



Breaking the Culture of Violence against Civilians – A Case Study of Nigeria

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Abstract

Violence is seen as an intricate part of the Nigerian socio-political landscape, and often occurs in many ways including violent events targeting civilians which form the base for this study. Though the phenomenon of violence against civilians has found its way into many academic and developmental discourses, durable and practical solutions have not been fully implemented to effectively address its causes and consequences. The study has four objectives: to understand the concept of breaking the culture of violence against civilians; to determine effects of sexual violence against civilians; to examine effects of attacks against civilians; and to evaluate the effects of abduction or forced disappearance of civilians in Nigeria'. Relying on a methodical examination of existing scholarly works and secondary quantitative data generated from the database of the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) from January 1997 to September 2023, this study argues that violent events targeting civilian populations gave rise to a culture in Nigeria which requires urgent and collaborative actions for combating it. The People-Centered Development Theory is used as a theory to underscore the importance of engaging members of the community in efforts to prevent and mitigate violence against civilians in Nigeria. It was concluded that sexual violence, attacks and abduction/forced disappearance have significant effects on civilians and also on sustainable national development.



Consequently, the study encourages the Nigerian government to urgently adopt and implement the Draft National Policy on Protection of Civilian and Civilian Harm Mitigation in Armed Conflict using a people-centered development approach as well as adopt the Gender Early Warning System (GEWS) approach as an innovative, joint and proactive approach for dealing with emerging trends and incidents of violence against civilians in Nigeria in line with 'Leave No One Behind Principle' of the 2030 Agenda of the United Nations.

Keywords: Violence against Civilians; Sexual Violence; Attack; Abduction; Gender; Early Warning System

Introduction

Civilian populations often endure the effects of armed conflicts; there are many reported cases of deliberate attacks, abduction and detention of civilians across the globe, and as CRC (2023) observed, violence caused massive displacement of many populations, and disruption of social and economic lives of the people. Fjelde & Hultman (2014) connected armed conflicts with carnages and violation of human rights of civilians whereas Balcells & Stanton (2021) linked violence against civilians (including massacres, cruelty, sexual abuse and involuntary displacement) to conflict situations where State-owned security personnel or global peacekeepers are not enough to safeguard the people. Boukhars (2022) identified context-specific factors (for example, grievances among groups and control over land) as key factors that heighten violence against civilians by insurgents. ACLED (2022) identified the upsurge in political violence as a key driver of violence against civilian populations.

Violence against civilians can lead to damages, psychological trauma, and loss of lives, livelihoods and basic infrastructure. In many instances, civilian populations can become victims of direct and indirect fires; for instance, when their homes are close to military targets and checkpoints, or where they are targeted in error or mistaken as combatants as a result of poor security intelligence and inadequate provision for noncombatant presence on the battle arena (THISDAY, 2021).

Statement of Problem

Global and national legal and policy frameworks prohibit violence against non-combatants; however, civilian casualties are still rife (Brehm, Robinson & Saraswati, 2023). Violent actions targeting private citizens are most often adopted as a tool by Government and other actors during conflicts and in cases where other strategies were futile.



Such violence can occur due to their gender, ethnicity, profession and government affiliation, religious, socio-economic, political or cultural background. For instance, while ACLED (2022) linked the increase in violence targeting civilians to an extensive surge in overall political violence in Nigeria, Kalyvas (2006) argued that such violence occurs when armed groups do not have the knowledge needed to effectively respond to their opponents.

In Nigeria, violent acts by armed groups against civilians can occur in direct and indirect forms such as civilian killings, suicide bombings, kidnappings, cruelty, maiming, sexual-based violence including rape and involuntary marriages, enlistment of child soldiers, and attacks on public structure, community and spiritual leaders, and private citizens (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2023). State forces may commit violence against civilians during their counterterrorism operations in form of arbitrary use of power such as unlawful killings, sexual and other types of violence, and forced detentions against suspected combatants and civilians. Similarly, ACLED (2022) identified communal and ethnic militia activities such as killings, attacks, and abductions are key drivers of violence targeting civilians. Furthermore, violence against civilians can lead to humanitarian crises particularly massive displacement of human populations, health challenges, food insecurity, destruction of lives and assets including infrastructure, and the disruption of socio-economic life. Violence may also cause other forms of violence and formation of resistant groups (LSEPS, 2023).

Dietrich (2015) identified these fourteen (14) gaps to civilian protection in Nigeria: dearth of relevant policies to safeguard civilian populations; problem of distinguishing civilian populations from revolutionaries; insufficient deployment of security personnel and reluctance to battle; poor competence and responsibility; regularization of violence; limited capacity and tools; deficiency in grievance mechanisms; poor due process and illegal imprisonment; ineffective communications and communal relations; alleged dishonesty and distrust of security personnel; poor gathering of intelligence and information; disproportionate combat strategies; unusual circumstances and the SOE; and rising vigilantism. These identified challenges in civilian protection have led to an abuse of power by State security, violation of civilians' human rights, and the public's distrust of institutions that are saddled with the responsibility of protecting them.

