

# The Impact of Armed Banditry on Women and Children in Nigeria: Challenges, Insights, and Future Outlook

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## Abstract

## Review Article

Nigeria is bedevilled by a complex array of violent offenses directed both at individuals and the State itself. The phenomenon of armed banditry has notably intensified across Nigeria, presenting itself through various forms such as kidnapping, assaults on communities, arbitrary killings in rural areas, acts of sexual and gender-based violence, and the theft of livestock, among other manifestations. This study critically examines the impact of armed banditry. This pervasive malevolence affects various dimensions of national existence, particularly in its impact on women and children in the North-West and North-Central regions of Nigeria. The research examined an array of narratives concerning the motivations, expressions, and consequences of armed banditry, particularly about the at-risk populations of women and children. The analysis also examined the reactions of both state and non-state actors in their efforts to counter and prevent armed banditry in Nigeria. Utilizing secondary materials and employing the Human Needs Theory as the theoretical framework, the study concluded that factors such as inadequate governance, the presence of ungoverned spaces, exclusive political practices, poverty, incidental inequalities, the proliferation of weapons, and porous borders significantly contribute to armed banditry in Nigeria. It also recognized that women and children are predominantly vulnerable to livelihood and humanitarian challenges due to the prevalence of banditry. The research advocated for policy interventions to address the root causes of armed banditry, including poverty, inequality, and a lack of access to education and economic opportunities. It also recommended that stakeholders, including state and non-state actors, should provide protection and support services for women and children affected by armed banditry, such as counseling, healthcare, and economic empowerment programmes.

**Keywords:** Armed Banditry, Women, Children, State, Non-State Actors, Human Security.

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## Introduction

The pervasive threats posed by armed banditry have progressively enveloped the entirety of the Nigerian landscape, evident in the forms of kidnapping, armed robbery, assaults on villages or settlements, and indiscriminate killings, alongside cattle rustling and incidents of sexual and gender-based violence, among various other manifestations. The escalation and intensification of this conflict over the past decade pose significant threats to human security, with particularly adverse effects on vulnerable groups such as women, children, and the elderly in Nigeria. A consensus exists among scholars (Abdulrasheed & Nurain, 2024; Alabi, 2024; Vande, 2023; Albert, 2018) that insecurity serves as the fundamental catalyst for violence in Nigeria and globally. Consequently, the

widespread phenomenon of armed banditry and its related dangers to human security in the North-West and North Central regions of Nigeria, especially in Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, Sokoto, and Niger States, has emerged as a matter of significant national security and public interest. The West African Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP, 2020) asserts that the complex dimensions of criminal activity and the persistent occurrence of armed banditry necessitate the implementation of robust strategies to address the risks they pose to peace and security within the affected states.

Furthermore, Uche and Iwuamadi (2018) assert that the occurrence of banditry has led to a significant loss of countless lives, the forced displacement of local populations, and extensive devastation throughout Nigeria. Odinkalu (2018) asserts that banditry has surfaced as the latest specter of

insecurity in Nigeria, adding to an extensive and continually expanding roster that encompasses Boko Haram terrorism, cultism, herders' militia violence, kidnapping, and violent agitations. In some areas of the North West and North Central, bandits serve as a symbol for the unbearable violence and the perplexing ineptitude of the State in Nigeria. As this unfortunate condition spreads, it is essential to examine the impact of banditry on national and human security overall, with particular attention to the vulnerable populations of women and children. What are the implications of banditry for women and children in Nigeria? This research thus examined the underlying factors, expressions, and consequences of armed banditry, particularly about the at-risk populations of women and children. The analysis also scrutinized the reactions of both state and non-state actors in their efforts to counter and prevent armed banditry in Nigeria. The study also presented several astute recommendations aimed at countering and preventing armed banditry, along with strategies to alleviate the impacts of such activities.

## **Clarification of Concepts**

### **i. Banditry**

The notion of "banditry" has garnered significant attention and provoked extensive commentary and discussion. In this context, Okoli and Okpalele (2014) assert that banditry encompasses the application of force, or the threat thereof, to coerce an individual with the purpose of robbery, sexual assault, or homicide. He asserts that banditry constitutes an offense against individuals. Consequently, banditry denotes a form of armed aggression primarily motivated by the unlawful desire to appropriate and loot. The driving force behind it is the pursuit of economic accumulation. The affected parties consist of individuals and communities possessing tangible assets. In Nigeria, banditry manifests through a range of criminal activities, including depredations, cattle rustling, armed robbery, kidnapping for ransom, village raids, rape, and the unlawful collection of tolls at local markets. These have emerged as persistent characteristics within numerous communities in Northern Nigeria.

### **ii. Women and Children**

The term "women" (singular, woman) employed in this context denotes female human beings. It serves to identify and differentiate between the male and female sexes. Consequently, the term 'women' refers to female human beings, regardless of their age. The notion of "Woman" can also denote an individual's gender identity. It is sufficient to note that every society possesses a framework of gender classifications that can underpin the development of an individual's social identity about other members of society. In numerous societies, a fundamental distinction exists between the gender characteristics attributed to males and females. Women exhibiting standard genetic maturation generally possess the ability to conceive from the onset of puberty until the cessation of menstruation. Throughout history and across various societies, women have been designated specific social roles.

A universally accepted definition of children or childhood remains elusive. It is significant to recognize that

childhood is shaped by cultural and social factors, rather than being merely a universal phase in the physical and psychological growth of individuals. Notwithstanding this, the Convention on the Rights of the Child delineates "child" as any individual below the age of 18, unless specified otherwise by relevant legal statutes. Although this definition serves as a shared point of reference for international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and governments, it is important to note that operational definitions within the field may vary. The International Committee of the Red Cross defines an unaccompanied minor as an individual under the age of 15 whom an adult does not accompany. The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990) defines a child as any individual under the age of 18 years. The Nigerian Child's Rights Act of 2003 is based on the principles outlined in the African Charter.

