

Insurgency In Africa; Cushioning the Impact on Women, the Role of International Committee of Red Cross; A Case Study of Boko Haram Insurgency in Northeast Nigeria

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Received 23 April 2025; revised 02 June 2025; accepted 04 June 2025

Abstract

Insurgency is a global challenge that has affected numerous countries across different regions for decades. In the era of globalization and digitalization, insurgent groups have leveraged modern tools to spread ideologies, recruit members, and garner cross-border support more effectively. In Africa, insurgency has manifested in countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Mali, Somalia, and Nigeria, often resulting in violent conflict and persistent instability that undermines development. Since 2009, Nigeria's north-eastern region has been particularly affected by violent extremism through the Boko Haram insurgency. Boko Haram has exploited the patriarchal structures prevalent in Northern Nigeria, marginalizing women and increasing their vulnerability. This marginalization negatively affects women's civic participation, social recognition, economic empowerment, and access to property and inheritance rights. This study employed a qualitative, descriptive survey design, involving 24 key participants drawn from 24 Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps in Maiduguri Municipal. The participants included IDP camp chairpersons, displaced women, and humanitarian workers from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Findings revealed widespread gender-based violence (GBV), including physical, sexual, psychological, and economic harm, as well as forced marriages, human trafficking, exploitation, and discrimination against women. Additional challenges included displacement, food insecurity, poor sanitation, and severe psychological trauma. The study highlights the significant role of the ICRC in mitigating the impacts of the Boko Haram insurgency on women in Northeast Nigeria. This area remains underexplored in academic literature, representing a gap in both conflict studies and humanitarian intervention research.

Keywords: Insurgency in Africa; impact on women; humanitarian response; role of ICRC

Introduction

Insurgency is a global problem that has confronted multiple countries across different regions for decades. In the era of globalization and digitalization, insurgent groups have leveraged modern technologies to spread ideologies, recruit members, and gain cross-border support (Aly et al., 2017). Insurgency is generally defined as an organized rebellion against a recognized authority, often aiming to challenge or overthrow that authority. It involves armed conflict by non-state actors using irregular warfare tactics, including guerrilla warfare, sabotage, and terrorism, often arising from political, social, economic, or religious grievances (Bard, 2002).

Globally, insurgencies are often driven by radical ideologies, including religious extremism and anti-globalization sentiments. For instance, jihadist insurgencies aim to establish a global caliphate based on their interpretation of Islam (Hoffman, 2006). Historical examples include the Iranian Revolution of 1979,

which overthrew the Shah and established an Islamic Republic (Arjomand, 1988), and the Cuban insurgency led by Castro, which reacted to inequality and political repression under Batista (Gott, 2004).

In Africa, insurgency manifests in various forms, characterized by violent conflict and instability that undermines development (Autesserre, 2010). The DRC faces complex insurgencies rooted in ethnic tensions, resource competition, and weak governance (Autesserre, 2010). Somalia experiences ongoing insurgency from Al-Shabaab, seeking to impose strict Sharia law and destabilize the government, with attacks extending to neighboring Kenya (Anderson & McKnight, 2015). Mali has faced insurgency since the 1990s, intensified by Tuareg rebellions aligned with jihadist groups in 2012 (Lecocq & Klute, 2013). Similarly, northern Mozambique's Cabo Delgado region has experienced insurgency due to the discovery of natural gas reserves, displacing over 700,000 people (Marten & Mampilly, 2020).

Nigeria's Boko Haram insurgency, which emerged in 2009, has had devastating consequences in the northeast. Boko Haram ("Western education is forbidden") opposes Western-style education and seeks to establish an Islamic state under Sharia law (Zenn & Pearson, 2014; Okorie, 2013). The group exploits patriarchal norms in Northern Nigeria, disproportionately affecting women through gender-based violence, abductions, forced marriages, human trafficking, and exploitation. For example, the 2014 Chibok abduction of 276 schoolgirls and the 2018 Dapchi abduction of 101 girls demonstrate how women are used as bargaining tools or for forced labor (UNICEF, 2018).

