



(RESEARCH ARTICLE)



The Multifaceted Vulnerability of Women in Conflict Zones: Beyond Widowhood

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World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews, 2024, 24(03), 1419–1426

Publication history: Received on 08 November 2024; revised on 14 December 2024; accepted on 16 December 2024

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2024.24.3.3858>

Abstract

This study delves into the multifaceted impact of armed conflict on women, with a specific focus on the experiences of women in conflict zones. Employing a qualitative research design, the study utilizes a desk review of secondary sources to explore themes such as forced displacement, sexual violence, economic marginalization, and limited access to healthcare. The findings highlight the devastating consequences of conflict on women's lives, including increased vulnerability to violence, poverty, and social exclusion. The paper concludes by discussing the urgent need for targeted interventions to address the specific needs of women affected by conflict, such as providing psychosocial support, economic empowerment opportunities, and access to justice.

Keywords: Conflict; Displacement; Human Rights; Sexual Violence; Women

1. Introduction

Violent conflicts have had devastating effects on the entire fabric of the society. However, it always leaves in its trials drastic effect of lives and dignity of women and girls (Qayoom, 2014; UNFPA, 2001). This is because wars and armed conflicts lead to death, destabilize families, devastate communities and unsettle countries. Women and girls on one hand are usually the worst victims of conflict situations as they shoulder responsibilities of their families as a result of being widowed or losing their fathers and brothers in violent crisis. Therefore, the unity and solidarity that exist in families and communities prior to conflicts are usually destroyed and survivors left at the mercy of donor agencies and reliance on mothers and wives for sustenance.

Armed conflict extremely harms women across the world irrespective of region and level of civilization and development. For instance, it is on record that a woman dies in childbirth every two hours in Yemen while more than 65% of women have experienced sexual or physical violence (which is twice the global average) in South Sudan (UNHCR, 2019). Similarly, about 40% of girls within the age of 18 years and below are married in Nigeria. These statistics are directly linked to ongoing violent conflicts in the affected nations.

Literature is replete with studies on the negative effects of armed conflict on women. A good number of these studies were carried out by human right and humanitarian organizations. Chief among these institutions include – the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the United Nations Development Fund for Women, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), etc. These studies have unarguably portrayed how armed conflicts have negatively impacted women and how much the plight of women in such situations have been neglected. These studies have highlighted the mis categorization of women in war-torn or conflict-ravaged environment (UNHCR, 2002). It is against this backdrop that this study examined the assertion that “The multifaceted vulnerability of women in conflict zones goes beyond being rendered a widow” to understand other areas of means through which armed conflicts have

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affected women in conflict zones with a view to proffering solutions that may curb conflicts and as well help in managing the plight of women in such situations.

2. Literature review

2.1. Insecurity and Terrorist Organisations

The concepts of security and insecurity are typical social science concepts that appear principally in the social psychology, sociology, political science, and allied subjects' literature. In the framework of political science, the concept of security according to Bar-Tal and Jacobson (1998) denotes a situation which provides national and international conditions favorable to the protection of a nation, state, and its citizens against existing and potential threats. The socio-psychological conceptual framework of security on the other hand, acknowledges the military, political, economic, and cultural conditions which play an important role in creating or decorating situations of security. However, the situation of security assures the survival of a state, its territorial integrity, repulsion of a military attack, defense and protection of citizens' life and property, protection of economic welfare and social stability (Haftendorn, 1991).

Analysts have examined the problem of insecurity generally from various perspectives. Cameron and McCormic (1954) have pointed out nine different sources of insecurity, namely, insecurity as emotional response to sudden external threats from within; and insecurity from a relatively constant threatening external situation; insecurity due to threat from within; and insecurity as a function of beliefs, especially religious; etc. these categories of insecurity are believed to be caused by "frustration and neurosis" (Cameron and McCormic 1954). This classification notwithstanding, Cameron and McCormic's work contains little of what can be regarded as empirical research on insecurity. This is because the work is filled with speculations without empirical evidence. Also, issues raised are not exhaustively discussed.

