action of the insurgents and the government nonchalant attitude toward the event. Together with the Muslim Women Association in Borno also mounted pressure on the Government of Goodluck Jonathan on the abduction of the school girls. The Muslim Association in Borno also formed up peace clubs. The peace clubs to promote peace and security at state level that is affected by Boko-Haram. To collaborate the effort; they also employed using radio station for phone-in- programme, an idea for building the capacity and resilience of young women and men to manage in an inclusive way. Women through their associations seek for peace and to say enough is enough of the killings and destructions of properties in the north.

Prominent women were also known to have joint a combatant hunters association (kungiyarmarhaba) to fight Boko-Haram. Women like Mai Bintu, Aisha Bakari Gombi who was known for hunting voluntary joint the non-state defence group known as Civilian Joint Task Force. The groups played a major role preventing Maiduguri from fall to the rise of the Boko Haram. The women leads a command of men, communicate using sign, Language, animal sounds and even birdsong was said to have rescued hundreds of men, women and children from the Boko-Haram hideouts. Women have been active at the grassroots of peace building ever since the onset of the insurgency in the north.

Implication for Family Life

There is no gainsaying the fact that food is a basic necessity of family life and the required quality of food is a key requirement for healthy and productive family life. However, as a result of the onslaught of Boko-haram in the northeast the narrative have changed. Most women farmers interviewed narrated their ordeal of how they had to abandon their farms for fear of being attacked. Maria Del stated that, if women had the same opportunities of access to productive resources as men could increase yields by 20-30%.²⁰ Therefore, women play crucial role in ensuring household food security.

Movement restrictions have not only impacted farmers and traders but even households alike. Most households are frustrated due to the stress they undergo in trying to access the market to buy food stuffs. They are usually subjected to stringent checks by the security operatives all along the way. Some even barely go to the market for fear of being caught-up in attack and reprisal attacks. Some household have limited foodstuff and could not access to other condiments to cook appreciable meal. The impact of this imposed restriction on movement either by way of curfew or fear of being attacked by the terrorist group is that access to food and means of livelihood is affected thereby compounding their food insecurity situation. Women have lost their means of livelihood that enables contribute their quarter for family life and to make ends meet. It is obvious that the number of women living in acute poverty and unemployed has greatly increased. This in itself is a threat to human security. Furthermore, the purchasing power of the women is impacted and will affect their ability to purchase food for their daily need.

Implication for Food Security

The Northern Nigeria conflict especially Boko-Haram insurgency has drastically crippled the agricultural and other economic activities such as: business and educational connectedness which have negatively affected both men and women. Majority of the female were young married women and girls within the age group of 26-35 years. Bulks of them are crop farmers and those engaged in handy works such as selling and trading. A source stated that in (2012-2015) Boko-Haram insurgency had really had a toll on all normal human activities in the area including farming to the extent that crop and animal production virtually came to a standstill and many farmers went into exile for a period of one year (2014-2015). He said, our women are not being giving the opportunity to go to the farm due to fear of rape and abduction and farming is the economic base of Northern region.²¹

However, the parameter measuring food security is availability, accessibility, utilization and stability. Thus, women in the north play an essential role ensuring food sufficiency. Some formed Associations bridging the gender gap between individual women and international or local organization in order to promote the launch of women empowerment and development programmes toward food sufficiency. Because of insecurity, production and availability of resources such as arable farmland, fertilizer, pesticide is inadequate. The paucity of these due to Boko-Haram heinous activities poses serious challenges for food security in that area. Agriculture has been the main economy activities women engaged on as their main source of food and income. The supply and transportation of food produce to the markets where they are sold have also been seriously hampered. This has underpinned food sufficiency and supply, which has worsened food insecurity not only to the North but the country at large.

The sect activities have led to the death of the workforce women who are supposed to form part of the farming population. Some were forced to abandon the vast expanse of arable farmlands and displaced to other neighbouring communities, states or countries in search for safe heaven thereby grounding food production and sufficiency. Famine is a possibility where food production and sufficiency is limited. The implication for food security in the troubled northern region could as well be felt in other parts of the country and neighbouring countries. This is because the production of most of the grains consumed in Nigeria such as millet, wheat, sorghum, beans, rice, groundnuts, maize and locust have been disrupted due to the insurgency. The same goes with livestock production especially with increase in banditry, cattle rustling, and kidnapping.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The paper attempted to analyse human security in Northern Nigeria region. The patriarchal context of the upheaval places restrictions on women's means of livelihood and plays on conservative gender ideologies. This complicates peace initiatives and specifically the inclusion of women as formal actors in peace-building process. Although women are largely seen as victims in need of protection, they are engaging in informal peace-building process through demonstrating and advocacy for a cease-fire. Women played significant roles in the conflicts and agitation, they also promoted peace. Their role however, as active actors has several implications for the region. However, in spite of the structural and cultural limitations imposed on women, their association life seen in the formation of various economic emancipation groups has been invaluable to development in the region. It should be noted that,

conflicts in northern Nigeria have flared up periodically over three decades. Mainly in the form of urban riots, pitted Muslims against Christians vice versa and has seen the resurgence of Islamic fundamentalist. Although there have been some successes in conflict management in the past, the lingering troubles in the northeast states involving the radical Boko-Haram sect show that violence still may flare up at any moment. If the situation were to deteriorate significantly, especially on Christian-Muslim lines, it could have serious repercussions for national cohesion. To deal with the risks, community-level peace initiatives and women participation need to be reinforced, a more subtle security response should be formulated and the management of public resources improved. While some in the West panic at what they see as growing Islamic fundamentalism in the region, the roots of the problem are more complex and lie in Nigeria's history and contemporary politics.

It is indeed necessary to end all forms of conflicts, ensure food security and restoration of livelihoods in the affected region. Such developments would entail positive effects on the population at large. Women's rights organizations should be supported and enabled to build peace and reconciliation initiatives. While women's participation in informal peace processes since the lingering conflicts in the northern Nigeria yielded positive results, they are infrequently included in the formal peace processes. The formal peace processes fail to take gender perspectives into account due to the patriarchal nature in the northern region and their only flack of experience in peace and conflict resolution. However, peace building factfinding is facilitated by soliciting information from all sectors of society, including women's groups and networks. Thus, inclusion of more women in formal peace initiative representatives may facilitate negotiations and cease-fire.

Endnotes

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