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Sex for survival: Terrorism, poverty and sexual violence in north-eastern Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study advances the discourse on factors behind conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV). Focusing on terrorism-affected north-eastern Nigeria, it argues that terrorism creates poor economic conditions that compel women and girls to engage in transactional sex in exchange for money, food, shelter, protection, and marriage, despite the risks of socio-legal persecutions. This further intensifies the vulnerability of women and girls to sexual violation by security force personnel and aid workers who may exploit their positions of relative power. Furthermore, the lax government response to the rise of CRSV, partly arising from this trade in sex, has contributed to its growth. Thus, this study builds on the debate regarding the motivations behind CRSV. It advances the sex economy framework building on Elisabeth Wood's discussion of the 'toleration' of sexual violence. This pattern of CRSV also has implications for the state's capacity to access intelligence for the purpose of curbing terrorism.



KEYWORDS

Boko Haram; conflict-related sexual violence Islamic State of West African Province; gender-based violence; terrorism; transactional sex; food-for-sex

Introduction

There have been advances in the study of the drivers of conflict-related sexual violence¹ (CRSV). Some of the arguments that have held sway include those that claim pre-existing gender identities and inequality, or gender orders and structures in societies.² Another prevailing explanation for CRSV is that combatants use sexual violence to gratify their physical needs or as a strategy to psychologically weaken their opponents.³ However, studies on how a sex economy, or transactional sex,⁴ reinforces, justifies and normalises sexual violence perpetrated against women and girls in conflict-affected areas – and its socio-political and policy implications – are not common in the discourse on CRSV. This study seeks to work with the notable exceptions,⁵ examining CRSV through this lens, focussing on Nigeria's north-eastern region as a case study. The choice of north-eastern Nigeria arises from its current nexus of terrorism, poverty, and sexual violence.

It is widely acknowledged that terrorism both arises from and exacerbates poor economic conditions. It is argued in this article that such economic conditions increase the

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likelihood that women and girls will feel compelled to engage in transactional sex as a survival mechanism. The article further contends that transactional sex intensifies women's and girls' susceptibility to sexual exploitation and abuse by security agents.⁶

Since 2009 the Nigerian state has suffered from violent acts of terrorism, carried out by groups such as Boko Haram.⁷ In response, the Nigerian government established policies and institutions aiming to curb the activities of these groups. One of these institutions is the Joint Military Task Force on Boko Haram, which was later replaced with the Seventh Division of the Nigerian Army. The government also sanctioned the Civilian Joint Task Force – a vigilante group – specifically to assist the military in combating terrorism in the north-east. There have also been humanitarian efforts aimed at curbing the effects of terrorism and counter-terrorism operations. However, while these efforts are commendable, it is clear that terrorist activity continues and in addition, there have been allegations of sexual violence in counter-terrorism operations.⁸ This article thus seeks to examine factors that spur increased sexual violence in the north-eastern part of Nigeria and its implications for counter-terrorism operations.

This article draws from primary data derived from field research conducted in 2018 and 2020. Specifically, we used purposive sampling in selecting eight security personnel involved in counter-terrorism operations in the north-east and seven local non-governmental organisation (NGO) and three international NGO workers engaged in medical care, psycho-social counselling, development and advocacy efforts for women and girls who are victims or survivors of sexual violence in the north-east. Their knowledge and experience in counter-terrorism operations, capacity building, technical assistance and advocacy in the terrorism-affected north-east was the criteria for selection. Secondary sources have been drawn upon to supplement these primary data. Secondary sources include grey literature, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch reports, and critical literature on sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict settings. Content analysis was used to study the primary and secondary data.

First, from the findings of this study this article argues that the enduring violence by Boko Haram, ongoing since 2009, has led to the loss of livelihoods and created material hardship. Millions have been displaced and have settled in various camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs). The result is that to survive these harsh economic conditions, many women and girls engage in transactional sex, ie, they engage in sex acts with security personnel and with aid workers in exchange for scarce resources. The women and girls may be promised money, food, shelter, protection, and marriage in exchange for sex. Inevitably, many of them are impregnated and left to bear a child on their own. According to anecdotal evidence, these women and girls are often lured with false promises, raped, and then threatened afterwards to deter them from reporting the sexual violence.

Second, from the findings of this study this article contends that the government and the heads of security agencies in the north-east have not demonstrated the political will to curb the sex trade that has contributed toward a rise in CRSV in the region. The government does not condone CRSV, but its lackadaisical attitude in addressing sexual violence, it is here argued, has enabled it; the government appears to be more interested in institutional self-preservation, exemplified by its denials about the occurrence of sexual violence, than in curbing CRSV.