Bar-Tal and Jacobson (1998) have also examined issues of security and insecurity. Using the security challenges in Israel as a case study, they specifically concerned themselves with approaches and methods of dealing with security situations. Thus, two main approaches to security studies were identified, namely, political, and socio-psychological approaches. According to the political approach, security is an essential precondition of an ordered existence for an individual and societal system. Here, individuals and collectives must have a secured environment which allows them to pursue their goals without being subjected to threats. The argument of this approach is that it is the role of the state to provide security to its citizens, both on internal and external levels. On the domestic level, the state must create economic, societal, cultural, environmental, and educational conditions which assure life to its citizens. On the international level, the state must defend the citizens against possible harm from external forces (Buzan, 1991). Thus, this approach is concerned with military alliances, and foreign policy. Comprehensive as this approach may be, it neglects the economic, societal, cultural, and psychological issues which are imperative to the study of security. The socio-psychological approach on the other hand, argues that people as individuals and/or as group members (e.g., members of economic groups, nations) experience security, or insecurity, regarding own personal life and/or about their collective entity and its systems. Security thus, is a psychological experience. Generally, however, the paper did not explain, using both approaches to the study of security, what primarily causes insecurity in any given society.

In a study, Eriksen, Bal and Salemin (2010), examined security and insecurity from an anthropological perspective. Here, attempts were made to conceptualize insecurity from the perspective of social and human security. However, the major flaw of the paper is that it did not contextualize insecurity. In other words, the study did not locate insecurity within a given geographical environment or location.

Right from the twentieth century, the growing global transformations has resulted to the spread of religious extremism and jihadist as well as other violent movements. The United States on September 11, 2001, witnessed the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre by Al-Qaeda. The Great Britain, Spain, France, and other parts of Europe were not spared in these violent attacks within the same period (Ogbonnaya, 2013). The sectarian clashes in Northern Lebanon have lingered since 2006 due to the arrest of a Lebanese Islamist linked to the Syrian uprising. In West Africa, the Boko Haram Islamic sect with known religious preferences and belief system and the Tuareg fighters with support from Al-Qaeda have occasioned national security crisis and stoked a simmering insurrection in Nigeria and Mali respectively. Expectedly, this trend of happenings has created sub-regional security challenges which threaten the security of nation-states and their citizens across ECOWAS member states.

In West Africa, several violent extremist organizations are actively carrying out attacks, detonating explosives, engaging in violence against civilians, and counter-terrorism actions (Ogbonnaya, 2013). In this region, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and Mali are the most impacted countries by extremist and terror events. Among the deadliest groups, there are Boko Haram, JNIM, ISIS in the Greater Sahara, and ISIS-West Africa. Boko Haram is based in Nigeria, a jihadist terrorist

organization. This group is also the most active violent extremist organization in Cameroon. In Mali, the al-Qaeda affiliate JNIM has conducted various deadly attacks. Moreover, an ongoing war started in Mali after a coup d'état in 2012 has caused a thousand fatalities, has displaced people, and caused high levels of chronic malnutrition and poverty (Statista, 2021). The persisting political impasse in Mali appears to have defied all regional efforts being made by the ECOWAS.

