



TERRORIST VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS IN NIGERIA BY NON-STATE ACTORS: A STUDY OF STATE COMPLICITY AND NEGLECT

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ABSTRACT

In spite of official claims by Nigeria of tackling the problem of gender-based violence, there is a glaring spectacle of state neglect of female victims and survivors of horrendous atrocities perpetrated by extremist groups within its borders. The government neither recognizes their trauma and travails nor does it have any policy/program to grant them justice, or for their treatment, restoration, rehabilitation and reintegration. Rather government's sympathy leans toward the evil terrorists who they protect from facing justice for their crimes through an ill conceived program of de-radicalization, rehabilitation, compensation and re-integration. It is against this background this paper investigates terrorist violence against women and girls and the way government actions encourage terrorists rather than bring succor to their victims. The paper identifies the crimes of the terrorists and why government frames policies that shuns suffering victims to reward the terrorists. Failed state theory is the framework on which the paper is anchored and it relies on content analysis of secondary data obtained from newspapers, journal articles, books, social media and the internet. The study reveals the uncomfortable truth that the terror groups were formed by powerful people in northern Nigeria who also use their presence and influence in positions of power to work for their sustenance. . The paper recommends immediate scrapping of all policies/programs designed to reward terrorist; and the bringing of all captured or surrendered members of the groups, their sponsors and supporters to account for their atrocities against women and girls, before our courts. The paper further recommends that government set up appropriate programs and agencies across the states for the restoration, rehabilitation, empowerment and re-integration of female survivors of terror; that government should clear terrorists from all illegally occupied lands and communities and restore the displaced original owners to their inheritance and that government make religion a personal issue, remove all references to religion from the constitution and restore the rule of law, justice and equity throughout the territory of Nigeria.



Key words: Gender-based violence, Women and Girls, terrorist groups, Non-state actors, state complicity, Nigeria

Introduction

Terrorist violence against women and girls (TVAWG) is a serious problem in Nigeria. It is an extreme form of the global problem of violence against the female gender. Generally, violence against women is "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private" (WHO, 2024). TVAGW in Nigeria is part of a uni-directional terrorist violence initially directed at non-muslim women. The women and girls were specifically targeted to achieve tactical and ideological aims, and in some contexts forcefully displaced internally, and prevented from accessing help and justice (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020).

TVAWG intensified in some muslim dominated countries following the rise of trans-national organizations like Al-Qaeda and Islamic State, both of which are notorious for their jihadist agendas (Elemanya, 2023). A typical instance of large scale assaults on women in recent history that is akin to what is happening in Nigeria occurred in Iraq and Syria when Islamic State fighters embarked on genocidal campaign against the Yazidi people in 2014. Other groups that were targeted beside the Yazidis were Christians, Turkmen, Sabea-Mandean, Kaka'e, Kurds, Shias, and Sunnis perceived to be working with the Iraqi government (The Center for Justice & Accountability, 2023). It was a genocide that was premeditated and ideologically driven resulting in mass murder, trafficking, and enslavement of thousands of men, women and



children (The Center For Justice and Accountability, 2023). A document prepared by over half a dozen international organizations established that acts of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes were committed against Yazidi women and girls. They were so dehumanized to the point of being sold in open and online markets.

In Nigeria, TVAWG gathered momentum with the rise of political islam following the return to democratic rule in 1999. Hardliners introduced sharia law in 12 of Nigeria's muslim majority states in 2001. This development threatened the democratic/plural status of the country and heightened the inclination of some northern Islamic organizations to use violence to subvert the secular state in the push to create an Islamic state (Saheed Rufai 2011). Since then Islamic terror groups have been waging a campaign of insurgent violence, banditry, abductions, kidnappings for ransom, and systematic extermination of non-muslim communities, with women and girls as special targets for abuse. This paper is an attempt to highlight the terror campaign against women and girls in Nigeria, and government's insensitivity/complicity in the continued perpetration of the crimes.