While it is prevalent to categorise children based on age and their biological and psychological maturation, the definitions surrounding children and the concept of childhood are far more intricate than such simplistic measures suggest. In various cultural frameworks, elements beyond mere age may play a significant role in determining an individual's status as a child or an adolescent. In certain cultures, elements such as social roles, gender, marital status, and economic contribution may hold greater significance than mere chronological age in influencing the expectations placed upon children. In other words, childhood cannot be regarded as a concept that is either eternal or universally applicable, nor can it be solely defined by age or merely by biological and psychological influences. Childhood is comprehended through the lens of specific cultural and social contexts, as well as distinct historical periods. Nevertheless, this study delineates a child as a human entity under the age of 18 years.

This study conceptualises women and children within the context of their vulnerability due to their interrelated nature of interdependence on each other. They are grouped in the same category of vulnerability because they are the defenseless victims of violence (Okojie & Ahmad, 2022; Mohammed et al., 2021).

## **Theoretical Framework**

This research employs the Human Needs Theory as the most appropriate theoretical framework for its analysis. The Theory emerged during the 1970s and 1980s as a comprehensive framework for understanding human behavior. This concept is grounded in the premise that human beings possess fundamental requirements that must be fulfilled to ensure the stability of societies. Human needs can be characterized as a condition of perceived lack and essential requirements that must be fulfilled (Burton, 1990). The theory of human needs emphasizes the importance of fulfilling essential needs for human survival, as any compromise in this area can lead to significant conflict. According to Burton (1979), it is posited that individuals engaged in conflict scenarios are inherently striving within their institutional contexts across various social strata to fulfill fundamental and universal requirements, including security, identity, recognition, and development. Furthermore, individuals increasingly endeavor to assert control over their surroundings,

a pursuit essential for fulfilling these needs. This struggle is inextinguishable; it is fundamental (Burton, 1979). The contention surrounding fundamental needs is conceptually linked to the Frustration-Aggression theory, which is grounded in the stimulus-response hypothesis (Dollard et al, 1939). The inability to fulfill these needs engenders frustration, which in turn manifests as aggression and ultimately culminates in conflict. The distinction between Human Needs theory and Frustration-Aggression theory lies in the former's focus on fundamental requirements, whereas the latter encompasses both wants and desires. Therefore, if identity requirements are not fulfilled in multi-ethnic societies, and if every social system lacks distributive justice, a sense of control, and opportunities for the advancement of all other human societal developmental needs, instability and conflict will be unavoidable (Burton, 1990). This theory is founded on audacious assumptions.

Moreover, Maslow (1970) delineated a spectrum of needs encompassing physiological requirements, safety concerns, the need for belongingness and love, esteem, and self-actualization. He systematically arranged these needs into a hierarchical structure, establishing a clear order of precedence. He posits that the most fundamental needs or desires, which possess the most tremendous significance, must be satisfied in an individual before they can pursue higher aspirations. In a similar vein, Burton (1979) enumerates various factors, including response, stimulation, security, recognition, distributive justice, meaning, the necessity of projecting rationality and cultivating rational thought, the desire for a sense of control, and the imperative for role defense. He categorizes specific necessities as fundamental, encompassing sustenance, shelter, reproduction, and so forth. Furthermore, fundamental requirements such as safety, equitable justice, acknowledgment of one's identity, and meaningful engagement in the processes that define these identities are essential. Once more, fundamental human requirements encompass physical, physiological, social, and spiritual dimensions. He posits that granting access to food while simultaneously restricting or obstructing the freedom of worship constitutes a form of denial, potentially driving individuals to resort to violence in defense of these essential needs.

This theory's strengths lie in its extensive applicability. Although some regard it solely as an instrument for prevention or post-conflict peacebuilding, practitioners such as Rosenberg (2003) employ Human Needs Theory in the mediation of violent conflicts. A significant advantage of the theory lies in its emphasis on the origins of conflict, examining the optimal ways for the involved parties to fulfill their own needs as well as those of others. The Human Needs Theory further underscores the concept of shared humanity, as articulated by Maslow in 1970. In a global landscape where distinctions are emphasized, Human Needs Theory seeks to unite individuals from diverse regions and cultures, fostering a shared understanding of our identities and the universal nature of human needs and emotions. Nevertheless, Human Needs Theory possesses certain limitations that contribute to its shortcomings. Initially, one can observe numerous inconsistencies among the different theorists, including Burton (1979) and Rosenberg (2003), who concur that all needs are universal, non-hierarchical, and complementary. Secondly, it is

essential to prioritize specific needs over others. Does Maslow's assertion hold validity in prioritizing the fulfillment of basic needs such as food and shelter before addressing the more complex needs related to self-esteem and self-actualization? Is it not the case that protection, rest, and play hold equal significance in ensuring human well-being? Thirdly, there appears to be an inflated perception of the significance of dialogue (Abiodun, 2012).

The significance of this theory lies in its acknowledgment and validation of the needs of bandits in Nigeria. It asserts that the requirements of every individual citizen and collective must be addressed. This facilitates a transition from a zero-sum scenario to one characterized by mutual benefit. The conceptualisation of 'human needs' serves to dissolve the perception of conflicting objectives. The fulfillment of these needs does not come at the detriment of the other community; instead, it occurs in conjunction with the needs of the other community. These needs coexist harmoniously and do not detract from one another; they are inherent to all individuals. It is crucial to highlight the significance of the Human Needs Theory, as it elucidates how conflicts can be effectively managed and resolved by addressing fundamental human needs.