Third, the article also argues, based on this study, that the rise of sexual violence against women and girls in counter-terrorism operations in the north-east of Nigeria

has negative implications for the successful implementation of counter-terrorism objectives generally. It has been argued previously⁹ that an increase in sexual violence against women and girls would ultimately cause communities in the region to distrust security agents and aid workers. This distrust has negative security implications, as the government needs the cooperation of the community members and leaders to provide the necessary information to track down terrorist group members within communities. Thus ultimately, instances of security agents perpetrating sexual violence have strained state-society relations, undermining effective counter-terrorism. Furthermore, reports of sexual violence by state security agents may throw into question the support given to the government for Nigeria's counter-terrorism efforts from international partners in counter-terrorism. This, however, would form the basis for separate research and is not the focus of the current study.

This article makes several contributions to the literature. It contributes to the literature on the sex economy by showing how transactional sex interacts with terrorism through an empirical case study. Moreover, it contributes to the literature on CRSV by advancing how the sex economy framework aids in explaining a causal factor of CRSV. It seeks to build on the insights from Elisabeth Wood's typology of conflict-related rape, to be discussed below.¹⁰ It provides empirical evidence of how the Nigerian government and its security agencies' responses to CRSV in the north-east confirm Wood's 'toleration' typology, which argues that such an approach gives rise to, and normalises, sexual violence.¹¹

In addition to the various literature contributions, the article has practical relevance for national and local policymakers, as well as non-governmental agencies, in Nigeria. It illuminates the implications of sex trade-induced CRSV in counter-terrorism operations, and the need to review, or replace, existing approaches to combatting CRSV.

A review of the literature on causes of CRSV

There are, arguably, three main causes discussed in the existing literature¹² about CRSV: (1) the persistence of pre-existing gender identities, structures and inequality in societies; (2) sexual violence as a weapon of war; and (3) the impetus to physical gratification on the part of combatants. There has also been increased interest in how state actors' responses or inactions contribute to the rise of CRSV. However, little is known about how transactional sex is a causal factor for CRSV.

The existing gender identities, structures, and inequalities in Nigerian society during peacetime, such as household headship, privilege the male gender. Under this arrangement, women assume subservient roles, perform household chores, provide care for children, and are excluded from participating in decision-making. These subservient roles, and the related economic dependence, increase women's vulnerability to sexual violence. Central to this expectation is the logic that women are naturally expected to satisfy their male partners sexually, and that men, by default, have authority over, and the right to the bodies of women. Sara E Davies and Jacqui True describe it as the gendered structural inequalities and identities that provide explanations for conflict-related sexual violence.¹³ That vulnerability, according to the literature, is exacerbated in an outbreak of conflict in such a society.¹⁴

Thus, the outbreak of conflict not only alters the gender imbalance within a patriarchal society, but, in fact, reinforces it.¹⁵ Sara Meger refers to the military as a patriarchal

institution that relies on violence and a hyper-masculine ideology.¹⁶ According to Sheila Jeffreys, 'this masculinity is deliberately created by militaries to inculcate into soldiers attitudes that tend to be aggressive and to devalue women'.¹⁷ Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern argue that military institutions aid masculinity through the focus on physical fitness and training in violent activities, to the extent that it becomes intrinsically connected with the penchant to perpetuate violent actions.¹⁸ Thus, Meger highlights that military subcultures produce hegemonic- and hyper-masculinities, and sexual violence remains one of the predominant routes through which this is achieved (and expressed).¹⁹

Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern posit that the stereotypical association of women and girls with 'feminine' attributes and men and boys with the 'masculine' attributes leads to a construct in which women and girls are susceptible to the instruments of sexual violence in both conflict and post-conflict settings.²⁰ Ruth Seifert further acknowledges that the perpetuation of sexual violence against women reflects the society's attitudes towards women.²¹

Employing rape as a 'weapon of war' is another argument that has featured in the literature on the rationale behind CRSV.²² Sexual violence is viewed as a part of wartime strategy deployed by combatants to physically, emotionally and psychologically defeat their opponents. According to Maria Olujić, sexual abuse during war is conceived as a weapon adopted to terrorise a population, create a political communication strategy against opponents, and negate the autonomy of women over their own bodies.²³ Reiterating the above, Ruth Seifert deciphers sexual violence in conflict in five different ways: as an integral part of warfare; as an element of male-to-male communication, most especially as a symbol of humiliating opponents/enemies; as a means of reaffirming masculinity; as a tool with which to destroy the enemy/opponent's culture; and as an end-product of misogyny.²⁴

However, not all wars or conflicts lead to sexual violence. Elisabeth Wood underscores the fact of these variations, arguing that the form that sexual violence takes during conflict varies across cases and that it is not necessarily a feature of all conflicts.²⁵

Another essential point in the literature is the role of state responses to the issue of CRSV in reinforcing it. Part of a typology developed by Elisabeth Wood²⁶ when studying rape as practice, included a typology of commanders' responses to CRSV, which range between promoting prohibition of rape norms or punishing offenders; tolerating rape; or promoting rape as a policy.