The concept of terrorism

"Terrorism" has become a problematic concepts to define because of its politicization by states and non- state actors to advance vested interests. Therefore we intend to just clarify its usage in this paper. According to the United States Council on Foreign Relations (2019) terrorism "is the intentional use of violence by non-state actors against civilians in pursuit of political or ideological objectives". Non-state actors refer to individuals, groups or organizations that carry



out violence, illegally and outside state authority. Only a state has legitimate authority over the use of force and so the concern over terrorist activities of non state actors is understandable. In another definition, the United Kingdom terrorism Act 2000 describes local and international terrorism as the use or threat of violence to influence the government, an international organization or to intimidate the public for the purpose of advancing a political, religious, racial or ideological cause (Crown Prosecution Service, 2026). It could be in form targeting of a person, properties, endangering other persons' life, endangering public health and safety or disrupting electrical systems. From these we understand that terrorism is marked by lethal and destructive use of violence to kill, intimidate, cause fear especially among innocent and unarmed civilians in a scale beyond ordinary criminality.. The Inter-Parliamentary Union for democracy (2026) affirms this in its listing of the main characteristics of terrorism/ they include the use of violence (bombings, assassinations, killings, kidnappings, etc); political, religious or ideological motivations;; intention to commit harm beyond the direct victims; attack against innocent, unarmed civilians, use of surprise and clandestine attacks and the violation of international norms.

The term took its roots from the era of the French revolution when state-backed revolutionaries employed the weapon of fear and terror against their opponents. In contemporary times, the term has been used to refer to acts that challenge or target government in order to influence policy, and in extreme cases, as with the case of ISIL in the middle east and Boko Haram in Nigeria, seek to replace the secular states with a religious state. There are two types of terrorism: state terrorism and non-state terrorism (Inter-Parliamentary



Union for Democracy, 2026). State terrorism is the use of terror by a government or groups sponsored by it. Non-state terrorism, which is the focus of the current study is terrorism perpetrated by individuals, groups or organizations to wreck premeditated violence and terror against innocent populations or other members of society in pursuit of political, religious or ideological goals.

The United States Bureau of Investigation (FBI) defines domestic terrorism as “violent criminal acts committed by individuals and/or groups to further ideological goals stemming from domestic influences, such as those of a political, religious, social, or environmental nature”. The emphasis here is violent criminality in pursuit of ideological goals.

Theoretical foundations: Nigeria on the Path to a Failing State

A country that looks away or folds its hands when fundamentalist groups target some of its citizens is on a certain path to failure unless. Failed state theory explains the nexus between state fragility and gender-based violence. In the case on hand, our emphasis is on state neglect (here interpreted to mean failure to protect) and state complicity (through active and passive enabling). The theory posits that nation states fail when they lose monopoly on legitimate force, can no longer provide basic public services and lack political legitimacy (Rotberg, 2004; Weber, 1919). There are several dimensions to the idea of state failure. First, is the presence of security vacuum. This imply the inability of the state to maintain order, thereby giving room for non-state actors to thrive (Rotberg, 2004). In Nigeria, this state of affairs led to the emergence of Islamic criminal/jihaddi terror groups The groups, especially Boko Haram, exploit state

weakness to commit violence, with women and girls as strategic targets for abductions, sexual slavery and forced marriage (Matfess, 2017).

State failure also imply the breakdown of governance. This manifests in widespread corruption,, weak institutions and poor rule of law (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). Nigeria ranks very high on the global corruption index according Transparency International (2023). The country also exhibits institutional fragility in all the conflict zones (Nwankpa, 2015). When decay continues for a long time, such country begins to experience loss of legitimacy. In Nigeria, distrust in the government is widespread, and is growing round the country as the leaders literarily watch terrorists attack citizens without consequences (Higazi, 2016)