With reference to Nigeria, Ezeribe (2009) has catalogued a history of conflicts and insecurity in Nigeria since independence in 1960. Here, the conflicts which result in insecurity are traced to the colonialists creating antagonistic ruling class along ethnic and religious line. Thus, the northern part of Nigeria has had a long history of security challenges, communal and ethno-religious crises. For example, in Plateau State, there have been many outbreaks of bloody violence between different communities since the return to democracy in 1999. There have also been riots in urban centers of Kaduna and Kano, and for several decades there has been simmering conflict in the Tafewa Balewa district of Bauchi (Walker, 2012). According to Walker (2012) and Azizi (2012), when viewed from outside, it does seem that these conflicts boil down to religious differences, tensions between blocs of Muslim and Christian inhabitants. But on a closer consideration, one finds that politics – more precisely, control of government patronage – is the primary cause of many of these conflicts. However, the Boko Haram insurgency which surfaced in 2009 with bombing attacks and killings which as at last count, have left over 16,000 Policemen, soldiers and civilians including politicians dead (Nigerian Crime News, May 31, 2011; USCIRF, 2012) remains one of the recent terrorist-related dimensions to security challenges facing Nigeria.

The Jamaatul Alissuma lid da a wa wal Jihad, otherwise known as Boko Haram rebellion, started in Bauchi state on July 26, 2009, and has since spread to other parts of Nigeria especially in the northern part, Chad, and Niger. Other terrorist networks in West Africa include Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), Tuareg fighters with support from Al-Qaeda, etc. These groups have since their formation entrenched their reign of terror predicated on their religious belief and social inclinations. But as Eso (2011) has observed, “the root causes of resort to violence and criminality in order to influence public policy is rather deep-seated and beyond the sectarian”. This is because the attacks of the group have been targeted or directed at the State, its institutions, and the civilian populations. Several police stations including the Force Headquarters, Abuja; army barracks, schools, government establishments and places of worship have been attacked in several states of the Federation. But the attack on the UN office in Abuja in 2011 was, according to Eso (2011), “a game-changer with new dynamics, far reaching and imponderable reverberations that dramatically altered the scope, intensity, and focus of Boko Haram’s Violence and mission, as well as any consideration of sect”. Thus, some analysts have argued that the Boko Haram induced security crisis in the north is more religious than political. Those who argue along this line submit that beginning from 1987 to the controversial introduction of Sharia penal system by some States in the north in 2000, some political leaders have laid the foundation for extremist sects to emerge through religious manipulation which coupled with widespread illiteracy, poverty, and a weak leadership, has since allowed a terrorist group like Boko Haram to emerge (Harrington, 2012; Punch Editorial, February 19, 2012). Others have argued that the current insecurity is worsened or aided by the high level of poverty in that region and Nigeria in general (Awonyemi, 2012). According to Awoyemi (2012), “...the Boko Haram phenomenon has a deep economic root more than any other perspectives from which the investigating intelligence can suggest”. These realities are much more obvious in rural areas. A factual indicator is the result of the Harmonized Nigeria Living Standard Survey published by the National Bureau of Statistics in 2012 which showed that the North scored badly and accounted for the large proportion of Nigerians living in poverty. Another analyst who has argued along this perspective is Jonnie Carson, US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs. According to him, “religion is not driving extremist violence either in Jos or northern Nigeria” (Harrington, 2012). Others have contended that violence in the north is orchestrated by the betrayal of peoples trust in government. According to Mr. Terence McCulley (the US Ambassador to Nigeria), the betrayal of people by the governments and the low level of government presence provided criminals and terrorists a platform to launch insurrection being witnessed across northern Nigeria (Benjamin, Ogunmola, Joseph and Ibrahim, 2012).

2.2. Conflict

Iroye and Ajeh (2020) see Conflict as a general phenomenon existing in all human societies following interactions and relationships (p. 83). Conflict as “an art of disagreement” which results from varied “values and expectations” of different people (Iroye and Ajeh, 2020). Be it positive or negative, conflict is a crucial part of the human society which may help in understanding the society in different situations. In a situation that conflict because threatening, the most the weak and helpless could do on their own is to look for safer havens and flee for their lives.

According to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS),

Conflict refers to the contradictions inherent in power relations and which manifest themselves in individual and group interactions with one another and with nature in the pursuit of limited resources or opportunities. Conflict is the motor of transformation and is either positive or negative. It can be creatively transformed to ensure equity, progress and harmony; or destructively transformed to engender acute insecurity (ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework, 2008).