Many approaches for mitigating violence targeting civilians have been identified by scholars and practitioners in the development sector; however, they have not been integrative and comprehensive in addressing the culture of violence against civilians. Also, while

extant literature has identified the various triggers of violence against civilians, they have not been able to provide context-specific details of the effects of such violence and their mitigating actions. This study therefore aims to examine the effects of sexual violence, attacks, and abduction/forced disappearance of civilian populations, and identify effective mechanisms for breaking the culture of violence against civilians.

Rationale for the Study

This study reviewed available literature and secondary data on violence targeting noncombatants in Nigeria so as to understand their patterns, consequences and actions for preventing or mitigating such violence. Thus, the study suggests practical and pioneering approaches to break the culture of violence targeting civilians in Nigeria while contributing scholarly ideas to enhance development planning, policy and actions that safeguard and enhance the quality of life of civilians across the Country.

Research Objectives

The overall objective of the study is to understand the concept of breaking the culture of violence against civilians in Nigeria while the specific objectives are to:

1. To determine the effects of Sexual Violence against Civilians in Nigeria.
2. To examine the effects of Attacks against Civilians in Nigeria.
3. To evaluate the effects of Abduction or Forced Disappearance of Civilians in Nigeria.

Research Questions

The study is centered on three key research questions (RQs) that are influenced by the study objectives, theoretical and conceptual frameworks:

RQ1: What are the effects of sexual violence against civilians in Nigeria?

RQ2: What are the consequences of attacks against civilians in Nigeria?

RQ3: What are the impacts of Abduction or Forced Disappearance of Civilians in Nigeria?



Focus of the Study

The study is focused on the pattern, frequency and impacts of violence against civilians in Nigeria, and discusses gender early warning system (GEWS) approach as an innovative and sustainable model for addressing violence against civilians in Nigeria.

Research Methodology

Secondary data and the descriptive method of analysis are used in this study. Extant literature and other relevant information were sourced from specialized research database, Open Access research papers and academic search engines. Numerical data was sourced from ACLED Dataset between January 1997 and September 2023 to buttress the point that a culture of violence targeting civilians prevails in Nigeria and has huge consequences for human capital and sustainable national development.

Theoretical Framework

Contemporary development scholars advanced the People-Centered Development Theory due to their dissatisfaction with the traditional development theories and the need for alternative conceptual explanations. Key proponents of the Theory include Dodds (1989), Conyers & Hills (1990), and Roodt (2001).

Also termed 'Participatory Theory', the People-Centered Development Theory was selected as the theoretical frame for this research to reveal the significance of community involvement as a key strategy for undertaking actions geared towards reducing violence against civilians. People-Centered development approach emphasizes the improvement of autonomy of local communities, promotion of equity and fairness, and access to inclusive policymaking that affects their lives. It is concerned about principles of impartiality, durability and completeness in the process of advancement. People-centered development promotes moderate communal actions to boost financial autonomy, social capital and creation of dependable income streams.

This study uses the People-Centered Development Theory to emphasize the importance of engaging members of the community in undertaking preventive and mitigating actions for addressing violence targeting civilian populations in Nigeria.



Historical Background on Violence against Civilians in Nigeria

Before the 1990s, a universal agreement about the origins of violence targeting civilians shaped the philosophy around incidences of mass killing, genocide, and terrorism; however, while scholars with backgrounds on history, journalism and policy making relied on this earlier agreement, other scholars particularly most political scientists scarcely focused their research on these violent trends, their causes and consequences (Valentino, 2014). The agreement essentially focused on interpreting extensive violence targeting civilian populations as an outcome of dual practices: collateral damage or as a result of ancient hatreds. Most scholars viewed civilian deaths as 'collateral damage' or as the disastrous side-effect of most extensive armed conflicts as a result of external or eccentric factors such as the precision of accessible weaponry or if conflicts occur in highly populated areas (Valentino, 2014; Conway-Lanz, 2006). Violence against civilians was also viewed as the outcome of prehistoric tribal hatreds, or the malicious and vicious acts of individuals (Kaplan, 1993; Huntington, 1993; Sadowski, 1998; Power, 2002).

The third consensus is that motivations for violence targeting civilian populations go beyond collateral damage and ancient hatreds; they are perceived as the outcome of decisive activities of politicians that enhance violence and deliberate strategies instead of the illogical actions of the public (Gagnon, 1994). Some scholars identified the nexus between armed conflict and violence targeting unprotected civilian populations; these scholars include Melson (1992), Fein (1993), Kalyvas (1999, 2006), Valentino (2000), Arreguin-Toft (2001), and Straus (2006).

Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) is a foremost incident in the history of violence against civilians in Nigeria; as Hum Angle (2020) reported, the civil war between Nigerian government and pro-independence groups that represented the Republic of Biafra caused the death of over one million people, approximately 100,000 military fatalities, and between 500,000 and two million Biafran civilian deaths due to hunger and other effects of the conflict.