Gendered terrorism in Nigeria

Sexual violence has been used as instrument of warfare and aspect of ethnic cleansing since the rise of Boko Haram in Nigeria in the early 2000. According to Matfess (2017) the group used sexual violence to instill fear and sustain recruitment. Women were forcefully abducted, converted and acquired, or tortured and debased , to attract huge ransom as part of the islamization project. In affirmation, Abubakar Shakarau, a former leader of the group, boasted that he would sell off the non-muslim girls and marry off the converts, including girls as young as 9 (Bloom &Matfess, 2016). This ideology, rooted in their interpretation of sharia, views non-muslim women as properties that can be sold, gifted out or whose life can be dispensed with at will (Zinaddzo & Netangaheni, 2022). Hence the violent use and abuse of (non-muslim) women and girls was integrated as part of its jihad at the on-set (Adejoh, 2019). Later on, Boko Haram



began abducting muslim women to hurt communities that opposed them (International Crises Group, 2016). Many of such women, and converted non-muslims were forced to participate in insurgent activities as active combatants and suicide bombers (Human Rights Watch, 2015).

Groups terrorizing women in Nigeria

Three jihadist groups are notable for atrocities against women and girls in Nigeria. The three form the triangle of terror (Omitola, Aderire, Akinrinde, Omodunbi & Sackflame, 2021), and are Boko Haram, Fulani herdsman and bandits. They share the same religious and cultural affinity, with bandits known to cooperate more with Boko Haram (Global Center for Responsibility to Protect, 2025; Aina, 2022). All of the three are armed to the teeth and they operate with impunity with the backing of powerful northern interests for whom they serve as foot soldiers (Oluku & Ofili, 2025). A lot of writing has been done on these groups, particularly Boko Haram that need not be repeated here.

TERRORIST ATROCITIES AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

The following crimes against women and countless others are hardly discussed let alone published in the news like crimes committed by conventional criminals. Most unfortunately the government shows no concern about what the terrorists do to the innocent women they abduct. The lucky ones that escape never get justice, yet the terrorists abusers are celebrated as 'repentant' and rewarded when they claim renunciation of violence. That is why Nigeria should be on the watch list of all countries that care about human and women's rights.



Extermination threats: Frequent violent attacks, abductions and evictions in several minority parts of the north are intended to decimate the population and take over their lands. Over 80 communities in Benue and Plateau states alone are alleged to be under the control of herdsmen (Vanguard, 2025 April 29). Women and girls who survive the jihadist attacks languish in state run Internally Displaced Persons Camps (IDPs) where they are further abused and barely cared for by the government. According to the International Organization for Migration (2025) there are currently 1,322,766 internally displaced persons in 225,458 households spread across Benue, Kaduna,, Kano, Katsina, Kogi, Nassarawa, Niger, Plateau, Sokoto, and Zamfara states.

Brutal killings: Thousands of women and girls have been killed by the terrorists since their emergence in Nigeria. One video that circulated after one of the assaults on Benue communities showed women and girls heaped on the back of a truck. They were brutally hacked to death with machetes. Terrorist killings are executed in the most savage way with machetes, swords and assault rifles. The savages laugh as they watch their innocent victims wriggle in pain and agony and are satisfied to watch them die that way. Some are tormented to death with burning plastics held over their tied up bodies or fire lit under their naked bodies to roast them alive. A single attack at Agatu in Benue state, left between 300-500 unarmed people dead, including women and children. *The Guardian* described the killings in Benue and Plateau states as progrom (The Guardian, 2025 April 21). .

Destruction/seizure of farms and means of economic livelihoods: Farming is the predominant occupation in rural communities particularly of northern Nigeria and women are the major

players in the sector. Over the last two decades terrorist attacks have devastated farm settlements and the natives including women and children chased into Internally Displaced People's (IDP) camps. Herders deliberately graze farm crops of targeted populations as part of a larger agenda of economic terrorism (Okeke, 2014; Oluku, 2025). Babachir Lawal a Christian member of Buhari's government, confirmed this impunity by experience and the backing terrorists have from their kinsmen in authority (Lawal, 2026, April 16).

Kidnappings and forceful abductions: Individual and mass abduction of women and girls by different groups occur daily in the country. The inaction of government has emboldened some groups to now demand women and girls to be supplied to them in the bushes. In some places, terrorists reportedly knock on doors to demand for wives and daughters to be released to them.. In one reported case virgins were demanded by bandits for their sexual appetites as precondition for peace or as part of requirements to release kidnapped victims (Oyediran, 2026 March 7; Olatunji, 2026, March 8).