Applied within a state context, the typology of Wood (who included state and non-state actors in her analysis) would suggest that armed organisations' top-ranking members may respond to CRSV by enforcing and ensuring the punishments of guilty officers, although the extent of the punishments would differ across organisations. Among the range of responses given by the top-ranking commanders in her study were the enforcement of codes of conduct or standard operating procedures on sexual violence.²⁷ The underlying logic behind this code of conduct is that it guides not only civilian affairs and conduct, but also forms a deterrent for future officers or members who may think of perpetrating such nefarious acts.²⁸

The second type of response that Wood considers is the toleration of rape despite its not being an organisational policy. This indicates that military commanders in conflict settings see sexual violence as a standard practice rather than an aberration within their unit, and thus it is tolerated. She further argues that the toleration of rape as a form of sexual

violence by commanders is more about the commander's esteem or gaining approval, respect, or acceptance of subordinates than an organisational policy. In other words, they prioritise how their subordinates would view them if the acts of sexual violence were to be punished. Thus, some approaches to individual and institutional preservation enable the toleration of sexual violence.²⁹ Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern claim that the military commanders tolerated sexual violence perpetrated by their subordinates during the violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo.³⁰

Third, Elisabeth Wood asserts that in some cases, high-ranking security agents promote CRSV by ordering, authorising or institutionalising it. Thus, it is seen as an operational tactic during conflict situations. The authorisation and ordering of sexual violence, according to Wood, further builds on the:³¹

sexual violence as a weapon of war thesis, as it illuminates how the rise of CRSV is a strategy used to weaken an opponent, a non-cooperative group or community psychologically or is used to satisfy the urges of combatants as an incentive.

Elisabeth Wood finds that sexual violence, rape in particular, is not openly ordered by military commanders. Instead, it is implicitly authorised through slogans, catchphrases, and rhetoric laden with innuendos of sexual violence.³² The above was evident in Yugoslavia, Sudan, and Guatemala.³³

Moreover, there are cases where military commanders permit sexual violence in conflict as a form of payment preceding their troops' salaries. For instance, in South Sudan, the Sudan People's Liberation Army and affiliated militia groups agreed that militia and soldiers on cattle raids were allowed to rape women and girls as a form of compensation or payment for their services.³⁴

While the above arguments aid our understanding of the drivers of CRSV, the question on how the sex economy is reinforced in conflict settings as well as facilitating CRSV has received little attention in the literature. There is also a need for further empirical studies regarding this issue in the context of counter-terrorism in Nigeria, in view of the increasing frequency and lethality of attacks in the northern region by Boko Haram and commensurate calls for government to improve counter-terrorism efforts.

Using the case of Nigeria's north-east region, an area ravaged by terrorism and increasing incidences of CRSV, the following arguments are made as a point of departure. Although the north-east has had years of socio-economic inequality due to poor governance at the central and regional levels, there is evidence that terrorist violence has significantly affected the economic activity in the region, the economy of which is based mainly on farming, pastoralism and fishing. Many residents, including women and girls, who engage in the farming and trading of food crops and livestock have been displaced and are unable to return to their primary sources of livelihood, thus leading to poor economic conditions.³⁵

As noted above, it is suggested in this article that the material deprivation caused by terrorism further influences women and girls to engage in transactional sex to survive, even though it is socio-culturally prohibited. This article proposes an important theoretical contribution to the study of CRSV by advancing a theory on how transactional sex motivates CRSV. By so doing, the article further develops the sex economy framework, considering the issue in the context of terrorism and counter-terrorism efforts. Moreover, the empirical evidence in the article supports Wood's identification of toleration as a

factor enabling CRSV, since the lack of decisive government action toward the factors that underlie transactional sex effectively normalises and tolerates it, and thus CRSV. This has repercussions for the efficacy of counter-terrorism operations.

It is essential to discuss the term transactional sex, or what is also termed the sex economy, to provide a basis for our argument.

The sex economy in conflict areas

According to Roy Baumeister and Kathleen Vohs, the sex economy refers to a system of covert and overt demand and supply of sex in exchange for access to resources (including money).³⁶ In their framing, the interaction is between two heterosexuals and is accompanied by costs and benefits for each.³⁷ However, these interactions have occurred between people of the same sex.³⁸ Irrespective, Baumeister and Vohs imply that sexual behaviour is influenced by the market situation within a particular environment. Though Baumeister and Vohs deployed their sex economy framework in understanding the interlink between human conduct and market structures – or specifically how economic conditions influence sexual behaviour in an environment free from conflict³⁹ – there are emerging studies on transactional sex in conflict and post-conflict settings.⁴⁰ However, there is a need to study this issue in terrorism-affected areas.