For the purpose of this study, therefore, conflict may be regarded as a situation of clash or incompatibility in ideas and interests between individuals and/or groups, which may result in violence as a result of the parties' inability to understand and address such incompatibilities. This is the situation that has occurred over the years in different parts of the country, especially the North, which is in focus, thus resulting in the unprecedented internal displacements.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design, specifically utilizing a **desk review** methodology. This approach involves the systematic collection and analysis of secondary data to gain insights into the research topic.

3.2. Data Collection

The primary method of data collection was **content analysis**. This involved a systematic review and analysis of secondary materials, such as journal articles, books, government reports, news articles, and online databases. A **purposive sampling technique** was employed to select relevant documents based on their relevance to the research questions.

3.3. Data Analysis

The collected data was analyzed through a **thematic analysis** approach. This involved the following steps:

- **Familiarization:** Researchers immersed themselves in the data through repeated reading and note-taking.
- **Coding:** Key themes and subthemes were identified and coded within the data.
- **Theme Development:** The coded data was organized into thematic categories based on patterns and similarities.
- **Theme Review:** The developed themes were reviewed to ensure their coherence and relevance to the research questions.
- **Report Writing:** The findings were interpreted and presented in a clear and concise manner, drawing connections between the themes and the broader context of armed conflict.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

While this study primarily relied on secondary data, ethical considerations were still important. It was ensured that all sources were appropriately cited and acknowledged. Additionally, any sensitive or confidential information encountered during the analysis was handled with care and discretion.

4. Theoretical framework

In order to have a good grasp of the issue under study, it is very important that the root causes of the displacements are properly understood in relation to the reasons behind them.

In the view of Fisher et al (2000) Conflicts arise from imbalances in human relationships; this includes unequal social, unequal wealth and access to resources and unequal power – leading to problems such as discrimination, unemployment, poverty, oppression, crime. Each level connects to the others, forming a potential powerful chain of forces either for constructive change or for destructive violence. For much clearer understanding of this study, therefore, certain Conflict theories are explained:

4.1. The Human Needs Theory

This theory explains the relationship between those important things that human beings need for normal and healthy living, growth and development. Maslow's Hierarchy of needs best explains the theory. They include:

- **Physiological Needs** (e.g., Oxygen, Food and Water amongst other primary needs);

- **Safety Needs** (Needs of Belonging; Self Esteem; and Self-Actualization).

Essentially, the theory states that conflict could arise as a result of frustration of these basic human needs. Faleti (2006) agrees with this view stating that:

Human needs for survival, protection, affection, understanding, participation, creativity and identity are shared by all people are irrepressible and according to Burton have components that are not easy to give up. No matter how much a political or social system tries to frustrate or suppress these needs, it will either fail or cause far more damage on the long run.

Consequently, this suggests that the root causes of conflict may be found in the frustrated or unmet basic human needs. This explains why the herdsmen dislodged from their original grazing domains, had to force themselves on helpless communities in order to tend to their cattle. This act therefore resulted - and is still resulting in the loss of livelihoods, violent conflicts across the country, and by extension displacing people as they are forced to flee for safety. Had people's basic physiological needs not been frustrated or suppressed, there would be no clashes or conflicts and no need for them to flee their homes and communities.

4.2. The Structural Conflict Theory

Human needs theorists have been able to explain that the suppression of basic human needs can cause conflict. However, it is important also to understand that under certain circumstances, unfriendly policies which frustrate the attainment of people's full potential could drive violence. If, for example, the structure of public institutions hampers people's progress in life or is seen by any group as doing so, then they may revolt against the government or institutions. This may be likened to what happened in the case of Boko Haram, the founders of which claimed to be so frustrated by the system. This is not different from a situation of bad social economic policies are also examples of structural violence. Faleti (2006) further adds that the exploitative and unjust nature of human societies as well as the domination of one group or class by another is seen by structural theorists as conflict drivers. This explains both the issue of Boko Haram campaigns and the issues of agitation for separation.