Maitatsine Riots (1980-1985) in Northern Nigeria that started as an outcry against Western culture, education, and technology led to 4,177 deaths (including the riot leader - Muhammadu Marwa) in Kano State in 1980; 3,350 in Borno State in 1982; about 1,000 deaths in Gongola State in 1984; and about 100 deaths in Bauchi State in 1985.



The Niger Delta Militancy which began in the 1990s is another remarkable historical event which contributes to violence against civilians in the country, and has led to thousands of civilian deaths.

From the 2000s till date, there has been an increase in Farmer-Herder Crisis due to climate change, decrease in the amount of accessible grazing land, and fewer spaces for farming (Hum Angle, 2020). Amnesty International (2018) Report revealed that from January, 2016 to October, 2018, more than 3,641 deaths occurred, 57 per cent of them in 2018 alone. Benue, Adamawa, Plateau, Zamfara, Taraba, Kaduna, and Nasarawa States were identified as the States greatly impacted by the crisis.

Insurgency in the North East by extremist groups can be labeled the most impactful act of violence targeting civilians in Nigeria. For instance, Dietrich (2015) contended that violent incidents against civilians by Boko Haram from 2009 till date are among the highest violence by extremist groups across Africa: more than two million noncombatants have fled their homes since the insurgency increased in 2013. Relying on a report by the Council on Foreign Relations, Hum Angle (2020) affirmed that since May 2011, the insurgency has led to more than 37,500 deaths and about 2.5 million displacements in the Lake Chad Basin. Amnesty International (2015) Report indicated that there were more than 200 attacks and over 3,500 deaths while Ewi (2015) reported that there were over 60 attacks and more than 1,000 deaths arising from insurgency from May 29 to August 31, 2015.

In the Southern part of Nigeria, banditry, cultism and electoral violence are among the main sources of insecurity and civilian death; for instance, ACLED (2022) Report identified more than 150 violent actions involving cult groups in 2022 that resulted to about 230 documented killings. Also, about 3,900 mortalities resulted from violence against civilian populations against 4,000 fatalities documented across the country in 2021. Of the six geopolitical zones, the North Western region and the Middle Belt account for about seventy-five per cent of the overall number of civilian fatalities reported by ACLED in 2022 as against their combined share which exceeded 75 per cent in 2021. In recent times, studies by ACLED (2023) revealed that violence against civilians is becoming more prevalent in the South Eastern and the North Eastern regions.

Conceptual Clarification of Terms

Abduction refers to the wrongful taking away or detention of another person, usually by force or fraud (Oxford Reference, 2023).



Belligerents refer to individual insurgents who, in a civil war, actually control part of the territory of a State (Médecins Sans Frontières, n.d).

Civilians refer to all persons who do not belong to any State forces or non-State armed group (ICRC, 2023).

Civilian Protection Payment is an ad hoc arrangement where community members pay levies in cash or kind to non-state armed groups in exchange for protection from attacks by other groups or attacks by the groups receiving the payment (Buba, 2023).

Culture refers to the aspects of humans that symbolize sphere of our existence (Galtung, 1996). In this study, culture refers to the way politics is practiced in Nigeria, that is, people's beliefs about politics which change overtime.

Early Warning involves the consistent collection and investigation of data on conflicts through the systematic monitoring and reporting of conflict indicators (Defontaine, 2019).

Early Warning Systems (EWS) are crucial elements of climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction that target to prevent or lessen the damages caused by hazards (Climate-ADAPT, 2022).

Enforced and Involuntary Disappearance occurs when a person is secretly abducted by a State, political organization, or by a third party (Duquesne University, 2023).

Gender refers to the socially constructed set of roles, rights, responsibilities, entitlements, and behaviors associated with being a woman or a man in society (United States of America Department of State, 2020).

Non-State Actor refers to any non-governmental group which has a name and uses armed forces against a government, or a formally organized group that does not belong to the State, or unorganized civilian groups (Croicu & Sundberg, 2017; Sundberg & Melander, 2013).

Political Violence refers to any type of systematized violence organized by political actors including governments, rebel groups, insurgents, or terrorist organizations (Valentino, 2014).



Responsibility to Protect is articulated in *Paragraphs 138-139 of the World Summit Outcome Document* as a political commitment made by Heads of States and Governments at the 2005 UN World Summit with the aim to prevent and halt four mass atrocity crimes: genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2023). The UN Secretary-General published a report in 2019 tagged 'Implementing the Responsibility to Protect' which identified three pillars of responsibilities: Pillar 1- State responsibility to its own population; Pillar 2 - State responsibility to assist other States in preventing atrocities and protecting their populations; and Pillar 3 - Responsibility of the international community to respond with appropriate timely and decisive action to atrocities taking place in other States (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2023).

Sexual Violence refers to an action which inflicts harm of a sexual nature such as penetrative rape, and other actions such as public stripping, sexual torture, among others. Irrespective of the gender, a person can be targeted with sexual violence (ACLEDD, 2023).

Triggers refer to events or processes that influence a micro- to macro-level change in violence against civilians (Brehm, Robinson & Saraswati, 2023).