Another reason the Human Needs Theory is regarded as a valuable framework is its capacity to foster unity among individuals, enhance our understanding of the emotional impact of unmet needs, and offer a foundation for facilitating peacebuilding efforts. Thus, the crux of human needs theory lies in recognizing unfulfilled needs, which may subsequently give rise to conflict. The Human Needs model posits that for resolution to occur, it is essential for both parties to convene and recognize one another, along with their perspectives and opinions concerning the matter at hand. This approach of recognizing and immersing oneself in another's perspective is referred to as 'Empathy.' Understanding the perspectives of others is crucial in the intricate process of resolving and analyzing conflicts. The primary challenge facing the two nations lies in the absence of trust, a consequence of numerous conflicts and strategies employed throughout the decades. To achieve resolution, it is imperative to engage in trust-building initiatives, and initiating dialogue and fostering empathy between the parties is undoubtedly a constructive beginning. Additional instances of exercises aimed at fostering trust may encompass the repatriation of troops from high-stress zones and the mitigation of hostilities between the military forces of the two countries.

## **The Underlying Factors and Expressions of Armed Banditry in Nigeria**

A thorough exploration of the factors contributing to armed banditry in Nigeria necessitates a meticulous analysis of the historical, socio-economic, and governance frameworks, alongside the conflict dynamics arising from the complex interactions surrounding resource disputes, particularly concerning land access. Jumare and Surma (2015) indicate that individuals who lost their cattle have resorted to becoming bandits and rustlers in rural regions. Meanwhile, WANEP asserts that factors such as unemployment, severe poverty, and social injustice play a significant role in the rising incidence of

cattle theft. It is sufficient to note that alterations in ecological conditions and pressures stemming from climate change have exacerbated conflicts within the agro-pastoral sector. This phenomenon is also closely linked to issues of banditry and governance challenges. Furthermore, the elements contributing to banditry in the North West region, including cattle rustling, illicit artisanal gold mining, the spread of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs), youth unemployment, inequality, and poverty, reflect deficiencies in governance and security capabilities throughout the States (WANEP, 2020). The individuals engaging in illicit activities across Benue, Plateau, Niger, Kwara, Nassarawa, Zamfara, Kaduna, Sokoto, Kebbi, and Kano are implicated in offenses including armed robbery and kidnapping. Instances of rural banditry have also been documented in the states of Delta, Enugu, Ondo, Oyo, and Ebonyi.

In examining the underlying factors contributing to armed banditry in the North West, the International Crisis Group (2020) delineates the violence impacting Nigeria's North West into three interrelated categories. The initial category encompasses violence primarily involving ethnic Hausa sedentary farmers and the vigilantes representing them, in conflict with predominantly Fulani nomadic herders and their affiliated militias, which are officially designated by Nigerian authorities as "bandits." The second category encompasses acts of violence perpetrated by criminal organizations engaged in extensive cattle rustling, abduction for ransom, armed robbery, looting, and assaults on gold miners and traders. The authorities occasionally characterize these groups as "bandits." The latest dimension of the violence pertains to the escalating confrontations between governmental security forces and jihadist factions that are becoming increasingly prominent in the region. The Nigerian government frequently undermines its efforts, primarily as a result of its excessively forceful approach to counter-terrorism. The implementation of these policies has undermined the government's aims and led to unforeseen repercussions, fostering greater instability and providing opportunities for exploitation by extremist groups.

Mustapha (2019) posits that the shortcomings of the Nigerian military have significantly contributed to the primary recruitment strategy of extremists, which relies on radical messaging, thereby intensifying the prevailing mistrust between the populace and their governing bodies. The underlying cause of the security crisis in the region stems from a protracted rivalry over land and water resources between the predominantly Fulani herders and the primarily Hausa farmers. Over time, both groups have organized armed factions—designated by authorities as "bandits" and "vigilantes," respectively—to safeguard their interests. The challenges posed by environmental degradation linked to climate change, coupled with significant population growth, have exacerbated this conflict. In the context of a burgeoning trade in small arms and light weapons within the region, there has been a notable increase in the activities of organized gangs that operate from lawless forested areas. These groups are involved in various illicit enterprises, including cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom, and armed robbery targeting miners and traders within the predominantly unregulated gold mining industry, alongside the plundering of local communities (ICG, 2020).

The phenomenon of gang violence, which initially emerged in Zamfara State, has subsequently proliferated to encompass five adjacent states: Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto, Kebbi, and Niger, the latter being situated in North Central Nigeria. With the decline of security, the region has increasingly fallen under the revitalized sway of jihadist factions, which have intermittently targeted security personnel. The recent surge in jihadist activity in the North West has elicited concerns that the area may soon evolve into a conduit linking Islamic insurgencies in the central Sahel with the longstanding insurgency in the Lake Chad region of north-eastern Nigeria. In a similar vein, security sources indicate a revival of the previously inactive Boko Haram splinter faction, *Jama'atu Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis Sudan* (Group of Partisans for Muslims in Black Africa), commonly referred to as Ansaru, which operated in north-western Nigeria from 2011 to 2014. Components of various Boko Haram splinter groups, particularly those affiliated with the Islamic State in West Africa Province, are making their presence felt in the region.

Furthermore, an inadequately fortified international boundary permits the influx of weaponry. It aids the transit of jihadists to and from the Sahel, a region where the Islamic State has been broadening its sphere of influence. The ramifications of violence extend profoundly into humanitarian and economic spheres within the region, engendering a cascading series of security challenges. In the past ten years, upwards of 8,000 individuals have lost their lives, predominantly in Zamfara State, resulting in over 200,000 people being internally displaced and approximately 60,000 seeking refuge in the Niger Republic. The devastation of livestock and crops has exacerbated the already dismal human livelihood indices, which rank among the lowest in the nation. The escalation of violence is exacerbating existing security issues, as it has compelled a greater number of herders to migrate southward into the Middle Belt of the country, thereby intensifying tensions between herders and farmers in that area and beyond (Lenshie, 2018).