Women in Boko Haram-affected areas experience early marriage, poverty, illiteracy, and social marginalization (Amnesty International, 2014). The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has intervened to mitigate these impacts, offering immediate relief, psychological support, counseling, vocational training, and reintegration programs to empower women and promote gender equality (ICRC, 2018; 2022).

This study aims to examine the impact of Boko Haram insurgency on women in Northeast Nigeria and critically assess the ICRC's interventions from 2014 to 2024. Understanding these interventions is crucial for informing gender-sensitive humanitarian strategies and fostering resilience in post-conflict communities.

Statement of the Problem

The Boko Haram insurgency in Northeast Nigeria has caused widespread violence, displacement, and socio-economic instability, disproportionately affecting women and girls. Women face heightened vulnerabilities, including gender-based violence, loss of livelihoods, and restricted access to education and healthcare. While existing studies highlight the need for gender-sensitive humanitarian interventions, gaps remain in understanding the specific impacts on women and the effectiveness of international humanitarian responses.

For instance, Abur and Iyoho (2019) focused on declining female school enrollment but did not examine broader socio-economic and psychosocial challenges. Similarly, Ali, Zakuan, and Ahmad (2019) documented increased widowhood, orphanhood, and displacement but failed to evaluate the effectiveness of humanitarian interventions in mitigating these effects. Consequently, there is limited empirical research examining the gender-specific impact of the insurgency and the role of organizations like ICRC in cushioning women's vulnerabilities.

This research seeks to fill this gap by critically analyzing the ICRC's interventions, highlighting both successes and shortcomings, and providing actionable insights for gender-responsive humanitarian programming.

Objectives of the Study

Main Objective:

To examine the impact of Boko Haram insurgency on women in Northeast Nigeria and evaluate the role of the ICRC in mitigating these impacts.

Specific Objectives:

1. Investigate the destruction of essential services, such as healthcare and education, caused by Boko Haram insurgency.
2. Analyze the forms of violence, exploitation, and discrimination experienced by women in Northeast Nigeria.

3. Assess the economic impact of Boko Haram insurgency on women.
4. Examine counseling and training programs provided by the ICRC to cushion the impact of insurgency on women.

Research Questions

1. What is the nature of disruption to essential services caused by Boko Haram insurgency in Northeast Nigeria?
2. What forms of violence, exploitation, and discrimination are experienced by women in the region?
3. What are the economic impacts of the insurgency on women?
4. What counseling and training programs does the ICRC provide to mitigate the impact on women?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it evaluates how Boko Haram insurgency disproportionately affects women and assesses the ICRC's interventions. The findings will inform policymakers, humanitarian agencies, and researchers on designing effective gender-sensitive strategies to mitigate the socio-economic, psychological, and reproductive health impacts of conflict on women. The study will also serve as a reference for future research on humanitarian interventions in conflict-affected regions.

Scope of the Study

The study covers the period from 2014 to 2024, encompassing key events such as the Chibok girls' abduction, Boko Haram's territorial control in Gwozo, and the global "Bring Back Our Girls" campaign. The study focuses on the northeast region of Nigeria and examines both the insurgency's impact and the ICRC's mitigation efforts.

Organisation of the Study

The research is structured into five chapters:

Chapter One: Introduction, including background, problem statement, objectives, research questions, scope, significance, and key terms.

Chapter Two: Literature review, covering conceptual, empirical, and theoretical perspectives.

Chapter Three: Research methodology.

Chapter Four: Presentation, analysis, and discussion of data.

Chapter Five: Findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

Definition of Terms

Conflict: A situation where two or more parties have opposing goals or interests, leading to a clash or struggle.

Armed Conflict: Prolonged violence involving organized groups, using weapons to achieve political, territorial, or ideological objectives.

Insurgency: A violent rebellion or uprising against established authority to challenge government control or achieve political change.

Gender: Social, cultural, and behavioral roles, norms, and identities associated with being male, female, or non-binary.

Boko Haram: An Islamist militant group in northeastern Nigeria opposing Western education and seeking to establish Sharia law.