4.3. Frustration-Aggression Theory

In response to the above theory, Jeong (2000) explains how frustration leads to aggression. The blocking of an organism in its pursuit of a goal could lead to the accumulation of frustration, the build-up of which may seek an energy outlet, and which may by extension release some aggressive action to confront the perceived cause of obstruction. In other words, the theory explains that aggression may be released to register discomfort about and tackle one's frustration which may be a consequence of the unequal structure of society.

In addition, it must be noted that poverty and deprivations could engender conflicts. From the explanations given using the three conflict theories above, it could be understood that the three of them can well explain the situation under study. More importantly, displacements would not have taken place without the ensuing conflicts. The conflicts and violence propagated by Boko haram may be a result of frustration-aggression that herdsmen are human needs, where they have been dislodged by climate change resulting in drought and famine. But must they destroy other people's livelihoods: life and property in order to sustain theirs?

5. Discussion of findings

5.1. The ways through which Violent Conflicts Affect Women

Violent conflicts affect society, especially the women folk in so many ways far and beyond being widowed by the loss of their husbands in war situations. Some of the ways through which conflict affects women include: -

5.2. Forced Eviction/ Displacement

In violent conflict situations such as war, insurgency, etc., women usually bear the burden of moving their families and themselves to safety (UNHCR, 2019), as men are often engaged in defending their territory. Most times, men are the prime targets thereby forcing them to go into hiding leaving their wives to take the family to safety. The United Nations refugee agency in its 2019 report shows that half of the world's 80 million displaced persons are women and children (UNHCR, 2019). This is because the gender dynamics of most armed conflicts often reveal sexist social standards. Thus, men fight for defense while women are forced to run away with the children and the aged. Save for a few societies, women are not allowed to fight in the field of war. It is a commendable feat when women flee conflict situations with

children while providing them the much-needed protection. The problems caused by eviction have gained increasing international recognition not only because of their severe adverse consequences but also because of the intricate and complex nature of evictions. Thus, the United Nations has not only considered forced eviction as a gross violation of rights but has also declared all instances of forced eviction as *prima facie* incompatible with the principles of international law

5.3. Sexual violence/ exploitation

In war/ violent conflicts especially those that are politically orchestrated, sexual violence against women is often deployed as a war tactic to terrorize and demoralize opponents. The United Nations in 2020 confirmed 2,500 incidences of conflict-related sexual violence committed against women across 18 countries of the world (most Middle East, South East Asia, and Africa). For instance, 62% of women in Afghanistan have gone through the horror of the three forms of gender-based violence (GBV): psychological, physical, and sexual abuse. A similar scenario is re-enacted in virtually all armed conflict flash-points across the globe. This ugly reality manifests and engenders trauma, stigmatization against victims, unwanted pregnancy, health challenges, and poverty. Human trafficking and domestic violence gain credence or momentum during armed conflicts due mainly to increasing social instability, poverty, and poor enforcement of state laws.

5.4. Limited Access to healthcare

The impact of violent conflicts on the health of women especially those widowed as a result of conflicts is calamitous, tragic, and devastating. This is due mainly to the glaring reality that the affected country's health infrastructure is often destroyed, and healthcare providers migrate to safety. Consequently, the remnants of healthcare facilities and workers are always overwhelmed due to a dearth of staff. Social amenities such as water supply, sanitation, electricity, and supplies are disrupted thereby exposing women to all manner of activities in a bid to make ends meet.

Limited access to sexual and reproductive healthcare services such as family planning, etc. exposes women in war-torn zones to unwanted pregnancies, HIV/AIDS, etc. This situation may lead to the affected women having sleeping disorders and difficulties in falling asleep, getting up in the middle of the night, having nightmares, and having insomnia.

