

# **Tending To The Devastating Wounds Of Nigerian Girls And Women**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In 2018, one thousand, one hundred people were murdered across six states of north-west Nigeria, in 2019, two thousand two hundred people and between January and June 2020, one thousand, six hundred people were killed. In addition, more than 200,000 have been internally displaced [Strife 2021].

These are what we read daily; and further alarming are that the attacks and abductions seem to be more targeted at educational institutions of all levels in recent times, particularly across north-western Nigeria. For example, the abduction of at least 20 college students and two staff from Greenfield University Kaduna in April 2021. In February 2021, gunmen seized 279 girls from a school in Zamfara state and the abduction of 200 students by some reports; from a school in Tegna, Niger state. In early July 2021, more than 100 students were also abducted from Bethel Baptist High School, Damishi, Kaduna.

While these attacks are not restricted to girls and women alone, this report aims to explore what the effects and related trauma of this seemingly intractable violent conflict on girls and women in Nigeria are and answer how we can curb the continuous occurrences.

We reflect with women activists across the country, on ways to address the violence, and support the healing and rehabilitation. The paper also outlines fifteen major recommendations in response to the key question of how to support recovery and the part everyone can play to halt the menace.

**KEYWORDS:** Girls, Women, Violence, Nigeria, Abduction, Kidnapping, Rehabilitation, North-West Nigeria, Effects, Healing.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

No doubt distressing experiences are part of life. From major incidents like the decade of the great depression of the industrialised world or the Spanish flu of 1918 where at least 50,000 million died, humans seem to have grown in resilience and adapting to difficulties on a large scale-especially when these incidents are not human made. The most recent example being the novel corona virus which hit every sector of the world in unprecedented proportions and has made us rethink life as we know it.

Stories of incredible feats of human beings continue to fuel the narrative of how resilient the human spirit is. In fields of sport, arts and even entertainment, we continue to see records set and broken, innovation and new heights reached. From Grammy awards to Olympic medals, we marvel at what humans can do with the right training and nurturing environments. These are the more pleasant stories.

There is the flip side of this which is when humans experience trauma because of negative experiences and how we deal with trauma. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), “Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster” [American Psychological Association].

Trauma is said to be of three main types: Acute, Chronic, or Complex. Each type is characterised by the length of time the incident happens for.

Accordingly:

“Acute trauma results from a single incident, Chronic trauma is repeated and prolonged such as domestic violence or abuse and Complex trauma is exposure to varied and multiple traumatic events, often of an invasive, interpersonal nature,” [Missouri’s Early Care and Education Connections].

Our bodies have five responses that are programmed to respond when we are in traumatic circumstances. They are fight, flight, freeze, flop, and friend. When in danger, these responses try to keep us safe automatically. [Psychoeducation: Trauma 5 Fs of Trauma Response]. It is therefore expected that victims of traumatic experiences go through a range of emotions that are destabilising and have long term effects.

This paper aims to look specifically at the effects of traumatic experiences that girls and women in northern Nigeria face; and what strategies we can take to tend to the devastating and long-term wounds that the current situation is creating.

We want to ask ourselves how the continued abductions in Nigeria have affected the abductees and how do we go about addressing the aftereffects of their ordeals which remain with them even when or if released?

How do we support families who lose their loved ones in such instances? What are we “breeding” for generations now and those to come?

## 2 CONTEXT

As of 2020, the great nation of Nigeria was 206,139, 587 strong; according to the World Bank [World Bank 2020] with a gender disaggregation of 101, 669, 150 being female and 104, 469, 637, male. Nigeria is the most populated African, and black nation in the world.

This West African powerhouse is additionally abundantly endowed with natural resources. For example, Nigeria is the tenth largest oil producer in the world, has the largest natural gas reserves in Africa in addition to mineral resources like coal, bauxite, gold, tin, iron ore, limestone, niobium, lead, and zinc. Agriculture and tourism are underutilised sectors and the potential to live up to the name “Giant of Africa” is ever present, however over the past two decades the living conditions and general environment in the country have deteriorated rapidly.

There is a wide variety of issues that can be spotlighted, not least of which include high levels of corruption, outdated and/or unavailable infrastructure, high rates of inflation and in 2020, a ranking of 161 out of 187 in the Human Development Index, a Gender Development Index of 0.881 and 46.4% of the Population in multidimensional poverty [United Nations Development Programme 2020].