Displacement: Forced or voluntary movement from homes due to conflict or crises, often resulting in living in IDP camps.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs): Individuals forced to flee their homes due to conflict but remaining within their country.

Humanitarian Crisis: A situation where large populations need immediate assistance due to conflict, natural disasters, or other crises.

Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter provides a comprehensive review of key concepts related to conflict, armed conflict, insurgency, and gender. It also presents an empirical review of the impact of Boko Haram insurgency on women. The chapter explores the historical origins of insurgency, contemporary global and African insurgencies, an overview of Boko Haram in Nigeria, reports on Boko Haram by commissions of inquiry, judicial interventions, and the role of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in humanitarian intervention. The chapter further discusses the theoretical frameworks guiding the study, including intersectionality, radical feminism, conflict theory, and systems theory, and identifies gaps in the literature.

Conceptual Clarifications

Conflict generally involves deliberate acts of violence or the shedding of blood, activities that no society can tolerate without rules defining acceptable conduct (Fresard et al., 2004). Louis Coser (1956) defines conflict as a struggle over values, status, power, and scarce resources, where opponents aim to neutralize, injure, or eliminate rivals. Coser emphasizes the competitive and adversarial aspects of conflict, particularly over resources or recognition.

Morton Deutsch (1973) describes conflict as “incompatible activities where one party's actions interfere or are perceived to interfere with the actions of another,” emphasizing interference in actions or goals as a core element. Rahim (2001) views conflict as “an interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement, or dissonance within or between social entities,” highlighting perceptual and goal-based incompatibilities. Thomas and Schmidt (1976) note that conflict arises when one party perceives that another frustrates, or is about to frustrate, their concerns.

The Department for International Development (DFID, 2002:12) identifies political variables contributing to conflict, including weak political institutions, lack of independent judiciary and media, corruption, flawed elections, ethnic and religious exploitation, weak conflict management systems, and weak international engagement.

Armed Conflict

Mary Kaldor (2012) defines modern armed conflict as a combination of war, organized crime, and gross violations of human rights, often involving both state and non-state actors. Charles Tilly (1978) emphasizes the historical role of armed conflict in state formation, while Collier and Hoeffler (2004) stress economic incentives driving civil wars (“greed vs grievance”).

The ICRC (2021) defines armed conflict as organized violence between parties using armed force to achieve political, social, or territorial objectives. Clapham and Gaeta (2014) highlight that organized armed groups must reach a threshold of intensity and duration to constitute armed conflict, while Kalyvas (2006) emphasizes political and ideological motives. Sivakumaran (2012) further specifies that armed conflict must exceed mere disturbances or riots.

Insurgency

Derived from Latin *insurgentia*, insurgency refers to organized movements challenging established authorities, typically through violence and subversion (Britannica, 2023). Galula (1964) views insurgency as a protracted, methodical struggle to achieve objectives leading to the overthrow of existing power. O'Neill (2005) emphasizes the use of both political resources and violence, while the U.S. Department of Defense (2007) defines it as movements aimed at governmental overthrow through subversion and armed conflict. Kilcullen (2006; 2023) underscores the blending of guerrilla warfare, terrorism, political mobilization, and the need for insurgents to maintain popular support.

Key drivers of insurgency include political oppression, economic inequality, ethnic and sectarian tensions, and foreign occupation. Insurgent tactics include guerrilla warfare (Guevara, 1960), terrorism, propaganda, and political mobilization.

Gender

Gender refers to socially constructed roles, behaviors, and expectations associated with being male or female, distinct from biological sex (Connell, 2002). Judith Butler (1990) argues that gender is performative, produced through repeated social acts. Joan Scott (1986) views gender as a social relationship

signifying power dynamics, while Connell (2002) links gender to social institutions and reproductive relations.

Crenshaw (1991) introduces intersectionality, emphasizing that gender intersects with race, class, and sexuality. West and Zimmerman (1987) describe gender as a routine accomplishment produced through social interaction. Gender is dynamic, shaped by cultural norms, historical periods, and political and economic structures.