Torture and psychological violence: Terrorist torture techniques are brutal, and are sometimes sustained till the victim dies. They include being whipped while bound hands and feet, scorching with burning plastics hung over victim, amputations, suspension over burning fire and executions by public stoning. Some captives are buried neck deep in the ground, prior to execution (Ziradzo & Netangaheni, 2022). Victims (Women and girls) are also denied food and sleep and are forced to perform hazardous tasks (Bloom & Matfes, 2016). In 2022 Deborah Samuel a christian student of Shehu Shagari College Education Sokoto was frame of charges of

blasphemy against Islam, dragged from her hostel, tortured by her fellow students and finally burnt to death.

Forceful conversion: Thousands, if not millions of Christian women and girls have been forcefully converted to Islam, and forcefully married off without the knowledge and consent of their families, and the government neither condemns nor take any action to reverse the oppressive trend perpetrated by both terrorists, and ordinary Muslim men from Northern Nigeria.. But the conversion of a single Muslim to Christianity in Nigeria could spark nation-wide violence. The 276 abducted Chibok girls were all forcefully converted (Ziradzo & Netangaheni, 2022). Of 110 girls abducted from a school in Dapchi, all but Leah, an only Christian among them were released. She still remains in captivity because of her faith. (Nigeria Human Rights Report, 2022).

Sexual crimes: The dehumanizing treatment terrorists subject women to are indescribably horrible and the Nigerian government should be held to account for its silence and inaction. In one video on YouTube, a survivor narrated how she and her daughters were stripped naked, fumbled and repeatedly raped in front of her husband all through the time of their captivity. In another video on Facebook, the corpse of a dead woman tortured to death by bandits was circulated showing a sharp piece of wood pierced into her vagina. The girls and (women) captured by Boko Haram were repeatedly raped, gang raped and subjected to sexual slavery (Bloom & Matfess, 2016). The continued silence and inaction of government now make the terrorist feel a sense of entitlement (Amnesty International, 2021).



Forced marriage, sexual enslavement and forced impregnation: Abducted wives and daughters of people, including under aged school girls are forcibly married by the terrorists, and some are sold into slavery. No nation can enjoy peace if one religious group assumes the monopoly of violence to subject believers of other faiths to such cruelties. Through the abuses thousands of the victims are forcibly impregnated. The Nigerian army was said to have illegally terminated at least 10,000 pregnancies of Boko Haram escapees and other women through an abortion program that at a time, though they denied (Global Center for Responsibility to Protect, 2025).

Commodification for sale/ransom: Boko Haram commodifies women as things or properties that can be sold, gifted out or even killed without consequence. The three groups demand unreasonably high sum of money as ransom payment to release their captives. It is being used as a strategy to drain victim's families of all their resources and put them into debt.

Forced conscription and use as suicide bombers: According to Amnesty International, more than 2000 women and girls abducted by the groups in 2014 were forced into sexual slavery and trained to fight. They were trained on how to handle guns and bombs while others were brainwashed to sacrifice themselves as suicide bombers.

The three terrorist groups have jointly wrecked the lives of millions of women and girls. Apart from physical deaths, their actions ruined marriages, education of children, businesses and visions of many women and girls. They infected their innocent victims with sexually



transmitted diseases while countless others suffered different degrees of physical and emotional trauma from the horrors of abuses.