In alignment with the preceding discussion, Oluyemi-Kusa and Salihu assert that "banditry has assumed a distinct existence, resulting in severe repercussions for the populace in Nigeria." Numerous analysts link the occurrence of armed banditry to the state's inadequacies in delivering security and essential services to the population. They further assert that banditry could indeed be a manifestation of political economy issues stemming from the lack of fair access to resources and a calculated effort to marginalize certain groups from social structures. Moreover, an analysis conducted by WANEP reveals that armed banditry has catalyzed the development of a multifaceted informal security sector in Nigeria, characterized by the proliferation of armed local vigilante groups formed to safeguard communities from banditry. A significant number of these groups exhibit deficiencies in security training and often find themselves in competition with one another. Their involvement in various criminal activities is evident, encompassing human rights violations, armed robbery, extortion, and the seizure of livestock and other properties from both bandits and their victims. This has prompted a public commentator to characterize their actions as 'legalized armed banditry' (Rufai, 2018). The illegal activities carried out by



these non-state actors exacerbated the insecurity experienced in numerous communities within the Northwest region.

Overall, as a consequence of the widespread presence of criminal organizations in the Northwest, there has been a significant rise in kidnapping incidents in both rural and urban locales, accompanied by accounts of families and communities being subjected to intimidation in their efforts to secure the release of their loved ones through exorbitant ransoms. A diverse array of individuals, including traditional leaders, businesspeople, politicians, and civil servants, have fallen victim to kidnappings for ransom, with the sums demanded varying significantly. The widespread phenomenon of armed banditry, along with its accompanying threats to human security in Nigeria, has emerged as a significant issue of national security and public interest. WANEP asserts that the complex dimensions of criminality and the persistent occurrence of armed banditry necessitate the implementation of robust strategies to address the risks they pose to peace and security in the affected states.

Furthermore, Uche and Iwuamadi (2018) assert that the emergence of violent extremism, manifested through armed banditry, has recently become a prominent topic in Nigeria's public discussions, stemming from the ongoing violence experienced in rural communities over the past decade. The outcomes were profoundly distressing. Consequently, the diminishing ability of the state to manage these conflicts and implement effective law enforcement in rural regions resulted in a perpetual cycle of violence. The reliance on self-help by the attendant exacerbated the security vulnerabilities within rural communities. As of March 2020, a minimum of 1,400 students have been taken hostage for ransom in Northwest Nigeria. There has been a notable rise in the incidence of abductions since December 2020. The states that have experienced the most significant impact are Zamfara, Kaduna, Katsina, and Niger. The persistent assaults by armed individuals in Northwest Nigeria have significantly obstructed economic endeavors and adversely impacted the quality of life within the affected communities. Following the attacks, educational institutions face closures, and travel and telecommunications restrictions are enacted for security purposes, thereby temporarily constraining mobility and access to learning opportunities. The provision of psychosocial support and counselling services for impacted parents and students has been recognized as a critical priority within the humanitarian response framework.

### **The Impact of Armed Banditry on Women and Children in Nigeria**

The substantial impact of banditry on women and children has not received enough attention in policy responses, despite the magnitude of banditry's violent attacks. This is true even if attacks against women and children who are vulnerable are becoming more frequent and are threatening their access to an education. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2022) reports that many schools were closed indefinitely and that over 61 children remain in captivity months after over 780 students were kidnapped by bandits in 2021 and held for ransom. After students were targeted in 2021 alone, UNICEF estimates that at least one million children were prevented from

attending school due to the fear of violence. This trend foretells significant ramifications for Nigeria, a nation known for having the largest number of out-of-school children in sub-Saharan Africa and plagued by widespread poverty in the Northwest.

Additionally, Bello and Suleiman (2022) demonstrated that children in their formative years—that is, those who are old enough to attend school—were compelled to leave their towns due to the attacks brought on by the rural banditry. This suggests that their future education or learning may be disrupted, which could impact their cognitive and educational development. The development of the impacted youngsters as adults will be impacted in the future. Furthermore, the poor educational condition of women in Northern Nigeria has gotten worse due to the loss of villages and communities and the movement of married and single women. On behalf of their displaced parents, a girl is spotted begging on the streets. These girls are searching for food and a way to stay alive on the streets, so they do not have time to attend school. This exacerbated Northern Nigeria's already low literacy rates and the number of out-of-school youth.

Furthermore, according to Ibrahim et al. (2023), banditry has a significant impact on girls' schooling in Sokoto State. They contend that, as a vulnerable group, the education of girls is significantly impacted by banditry in the northwest. Since some of them now grow up in homes and towns that have been ripped apart by banditry, they contend that innocent youngsters are forced to pay the ultimate price for the violence since they miss the sweetness of childhood. As internally displaced people, it was also verified that a large number of youngsters from the area had been split off from their families and loved ones and were now suffering from the terrible consequences of starvation, disease, and insecurity. Through heedless attacks on their schools, banditry has undoubtedly had an impact on girls' education. Once more, schoolgirls' attendance has significantly decreased due to regular kidnappings in their dorms and sporadic kidnappings on their route to school. The majority of educators and school administrators in the area are internally displaced. Schoolgirls and female teachers were shocked and terrified to attend classes for fear of being attacked by the rebel organization. Since the majority of regional education officers are currently out of their states, education planners and inspectors of girls' education programs are unable to perform routine inspections of schools. Schools in the northeast and northwest have had to close as a result of this situation. This has made the area already low access to education ranking much worse.