In contemporary society, gender inequalities persist in workplaces, education, and health. Gender roles in insurgency contexts affect experiences and vulnerabilities, as seen in the deployment of female soldiers in U.S. counterinsurgency operations (Enloe, 2000), though often criticized for oversimplifying gender complexities.

Empirical Review

Historical Origin of Insurgency

Insurgency has roots in political, economic, and social upheaval. Early examples include Spartacus' rebellion against Rome (Shaw, 2001), colonial uprisings such as the American Revolution (Wood, 1992) and Indian Rebellion (Metcalf, 2002), and Marxist-inspired revolutions, including the Russian Revolution (Fitzpatrick, 2008), the Cuban Revolution (Gleijeses, 2002), and the Vietnamese insurgency. Post-colonial Africa witnessed insurgencies driven by ethnic and political factions, e.g., Mau Mau Uprising in Kenya (Elkins, 2005). Modern insurgencies employ asymmetrical warfare, combining guerrilla tactics, terrorism, and ideological mobilization (Coll, 2004).

Insurgency in Contemporary Time: Global Overview

Middle East

Insurgencies like ISIS in Iraq and Syria emerged from sectarian tensions and power vacuums post-U.S. invasion (Cockburn, 2015; Mendelsohn, 2016). Syrian Civil War is a key example of a proxy insurgency (Lynch, 2016).

South Asia

The Afghan insurgency by the Taliban, Pakistani TTP, and Kashmir separatist movements exemplify ethno-nationalist and religious insurgencies (Rashid, 2010; Fair, 2014; Schofield, 2010).

Africa

Groups like Boko Haram and AQIM exploit weak institutions, poverty, and regional instability (Zenn, 2014; Thurston, 2020).

Latin America

Insurgencies are linked to organized crime, e.g., FARC in Colombia (Peceny & Durnan, 2006) and Mexican drug cartels (Grillo, 2011).

Southeast Asia

MILF in the Philippines and ethnic insurgencies in southern Thailand demonstrate long-standing regional conflicts (Banlaoi, 2010; Chalk, 2008).

Western Nations

Domestic extremism, including far-right militias in the U.S., exhibits insurgent characteristics (Jones et al., 2021).

Insurgency in Contemporary Africa

Somalia

Al-Shabaab emerged post-2006 to overthrow the Somali government, employing guerrilla tactics and terror attacks (Anderson & McKnight, 2015).

Sahel Region

Islamist groups like AQIM, MUJAO, JNIM, and ISGS exploit ethnic conflicts and weak state presence (Lecocq et al., 2013; Thurston, 2020).

Cameroon

The Anglophone crisis involves separatist insurgencies by “Amba Boys” seeking independence, compounded by Boko Haram spillover (Awasom, 2020).

Insurgency in Nigeria: Boko Haram

Founded in 2002 by Mohammed Yusuf in Maiduguri, Boko Haram initially opposed Western education and advocated Sharia law (Thurston, 2016). The 2009 military crackdown and Yusuf’s death radicalized the group, with Abubakar Shekau assuming leadership and escalating violent attacks (Cook, 2011). Boko Haram targets the Nigerian state and civilians, exemplified by the 2014 Chibok schoolgirl abduction (Zenn, 2014).

Internal splits emerged with ISWAP, altering tactics and focus on military targets (Onuoha, 2016).

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

The ICRC, founded following Henry Dunant’s *A Memory of Solferino* (1862), advocates humanitarian relief and the protection of civilians in armed conflict (Forsythe, 2005; Pictet, 1979). Its principles of humanity, neutrality, and impartiality have guided international humanitarian law and interventions across conflict zones (Moorehead, 1998).

Theoretical Framework

Radical Feminism

Radical feminism critiques patriarchal structures underpinning gender inequality, violence, and oppression (Firestone, 1970). In Northeast Nigeria, Boko Haram disproportionately affects women through abduction, sexual violence, and forced marriage. Radical feminism highlights these as systemic, rooted in patriarchal and militarized structures.

The ICRC’s humanitarian interventions, though vital, must incorporate gender-sensitive and transformative strategies to address underlying inequalities and promote women’s empowerment in conflict-affected regions.