COMPLICITY OF THE NIGERIAN STATE

Nigeria is doing too little to stop the atrocities. From the military angle, Nigeria is a classic case on how a nation can draft troops to stop criminality and insurgency, without actual intent to do so, thereby turning such effort into an endless, wasteful military jamboree. The insurgency of Boko Haram has caused Nigeria the lives of many military Generals, senior commanders and the destruction of military and civilian infrastructure. Many watchers believe that the so called war against insurgency is a ruse. According to Ogbonnaya (2020) conflict entrepreneurs consisting of Politicians and the hierarchy of top military leadership together with their cronies are using the conflict to make money. Okeke (2020) calls them the 'merchants of terrorism', and the phenomenon, 'a counter-terrorism economy' which expands and complicate the conflict for their personal gain. A study by Shimawua (2020) concluded that the on-going crisis is prolonged to channel billions of Naira into the pockets of politicians and military chiefs. The heavy deployment of troops across the country and in epicenter states has done nothing to check terrorist attacks, and abductions of women and girls. Abductions and killing occur daily, so much so that only mass killings and abductions are now being reported.

In Nigeria's Kwara state, gun men linked to the islamic state rounded up 162 residents of Woro and Nuku villages and executed them (SWJ Staff, 2026, June 2). 13 others were killed in the village of Doma in Katsina state. In Plateau state, an ECWA pastor, his wife, two children and



several other persons were murdered. (Buisness Day, 2026 April 27). In the south-west state of Oyo, a defenceless woman was raped in broad daylight and murdered by bandits (News Log, 2026 June 9). In Oyo state scores of pupils and their teachers were abducted, and one of the teachers, beheaded (The Guardian, 2026, May 20). In Ondo state, several houses were burnt and some persons were abducted in a similar attack (Mfonobong, 2026 June 5). On June 3, another group stormed a private hostel housing female students of Federal Polytechnic , Kaura Namoda, which was meters away from a military check point. When the list of abductees were released, all eight were Christian girls (Legit, 2026, June 4). There is hardly a day such incidences does not occur.

Communities severely affected by the crises accuse the security forces of either abandoning them or aiding and abetting the terrorists. Amnesty International reported an occasion where the security forces abandoned the people and fled during Boko Haram's assault on some Borno communities, (Amnesty International, 2025). When herdsmen went on rampage in some communities in Benue, military personnel posted nearby refused to respond to distress calls until hours after the invaders had left (News Mirror, 2025 June 4). Survivors of another program in Mbwelle village in Kwatas district of Bokkos local government area of Plateau state shared the same experience. A survivor who lost eight members of her family in the 2 hour long massacre said soldiers posted nearby refused to respond to distress calls. In another case at Maga, Kebbi State where 25 school girls were abducted in 2025, the state governor fumed that troops posted to guard the school were withdrawn just before the terrorists arrived. Nigerian authorities are also accused of not acting on intelligence. It is alleged that the government



failed to act on intelligence alerting on the 2014 abduction of the Chibok girls .(Caroline-Oba, 2020), as it does most others.

Some Nigerians like the popular social media influencer, Martins Otse have come to believe that there is an islamization agenda being promoted in the country. And there are reasons to believe the charge. Former president Goodluck Jonathan once revealed in an interview after he left office how he discovered that most of the top leaders in his team turned out to be associates of the terror groups (Blue Print Newspapers, 2025, June 5). The unseriousness of the security forces in the 'war' against Boko Haram and the other terror groups is not unconnected to this infiltration of the nation's government and security agencies. The clandestine, sometimes open support of northern leaders for the terrorists manifest in the way government policies are shaped to protect the groups both from destruction and from facing justice. For instance, northern elements insist on tolerance and dialogue with the deadly groups while the less resolute southerners prefer all out war (Olaniyan & Asuelime, 2014).

Unfortunately, northerners are the ones having their way, in the formulated policies concerning these groups created and clandestinely promoted by them. The current national security adviser, under the Bola Ahmed Tinubu's Government, himself a muslim and of Fulani ethnic stock affirm their bond with their terrorist brothers. He was quoted to have said " if your brother is a terrorist, he is still your brother". This was during a controversial defense of his negotiations with terrorists over 260 kidnapped pupils of a catholic girls school in Papiri. 7 million dollars was reportedly paid to his terrorist brothers to secure their release (Binniyat, 2026, March 5).