Discussion of Key Findings Understanding The culture of Violence Against Civilians in Nigeria

Violence against civilians has other common terminologies including 'civilian targeting', 'civilian victimization', 'one-sided violence', and 'terrorism'. Balcells & Stanton (2021) conceptualized violence against civilians as 'any act that, through the use of force, harms or damages civilians or civilian targets, including lethal and nonlethal forms of violence.' Violence against civilians also refers to violent events where a structured armed group intentionally causes harm on unprotected persons (ACLEDD, 2017). Extensive violence against civilians leads to a growing number of internally displaced persons and refugee populations (Leatherman, 2007). There are many reported cases of violence against civilians by State security personnel that have led to civilian casualties, forced disappearances, conflict-related sexual violence, involuntary displacement, and hindrances to humanitarian access (Brown University, Security Assistance Monitor, and InterAction, 2022).

United Nations Security Council and the African Union's Peace and Security Council recognize that the Nigerian Government and other



Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) Countries have the primary responsibility and mandate to protect civilians in their territories (Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect, 2015). Thus, the 'Principle of Distinction' is viewed as a critical element of the Responsibility to Protect as well as a significant principle of International Humanitarian Law which encourages parties to a conflict to always distinguish between 'civilians' and 'combatants' and avoid attacks against civilians.

Forms of Violence Against Civilians

Violence against civilians can occur in lethal forms such as mass killings, bombings, and terrorist attacks, and in nonlethal forms such as forced displacement and sexual violence (Balcells & Stanton, 2021; Lichtenheld, 2020; Nordås & Cohen, 2021). In direct violence, armed combatants have face-to-face confrontations with their victims using light weapons such as machetes or rifles whereas in indirect violence, heavy weapons such as tanks or fighter planes are used in remote and unilateral forms (Balcells & Stanton, 2021).

Patterns of Violence Against Civilians

There are various patterns of violence against civilians in conflict situations (Balcells & Stanton, 2021). Gutiérrez-Sanín & Wood (2017) identified four dimensions: collection (the form of violence), target groups (the social groups attacked), occurrence (the count or rate of violence), and method (the type of weapon or technology used in carrying out violence).

Intentional Violence is a pattern of violence where an armed person or group leadership or both, deliberately inflicts harm on civilian populations while unintentional violence against civilians also termed 'collateral damage' involves actions whereby neither the armed person or group leadership deliberately seeks to harm civilians; for instance, cases where civilians are trapped in the crossfire or displaced during a military engagement (Balcells & Stanton, 2021).

Strategic violence against civilians refers to violence intended to achieve a military or political objective; for instance, restraint towards civilians can be an intentional strategic choice by State forces or non-State armed groups (Hoover Green, 2018; Stanton, 2016; Wood, 2009).



Triggers of Violence Against Civilians

The under-listed factors are identified among the major triggers of violence targeting civilians.

Provision of Support: Governments and belligerents commonly use targeted violence to induce civilian populations into providing the required support or to compel them to withhold their support from perceived enemies (Kalyvas, 2006; Kalyvas & Kocher, 2009; Wood, 2010).

- ii. **Humanitarian Aid:** Several studies have shown that the provision of humanitarian assistance meant to enable the government to have victory over civilians often aggravates contestations as combatants challenge government attempts to solidify control over territory, leading to increased insurgent violence against civilians (Barcells & Stanton, 2021; Weintraub, 2016; Sexton, 2016; Wood & Sullivan, 2015).

- iii. **Logic of Control and Punishment:** Some scholars perceive violence targeting civilians as a weapon of the weak often used when armed combatants do not have other available resources for obtaining civilian support or compelling their opponents (Arreguín-Toft, 2005; Wood, 2010, 2014; Hultman, 2007).

- iv. **Armed Groups' Ideology, Organizational Norms and Practices:** Most experiences of civilian victimization are transferred across generations thereby affecting the ideology of a person and members of the family and leading to possible establishment of organizational structures and policies that promote a culture of violence (Balcells, 2012). While Straus (2015) argued that exclusionary ethnic or national ideologies are principal factors that enhance violence (such as ethnic cleansing and genocide), Wood (2018) contended that civilian killings evolve from practice, norms, or other socialization processes that develop within armed groups. According to Gates (2017), socialization practices among armed groups that forcibly recruit members contribute a lot to the advancement of a 'culture of violence' which encourages violent behavior toward group members and civilian populations.