The data starts to tell the story and it is a sad one. Things that Nigerians never thought would happen or happen again (after the 1967 – 1970 civil war) have re-emerged in the daily lives of Nigerians. Crime rates are soaring, and people are so desperate that they now resort to stealing food that is being cooked off the fire and making away with it.

“Political instability, citizen alienation, terrorism and violence define the Nigerian crime scene. Nigeria has recently been included among the countries with the least peace in the world, according to the Global Peace Index” [Statista 2021].

Of particular concern is the growing level of abductions and violence specifically targeted at girls and women and the overall lack of wellbeing among Nigerian citizens. From the infamous 2014 Boko Haram kidnappings of more than 270 girls in Chibok, north-eastern Borno state, with some still in captivity and abductions still ongoing in Borno state, to the ever-increasing instances of armed banditry across north-west Nigeria, we have reached a critical stage where girls and women are in a constant state of fear and unease.

For example, since 2020, more than 1,000 girls, women, boys and men have been abducted in various locations in Kaduna including Federal College of Forestry Mechanisation, Greenfield University, Bethel Secondary School, numerous communities across at least seven Local Government Areas, churches, colleges, hospitals and many unreported cases. School attendance rates have declined drastically and all primary and secondary schools in Kaduna state were temporarily shut down in August 2021 due to the deteriorating security situation. Kaduna has been worst hit among the other north-west and north-central states most affected by mass and individual abductions. With the DW reporter’s name redacted for security reasons, this short narrative tells of a community member who witnessed and became a victim himself:

“Alhaji Dan Juma began to relate the attack — during which his son, his brother and other 13 people had been murdered. “They came around 2:30 a.m. They killed my son and my brother and took (another) brother,” Juma told me in the Hausa language through a translator. “I pray for the government officials to protect the interest of the people, for God’s sake,” Juma pleaded. Gunmen killed Juma a day after I spoke with him. They had contacted him demanding ransom money to secure the release of his abducted brother.

After collecting 5 million naira (€1,000, \$13,123) from him, they then killed him and the brother he was trying to rescue.

Juma's death is similar to what many Nigerians in the north go through. But such stories barely make it in the news,” [Deutsche Welle 2021].

This describes one story and today there are thousands of similar stories. In addition, attention has not been given to the gender specific effects of these abductions on the abductees.

The world-famous Chibok girls have been the ones who have gotten the most chances to tell some of their stories, due to the notoriety of the incident and time that has passed; and some simply cannot. It is much too traumatic and the potential for re-traumatisation is an ever-present reality. In Kaduna state for instance, as of 29 September 2021, we are still very much in the throes of the bombardment by kidnapers and the publicised attempts of the armed forces and police, so no one is even thinking yet of the effects on the girls, women and the community as a whole, how much more what concrete actions need to be taken to start to address both short and long-term effects. This very complex and difficult situation has also hampered effective data collection related to women/men ratios of victims as data is sometimes scarce or even unreliable; and follow up on any rehabilitation efforts. This causes an enormous gap in being able to truly assess, find support for and implement holistic rehabilitation, mental health and psychosocial support to victims. There is also the devastating effect on families; both those who have been able to get their wards back and those whose wards have been killed in the course of their abductions- in most cases in the most humiliating and disrespectful ways [Al Jazeera 2021].

### 3 TRAUMA TESTIMONIALS

“The APA states that Hostage and kidnap survivors can experience stress reactions including denial, impaired memory, shock, numbness, anxiety, guilt, depression, anger, and a sense of helplessness,” [American Psychological Association 2013].

Such survivors can feel relief on being freed but being able to adjust “back to real life” can be just as hard as when one was in captivity. When survivors are released, they can feel a whole range of emotions that result in major adjustment difficulties.

Survivors may experience “survivors’ guilt” which is when they feel underserving of having survived over others who did not, and some common reactions include, denial, impaired memory, decreased concentration, being overcautious and aware, confusion, shock, numbness, anxiety, guilt, depression, anger, a sense of helplessness, withdrawal and avoidance of family, friends, and activities.

Even more complicated psychological effects can emerge like the “Stockholm Syndrome” which is a condition where survivors develop a bond with their captors or feel guilty for feeling that bond, and experience grief if their captors are harmed.