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in its 2021 report stated that about 20% of Yemen's remaining hospitals are able to provide maternal and child health services as a result of the conflict. The report further indicates the devastating implication is that on the average a woman dies every two hours in childbirth in the country. The causes of these deaths are either preventable or curable or both but dearth of facilities and workers has made the situation persist. This state of affairs is reinforced by poor nutrition and limited access to food. The report further estimated that 1.2 million pregnant and breastfeeding women in Yemen are currently severely malnourished (UNFPA, 2021).

Conflicts expose women to increased vulnerability on range of health threats. Social, cultural and economic disempowerment is compounded by poverty, and their combination produces a context in which women are susceptible to sexual exploitation and drug abuse. Items addressed include the availability of and access to preventive health services, information and treatment, and involve processes of empowerment, gender relations and the impact of HIV/AIDS.

5.5. Limited Economic Opportunity/ Poverty

Violent conflicts often destabilize the affected country's economy and disrupt social patterns leaving the survivors with dire consequences. The Stop Violence Against Women (StopVAW) in its 2005 report stated that women may be forced into prostitution or may be forced to choose to prostitute themselves in order to support their families in a violent conflict situation. This is because conflict and the resulting instability weaken border controls and facilitate the movement of women from country to country as refugees or forced migrants. Corruption also thrives in conflict zones where separatist regimes may be funded by such activities as kidnapping, trade in narcotics, or trafficking in people. These states of affairs continue unabated because women are either ready to do anything for the survival of their children or are forced to do so.

5.6. Moral Decay/ Transactional Sex

In conflict situations, women are forced by the prevailing circumstances to abandon morality and look for whatever works for them in a move to cater to their families mostly as widows (Mootz et al., 2022). Thus, they engage in transactional sex or prostitution to make money in order to take care of their children. In May 2021, the Legal Defence and Assistance Project (LEDAP) decried the rising trend of transactional sex in the various internally displaced persons (IDP) camps across the Northeast geopolitical zone. A zone ravaged by the Boko Haram insurgency. According to the

report, both government officials, security agents, and other camp managers subject women to sexual exploitation and abuses of diverse degrees (New Telegraph, May 14, 2021). In September 2020, Premium Times had raised similar alarm accounting for government officials, security agencies, etc. were subjecting women to transactional sex (Premium Times, September 20, 2020).

5.7. Rise in Child marriage

Sequel to the fact that war disrupts economies, supply chains, and agricultural production, it often leads to widespread poverty and hunger. Consequently, rates of child marriage go up as families become desperate for additional income or one less mouth to feed. Child brides often face a lifetime of suffering. Girls who marry before 18 are less likely to remain in school, more likely to experience domestic violence, and more likely to die from complications during pregnancy and childbirth. The consequences ripple across generations: The children of child brides are more likely to be stillborn or die in their first month of life.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined the multifaceted impact of armed conflict on women, with a specific focus on the experiences of women in conflict zones. Through a desk review of secondary sources, the research has highlighted the devastating consequences of conflict on women's lives, including forced displacement, sexual violence, economic marginalization, and limited access to healthcare.

It is imperative to address the specific needs of women affected by conflict through targeted interventions. These interventions should include:

- **Protection:** Ensuring women's safety and security through legal and institutional mechanisms.
- **Psychosocial Support:** Providing mental health services to help women cope with trauma and violence.
- **Economic Empowerment:** Creating opportunities for women to participate in economic activities and gain financial independence.
- **Access to Justice:** Ensuring that women have access to justice and redress for violations of their rights.
- **Education and Awareness:** Raising awareness about the impact of conflict on women and promoting gender equality.

While this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of women in conflict zones, further research is needed to explore the long-term consequences of conflict on women's lives and well-being. Additionally, more empirical research is required to assess the effectiveness of interventions aimed at addressing the needs of women affected by conflict.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed. The material described is not under publication or consideration for publication elsewhere.

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