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- v. **Weakness:** Various scholars have advanced the argument that insurgent groups might engage in civilian victimization if they are not strong enough to oppose State security forces directly; such lack of strength can prompt armed groups into violent actions so as to induce backing from local noncombatants (Valentino, 2004; Pape, 2005; Hultman, 2007; Wood, 2010; Wood et al., 2012).
- vi. **Economic Factors:** Access to external funding, financial and other incentives can influence people to engage in rebellious and violent acts (Weinstein, 2007).
- vii. **Motives:** Regional, local or personal reasons (for instance, revenge among political rivals, hatred, personalized vengeance, insatiability, hostility or a psychosomatic response to politically-motivated or military losses) can occasionally lead to violence against civilians (Petersen, 2002; Kalyvas, 2006; Weinstein, 2007; Mueller, 2004; Midlarsky, 2005).
- viii. **Emotional and Psychological Factors:** Emotions such as dishonor, repulsion, offence, and antagonism are among the identified triggers of violence against civilians (Minton, 2015; Weidmann, 2011; Balcells, 2010, 2017; Haer et al., 2013; Littman & Paluck, 2015).
- ix. **Political Elite Ideology:** Some political leaders encourage violence against civilians to serve their personal goals and interest, acquire more political power, support and financial benefits, to destabilize or overpower their political rivals (Valentino, 2014; Brass, 1997; Gagnon, 2004; Mueller, 2004).

Specific Objective 1: Effects of Sexual Violence Against Civilians in Nigeria

Conflict-related sexual violence is an emerging research area for scholars in the fields of political sciences, gender, international relations and conflict studies (Nordås & Cohen, 2021; Balcells & Stanton, 2021; Reiter, 2015). Conflict-related sexual violence includes rape, coerced undressing, and non-penetrating sexual assault or nonviolent forms such as humiliation and improper sexual comments (Hynes et al., 2004; Wood, 2006; Skjelsbaek, 2010; Htun and Laurel, 2012; Wood, 2018).



The Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict (SVAC) dataset and the International Criminal Court (ICC) defined sexual violence as including direct force or physical violence and/or the threat of force or coercion. The SVAC dataset which aligns with the globally-accepted Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) datasets is currently a principal source of numerical data on conflict-related sexual violence; it made sexual violence an aspect of conflict in performing quantitative evaluation of conflict and its consequences (Nordås & Cohen, 2021). Cohen & Nordås (2014) identified seven distinct forms of violence from this definition as rape, sexual bondage, involuntary prostitution, induced pregnancy, forced pasteurization/abortion, sexual maiming, and sexual cruelty. United Nations (2019, p. 3) defined conflict-related sexual violence as one which includes all forms of sexually-motivated violence that are directly or indirectly associated with a conflict and those perpetrated by combatants.

Several studies have revealed that sexual violence occur as a result of many factors; for instance, while Nordås & Cohen (2021) affirmed that sexual violence such as sexual torture, gang rape, and sexual slavery are influenced by a variety of processes, Cohen et al (2013) argued that conflict-related sexual violence is commonly enacted by disruptive insurgents. Several scholars including Leiby (2009b) and Hoover Green (2018) have advanced the argument that sexual violence targeting civilians can be committed by the State. Nordås & Cohen (2021) depended on circumstantial evidence to buttress their point that sexual violence are a key feature in States' oppressive repertoires, in cases of public massacres, and in dictatorial States where the intimidating tool is used in other methods of subjugation.

In tracing the causes of sexual violence, Mitchell (2004) and Butler et al (2007) highlighted poor management and correction of State security as the core driver of sexual violence whereas Davenport (2007) posited that State domination originates from the intentional motivations and direction of leaders. However, Leiby (2009b) argued that are instances where agents may commit sexual violence without the knowledge of their principal officers. Studies by Cohen (2016) identified most documented cases of sexual violence in detention that are committed by the State. There are also cases of sexual violations by United Nations peacekeepers and other State personnel that are connected to conflicts such as private military workers (Nordås & Rustad, 2013; Karim & Beardsley, 2017; Westendorf, 2020; Snell, 2011). Though Nordås & Cohen (2021) posited that conflict-related sexual violence is a key feature of war perpetrated by men



against women, Farwell (2004) perceived it as a normal and inevitable side effect of conflict which occurs as a result of male carnal desires.

There is gender imbalance in reporting cases of sexual violence against males; for instance, while Carpenter (2006) argued that men and boys as victims and survivors of sexual violence is often ignored, Sivakumaran (2007) believed that male victims and survivors may not want to report due to humiliation and stigmatization. In Nigeria, there is a recent argument by CIVIC (2023) that though both males and females are vulnerable to conflict-related sexual violence, the female gender is the most affected. For instance, 2022 Statistics revealed an increase in reported cases of sexually-motivated violence committed by combatants, security forces, and other conflict stakeholders; also, the UN Secretary General's report revealed 601 cases of sexual violence in 2021 that affected 326 girls and 275 women. Of the reported cases, 80 percent constituted rape and 5 percent were sexual slavery.

Victims and survivors of sexual violence pass through harsh conditions throughout and beyond conflict situations and often choose to report or hide their experiences for different reasons (Utas, 2005; Leiby, 2009a; Nordås & Cohen, 2021). They often suffer from humiliation, anxiety, exclusion, and mistrust, and may isolate themselves from the society (Wood, 2008). The victims also face stigma from their relatives and other members of the society, and in some cases, may be forced into committing suicide or engaging in anti-social vices that are inimical to personal and community development. The consequences of sexual violence have substantial impacts on actions to alleviate the consequences of conflict and recovery processes (Lindsey, 2019). According to CIVIC (2023), victims and survivors of sexual violence and their families are left with horrific physical and psychological scars and other physical harm attributable to the violence. For the women and girls, there are increasing cases of forced pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections which can intensify their mental and emotional trauma as well as lead to stigmatization, discrimination, ostracism, limited access to healthcare, and childbirth complications.