Conflict and violence subject people to social and economic conditions that significantly alter their lives. As put by Jasmine-Kim Westendorf and Louise Searle, poverty and insecurity become the norm during conflict periods.⁴¹ In the area affected by the conflict, the destruction of means of livelihood by the perpetrators of violence may be so extensive as to lead to deplorable socio-economic conditions, exacerbating inequalities and entrenching poverty. The disbanding of social, familial, and economic structures that accompanies such violent conflict leads to desperation.⁴² Sarah Spencer states that conflict often destroys opportunities to earn a viable income, leaving many people completely reliant on outside assistance. The above is particularly true for female- and child-headed households because reproductive work (caring for children and homes) limits their ability to secure gainful employment outside the home.⁴³ Furthermore, Westendorf and Searle argue that the structural conditions underlying poverty bring about an environment that generates a sex economy in society.⁴⁴ Similarly, Sarah Spencer stated that ‘in times of conflict, when resources are scarce, women and girls often use the last resource available to secure protection and assistance for themselves and their families: their bodies’.⁴⁵

Therefore, the above assertions advance how women and girls’ socio-economic conditions in conflict environments influence the trading of their bodies in the sex act in exchange for food and other resources. However, while the sex economy framework looks at conflict broadly, there is a need to consider how the framework can help us appreciate women’s vulnerability in areas affected by terrorist violence. Explicitly, how does the sex economy framework help us understand or explain how terrorism contributes to women’s likelihood to engage in transactional sex? How does transactional sex contribute to the rise of sexual violence and its diverse implications? In the subsequent sections, these questions will be examined by using empirical data derived from field interviews in north-eastern Nigeria. But first, there will be a look at the methods that informed this study.

Methodology

The study relied on both primary and secondary data. Primary data was gathered through interviews with executives and programme officers of NGOs as well as security agents.

Through the snowballing approach, data was derived from eight security agents who were actively engaged in counter-terrorism operations in Yobe, Borno and Adamawa States in the north-eastern part of Nigeria. The authors also conducted ten semi-structured interviews with executives and programme officers of international and local humanitarian, development and human rights NGOs involved in various service delivery and advocacy efforts in Yobe and Borno States. The delicate nature of the topic made the use of the snowballing sampling technique imperative because it enabled the researchers to access key respondents. The data was obtained between April and July 2018 and in August 2020.

The interview guide used in conducting the interviews with the NGO programme officers consisted of questions related to womens' and girls' socio-economic conditions before the 2009 Boko Haram violence and their current socio-economic status. Questions also included NGOs' knowledge about cases of sexual violence such as rape, sexual exploitation and harassment of women and girls in the north-east. It also included the roles of the counter-terrorism operatives and any other actors involved in sexual violence of women and girls in the north-east. Similarly, the interview guide for the security agents focused on issues relating to the possible or alleged involvement of some of their colleagues in sexual exploitation and violence, and factors that they observe as driving sexual violence. The authors obtained verbal consent and permission to use data in academic research on the condition of anonymity from all the interviewees.

In analysing the gathered qualitative data, content analysis was adopted. In doing this, each interview was transcribed carefully and subjected to a process of continual review and reflection before it was finally analysed vis-à-vis the aims of the study.

It is essential to point out some limitations of this study. First, there was difficulty accessing victims of sexual violence due to the stigma attached to it. Hence, interviews of NGO workers who interact with victims daily, or during field operations, were relied on. Second, conducting interviews with the security agencies was difficult as they were asked information about the sexual activities of some of their members. However, this was overcome by assuring the interviewees that the study was purely for academic purposes and that their anonymity would be guaranteed.

The study obtained secondary data from both academic and grey literature. The academic literature included extant literature and studies on sexual violence in conflict settings. Grey literature, such as reports from international NGOs, was studied. These included reports from Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Crisis Group, the United Nations Development Programme, and Relief World.⁴⁶ The reports focused on Nigerian government counter-terrorism operations in the north-east.

Terrorism and loss of livelihood in north-eastern Nigeria

This section examines how terrorism has created material imbalances and poverty among women and girls in the north-eastern part of Nigeria, where counter-terrorism operations

are ongoing at the time of writing this paper. The authors are not proposing that poverty arrived in the north-east with Boko Haram's violence; instead, it is argued that terrorism has disrupted the livelihoods of many, and decreased the growing commercial agricultural production and trade for the region as a whole. These developments increased the level of material inequality and poverty in the north-east.