Research Methodology

Preamble

This chapter outlines the methodological framework adopted for this study. It discusses the study area, research design, research method, population of the study, sampling size and techniques, methods of data collection, data analysis techniques, validity and reliability of instruments, and ethical considerations.

Study Area

North-Eastern Nigeria is a region of strategic cultural, economic, and geopolitical significance, comprising the states of Borno, Adamawa, Yobe, Bauchi, Gombe, and Taraba. It shares borders with Chad, Niger, and Cameroon and hosts diverse ethnic groups with rich cultural heritage.

Geography and Environment: The region is characterized by semi-arid savannahs, plateaus, and the northern Sahel. Seasonal variations dominate, with hot, dry conditions for much of the year and a short rainy season. Lake Chad, located in the northeast, serves as a crucial resource for fishing, agriculture, and local livelihoods.

Cultural and Ethnic Diversity: Major ethnic groups include the Kanuri, Fulani, Hausa, Shuwa Arabs, and various smaller communities. Islam is the predominant religion, shaping social norms, daily life, and community structures.

Economic Activities: Agriculture dominates the economy, with subsistence farming and livestock rearing forming primary livelihoods. Key crops include millet, sorghum, maize, and cowpeas. Other activities include fishing, trade, and limited exploitation of mineral resources such as gypsum, limestone, and clay.

Source: World Watch Monitor (2017), Nigeria: Benue death toll 60 over past 10 days, admits police chief.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative and descriptive approach using a survey research design. The survey design is appropriate because it facilitates systematic data collection from selected respondents via unstructured in-depth interviews.

Descriptive research aims to accurately and systematically describe a population, situation, or phenomenon. Primary data will be collected through interviews and focus group discussions, while secondary data will include journal articles, books, official reports, electronic media, and archival documents.

Population of the Study

The study population consists of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe states. According to recent reports:

Borno: 1.5 million IDPs (IDMC, 2022)

Adamawa: 240,000–300,000 IDPs (NEMA, 2023)

Yobe: 150,000–200,000 IDPs (NEMA, 2023)

Given the large population, the study focuses on a representative sample of IDPs to ensure manageable and meaningful data collection.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

The study employs purposive sampling, selecting participants with extensive knowledge of humanitarian issues.

In Maiduguri, Borno State, 8 IDP camps were considered: Bakkasi, NYSC, Dalori I, Dalori II, Teacher Village, Mogolis, Gubio, and Doro. From each camp, three key informants were selected:

1. IDP camp chairman
2. A displaced woman representative
3. Staff of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

This totals 24 key participants across the 8 camps. Purposive sampling ensures that data are gathered from those most familiar with the humanitarian and socio-economic conditions of women in the IDP camps.

Method of Data Collection

Data collection combines primary and secondary sources:

1. Primary data: unstructured in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and official records from camps and humanitarian agencies.
2. Secondary data: books, journal articles, research reports, and unpublished documents.

Descriptive statistics will summarize qualitative information where applicable.

Method of Data Analysis

Data will be analyzed using content analysis, which involves systematically categorizing verbal and written information to identify patterns, themes, or meanings. This method is suitable given the qualitative nature of unstructured interviews and archival data.

Validity and Reliability of Instruments

The interview guide is the primary research instrument. To ensure validity and reliability:

1. Instruments will be reviewed for clarity, language appropriateness, and comprehensibility.
2. The research supervisor will proofread and provide feedback.
3. Data will be cross-checked with focus group discussions and secondary sources.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards will be maintained by:

1. Ensuring confidentiality and anonymity of participants
2. Obtaining informed consent
3. Clearly explaining study purpose, risks, and benefits
4. Allowing participants to withdraw at any time without consequences
5. Conducting research transparently, objectively, and without bias

Findings and Discussion

Findings

The study reveals that the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) plays a significant role in mitigating the effects of Boko Haram insurgency on women in North-Eastern Nigeria. Key interventions include:

1. Provision of funds and medical care
2. Construction of infrastructural facilities
3. Collaboration with security agencies to ensure safety of women in IDP camps

These interventions have contributed to improved socio-economic well-being among women in the affected areas.