The effects of abductions on girls and women cannot be minimised. Additional problems of stigma, economic difficulties which may have come about because of ransom money paid or general destabilisation of the family, ill health, and poor well-being of the family also as a result of the abduction are all factors that additionally play a significant role in the effect of abductions on abductees. Many communities tend to see survivors as outcasts and in some cases even as traitors (especially when linked to terrorism and such abductees come back with children or even a “repentant” husband). The weight of being an abductee is enormous and only with proper medical attention, connecting with loved ones, talking about or relating their experiences, and being in a safe and secure environment can they even begin to experience some relief and potential healing from their ordeals. Our trauma testimonials will focus on two cases.

Noami Adamu’s story is intriguing. She was one of the Chibok girls abducted in 2014. And she managed to keep a diary throughout her ideal. She spent three years in captivity. “Senior Boko Haram militants were constantly trying to get Naomi to marry one of their fighters. They believed seeing her get married would help convince the younger girls to follow her lead. Every time she refused, she would be beaten brutally and threatened with death,” [Jones, M. 2021].

Her story is definitely worth reading. But for the sake of scope, we are focusing the emphasis here on what happened after she was released along with 81 other girls. Naomi reports that every time new reports of abductions are in the news, she cannot sleep; and when she heard about the Zamfara abductions she didn't want them to go through what she and her peers went through. She says she still gets scared whenever she hears gunshots - even if they're from the military. Naomi is rebuilding her life. She is now happily married and expecting her first child as at the time the report was published. Her story is ongoing as she faces whatever her new life brings her including dealing with the complexities of being an ex-abductee. More than 100 of the Chibok girls are still missing. How does Naomi feel when she thinks of those left behind? How will she approach the care of her own child and the potential paranoia that will come as the child grows up? How will she cope with loss as life goes on? Many questions are staring us in the face that we cannot answer right now.

In Kaduna, some abducted students are seeking alternative educational opportunities overseas as they do not see Nigeria and particularly Kaduna state as an option anymore because they are not safe. With very scarce information about abductees and the barring of journalists

speaking with them to avoid re-traumatisation as probably for security reasons, we are only able to access bits and glimpses of the state of minds of these rescued abductees. 19-year-old Kauna Daniel from one of the Kaduna colleges wants to leave, even though she currently has no passport or money to fund her education abroad but is extremely frightened on top of it all.

“I don’t want to go anywhere again,” her voice rang out angrily over the phone. She said she hasn’t been able to sleep since she was released from captivity in May because of trauma and an eye problem. The trauma we are passing through is getting out of hand and it is even now that everything is getting worse,” she said, adding almost as if she is pleading that “it is better for me to stay at home.” [Asadu C. September 2021] If that’s not confusion and disorientation, I do not know what is.

We do not have in-depth testimonials because we do not have access to them and for this to happen within a culture that mental health disorders and problems are considered shameful and are stigmatised, it is no surprise that we cannot hear more in order to help more. One thing is for sure, no good comes out of such an ordeal as an abduction or kidnapping and the effects for everyone are destabilising and distressing.

## 4 THE VOICES OF ACTIVISTS

This chapter documents the reflections of activists on the issues of violence against women and specifically issues of abductions and kidnappings. This question was posed to them: “With the increase of violence against women and abductions particularly of girls and women in Nigeria, what solutions would you proffer to start to heal these girls and women from these traumatising incidents and how can we prevent their continual recurrence?”

### **Activist One: Geo-Political Zone-North Central**

Having contacted victims and survivals of GBV, I know what victims of violence can suffer such as sexual and reproductive health consequences, including forced and unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions, traumatic fistula, sexually transmitted infections including HIV, and even death.

Possible solutions here are to make provision of **Safe Centers** for GBV survivals. Here the victim stays there for about 2 months and during this period they should be preoccupied with different activities that will develop their minds. Such activities will help contribute and increase safety, hygiene and comfort among the survivors.

This is where they will be empowered on various views. Empowerment and autonomy of women and the improvement of their political, social, economic and health status is a highly important end in itself. In addition, it is essential for the achievement of sustainable development. Involving them in **skills acquisition** activities will help ease them from being traumatised.

The self-esteem of these survivors needs to burst out (**high self-esteem**). The fear of inferiority should have to be cleared from their minds. They need to see themselves as one who can do better than the other, to be courageous and understands and recognises their high safe esteem. They should also be encouraged in **participation** in activities that promote the ending of GBV, such as 16 days of Activism (Orange Day). With their active involvement they will be healed from the trauma.