In short, the violence of Boko Haram since 2009, and that of the factional Islamic State of West African Province (ISWAP) since 2015, has caused an economic crisis in the entire Lake Chad Basin, which includes north-east Nigeria. Agriculture is the mainstay of the economy of the region. Before the terrorist violence, the north-east was home to productive human and natural resources, producing livestock, food, and cash crops.⁴⁷ As noted by a security and development NGO executive in the north-east:⁴⁸

Pre-Boko Haram conflict, it is generally believed that the people of the north-east [were] agriculturally based like in Borno State especially Gwoza, Bama, Monguno, Rann and Damasak, then coming down to Adamawa like Madagali and Micheka, you will see women are at the forefront in peasant farming and commercial farming. You will see a woman engage in producing agricultural products, especially beans, groundnut, maize, rice, and so many other things. So, women depend solely on agriculture for their livelihood as source of their daily income.

Although livelihoods in the north-east were fragile, owing to the excessive reliance on small-scale agriculture, low average income levels, and a scarcity of other revenue sources, terrorist violence has clearly worsened the situation. The UN Development Programme, in its *North-East Nigeria Livelihoods and Economic Recovery Assessment*, reported that terrorism has led to a reduction in the labour force in the region, from 43% to 27% of the economically active population, between 2012 and 2013.⁴⁹

Another UNDP report on the region's economy also noted how both the terrorist violence and counter-terrorism operations have led to decreased economic productivity, food insecurity, disruption of market flow, and loss of livelihoods.⁵⁰ The violence has led to several fatalities and population displacements, hindering people from going about their normal livelihoods and disrupting the market's proper functioning. Restriction on food availability and access to farms and markets has led to a severe food insecurity crisis. The six north-eastern states' agricultural sector suffered about \$3 billion worth of destruction between 2011 and 2015.⁵¹

The crisis' spiralling effect further brought about inaccessibility and a loss of productive assets and inputs due to displacement and destruction, the disruption of facilities and transportation, and an increase in agricultural products' prices, including food (which increased at an average of 7% annually in all six affected states⁵²). All of these led to a massive fall in agriculture-related activities and food security in most of the north-eastern states.⁵³ In a separate assessment, the Federal Government of Nigeria in 2015 estimated that a loss of about \$3.7 billion was experienced in the agricultural sector alone.⁵⁴

A security and development NGO executive in the north-east agreed with this depiction of the economic impact of terrorism in the north-east.⁵⁵

When Boko Haram conflict came to [parts of the north-east], they sacked the community; they displaced thousands of people from those communities. Those people no longer have anything to do; some are just stranded in IDP camps. For some, nobody even knows where they are currently. Some are begging on the streets in other parts of the country.

Some statistics will illustrate the obstruction of agricultural and trade activities which has led to considerably increased food insecurity in the local communities. Between 2010 and 2015, in Borno State for instance, sorghum production declined by 82%, rice by 67% and millet by 55%.⁵⁶ Furthermore, the International Crisis Group reports that over 2 million people are displaced within Nigeria alone, with over 200,000 Nigerians living as refugees in other Lake Chad Basin neighbouring countries, while over 20 thousand deaths have resulted from terrorist attacks.⁵⁷

Importantly for this study, the loss of livelihood of displaced women and girls created a situation in which they would be compelled to engage in transactional sex to survive the harsh economic environment. Before examining empirical evidence from the region in this regard, discussion turns to the relationship between poverty, transactional sex and sexual violence.

Poverty, transactional sex and sexual violence against women and girls

This section examines the relationship between the economic crisis occasioned by terrorist activities in the north-east and the engagement in transactional sex by women and girls in north-east Nigeria. It does not argue that transactional sex did not occur in the region before the terrorist violence began, but does see a link between terrorism, a loss of livelihood among women and girls who depended on subsistence agricultural produce,⁵⁸ and an increase in the sex economy. This, it is argued, concomitantly increased their vulnerability to sexual abuse.

Trade by barter: Sex for food, money and protection

Those engaging in transactional sex, as is the case with other business transactions, are open to abuse, fraud and exploitation by patrons.⁵⁹ The empirical evidence gathered for this study showed similar trends among economically impoverished women and girls of north-east Nigeria. It was observed that food provisions supplied by the government and humanitarian organisations in IDP camps and in affected local communities are typically not sufficient to meet their needs; hence there is competition for these scarce resources, and opportunities for exploitation by those with access to them.

In some cases, aid workers allegedly use their access to resources to lure women and girls into having sex with them in exchange for the goods. In effect, women and girls are forced to sleep with those in charge of distributing the foods and other necessities to secure their means for survival. A development and security NGO executive described the situation as follows:

Many women are engaged in the business of trade by barter. Normally they give them food on a monthly basis, so most of the women I interviewed complained that the grains they are giving them are not enough to cater for their family So, they have no option but to sleep with the guys [aid workers] so that they will give them twice or thrice what they are giving a single person whenever they come to distribute the grains.⁶⁰