Addressing conflict sexual-related violence (CSRV) has not been successful in Nigeria because of poor political will at Federal, State and Local Government levels which leads to inadequate funding for programmes and policies to prevent and respond to CRSV. For instance, the government of Nigeria reduced by 49%, its 2022 budgeting funding against rape which aimed to track and rehabilitate survivors. This in turn, led to the reduction of resources including health and psychosomatic support services for victims of

sexually-motivated violence (CIVIC, 2023; Tribune Online, 2022). The culture of silence also hinders actions against conflict sexual-related violence; most surviving victims are often unwilling to speak up for fear of stigma, retaliation, or further violence. This condition becomes more difficult when sexual offenders are not adequately punished for their offences thereby leading to a culture of impunity.

Several initiatives have been introduced and implemented so as to address conflict sexual-related violence in Nigeria. For instance in the North East, CIVIC through its engagement with civilians that are organized in Community Protection Committees, helps them to identify how to prevent and respond adequately to CRSV, and supported them in establishing channels of communications with relevant authorities. This Community Protection Committees which comprises women, men and persons with disabilities, regularly discuss and address their protection concerns and needs with the local authorities and security forces, which has in turn, improved their response to any incident of CSRV, while also providing referral pathways for victims to get the support they need from our partners (CIVIC, 2023).

Furthermore, capacity building and other initiatives to empower victims and survivors of sexual violence are necessary in dealing with its undesirable effects (Amisi et al., 2018). The academic community should continue to hypothesize and evaluate the various mechanisms for preventing or mitigating conflict-related sexual violence (Nordås & Cohen, 2021). Wood (2014) highlighted the importance of understanding the nature of the sexual violence in order to determine the right mechanism to use in ending or mitigating it (that is, whether the sexual violence is strategic, opportunistic, or evolved as a practice among armed groups). Leatherman (2007) recommended the urgent need for more collaborative and effective global actions to enforce international humanitarian laws that prohibit sexual violence, and the provision of effective measures to enhance the safety and welfare of vulnerable groups. Also, support and recovery programs should integrate vocational and educational, health and socio-economic programs to assist victims and survivors of sexual violence to be reintegrated into the society and build back better and stronger.

Specific Objective 2 – Effects of Attacks Against Civilians in Nigeria

Attacks refer to acts of violence against the adversary, whether in offence or defense and in whatever territory conducted (ICRC, 2023). International Humanitarian Law proscribes some attacks against civilian populations. For instance, Articles 48, 51(20), 85(3) and Article



13 of the Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and Relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts, of 8 June 1977 provide that the civilian population may never be attacked or terrorized. Similarly, *Articles 52 – 56 and 85(3)* prohibit attacks directed at civilian objects (ICRC, 2023).

Non-State actors engage in indiscriminate and unauthorized killings, kidnapping, bodily exploitation, and other forms of harm against civilians (United States Department of State, 2022). For instance, in the first six months of 2014, over 2,053 civilian deaths occurred from extensive attacks by Boko Haram insurgents in more than 70 towns and villages in Abuja, the North East and other parts of the country. In most of these attacks, noncombatants were killed in markets, religious centres, and residential areas (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

Attacks and other forms of violence by State security have also led to many civilian deaths. For instance, United States Department of State (2022) reported that on February 18, 2022, an airstrike by State security personnel which targeted bandit leaders on the Nigeria-Niger border led to 12 civilian deaths (including more than four children) while another airstrike in Niger State led to the death of more than six children on April 13, 2022. According to Human Rights Watch (2014), since 2009, there has been an increase in the number of reported cases of abuses (such as extreme force, setting homes ablaze, physical abuse, forced detention and disappearance of men and boys, and extrajudicial killings of civilians suspected of supporting armed groups) committed by State Security in their response to attacks by armed combatants.

Specific Objective 3 – Effects of Abduction or Forced Disappearance of Civilians in Nigeria

Forced or enforced disappearance refers to the apprehension, imprisonment, capture or any other form of denial of right by State actors or by individuals or groups acting under the guidance and direction of the State, coupled with the failure to admit the denial of liberty or by concealing the destiny or location of the missing person, which places such individual beyond the ambit of the law (Article 7.2 (i) of the Rome Statute; Article 2 of International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance). An enforced or forced disappearance is the secret capture or detention of an individual by a public or political organization (Henckaerts & Doswald-Beck, 2005)



Enforced or forced disappearance is a criminal offense against the human race if done as an aspect of an extensive or organized attack against any civilians with an awareness of such attack (Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, 2002). Similarly, the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (2006) stipulates the right not to be exposed to forced disappearance, and the right for the families of the missing individual to know the reality and destiny of the missing person. Enforced disappearances infringe on several human rights including the right to: safety and dignity, not to be subjected to pain or other dehumanizing acts, liberty, safe detention; legal representation, fair trial, marital life, and right to life (Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2023).