In conclusion, the most powerful approach in ending violence against women is making sure perpetrators are brought to book, if possible, naming and shaming of perpetrators should be implemented. This single activity will send a message out there to people who wish to continue with violence against women. In Benue we are working closely with NGO and CSO implementing partners to see if we can achieve this target by 2022.

### **Activist Two: Geo-Political Zone-North Central**

To heal victims of this menace, government and relevant organisations have to take seriously the setting up and equipping of rehabilitation centres to provide succor to women.

To prevent recurrence of these incidents, government should clamp down on the elements involved in these activities. After which they should make the penalties for kidnapping more stringent in order to ward off intending kidnappers.

### **Activist Three: Geo-Political Zone-North East**

From my experience over the years, one of the major ways that women and girls can be protected from rights violations and its consequences is through sensitisation, and engaging the community gate keepers. Many people don't even have a clue what their rights are. So, when we start to sensitise communities on human rights which should be protected, it goes a long way. Also, when we engage men in accountability practices, sensitising them on their roles as upholders of the rights of women and girls, it would help. We also need to work through community gatekeepers/leaders and religious leaders. All these are prevention strategies. Then when rights are violated, there must be channels of reporting which protect women, referral pathways so to speak. Women should be linked with functional legal and psychosocial services. Women should also have safe spaces to speak, to heal and dialogue with other women. There should also be skills acquisition schemes, livelihood, or economic capacity building, for women and adolescent girls.

### **Activist Four: Geo-Political Zone-North West**

In recent years, Nigeria has been plagued with so much crime and terrorism. The height of this is the incessant abductions happening around the country. Women and girls are not free from these abductions, one might even say they are higher risk as they experience different levels of trauma as a result.

Some of the traumas these girls and women experience include; sexual harassment, rape and assault. Some of the victims abducted by Boko Haram have been indoctrinated into the terrorists' group and forced to participate in their terrorist activities.

Thankfully, some of these girls and women are rescued or released after a while, however the damage has been done and upon their return they are confronted with a different kind of challenge; reintegrating into society after experiencing days, weeks, months and even years of unspeakable agonising trauma. At this point, they need the help of all-family, friends, society and even the government-to heal and to return to normalcy, if possible.

These survivors have gone through something so profound, most of them live with the scars-physical, psychological, and mental. Hence, they need the help of loved ones, their community and the government to heal and reintegrate back into society and live life with the highest level of normalcy attainable for them. The first step to be taken is to have them undergo a thorough medical examination to check for internal and external injuries as well as STDs. This can be provided by Sexual Assault and Referral Centers (SARC), or otherwise by public hospitals at no cost to the survivors. Having covered their physical wellness, then there is a need to also take care of their mental and psychological well-being; this can be in form of therapy sessions with a professional therapist or a psychiatrist. Talking to a professional is only 50% of the work, they also need to talk to loved ones about their experiences.

Talking to loved ones may prove difficult if not impossible especially for those who have been away from their families for years. The Chibok girls, who were abducted in 2014 as kids are now adults, haven't been gone for 7 years, and this means some of them have already forgotten what their families look like and one thing is sure for all of them, interacting and trusting their families and loved ones again will take time and work. Work on both sides; the families and the survivors, but mostly their families, as they have to remind the survivors that they are now home, and safe.

Some of the work needed is engaging them in activities that keeps them busy and away from isolation and provides them opportunities to learn new skills as well as re-learn day-to-day interaction. Another most crucial path to healing for survivors is reassuring them of their



safety and justice what for what has been done to them, this is only achievable by bringing perpetrators to justice and intensifying security measures across the country. To prevent the continual occurrence of these traumatising incidents, perpetrators must be held accountable for their actions, and should be brought to justice.

#### **Activist Five: Geo-Political Zone-North West**

People should be allowed to tell their story and you should listen without judging them because that's how you build trust and make them to have a safe place to tell their story as nobody likes to be attacked which doesn't give room for healing. Listening to their story makes you to know how to respond and preserve their sanity. Safe spaces must be provided to assure them that they are safe from their perpetrators and that they are safe with you.

You shouldn't select the victims and treat them in a discriminatory manner, leaving this one and picking another. Healing should be approached in uniformity, and this builds more confidence in them knowing they are not the first neither the last, so it doesn't start and end with me. In as much as we encourage healing, we should also render justice to them. We must make sure that there is implementation and enforcement of the necessary laws. Another thing is confidentiality when people need healing, we should be able to keep their confidentiality intact in the sense that when they tell their stories, we should allow them heal first before we share the stories so by the time we want to share it with other people they are already healing and back to the society.