Women and girls also reportedly engaged in transactional sex with security agents, in exchange for money or for protection. One counter-terrorism security operative interviewed credited this to the 'lack of resources' experienced by the women and girls in

the IDP camps, who can 'hardly find a way to sustain themselves and [so] the military men take advantage of them'.⁶¹ With regard to the need for protection, clearly terrorism increased the precarious position of women and girls on every level in the north-east. In this context, not only have governments at the central and local level failed to prioritise the protection of women from sexual harassment; there is also victim-blaming, stigmatisations and endemic rejection within society.⁶² The situation has influenced them to seek protection – if necessary, by selling their bodies to security agents in exchange for that protection. One NGO worker stated 'there are reports where you have the military, civilian joint task force and police ... involved and using sex as a tool to provide protection for the victims'.⁶³ A counter-terrorism security operative observed that: 'the females, they love soldiers. Most of them have a love for the uniform. So, when they see security men, they try to come close so that they would have immunity protection in case somebody offends them'.⁶⁴ Another NGO worker expressed it thus:⁶⁵

Sex for food, sex for money, sex for survival, you know this is all violence against women in their quest to survive. So, they succumb to whatever those in authority or those in the provision of or those giving food and water or what have you, relief materials they demand for.

Similar reports were repeated in numerous interviews in this study. These respondents' answers point to how socio-economic hardship and powerlessness against threats of physical violence experienced by women and girls in terrorism-affected areas prompted their engagement in transactional sex.

In the next section, the link between transactional sex and sexual exploitation and violence is discussed.

Transactional sex, sexual exploitation, and sexual violence

The responses from respondents in this study further showed how transactional sex appeared linked with sexual exploitation and sexual violence. For instance, an executive of a human rights advocacy NGO who had carried out a major investigation on the issue of sexual violence in north-east Nigeria stated that they found evidence of counter-terrorism security operatives exploiting and abusing women and girls who offered their bodies in exchange for food, money, shelter, and protection; once these men had satisfied their physical needs, the women and girls were abandoned.

In other instances, the security agents involved promised to make the lives of these women or girls better in exchange for continuous sex during the period of their deployment in the region. The executive reported that:⁶⁶

Some of the girls will tell you that it is this officer, it is that officer, he promised to marry me, he makes food ration available to me and my family, he ensures that when things are distributed we get it, and it is not only security agents, even the NEMA [National Emergency Management Agency], SEMA [State Emergency Management Agency] people are also part of it.

Likewise, when asked if there had been cases of sexual violence against women and girls in IDP camps, a humanitarian and security civil society organisation worker investigating the condition of IDPs said:⁶⁷

Yes! The people who are supposed to secure the IDP camps [security agents] take advantage of the fact that these people are in a very bad situation and then sexually harass (violate)

them in the IDP camps. You see a lot of people pregnant in IDP camps because they have been sexually taken advantage of by security agents and by some of the men in the IDP camps.

In addition to sexual exploitation, the research found, transactional sex has also led to sexual violence against women and girls in the north-east. In some cases, perpetrators would promise them money and food to lure these women and girls into a secluded place and then rape them. A counter-terrorism security operative, during an interview, noted the incidence of such sexual violence, stating that ‘people [women and girls] in IDP camps, most of them complain that they were raped. It is undisputed. In the course of operations, security personnel take advantage’.⁶⁸ The incidence of rape in IDP camps has been corroborated by an Amnesty International report.⁶⁹

Security agents, it appears from the research, use promises of material goods in exchange for sex as a way to satisfy their own sexual needs, and rarely uphold these promises. The security institutions to which these security agents belong – such as the Nigerian military, police force or civil defence corps – officially prohibit sexual violence.⁷⁰ However, interview data suggested that there were no effective measures to curb the practise of sexual violence by security agents in the field. Attempts made by the leadership of these security institutions to tackle the issue were circumvented by the socio-cultural norms of the region, under which perpetrators are not punished in a legal sense even when identified as rapists. For instance, in Chad – an operational base of Boko Haram – the traditional leaders who are charged with handling issues of sexual violence often respond to charges of sexual violence without securing justice for the raped woman or girl. Instead, the perpetrators and the raped are forced to marry.⁷¹ The above also highlights the arguments about extant socio-cultural norms under which women are expected to satisfy their male partners sexually; that men have the right to women’s bodies.⁷²

The research also points to other instances in north-eastern Nigeria where the promise of marriage is used as a cover to sexually exploit women and girls. For instance, a security and development-based NGO worker reflected on the north-east situation by relating this account:⁷³

We had met with emirate council in Gwoza [Borno State], traditional leaders and the faith-based organisations on the military’s unprofessional conduct in their communities because these people that are army officers will just walk into your house and just sleep with your girl. So, after the community leaders complained of the sexual violence against women, then the commandant in Gwoza said that they should help in arresting [an erring] military [man] and that there should be evidence that the person is involved in sexual gender-based violence. So, when the military heard this thing, they changed pattern. So, they come with temporary marriage. These women are vulnerable; the only way to continue their sex is to go and meet their parents saying they want to marry their children. After one month or two months [of marriage], they will not see their husbands again. So many women and small children when I ask them where [are] their people [father/husband]? They say their parents are military. I will say, do you know where they are? They will say no they do not have their phone numbers; they do not know where they are, they do not know their states of origin all they know is that they are their husbands, and they are mainly in Gwoza, Bama and Monguno. You see countless children that belong to the military officers ... but their mothers do not know where their husbands are.