Nature of Boko Haram Insurgency:

1. Armed conflict, extra-judicial killings, use of child soldiers, and transnational links
2. Severe disruption of social and economic structures

Impacts on Women:

1. Fatalities and loss of family members
2. Captivity, forced marriage, and abduction
3. Denial of access to formal education
4. Exposure to psychological trauma, social disintegration, and economic losses

Role of ICRC:

1. Prevention of human rights violations
2. Provision of humanitarian aid and economic support
3. Construction of infrastructure and social rehabilitation programs

Forms of Violence Experienced by Women:

1. Sexual violence, forced marriage, human trafficking, physical abuse, social isolation
2. Limited access to quality healthcare and education

Economic Impacts:

1. Restricted access to financial services
2. Food shortages, inflation, and malnutrition
3. Loss of assets and livelihoods
4. Challenges in maternal and child care
5. Forced displacement

Discussion of Findings

Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

GBV includes physical, sexual, psychological, and economic harm based on gender or perceived gender (WHO, 2013; UN, 1993). In North-Eastern Nigeria, GBV is rooted in unequal power relations, patriarchal norms, and exacerbated by conflict.

Forced Marriage

Forced marriage occurs when individuals are coerced into matrimony without consent, violating human rights and reinforcing gender inequality (UNFPA, 2012).

Human Trafficking

Human trafficking involves recruitment, transport, or harboring of individuals through coercion, fraud, or deception for exploitation (ILO, 2021). Women and girls in conflict zones are particularly vulnerable.

Socio-Economic Impacts of Insurgency on Women

Conflict has disrupted livelihoods, displaced populations, and limited access to healthcare and education. Women face heightened vulnerability to GBV, social stigma, and economic exclusion (UN Women, 2015). Displacement and loss of male breadwinners exacerbate poverty and dependence.

Conclusion

Insurgency in North-Eastern Nigeria has multifaceted impacts on women, including economic hardships, GBV, displacement, and psychological trauma. Disruption of social structures and essential services impedes women's ability to rebuild their lives.

Addressing these challenges requires:

1. Women's empowerment and inclusion in peacebuilding
2. Restoration of livelihoods
3. Protection against gender-based violence
4. Access to healthcare and education
5. Promotion of social and economic rights
6. Investing in women's rights is both a moral and strategic imperative for sustainable peace and development in the region.

Recommendations

1. Ministry of Health, ICRC, NGOs, and IDP camp health coordinators provide comprehensive healthcare services, including maternal, reproductive, mental health, and trauma care for women in IDP camps. Mobile clinics and psychosocial support units should be strengthened to ensure accessibility.
2. Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) Ministry of Water Resources, ICRC, UNICEF, and local camp management committee ensures access to clean water and adequate sanitation facilities. Women should be actively involved in planning, management, and maintenance of water points to address gender-specific needs.
3. Gender-Sensitive Humanitarian Assistance: Humanitarian agencies (ICRC, UNHCR, local NGOs) designs targeted interventions that address women's health, economic empowerment, and psychosocial support. Aid distribution should consider women-headed households and vulnerable groups.
4. Prevention of Gender-Based Violence (GBV): Ministry of Justice, law enforcement agencies, camp security, NGOs (e.g., Women's Rights Organizations) strengthen legal frameworks to prevent GBV, establish survivor support services, and promote awareness campaigns challenging harmful cultural and patriarchal norms.
5. Economic and Social Empowerment: Ministry of Women Affairs, NGOs, vocational training centers, local community leaders provide skills acquisition programs, educational opportunities, livelihood support, and leadership training for women to enhance economic independence and social inclusion.
6. Conflict Mitigation and Social Cohesion: National and State Peacebuilding Commissions, local government authorities, community leaders address underlying socio-economic inequalities and human rights violations, promote inclusive governance, and engage women in peacebuilding processes at local and regional levels.
7. Monitoring and Accountability: Government monitoring agencies, humanitarian organizations, independent research bodies collect sex-disaggregated data, conduct gender-sensitive impact assessments, and incorporate women's voices in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of humanitarian and peacebuilding programs.

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