#### **Activist Six: Geo-Political Zone-South East**

To prevent violence against women and girls, it's necessary that law enforcement officers should rise to their responsibilities and the government should stop playing politics with the safety and well-being of women and girls, the citizens at large and ensure that perpetrators are fished out and adequate punishment served (irrespective of social status of perpetrator or victim) to serve as a deterrent to others abusers. Women and girls should be encouraged to stand up for one another, to speak with one voice over the failure of the government to protect them, and punish offenders. There is also a need to teach self-defense skills to women. In order to help them heal, we should end stigmatisation of victims and provide psychosocial support.

#### **Activist Seven: Geo-Political Zone-South West**

While we must admit the difficulty to forget the experiences of violence by survivor, trying to help them forget bad experiences is important because someone who has been a victim of violence definitely has been in an environment where s/he feels so lost and is not accepted. So, I believe that if such a person is placed in a community where s/he feels loved and accepted, that way it can be the beginning of the healing process.

We can also encourage them by booking counseling sessions for them where they can have one-on-one interactions with therapists who are specialists in some of these areas to help them express themselves (express their grief) freely without condemnation. These sessions have to be consistent as a process and constant engagement with the therapist, will help them to renew their mind. Because Sexual and Gender Based Violence can have physical, psychological, and financial effects (trauma) on the survivor, as we take care of the psychological part, we should encourage them to invest in their interests, talents, skills, and build them up such that they are

able to see themselves as useful to the society because we've been able to help them through their physical and financial trauma.

To stop these from reoccurring, the government needs to play a major role. The insecurity situation is worrisome, and the security agencies need to be well empowered to face the challenges posed by it. Schools should be well protected from kidnapping. An average girl should be able to defend herself by including taekwondo in our sexual and reproductive health rights curriculum. I feel that the government has a major role to play and invest in the budget for security.

## 5 CONCLUSION

This paper has highlighted one of the very important and overwhelming problems Nigeria, especially northern Nigeria is facing today. This is done using the lens of trauma and we questioning ourselves on how we can tend to the effects of trauma that girls and women face daily. We also glanced very briefly into some testimonials that give us little information but even that is showing us very clearly that things are in a bad shape and will only get worse over the short and long term.

We wanted to share a glimpse of the scope of the problem in such a richly endowed nation and highlight the irony of how now even striving for education is now a deadly endeavour, especially for girls and women. We posed a question to women activists to hear their views on possible solutions to start to heal girl and women abductees from these traumatising incidents, and how to prevent their continual recurrence.

Considering all the conversations and reflections, the following recommendations emerge commonly:

1. The problem must be acknowledged, its importance and effects must be recognised to be on the level of a pandemic by all stakeholders especially the government and security agencies.
2. Government must acknowledge and invest all resources to uphold the sanctity of human life, security and human rights of every citizen of Nigeria.
3. We cannot allow this issue to become a political issue – as it relates to the well-being of those who literarily care for the nation and its people.
4. All resources must be mobilised to prioritise and enforce the safety and security of Nigerians and particularly of girls and women.
5. Survivors must have access to rehabilitative and support resources including legal, health, empowerment, psychosocial and mental health services in addition to the provision of safe spaces.
6. Experts, community, and civil society groups should be engaged as active partners and provided with resources to support the state's efforts in responding to the needs of survivors.
7. Families and communities need to be sensitized and encouraged to provide support to survivors.
8. Reflecting on and localising good practices of addressing the problem of abductions and kidnapping should be undertaken by all stakeholders systematically.
9. Root problems that are factors feeding into the increase of abductions should be analysed and proposed solutions to transform these environments discussed in a consultative manner and implemented.
10. Self defence and rights education should be mainstreamed into school curricula.
11. Work closely with gatekeepers, religious leaders, and influencers to raise awareness and encourage action against abductions.
12. Promote the dignity of survivors and encourage them to tell their stories when the risk of re-traumatisation is low.
13. Stringent laws and policies must be put in place as deterrents for those considering or involved in adductions or kidnappings.
14. Perpetrators must face the full wrath of the law when caught and should be named and shamed.
15. Holistic programming should be provided to survivors and patience must guide the application of any services or process to support them.

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