Though Nigeria is a State party to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, it has been experiencing an increase in the incidence of enforced disappearances because of the declining safety condition in the country. Abduction or forced disappearance is commonly used across the country as an instrument of tyranny and coercion; for example, targets of enforced disappearance are frequently harmed or murdered, or deprived of their right to a fair trial and to be reunified with their relatives. Similarly, relatives of the missing person are often kept in the dark about the state and whereabouts of their beloved relative; this can lead to enormous mental and psychosomatic pain (Southern Examiner, 2023).

The United Nations Committee on Enforced Disappearances reported an increase in the number of forced disappearances across Nigeria (Peoples Gazette, 2023). Acts of forced disappearance are often committed by government and other stakeholders. Amnesty International (2021) Report showed that combatants kidnapped and executed over a hundred civilians while over 5,290 individuals were captured for ransom by criminal gangs. Across the country and particularly in the North Eastern region, armed groups continually embark on large-scale attacks and abductions of civilians (United States Department of State, 2022; Duquesne University, 2023). There are also many reported and unreported cases of abductions done by the State or on its behalf. For instance, Amnesty International in August 2022 reported that more than 50 alleged supporters of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) were arrested in 2020 in Rivers State and kept in unidentified locations (United States Department of State, 2022).

There are gender dimensions to abduction of civilians. For instance, there are emerging cases of mass abductions of women and schoolgirls across the country particularly in Northern Nigeria.

Specifically, there are reported cases of kidnapping of hundreds of schoolgirls in Chibok, Dapchi and Zamfara States in 2014, 2018, and 2021 respectively. While some of the kidnapped girls were set free after negotiations with the government, others including Leah Shuaibu are still in captivity, sexually abused, forced into marriages, or are compelled into armed groups (CIVIC, 2023).

Statistics on Violence Against Civilians in Nigeria

Table 1: Violence Against Civilians Events and Fatalities in Nigeria (1997 – 2023)

Year	Number of Violence Against Civilians Events in Nigeria	Fatalities from Violence Against Civilians Events in Nigeria
1997	42	83
1998	49	898
1999	58	463
2000	45	195
2001	52	322
2002	63	283
2003	87	423
2004	101	2204
2005	54	51
2006	46	53
2007	123	152
2008	79	98
2009	70	1051
2010	189	1442
2011	180	1888
2012	404	1948
2013	396	2126
2014	608	7006
2015	560	6995
2016	362	2214
2017	486	2352
2018	783	3083
2019	867	2424
2020	1495	2805
2021	1893	4084
2022	2182	3952
2023	1330	1930
Total	12,604	50,525

Compiled by this Author from ACLED's Dataset 1997 - 2023



Table 1 above gives a snapshot of events and fatalities of violence against civilians as captured by ACLED's dataset from January 1997 to September, 2023. The data showed that while violent events targeting civilians was at its lowest in 1997 with a total of 42 events, there was a record high of 2182 incidents in 2022 showing an increasing trend in violence against civilians. While 2005 had the lowest number of fatalities arising from violence targeting civilians, there were 7006 deaths in 2014. Various factors can be identified as triggers of such violence including political violence, climate change, armed conflicts and banditry, struggle over power, land and other resources, among others. Within 26 years, Nigeria has had 12, 604 reported cases of violence against civilians that have caused 50,525 deaths. This is an alarming situation that calls for more proactive and concerted efforts to avert such recurrence.

Breaking the Culture of Violence Against Civilians in Nigeria: Identified Actors and Approaches

Federal Ministry of Justice created a response division to tackle sexual violence, and a Solution Room to enable child survivors to access justice (Premium Times, 2023).

Centre for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) trains and engages with State security to safeguard civilians, and undertake joint actions to avert, reduce and react to civilian harm. CIVIC also trains communities in the Northeast on civilian protection, establishes community protection committees to enhance community relationships with security institutions, trains community militias including vigilantes and hunters on civilian-centered protection, and provides stakeholders' engagement platform to advocate for the adoption of National Policy on Protection of Civilian (THISDAY, 2021).

Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre (CISLAC) established a technical working group to work on the draft National Policy and the draft Bill on Protection of Civilian and Civilian Harm Mitigation in Armed Conflict, and promotes media advocacy on the Policy (THISDAY, 2021).

State-Level Peace Agencies: were established by Plateau, Kaduna and Adamawa States to assist local governments in setting up community-level peace committees to promote conflict prevention, early warning, mediation and restorative justice (USIP, 2021). This peace architecture can be replicated across communities in Nigeria.