General Theophilus Danjuma, a former chief of army staff has long accused the government and its security forces of complicity in terrorist atrocities against vulnerable groups and minorities. In his words:

"The armed forces are not neutral. They collude, they collude, they collude, they collude with the armed bandits that kill people and kill Nigerians. They facilitate their movement. They cover them." (The Guardian, 2018 March 27).

The northern muslim block in government remains unmoved, blocking every attempt to destroy the groups. Rather, former President Muhammadu Buhari, an Islamic fundamentalist designed a reward system for them, which they still enjoy to this day while the government remains silent and uncommitted to the sufferings of millions of their abused female victims.

REWARD FOR TERRORISTS, REVICTIMIZATION FOR VICTIMS

Nigeria has no formal policy or program to address the plight and welfare of its female survivors of terror. Instead it entrenched a reward policy for the terrorists, at the behest of their powerful backers in position of power. This is in spite of enacting an anti terrorism law in 2011/2013 which was amended in 2022. This only instrument directed specifically against terrorism was so watered down that it neither addresses nor provide sanctions against sexual and other violence committed against women and girls. This conspiratorial silence (Attah, 2016) literarily shields terrorists from accountability for their crimes while denying the victims of every opportunity to get justice.



The implication is that the heinous crimes of the groups against women and girls is not of any concern to the Nigerian authorities. The groups remain brutally defiant and unrelenting in their campaign against innocent citizens and the state. There are "deeply troubling reports" of continued killings, abductions, sexual violence, forced conversion, forced marriage, abductions and enforced disappearances targeting Christian and other religious minority groups (UNHCR, 2026)

The government reward scheme for terrorists is a leniency program for so-called "repentant" terrorists under a Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) (Felbab-Brown, 2018). The program started in 2016 under the former fundamentalist President Muhammadu Buhari. It has churned out and empowered thousands of graduates many of whom were reportedly recruited into the security forces and other government agencies, Some of the beneficiaries reportedly return to the forest to rejoin their peers after collecting compensation Ironically, while the federal government protects and lavish state resources on terrorists, thousands of women and girls still remain in captivity. Escaped survivors are abandoned, and denied justice. Among them are children who were serially raped and impregnated, mature women who were captured from their husbands, raped and forced to become wives to terrorists, survivors who have no families or communities to return to; former children and teens whose dreams of formal education were abruptly cut short, women and girls with deep physical and emotional wounds; widows and orphans. Escapees and those who are lucky to be ransomed home by families from the terrorist dens are unattended to but left to lick their wounds in silence (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

**Conclusion**

The paper examines terrorist violence against women and girls in Nigeria. It enumerates the atrocities the groups commit and continue to commit against women and girls that the Nigerian government shows no concern about and therefore considers the federal government's war on terror a ruse. The paper exposed the uncomfortable truth that the government is not interested in securing endangered women and girls, let alone rescue those in the captivity of terror groups. The government is also uninterested in granting the millions of female victims justice through trial of captured and surrendered terrorists, and a deliberate policy/program of rehabilitation, restoration/compensation and reintegration for terror survivors. The reason being that the Nigerian terror groups are the creation of powerful cabals in the fundamentalist muslim north who are also using their presence in the seat of power to promote policies that favour the terrorists over their victims. The preference for terrorists over victims show how insensitive the government has become to the plight of law abiding citizens and raises fears of a hidden islamization agenda in the country.

Recommendations

This paper makes the following recommendation to assist in resolving the problem of terrorist violence against women in Nigeria:

1. That the Nigerian government halt all rehabilitation and re-integration programs for terrorists and scrap all programs set up for their empowerment. Government should push with all its might for immediate disarmament and disbandment or destruction of the groups.
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2. That all captured or surrendered members of the groups, their sponsors and supporters be made to account for their atrocities against women and girls, before our courts.

3. That government should set up appropriate programs and agencies across the states for the restoration, rehabilitation, empowerment and re-integration of female survivors of terror.

4. That government should clear terrorists from all illegally occupied lands and communities and restore the displaced original owners to theory inheritance.

5. That government should make religion a personal issue, and remove all references to religion from the constitution. It should restore the rule of law, justice and equity all through the territory of Nigeria

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