

# THE IMPACT OF ARMED CONFLICT ON WOMEN: PERSPECTIVES FROM NIGERIAN WOMEN

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**Abstract:** Many countries in sub-Saharan region in Africa have been plagued with ethnic and religious conflicts. Nigeria has not been immune to such conflicts. The country has and continues to witness high levels of ethnic and anti-state violence. Ever since independence from Britain in 1960 the African nation of Nigeria has been torn apart by wars, violence and ethnic conflicts. This paper centers on the effect of such conflicts on Nigerian women with a focus on the conflict in Jos, the capital city of Plateau State. The city has continually been rocked by brutal and relentless riots in 1994, 2001, 2008 and most recently in January 2010. These conflicts have brought about extensive destruction of lives and properties. Most significantly, the conflicts have brought about gross human rights violations perpetrated against civilian populations, particularly women and children who apparently make up the most vulnerable group.

Considerable work has been done regarding women and armed conflicts. Much of this work has been done by institutions concerned with human rights violations, particularly violations against women. Unfortunately, much of this work has focused on sexual violence against women and has largely ignored other important aspects of violations against women.

The purpose of this paper is to consider and highlight a range of ways in which women are affected by armed conflicts (in addition to sexual violence). Using responses from interviews conducted with women who have experienced the most recent conflict in the capital city of Jos in Nigeria, we argue that there is a wide range of ways in which women are affected by armed conflict. For example, armed conflict exacerbates inequalities. These inequalities continue even after the conflicts cease. Our findings show that women experience economic hardships during and after conflict. Furthermore, women are excluded from peace building initiatives that take place during and after armed conflict.

**Keywords:** Armed conflicts, ethnic conflicts, human rights violations, religious conflicts, and women's rights.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The frequency of conflicts leading to violence and extensive destruction of lives and property especially since the early 80s in many countries of the world can, without exaggeration, be traced to many factors. Some of these factors are political, economic, ethno-religious conflicts and land boundary issues. Most of these conflicts are often presented as either ethnical or religious in nature, and oftentimes both. However these research findings indicate that the underlying fundamental factor that facilitates such ethno-religious conflicts revolves around prevailing economic and political crisis. This is the basic podium for most of the recurring predicaments.

Unfortunately, ethno-religious conflicts remain the political, economic and social legacies of three decades which involves perceived marginalization, mal-governance and disrespect for the constitution. The greedy and selfish ways in which the Nigerian political leaders embarked on, in acquiring power at all cost, has overturned the true federal constitution negotiated by the founding leaders. This reveals some of the primary basis for the violent crisis in Jos, Plateau State of Nigeria.

## II. BACKGROUND

In 2001, a major crisis occurred in Jos, the capital city of Plateau State in the northern part of Nigeria, leading to the destruction of properties and loss of lives. There was also another crisis in 2004, 2008 and the most recent in 2010. The causes of these conflicts are seen as political, ethno-religious and indigene settlers' dispute. In most cases, it is tough to describe the Jos crisis from just the ethnic perspective without observing the political, economic or religious aspect. They are not mutually exclusive.



The recurrent crisis in Jos especially the one that occurred in 2010 left a fatal impact on the society. Many people including women and children were killed. The 2010 Jos crisis recorded the highest casualty of women and children in comparison to the previous ones. About 500 women lost their lives in unpleasant circumstances while other women lost their husbands and children as well as their means of livelihood.

It is rather unfortunate and unlikely that the leadership of the present government will be able to take the bold step to make required constitution changes to douse the festering ethno-religious tension and violence in many parts of the country Nigeria is a complex society with a wide variety of religious and cultural allegiance and susceptibility. The least one could do is to come to terms with the reality of the multi-religious status and thus recognize and ensure that the rights of all Nigerians are equally protected. The city of Jos had deadly riots in 2001, 2008 and 2010, and the communal/religious crisis that erupted in Jos (Plateau) in 2001 still causes a lot of clashes in the State till date. It was shocking to many Nigerians that had nursed the notion that Jos was a safe haven for most Christians from other ethnic nationalities who fled from the States dominated by the Islamic Sharia laws. We also observed that most of the conflicts are located in urban areas, and that mostly women and their children suffered the most. Those not killed during the conflict are left to feed and fend for themselves and their children.