Okojie and Ahmed (2022) also submit that the threat of armed banditry has harmed the health, education, and socioeconomic well-being of women and children. According to them, about 90% of the displaced people in the four internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in Anka Local Government Area of Zamfara State, between 2019 and 2021, were women and children. Additionally, 86.7% of the female victims had lost their family leaders or breadwinners as well as their source of income due to armed banditry. More so, over 20 women and girls experienced several gang rapes, resulting in unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections. In addition, 33% of kids aged 5 to 17 dropped out of school entirely as a result of school attacks and the abduction of more than 300

students. Consequently, 29% of people who had never gone to school lost hope as the majority of teachers left the villages in terror. Furthermore, 31.1% of children six years of age and older experienced acute malnutrition as a result of inadequate nutrition during that time.

It is significant to observe that a substantial proportion of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) comprised women, children, and the elderly seeking refuge in the neighboring Republic of Niger, Cameroon, and Chad. Recent reports from the Zamfara State Government indicate that banditry has resulted in approximately 22,000 widows and 44,000 orphans in Zamfara State since 2011. The recurrence of internal displacement has precipitated a disintegration of familial structures, detrimentally impacting education, nutrition, health, emotional well-being, and nearly every aspect of the lives of those affected. In this regard, Okoro asserts that the repercussions of displacement are experienced most severely by the most at-risk segments of society: women, children, and the elderly. He further asserts that the internally displaced persons within their designated camps were subjected to sexual violence, alongside occurrences of unintended pregnancies, child labor and trafficking, as well as sexually transmitted infections (Okoro, 2016).

Scholars have agreed that women and girls are disproportionately affected by banditry in the area during these attacks. Oluwole and Balogun (2022) affirm that women are routinely raped, abducted, or turned into commodities by families who are compelled to trade their daughters for safety, contributing to the surge in sexual violence. For example, in Niger State's Shiroro Local Government Area, at least 30 women and girls were raped without cause in five different communities. When residents in Zamfara State's Tsafe Local Government Area refused to pay a N3 million fee (about US\$5,000), a similar action was taken. Additionally, Abdurashied and Nurain (2024) found that raping and abducting women and young girls is a form of gender-based violence (GBV), which is a degrading act against women.

Thus, the act of raping or harassing women serves as an exhibition of dominance and perpetuates the victimisation of those targeted. It represents a further manifestation of the expropriation of the victim's resources, an additional gain derived from the theft of livestock. Once more, it is noted that women find themselves particularly at risk in circumstances where the men, endowed with greater physical strength by nature, have been restrained. It is essential to recognize that women constitute a vital component of any community facing adversity, and indeed, they play a crucial role in maintaining the continuity of life. Consequently, any infringement upon women undermines the community's capacity to sustain its continuity. Women represent a fragile yet invaluable component of society, often subjected to violations as if they were mere trophies of conflict. It is essential to note that the primary source of dispute in armed banditry encompasses the loss of young lives, the violation of women, the theft of livestock, the devastation of agricultural yields, and the undermining of communal dignity.

According to the findings of Oluyemi-Kusa and Salihi (2015), the phenomena of cattle rustling and village raids have a detrimental impact on women and children. From their perspective, the sheep and goats are regarded as valuable

resources akin to women's assets. The ownership is predominantly held by women, who also undertake their upbringing. Similarly, women obtain milk and meat from sheep during significant events, such as naming ceremonies. The goats are exchanged for financial gain and to fulfill various requirements. The women procure milk and butter from them, both for commercial purposes and for domestic use. In regions where the Fulani cultivate their farms, the women procure millet, which is utilized to prepare fura (a type of gruel), often accompanied by nono (milk) for sale. In the context of armed banditry, the availability of cattle, which typically contribute the manure essential for crop cultivation, is significantly diminished. In the absence of cattle, one finds a lack of organic manure, which consequently leads to an inability to procure inorganic fertilizer necessary for the cultivation of cereals. It is significant to observe that acts of banditry have been especially targeted towards women and children, who frequently endure sexual violence, abduction, and homicide.

Furthermore, because marketplaces and farms are frequently attacked, the humanitarian cost of banditry also affects women's livelihoods. In the face of growing instability and the urgent need for clothing, food, shelter, and safety, victims draw attention to the impact of rape and hunger. In crowded camps for displaced people, access to water has become increasingly complex. In the course of events, bandits are also using women as props for their illegal endeavours. The Nigerian Police Force detained a lady in November 2021 for providing drugs and 991 rounds of live ammunition for the AK-47 to bandits in Zamfara (Oluwole & Balogun, 2022).

Additionally, Alabi (2024) highlights how overlapping difficulties make women and children even more vulnerable to abuse. He argued that Nigeria's protracted armed conflict has had a significant negative influence on healthcare and education, making women and children even more vulnerable. Beyond being affected as victims, Iwara and Ayandele (2024) submit that by banding together and committing crimes, women and girls actively participate in violence in addition to being victims or survivors. Regrettably, the conflict studies literature still pays little attention to this aspect of conflict.

## **Reactions to Armed Banditry by Stakeholders in Nigeria**

Throughout the years, the Federal Government, state governments, international organizations, and civil society organizations have engaged in diverse responses to the region's violent extremism. The responses have varied from implementing security and enforcement strategies targeting all "bandit" factions, encompassing herder-affiliated armed groups and criminal organizations, to extending amnesty to certain herder-allied factions and engaging in dialogue and peacebuilding efforts. Nevertheless, the measures have yielded only modest outcomes. Responses have been systematically categorized into various levels as outlined below.