Policy, Institutional and Legal Frameworks: Section 14 of the Nigerian Constitution (as amended) provides that the security and welfare of the people shall be the responsibility and ultimate goal of every government. Under the *Terrorism (Prevention and Prohibition) Act 2022*, the Nigerian government designated certain armed groups as 'terrorists' and intensifies its military operations in affected areas. The *Draft National Policy on the Protection of Civilian and Civilian Harm Mitigation in Armed Conflict* promotes civilian protection, treatment and rehabilitation, corrective and responsibility measures for offenders and violators of human rights (THISDAY, 2021; Premium Times, 2023). Section 2 (1) of the *Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act, 2015* recognizes that a person who willfully causes or inflicts physical injury on another person by means of any weapon, substance or object, commits an offence and is liable on conviction to a term of imprisonment not exceeding five (5) years or a fine not exceeding N100,000.00 or both.

Gender Early Warning Systems (GEWS) Approach: Studies show that gender has not been effectively mainstreamed into actions to curb violence against civilians; thus, this paper proposes the adoption of Gender Early Warning Systems (GEWS) Approach as a sustainable model for addressing the culture of violence against civilians in Nigeria. The proposed GEWS model is based on the principle of inclusivity and is founded on three pillars: collection of early warning information, engendering the analytical process of risk assessments, and the formulation of response options. With an increase in events and fatalities of violence against civilians, adopting and implementing the GEWS Model offers a practical and durable solution especially as it prioritizes a 'People-centered' and 'Needs-Based' approach for identifying and properly addressing the core needs and aspirations of civilians in relation to their safety and welfare.

Conclusion

This study concludes that violence against civilians exist in Nigeria and has caused massive loss of lives, assets and infrastructure. Specifically, it was found that sexual violence, attacks and abduction/forced disappearance targeting civilians have effects on human capital and national development. Various mechanisms for addressing violence targeting civilians exist in the Country; however, they have not been effective in addressing the evolving nature and complexities of such violent situations. Therefore, to mitigate violence against civilians, it is necessary to identify effective and durable mechanisms for addressing the effects of sexual violence, attacks, and enforced disappearances of civilians.



Key Recommendations

Overall Study Objective – Understanding the Culture of Violence Against Civilians in Nigeria

Addressing violence targeting civilian populations requires a collaborative model which integrates the following: awareness creation, culture of peace, dialogues, traditional and alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, enhanced access to productive resources (including land, technology, finance, basic health and gender-friendly infrastructure, and other resources) to enhance productivity, employability and entrepreneurship among the civilian population particularly marginalized and vulnerable groups. Also, community governance should be promoted to enhance stakeholders' engagement and relationships with the State, and promote conflict resolution mechanisms to avert more conflicts (LSEPS, 2023).

Specific Objective 1 – Effects of Sexual Violence Against Civilians in Nigeria

Addressing conflict-related sexual violence in Nigeria requires a durable and multi-disciplinary approach by all parties, including federal, state and local authorities, civil society and international organizations. This can be achieved through collaboration, public education on human rights and consequences of violence, and by enabling affected communities to lead in the response. Existing laws and policies should be strengthened and implemented to ensure that perpetrators of sexual violence are adequately punished for their crimes. Also, there is need to promote more studies and discussions on the origins, consequences, preventive and responsive measures for sexual violence. CIVIC (2023) emphasized the importance of ensuring that victims and survivors of CRSV are at the forefront of such initiatives. Also, the United Nations Committee on Enforced Disappearances in its 2023 Report encouraged States to produce correct, current and gender-disaggregated data on missing persons, establish a national databank on sexual violence, and undertake all required actions to find the missing individuals or assist those that are victimized (Peoples Gazette, 2023).

Specific Objective 2 – Effects of Attacks Against Civilians in Nigeria

This paper adopts the following recommendations by Dietrich (2015): enhance civilian protection through effective security measures for

risks assessment and intelligence evaluation; create awareness and strengthen self-protection and early warning mechanisms for civilians; enhance access to humanitarian aid and security especially for displaced populations and those vulnerable to attacks to prevent re-victimization; and clearly distinguish civilian populations from armed groups to avert violence against them and enhance their safety.

Specific Objective 3 – Effects of Abduction or Forced Disappearance of Civilians in Nigeria

There is need to promote more training and deployment of security experts, implement actions to reduce enrolment into armed groups and enhance relations among communities and their members. The placement of disciplined professional forces will further enhance the protection of citizens in conflict zones and form a shield between conflicting communities (Boukhars, 2022).

This paper agrees with the recommendation by the United Nations Committee on Enforced Disappearances that the Nigerian Government should intensify its actions to guarantee that any apprehension, imprisonment, capture or any other form of denial of freedom undertaken and hidden by State agents or their representatives are probed instantaneously and that the suspected violators are punished.

The paper also adopts the following recommendations of the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (2023): (i) the need to encourage public actions and political restructuring to address the sources of violence; (ii) establish and/or strengthen community peace committees towards peacebuilding and local early warning systems across Nigeria especially in conflict-prone areas; (iii) government should leverage existing early warning System and intensify the deployment of security personnel to conflict flashpoints; (iv) Government should as a matter of urgency, reform the security sector and integrate the principles of International Humanitarian and Human Rights Laws into security training, and enhance responsibility for human rights violations; and (v) Government should probe all cases of attacks against civilians and punish offenders.

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