### III. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Many of these contestations between indigenes and settlers result in violence. As noted, Jos and most of the towns in Plateau State in 1994, 2001, 2004 in which the Beroms, Afizere and others who claim to be indigenes oppose the Hausa/Fulani tribes who are regarded as settlers from the era of the colonial masters who mostly came in to Jos town as miners and merchants.

Jos Crisis: A crisis triggered by inequality. It can easily be traced to the profound inequality that is

apparent in the society [3]. (a) In 2004, a state of emergency was declared in Plateau State more than 200 Muslims were killed in the attacks by Christian militia. (b) In the November 2008 crisis, over 340 people were killed and properties worth billions were lost when Muslim supporters went on the rampage when they were alleged over the election irregularities and that their candidate had lost to a Christian. (c) In January 2010, being the most recent crisis, more than 500 people were killed mostly women, this occurred after the Christian protest against the construction of a mosque building in a Christian area and after Muslim protesters attacked a Catholic church.

According to sources [3], it is ironic that such catastrophic and bloody encounters have occurred in Jos, a city which derives its name from an acronym "Jesus Our Saviour". Perhaps, the origin of Jos – a former enclave for colonial missionaries and its geographic location – aptly described by some as a "de facto fault line" separating Nigeria's mainly Muslim northern part from its mainly Christian southern region. Nigeria is a country of strong prejudice between indigenes and non-indigene a nation of natives and settlers, the Nigerian constitution even empowers this ethnic affiliation by giving credence to the "State of origin" and likewise political appointments are based on ethnic and state of origin [3]. The crisis in Jos is not immune to the "State of Origin" contraption – the Christians are the natives, while the Muslims are the settlers. Hence the belief remains that the natives are threatened by the increasing population and prominence of the settlers. The natives are neither too keen to share their lands with the settlers nor offer their hands in partnership on the political outfit. The settlers on the other hand, feel cheated and threatened too by the natives whom they feel have failed to recognize them politically and socially despite having co-existed for decades. The fact that the two are on the opposing sides of the religious divide certainly does not help. The cumulative effect of these factors – the aftermath of cultural and societal inequality is what has been happening in Jos over the years [3].



#### IV. METHODOLOGY

This research work is based on qualitative analysis methods. The principle method used is structured in-depth interviews conducted within and outside the conflict zones. Reports were drawn from rural dwellers and persons affected by the conflict including women and youths were interviewed at different times. Reports from government commissions' inquiry and other investigation by setup groups were also utilized. The report of the Plateau Peace Conference 2004 [8] was very useful for this paper. Reports from assigned committee at the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution after visits to the conflict town were also very useful for this journal work.

Some other researchers from the field who were also staff of the Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies similarly gave their report from the field work. Newspaper reports, textbooks and the web were also consulted for the completion of this paper.

#### V. ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE

##### Impact on the economy

In general, the political instability engendered by frequent communal disputes – riots, armed confrontation and breakdown of law and order – cannot be attractive for local or foreign investors. Jos, as it is right now from what we physically observed remains a ghost city with houses, market places, factories and company burnt down to ashes.

We had met with and interviewed a business tycoon, Alhaji Busari who was a car dealer and narrated his ordeal amidst tears. He said “how can this Jos riot be a forgotten incident to me when I practically lost all what I have worked and lived for in life in just one day. Billions of Naira was burnt down, the showroom where cars are parked for display was burnt down to ashes and all the cars on display were destroyed and burnt by the rioters”.

##### Impact of the crisis on women

Gender is thus a socially constructed identity through which roles are assigned at different levels and which can differ according to culture and can be changed by circumstances such as conflict. While the entire community suffers the dire consequences of armed conflict and terrorism, women and girls are particularly affected because of their status in society and their gender. Parties in conflict often rape women with impunity sometimes using systematic rape as a tactic of war and terrorism.

A youth activist remarked as follows: The conflict inflicted psychological and emotional pain on both genders. However, the plight of women was particularly pronounced. There was the case of about twenty women and girls captured by the Boghom people and taken to a village called Kangyal in Kanam Local Government Area. The women and their daughters suffered the worst form of sexual abuse as their captors took turns on them every evening for three months. When they were eventually rescued, five of them were pregnant and tested positive to HIV/AIDS test.

##### The impact of violence against women

This also has to do with violation of human rights of women, in such situation as experienced by women of all ages, who suffer displacement, loss of homes and property, involuntary disappearance of close relatives, poverty, family separation, disintegration and those victims of acts of murder, terrorism, torture, sexual slavery. These spell out the prevailing human right violations and policies of ethnic cleansing in the war-torn and occupied areas. These practices have created inter alia a mass flow of refugees. Such women and children become refugees that no longer have homes or houses over their heads i.e. they become internally displaced persons. According to the research findings, women make up the highest group of casualties.