### **i. Responses from the Federal Government**

The endeavours of the Federal Government to mitigate banditry in the North West and across Nigeria have

predominantly relied on the capabilities of the security forces. Since 2016, the federal police have initiated numerous operations aimed at combating banditry, concentrating on armed groups allied with herders and itinerant criminal organizations.

Among these are:

- i. Operation Maximum Safety, initiated on 5 August 2016;
- ii. Operation Absolute Sanity, commenced on 25 July 2017; and
- iii. Operation Puff Adder (a collaborative multi-agency effort), launched on 5 April 2019, encompasses five states in the Northwest and North Central regions (ICG, 2020).

In 2016, the military further augmented its troop presence in the region by transforming the Falgore forest in Kano State into a permanent training facility. This initiative included the establishment of three new forward operating bases within that forest, as well as in the Kafanchan and Kachia Local Government Areas of Kaduna State. Additionally, five operations were initiated under the auspices of “anti-banditry” mandates. These are:

- i. Operation Harbin Kunama (Hausa for “Scorpion Sting”);
- ii. Operation Harbin Kunama II;
- iii. Operation Sharan Daji (Hausa for “Forest Sweep”);
- iv. Exercise Egwu Eke III initiated in Birnin Kebbi, Kebbi State;
- v. Exercise Harbin Kunama III; and,
- vi. Operation Hadarin Daji.

It is significant to observe that the Nigerian Air Force, which has progressively engaged since 2017, has also dispatched new units, including Special Forces personnel, and has, since 2018, executed a multitude of aerial operations aimed at forest encampments associated with herder-allied armed groups and criminal organizations. In 2017, the Air Force initiated the formation of a new unit, the 207 Quick Response Group, located in Gusau, Zamfara State. In 2018, Operation Diran Mikiya was launched to bolster the Army's efforts against banditry in the Northwest. In April 2019, Operation Tsaftar Daji was initiated, incorporating Alpha, MI 35, Augusta, Bell 412, and surveillance aircraft, aimed at combating banditry and kidnapping within the Dajin Rugu forest. On 4 May 2019, a new facility, the 271 Nigerian Air Force Detachment, was established in Birnin Gwari, Kaduna State. This facility is intended to function as a support base and a blocking force for troops involved in Operations Diran Mikiya and Sharan Daji.

It is sufficient to note that the military operations have arguably influenced the anti-banditry campaign. The ICG (2020) reports that the Army and Police have apprehended numerous individuals believed to be affiliated with herder-allied armed factions and criminal organizations, eliminated hundreds more, dismantled several of their forest encampments, seized weapons and ammunition, and liberated hundreds of those who had been abducted. Recently, law enforcement agencies executed operations that resulted in the reported elimination of numerous members of armed groups and Ansaru.

Notwithstanding these advancements, the security forces have yet to quell the multitude of armed factions effectively. Despite intensified initiatives, the existing personnel, logistical support, and resources remain inadequate to address the assaults by armed factions promptly and effectively. Similarly, military personnel are often deprived of motorcycles, which are essential for traversing routes inaccessible to automobiles and larger vehicles. The military is also deficient in the number of helicopters necessary for the swift deployment of troops to distant areas. Participants indicated that while military operations (Operations Harbin Kunama I and II) succeeded in displacing numerous criminal factions from their forest encampments in 2016 and early 2017, the army did not effectively secure those advancements or maintain control over the territory, allowing the groups to reorganize and reestablish their presence swiftly. The government's initiative in April 2019 to ban all forms of gold mining in Zamfara State, citing potential connections between miners and criminal activities, has proven largely ineffective. The enforcement of the ban has proven challenging for authorities due to the isolated nature of numerous mining sites, constrained resources for ensuring compliance, and opposition from influential figures within the industry.

Furthermore, where enforcement is present, its direct consequences have resulted in the disenfranchisement of countless artisanal miners and their families, thereby engendering a new array of challenges. The prohibition, in the absence of alternative means of sustenance, may exacerbate the susceptibility of numerous unemployed youths to the allure of recruitment by armed factions and criminal enterprises. Moreover, the government has pursued enhanced security collaboration with neighboring nations in the sub-region, including Niger and Chad, to mitigate cross-border crime and violence.

## ii. Responses from State Governments

In their endeavors to counter violent extremism and banditry within their region, state governments in the North West initially opted to bolster federal security agencies through financial and logistical support aimed at combating the armed groups, thereby compromising their capacity to tackle other urgent socio-economic issues. In Zamfara State, for example, former Governor Yari indicated that between 2015 and 2019, the government allocated 35 billion naira (approximately \$95.8 million) towards logistical support for federal security agencies, special allowances for security personnel assigned to the state, and assistance for victims of attacks (Mustapha, 2019). Similar to the Federal Government, state governments endeavored to address assaults by herder-affiliated factions and criminal organizations through the application of force, establishing and strengthening vigilante groups, notably the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), aimed at safeguarding communities.

However, this approach essentially yielded counterproductive results. This initiative demonstrated a rather constrained impact for two primary reasons. Initially, the military, perceiving the CJTF as a potentially competing entity, exhibited reluctance to collaborate with it. Furthermore, the inadequately equipped vigilantes frequently found themselves outmatched by the very factions they sought to challenge. A



considerable number of vigilantes lost their lives during the numerous confrontations in the North West.

