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SOCIAL IMPACTS OF ETHNO-RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE ON WOMEN IN NIGERIA: EVIDENCE FROM SELECTED CASES

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Keywords	Abstract
<i>Ethno-Religious Violence, Women, Social Impacts, Society, Nigeria</i>	Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa with approximately 242 million people, is known for its rich ethnic and religious diversity. Despite having rich natural resources and cultural heritage, ethno-religious violence has become a recurring phenomenon in Nigeria for the last several decades, particularly in the north-eastern part of the country that has created instability and remained a constant threat to peaceful co-existence in the society. This paper aims to highlight instances of the ethno-religious violence in Nigeria and their social impacts on women. Though numerous studies have been conducted on the issue of ethno-religious violence in Nigeria, the social impacts on Nigerian women still remain inadequate. In recognition of this, the paper seeks to examine the same. The paper finds that women are more vulnerable to ethno-religious violence in Nigeria. The social impacts are profound, multifaceted and devastating. Women in conflict zones often face displacement, sexual violence, leaving survivors with severe physical injuries, emotional trauma, and social stigma. Apart from destruction to properties and loss of their loved ones, displaced women and girls often face dire consequences, including lack of access to adequate shelter, food, healthcare, education among others. The paper concludes, inter alia, with recommendations that addressing these impacts demand a



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	comprehensive approach to empower women, advance gender equality, and promotes justice and peace-building that prioritize women's voices and needs. To this end, the government must implement consistent and effective policies, accompanied by decisive actions to safeguard women from violations of their fundamental human rights. By confronting the root causes of ethno-religious violence, Nigeria can pave the way for lasting peace and social stability for better prospects.
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Introduction

With a population of approximately 242 million people, Nigeria is the most populated country in Africa and is both multi-ethnic and multi-religious. It is home to 371 ethnic groups speaking over 500 languages. Three largest ethnic groups, namely the Hausa-Fulani, Yorubas, and Igbos constitute more than 60% of the population. Many smaller groups, viz. Ijaw, Efik, Ibibio, Annang, Ogoni, Tiv, Urhobo-Isoko, Edo and Itsekiri are some of the other sizeable ethnic groups in Nigeria. Islam and Christianity are the two major religions of Nigeria and less than 10% of the population embraces ATR (African Traditional Religion). Interestingly, the northern region of Nigeria is dominated by Muslims while the southern region is mainly dominated by the Christians. Apart from this, there is a strong overlap between ethnic and religious boundary in Nigeria's plural setting.

Since gaining its independence in 1960, Nigeria has seen many phases of corrupt and ineffectual civil rule and repressive and corrupt military rule. Political instability, economic decline, and 'divide and rule' policy are among the problems that have increased group divisions within the country to a dangerous point. Ethno-religious violence has escalated in Nigeria due to increase of ethno-religious politicization and mobilization after democracy opened up political space in 1999 after a long period of military dictatorship. These issues generate the fiercest contestations over the control of state power; resource allocation, such as oil and land ownership; and citizenship rights. This ultimately leads to violent ethno-religious conflicts, which further leads to loss of lives and destruction of properties as well as displacement of people ultimately leading them to seek refuge in their own country.

In the case of women, a number of them have lost their husbands and/ or other family members leading them to significant hardships, such as physical displacement, lack of access to adequate shelter, food, healthcare, education among others. Most critically, gender equality has further perpetuated the marginalization of women in the society. It is against this background, this paper examines the instances of ethno-religious violence that have occurred in Nigeria with particular focus on their social impacts on women.

Theoretical Framework

The instrumentalist approach has been employed to study the ethno-religious violence in Nigeria. According to this perspective, individuals may change their ethnic affiliations, either due to changing



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circumstances or, as Paul Brass argues, through manipulation by political elites. Brass views ethnicity as a product of political myths, intentionally constructed and exploited by elites to gain power and influence. In this context, the traditions, values, symbols, and practices of ethnic groups are leveraged as instruments by elites to achieve political supremacy. As a result, ethnicity and religion become symbols and tools in the contest for power within a democratic system. Political elites manipulate and mobilize the masses to further their personal agendas, significantly fueling the escalation of ethno-religious violence in Nigeria.

In Nigeria, the political elites in power have largely failed to effectively manage the nation's affairs and resources for the benefit of its citizens. They have been unable to resolve key issues such as minority rights, power distribution, revenue allocation, corruption, and mismanagement. Marginalized groups often fight for their rights, entitlements, and fair access to national resources, which often leads to violent conflicts. These persistent conflicts, which result in insecurity, ethno-religious tensions, unrest, and internal instability, are closely linked to ethnic and religious divides. In practice, political elites exploit these divisions by manipulating the vulnerabilities of the masses to further their own power and personal interests.