The picture above shows women in Abuja carrying pictures of dead women and children. Mostly women and children constitute about 80 percent of the millions of refugees around the world. Other refugees including internally displaced persons are deprived of their properties, goods and also deprivation of their right to freedom of movement to return to their homes for fear and insecurity. The degree of insecurity and disorientation was identified when the Institute for Peace and Conflict researchers went to the refugee camps in Bukuru, Jos (a south Local Government Area of Plateau State) and were told that thirty-one pregnant women at the internally displaced persons (IDP) camps were delivered of their babies at different camps [5].

Reports from their spokesperson in charge of women in the IDP camps said in an interview *"that the women who gave birth were earlier taking refuge at the police stations and premises of Bukuru central mosque before they were later taken to another house which was converted to serve as a temporary maternity"* [5]. Out of the 31 women that put to bed

only two babies did not survive. However, the two mothers were in very good conditions [5]. In a newspaper report, one of the nurses in charge of the maternity centers created mentioned that "some bullets were removed from some of the pregnant mothers' bodies who were shot during the crisis and they had to undergo some operations to stitch them".

#### **The women welfare: Feeding and Clothing**

Lack of nutritious food in the camps is due to their population, although some Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) and United Nations (UN) have visited some camp grounds to enhance the supply and distribution of food stuffs and clothing. Different groups have surfaced to donate generously for the refugees. Other repulsive experiences include: (1) Snake bites in the bush while attempting to escape (2) High rate of widowhood (3) Loss of children (4) Premature births due to fear and pressure (5) Mothers abandoning newly born babies due to lack of funds and inability to survive (6) Forced marriages





This picture shows some illustrations of the impact of the conflict on women in Wase, Yelwa-shendam and Langtang south local government in Jos.

In an interview, Vonnan Dashe, president of the Gani community development association, on 5th November 2004 mentioned that, "Women were subjected to violence and hardship because they had to worry about the fate of their children. Some of their children actually got killed and others were wounded while others were raped by the attackers. They were not only physically harassed but also sexually abused and degraded". It was also gathered from our research team that apart from the fact that women were raped, they were also divorced by their husbands, which facilitated a worse emotional stressful and painful condition. The resort to divorce by men whose wives had been sexually abused was a means of dealing with the humiliation acquired from the conflict.

### **Equal rights**

Even though women were affected greatly by the conflict in obviously negative way, they have been unable to set up networks and support groups to enhance their empowerment in the aftermath of the conflict. This includes the ability to participate in politics and decision making forum. Most of their voices are heard through the voices of men or proxy groups. Women make an important but often unrecognized contribution as peace educators both in families and in their societies.

In addressing armed or sectarian conflicts, an active and visible policy of mainstreaming a gender perspective into all policies and programs should be promoted so that before decisions are taken an analysis is made of the effects on women and men respectively. Action should be taken to promote equal participation and opportunities for women in government both at the Federal, State and Local Government levels.

There were hundreds of women mostly dressed in black that took to the streets of Nigeria's capital city of Abuja and also the central city of Jos in rallies against the Jos massacre. They subsequently demanded that the government put the necessary infrastructure in place to improve on the protection of women and children.

This research journal reveals to a large extent how women are streamlined in the policy making groups, politics and in general, all activities. Yet it has not told the whole story, the impact of conflict on women is too profound to be narrated. Most times, they live with the pain, agony, discomfort and under oppression for the rest of their lives.

A lot needs to be done, the bridge that cuts across religious, ethnic and cultural is to have women group work together. However they will need to be empowered through capacity building and enhanced controlled communication before such roles can be played. Women need to be equally represented in organizations so as to be able to contribute adequately in matters and issues that have to do with protection of women and their children during and after such conflicts.

### **VI. CONCLUSION**

It is clear from all the above that women must be involved in matters that has to do with the protection of women and their children. They must prove to the community that they are also relevant and that equality should be practiced when matters that has to do with them comes up especially in politics and decision making.

Women should be courageous and exhibit fearless independence in spite of all odds especially where human right issues are involved. Women are meant to bear the image of the community. In political matters, women should not shy away from their right and their voices must also be heard. In all, this must be the new

wave. The culture must evolve.

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