The above is in line with the findings of a 2019 UNHCR report where it discovered an increase in sexual exploitation or sex trafficking that women, girls, and children

experienced in IDP camps in the north-east. They reported that a lack of access to firewood used for cooking foods and water were crucial factors that facilitated women's exploitation, mainly single women in the IDP camps.⁷⁴

The preceding analysis has shown how interview data and secondary sources combine to demonstrate that women and girls who engage in transactional sex – which occurs as a result of poverty and also the need for protection – are exploited and violated by some security agents and aid workers. The preceding section has illustrated that the poor economic conditions of women and girls have forced them into transactional sex, which has made them vulnerable to being exploited and violated when people with access to resources make false promises of providing these goods in exchange for sex. However, the government has failed to address this effectively, despite the increased evidence of this exploitation. The strain this places on state-community relations is discussed next, in the context of an overview of the responses of government to CRSV in the north-east of Nigeria.

Responses of Nigerian government and security agencies to CRSV

Applying Wood's typology in the context of Nigerian responses to CRSV, these will range from prohibition to toleration to the strategic use of CRSV – although not necessarily overtly. According to Wood, 'rape by armed actors – even when it is frequent – may occur as a practice, by which I mean a form of violence that is driven from 'below' and tolerated from 'above,' rather than purposefully adopted as policy'.⁷⁵

Wood's description of toleration as a type of commander response to CRSV provides a useful lens for considering the Nigerian government's response to CRSV in the north-east. The Nigerian government – which could, arguably, be said to occupy a commander-type position – has effectively demonstrated toleration of CRSV by not responding to it.

According to the research, the Nigerian government in fact denies that its security agents are involved in CRSV. This is evident in the response of one NGO executive, who stated that one of the significant issues they had with the government and its security agencies was that, when the NGO was advocating for the victims of CRSV, the first response they usually got was a refutation of these claims. In view of the widely acknowledged evidence that CRSV is indeed occurring, this refutation suggests that the government's priority is institutional preservation, as well as the protection of the reputation of its security forces.

In answer to a similar question about government responses to CRSV, a humanitarian NGO worker stated that 'The first thing they will tell you is that their men can never be involved ... So, ... where do we go from here? Whom do we report to?' In the view of this NGO worker, 'the military's [aim] is to protect their men, their organisations. They can do anything to protect it'.⁷⁶

Government approaches to reports of CRSV also include leaving the work of investigation and arrest to NGOs or community members. However, this is difficult for NGO workers, who are unarmed and are sometimes threatened by alleged perpetrators. This further impinges on NGO workers' capacity to advocate for victims' interests and to ensure that offenders are punished for their crimes. The fact is that many NGOs do not have the institutional and technical capacity and skills to carry out criminal investigations

in uncertain environments. They look to the Nigerian Police to investigate and arrest perpetrators of CRSV. A development and security-focused NGO executive reported:⁷⁷

The Maiduguri commandant said that the only thing that can stop this menace is that when you see an army in your place or standing with your teenager that is below 18, we should just arrest that military (man) and bring him to them. That is the only solution I know they gave ... I do not think the Nigerian government came up with anything. We had a meeting with National Human rights commission in Maiduguri; I think all they say is they will just mount a human rights abuse desk in some of the IDP camps. So, whenever they have that issue or a victim that will report, they will forward it to the relevant authorities. So, I think they are just tolerating the violence.

Thus, while government security agencies may not officially sanction sexual violence in the north-east, it is here argued that CRSV has been normalised and is allowed to fester due to a lack of political will on the part of the government and security agencies. Their institutional self-preservation responses to protect the image of their organisations, both locally and internationally, aggravate the problem. Thus, CRSV may not be authorised, but the government's inactions enable and reinforce it.

What does this mean for state counter-terrorism efforts? This question is examined in the next section.