Moreover, during the period from 2016 to 2018, several governors in the North West region altered their approach. They endeavored to mitigate the violence by engaging in negotiations for peace agreements with armed groups allied with herders and various criminal factions. The states proposed amnesty, arms-for-cash initiatives, and commitments to invest in local communities, in exchange for disarmament. Although these agreements provided a semblance of tranquility for a brief period, they ultimately disintegrated after approximately one year, leading to a resurgence of assaults primarily by armed factions aligned with herders (ICG, 2020). In the recent period spanning 2019 to 2020, the state governments of the North West, including Zamfara, Katsina, and Sokoto, embarked on renewed initiatives aimed at fostering peace through negotiations with primarily herder-affiliated armed groups, as well as vigilantes and criminal elements.

The recent shift in policy is a response to the increasing public discontent regarding the federal security agencies' evident failure to quell the armed groups using military intervention, notwithstanding President Buhari's persistent assurances to achieve this goal. As a result, the state governments initiated discussions with leaders of armed groups primarily aligned with herders, with certain governors venturing into forest camps to meet them or extending invitations for dialogue in the state capitals. The governors extended proposals of amnesty and various incentives to the armed factions in an effort to cease hostilities. They reached a consensus to liberate all former armed individuals associated with herder-allied factions, currently in detention, in return for the release of all individuals held captive by the herders in their forest encampments. The governors committed to the disarmament and dissolution of vigilante groups, a significant request from herder-allied armed factions. They also vowed to rehabilitate and reintegrate those herder-allied and other armed groups that are prepared to relinquish their weapons. Furthermore, they plan to create rural grazing zones that will encompass settlements equipped with essential social amenities such as schools, hospitals, roads, electricity, and water for Fulani pastoralists.

Additionally, there is a commitment to restore homes that the conflict between herder-allied groups and farmers has ravaged. While the agreements have been partially upheld, these initiatives encountered numerous obstacles, and violence subsequently reemerged for various reasons (WANEP, 2020). Initially, the absence of a centralized authority and a unified objective among the herder-allied and criminal factions has rendered it challenging to convene them at a single negotiating table, resulting in agreements reached with one group lacking enforceability against others. Secondly, these discussions have predominantly centered on herder-affiliated armed factions, while the bandit groups driven by criminal motives and jihadists exhibit a notable disinterest in interacting with authorities. Thirdly, these dialogues seem to have insufficiently considered the perspectives of local communities that have endured the most significant impacts of violence and anticipate that the state will provide compensation, justice, and protection as prerequisites for lasting peace. Furthermore, three states within the Northwest region –

Kaduna, Kano, and Kebbi – did not participate in comparable peace initiatives, potentially encouraging herder-affiliated and criminal factions in those areas to intensify their assaults to compel those administrations to negotiate. In Kaduna State, the government's steadfast refusal to engage in negotiations with any armed faction has resulted in ongoing attacks that inflict considerable damage. Consequently, the failure of numerous armed factions to disarm has led to the disintegration of peace agreements in certain regions, while others remain precariously close to a similar fate.

### **iii. Reactions from Non-State Actors**

The role of civil society in peacebuilding has recently garnered significant attention and urgency in Nigeria. Currently, the primary inquiry is not about the role of civil society in peacebuilding, but rather how it can actualize its potential, discern, chart, and engage with diverse actors, essential elements, and prerequisites for their efficacy, as well as collaborate with external entities to determine the most effective means of support. Once again, the significant contribution of Civil Society Organizations in the realm of peacebuilding, particularly in transforming violent conflict in North West and North Central Nigeria, is unequivocally acknowledged. A diverse array of non-state actors has engaged in a range of peacebuilding initiatives aimed at transforming conflict and addressing the challenges of violent extremism in North West and North Central regions. The non-state actors in question comprise the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), Pastoral Resolve (PARE), Mercy Corps, Search for Common Ground, Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC), Savannah Centre for Diplomacy, Democracy and Development (SCDDD), and the Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development (ACTED).

Reports indicate that ACTED has concentrated its efforts on initiatives related to food security and peacebuilding, aimed at fostering community cohesion and promoting economic development in Northwest Nigeria. The organization provides urgent aid to the most vulnerable groups through a range of initiatives, including the construction of emergency shelters, the distribution of essential non-food items, support in administering camps for displaced individuals, and the provision of logistical assistance and information management services to the humanitarian sector.

Once more, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), in collaboration with Mercy Corps, has initiated one of its most extensive peacebuilding programs in Nigeria, known as Community Initiatives to Promote Peace (CIPP). This initiative aims to avert violent conflict in the most vulnerable communities across six states and 24 local government areas (LGA) in Nigeria's North West and North Central regions. CIPP draws upon the achievements and profound contextual understanding acquired by USAID and Mercy Corps through their prior peacebuilding initiatives in Nigeria. Executed in the North Western States of Kaduna, Kano, and Katsina, the CIPP aimed to enhance local competencies and skills for dispute management, fortify and facilitate more sustainable Early Warning and Early Response (EWER) mechanisms, foster collaboration among communities, government agencies, civil society organizations,



and local leaders to tackle the underlying causes of conflict, empower women to prevent and resolve conflicts, and improve the capacity to counter violent extremist recruitment strategies. Moreover, the Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC), a non-profit and non-governmental organization rooted in faith, is dedicated to fostering an inclusive society free from ethno-religious conflicts in Kaduna State and other regions of the Northwest. The organization aims to mitigate violence and foster trust and relationship development by promoting dialogue among individuals from diverse faiths and communities in Nigeria and beyond.

Overall, non-state actors have addressed violent extremism and banditry in the North West by engaging in various peacebuilding initiatives, including conflict prevention forums, early warning and response systems, food security measures, community dialogue, strategic coalitions, and the involvement of women in peace efforts, among others.