Implications of CRSV for counter-terrorism in Nigeria

The consequences of sexual violence emanating from transactional sex in counter-terrorism operations in the north-east are a critical point of discussion in this study. Njoku⁷⁸ has argued elsewhere that violating human rights while applying counter-terrorism measures is counter-productive; it creates grievances that fan the flames of terrorism. Thus, it is important to ensure human rights components feature in the formulation and enforcement of counter-terrorism measures. The interviews with respondents in this study and external reports suggest a rise in CRSV emanating from transactional sex, violence that is carried out by some security agents and aid workers involved in countering and mitigating the effects of terrorism. It is here argued that the increase in cases of sexual violence creates unintended adverse consequences for government counter-terrorism policy, engendering grievances and distrust of the government by local communities. The result is a lack of cooperation between these communities and the security agencies tasked with tracking down terrorists, which is critical to the government's counter-terrorism strategy.⁷⁹ Obviously, this impinges on the government's capacity to gather intelligence on the activities of Boko Haram and its factions, undermining its ability to curb the activities of these terrorist groups in the north-east of Nigeria and the wider Lake Chad Basin.

As noted earlier, reports of sexual violence committed by Nigerian security forces in counter-terrorism operations also tarnishes the national reputation in the international community.⁸⁰ This is likely to compromise the government's capacity to access foreign military aid. Already, donor countries in the West have cited human rights concerns as one of the reasons for their reluctance in supporting the Nigerian government's efforts in tackling terrorism. The US, under President Barack Obama's administration, refused to sell certain military helicopters to Nigeria due to allegations of gross human rights violations perpetrated by the Nigerian military in counter-terrorism operations.⁸¹ In press

reports from August 2020, the Nigerian Minister for Information decried the international community's unwillingness to support Nigeria in its fight against Boko Haram through the provision or sale of military equipment.⁸²

Thus, for many reasons, the need to address cases of sexual violence in counter-terrorism operations is warranted.

Conclusion

This article has considered the intersections between terrorism, poverty, transactional sex and CRSV. Specifically, it argues that terrorism through its violence undermines socio-economic systems, further entrenching inequalities and poverty, thus raising the possibility that women and girls will engage in transactional sex to survive. It also argues that transactional sex in this context is one of the drivers of CRSV. The study contends that few works have examined how transactional sex in terrorist-affected areas reinforces, justifies, and normalises the sexual exploitation of women and girls, and concomitantly increases the likelihood they will experience CRSV.

The research found that terrorism in north-eastern Nigeria has indeed contributed to women's and girls' reduced agency, due to the loss of their livelihoods and their displacement. These effects of terrorism were found to have promoted transactional sex as a means of survival. Participation in transactional sex was argued to increase the risk of CRSV due its exacerbating sexual vulnerabilities. It was also argued that security agents and aid workers were guilty of exploiting their access to resources and women's and girls' vulnerabilities to satisfy their own sexual desires. According to the research, these women and girls are often deceived through promises for food, money, shelter, protection or even marriage in exchange for sex by some security agents and aid workers serving in the north-east.

It is further argued that the Nigerian government's response to CRSV is one of toleration. The rise in transactional sex that contributed to CRSV highlights the Nigerian government's neglect of the human rights of women and girls affected by terrorist violence. There must be an acknowledgement of the violation of these human rights, and steps to enforce the official prohibition of sexual violence by Nigerian security forces and aid workers. At the same time, there is an urgent need for the Nigerian government to address the socio-economic conditions of women and girls in the north-east that compel them to seek transactional sex. The government can improve the conditions of these women and girls by ensuring the adequate provision of foods and other necessities, and then work with proven and trusted NGOs to monitor how these foods are distributed. Moreover, the government can offer IDPs entrepreneurial skills training in the camps and subsequently mobilise them into producing goods or services needed in other parts of the country, until the insurgency can be brought to an end and the region's agricultural sector can be revived.

The implications of the Nigerian government's 'toleration' of CRSV in its counter-terrorism operations, seen in its lack of effective response, are grave. The government is failing to protect the human rights of Nigerian women and girls, and it is undermining its own ability to stop Boko Haram by alienating local communities and international donors alike. The Nigerian government will have to respond more effectively to calls to address the causes, and the incidence, of sexual violence perpetrated in its counter-terrorism operations if it wishes to succeed against Boko Haram.

Notes

1. For this article, we define sexual violence as '[r]ape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilisation, or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity' (International Criminal Court cited in Koos 2017: 2).
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5. There are some notable exceptions: B. Beber et al., 'Peacekeeping, Compliance with International Norms, and Transactional Sex in Monrovia, Liberia,' *International Organisation* 71, Winter (2017): 1–30 <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818316000242>; S. Karim and K. Beardsley, 'Explaining Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in Peacekeeping Missions: The Role of Female Peacekeepers and Gender Equality in Contributing Countries,' *Journal of Peace Research* 53, no. 1 (2016): 100–115; K. Jennings and V. Nikolić-Ristanović, 'UN peacekeeping economies and local sex industries: Connections and implications.' (Microcon research Working Paper 17 2009), 18.
6. By security agents we are referring to military personnel, officer and men of the Nigerian Police and National Security and Civil Defence Corps. It also include members of the state sanctioned vigilante groups known as the Civilian Joint Task Force.
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