### **Deficiencies in the Responses to Armed Banditry in Nigeria**

The preceding analysis suggests that the Nigerian government employs two primary strategies in addressing violence: a predominant reliance on force or violence, particularly when such disturbances jeopardize perceived interests or threaten the existing order. According to Wodu (2020), the militarised or kinetic approach to conflict management has mainly proven ineffective when confronted with violent conflicts driven by structural or grievance-based issues such as armed banditry. Furthermore, in instances where the initial approach proves inadequate, one often resorts to superficial dialogues that fail to recognize or confront the underlying causes of that violence. This manifests as peace agreements or settlements that prioritize immediate benefits over long-term consequences. One need not look beyond Nigeria's approach to armed banditry to support this assertion. As a result, armed banditry in Nigeria persists, as the Nigerian State perceives peace merely as the lack of overt violence and hostilities. It neglects to acknowledge the systemic disparities and the anguish experienced by individuals, viewing them not merely as a manifestation of violence but also as a significant catalyst for violent conflict (Wodu, 2020). It is sufficient to note that nature abhors a void, and criminality flourishes in isolated areas where governmental oversight is absent, resulting in minimal deterrence and numerous opportunities for illicit behavior (Mungadi et al., 2020).

Consequently, the issue of ungoverned spaces represents a significant deficiency in the emergence and regulation of criminal activity. A significant number of communities or households in the North West are, in certain instances, delineated and interspersed with forested regions. This exposes them to the risks of banditry. The current predicament is exacerbated by the lack of robust community policing frameworks that can effectively address the unique security challenges faced by the hinterlands. The apparatus of state security has thus far been unable to address the pervasive issue of banditry, attributed to a deficiency in political resolve, insufficient collaborative initiatives, and various operational impediments. The endeavors of the government and various stakeholders to address banditry and other criminal activities,

particularly in the North West, are significantly hindered by the presence of porous borders and the challenges posed by uncontrolled migration. Mungadi et al. (2020) contend that the North West region is responsible for two thirds of Nigeria's 1,497 km international land border with the Niger Republic. A lack of stringent regulation characterizes this area, as the communities along the border possess intertwined cultural, religious, and historical connections. Consequently, regional agreements concerning freedom of movement have inadvertently facilitated opportunities for traffickers, smugglers, and criminals to engage in their illicit activities related to firearms, drugs, and human trafficking. Despite the successful implementation of technology, particularly information communication technology (ICT) and intelligence resources in combating crime in various regions (Adams, 2016), Nigerian security forces persist in their reliance on outdated analogue systems and coercive measures. Once more, Ashaolu (2012) discovered that the implementation of technology-driven intelligence analysis will effectively bridge the deficiencies in addressing criminality, banditry, and terrorism.

### **Final Thoughts and Suggestions.**

Nigeria has found itself entangled in a web of conflict and security dilemmas, particularly since 1999, the year it returned to democratic governance. Different regions of the nation have experienced diverse manifestations of violent conflict, jeopardising harmonious coexistence and presenting a range of consequences for peacebuilding efforts. The widespread phenomenon of armed banditry, along with its related implications for human security and the processes of peacebuilding in Nigeria's Northwest and North Central regions, has emerged as a focal point for scholarly investigation, peace studies, national security discourse, and public concern. The intricate dimensions of criminal behaviour, along with the persistent occurrence of armed banditry, necessitate the implementation of robust strategies to mitigate the risks it poses to peace and security in Nigeria.

This study revealed a significant humanitarian impacts of armed banditry on women and children, including trauma, displacement, and loss of livelihoods. It also identified specific vulnerabilities of women and children to armed banditry, including lack of access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. In the same vein, the study highlighted effective coping mechanisms employed by women and children affected by armed banditry, including community-based support systems and resilience strategies. The ramifications of armed banditry are evident, extending beyond mere loss of life and property to encompass sexual and gender-based violence, humanitarian crises, escalating instances of internal displacement, food insecurity, and the destruction of local economies and social structures. Consequently, there has been a notable rise in the population of individuals living with disabilities, deterioration of infrastructure, a surge in out-of-school children, an escalation in poverty levels, and heightened food insecurity, all attributable to the cessation of agricultural and economic activities. The conflicts yield additional repercussions, notably the deterioration of social relations, as

intergroup dynamics become strained, leading to a decline in trust, unity, and confidence among individuals.

Going forward, this study recommends the following:

1. **Policy Interventions:** It is imperative for the Federal Government, in collaboration with state and Local Governments, to develop strategies to address the root causes of armed banditry, including poverty, inequality, and a lack of access to education and economic opportunities.
2. **Protection and Support:** Stakeholders, including state and non-state actors, should provide protection and support services for women and children affected by armed banditry, such as counseling, healthcare, and economic empowerment programmes. The constructive contributions of women and children to both familial and societal structures ought to be safeguarded. They must be granted empowerment and a sense of belonging by facilitating access to economic and governmental authority.
3. **Community Engagement:** There is a need to engage with local communities to raise awareness about the impacts of armed banditry and promote peaceful conflict resolution mechanisms.
4. **Security Sector Reform:** The study strongly advocates for security sector reform to improve the response to armed banditry, including increased synergy among military and paramilitary forces, accountability, and transparency.
5. **Protection of Social Services:** The federal and state governments should ensure that schools and other educational settings are adequately protected, thereby fostering a safe and conducive learning environment. In this context, governments must investigate the socio-economic engagement of citizens, fostering a sense of community that empowers them to safeguard local schools by providing critical information to authorities regarding any impending crises before they emerge.
6. **Control of the Proliferation of Arms:** The military ought to prioritize the regulation of the flow, illicit trafficking, circulation, and utilization of small arms and light weapons. This initiative ought to transcend the simplistic act of submitting arms within the framework of a peace agreement, advancing instead towards the establishment of robust border policing measures aimed at curbing the influx of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) across Nigeria's numerous vulnerable borders.

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