Origin of Ethno-Religious Violence in Nigeria

The roots of ethno-religious violence in Nigeria can be traced back to the colonial era, when the colonial masters implemented divisive policies that exacerbated ethnic and religious differences. The colonial rulers introduced Christianity in the early 19th century, portraying African Traditional Religion as idolatry. Although Christianity had initially been brought to the West African coast in the 15th century by Portuguese Roman Catholic priests accompanying traders and officials, it achieved little success at the time. It was not until 1842, when the first group of Christian missionaries arrived on the western coast, that Christianity began to spread to other parts of the region. Before the onset of colonialism in Nigeria, Islam was introduced to the northern region in the 11th century and, by the 16th century, had gained significant influence in major urban centers of the region, extending into rural areas and the middle belt uplands. Shehu Usman Fodio founded a government based on Islamic principles in the northern part of Nigeria before the colonial era. Examining the history of ethno-religious violence in Nigeria reveals that, even before British colonization, the country had a diverse background encompassing multiple ethnicities, religions, and languages. After the arrival of the British in Nigeria, first and foremost, the country was divided into the northern and southern protectorates for administrative convenience. By 1914, both northern and southern Nigeria was amalgamated. Following the amalgamation, Nigeria was divided into northern, southern and eastern Nigerian regions. With the passage of time, colonialism became the 'Cradle' of ethnicity. Violent conflicts became common on the basis of ethnic, religion, and region. This regional demarcation became one of the most important causal factors of identity conflict and discriminatory practices.



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The British then stimulated inter-group competition and mobilization for power and resources in the new states that further led to ethno-religious violence.

Through their policy of 'divide and rule', the British are largely responsible for the division of the North and the South. By supporting the feudalistic, theocratic Muslim Hausa-Fulani dominated state in the North, the British created a huge cultural, political and economic gap between the two regions. The British policy of not allowing the activities of Christian missionaries in the North helped to spread Islam and prevented the northerners from having access to modern education. Besides, by perpetuating the feudal Islamic system in the North, the British sowed the seeds of social inequality including gender inequality as little was done to address inequality of women. Along with this, its relative lack of economic development made it more difficult for ordinary men as well as women of the North to improve their status compared to people in the South. In addition, geographically the North was more isolated and its towns were more provincial. On the other hand, the dynamic, culturally diverse ports and cities of economic activity were concentrated in the South. Urbanization, the mixing of peoples, and access to new goods and services stimulated considerable development and modernization in the South. Because of the Christian missionary activities, modern schooling, literacy, the learning of English, and exposure to western culture and technology were much more widespread in the South, whereas the North was much more backward in these areas. These economic and cultural differences between North and South made other grounds for divisiveness. Seeing these economic disparities, the political situations became grim, as the North feared domination by the more economically developed South. As a result, the North was determined to balance southern economic dominance with political dominance. On the other hand, the South feared domination by the North because of the fact that the North's population size would allow it to control the federal government and use its power to support northern interests. Besides, minorities would be dominated by the biggest ethnic group in their region. The minority groups thought that only by creating more regions could assure them security and stability, in which they could become majorities.

Indeed, British colonial policy paved the way for the uneven socio-economic and political development as well as division of the various Nigerian ethnic groups. By making a federal structure of three units, namely, the northern, eastern, and western region in 1954, the British made the tripartite major ethnic regions divisive, disintegrative and unstable. This tripartite federal structure promoted the political hegemony and fostered ethnic majority chauvinism and secessionism by erecting the boundaries of the northern, eastern and western regions around the identities of the major ethnic groups, i.e. Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo respectively. Further, it fuelled ethnic minority agitations, because it denied the country's non-Hausa-Fulani, non-Yoruba and non-Igbo. In this manner, the colonial legacy led to the initial major instances of inter-ethnic and ethno-religious violence in the country. Ethno-religious violence escalated in Nigeria due to increase of ethno-religious politicization and mobilization after democracy opened up political space in 1999 after a



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long period of military dictatorship. These issues generate the fiercest contestations over the control of state power; resource allocation, such as oil and land ownership; and citizenship rights. This ultimately lead to violent ethno-religious conflicts, which further lead to loss of lives, destruction of properties and displacement of people ultimately leading them to seek refuge in their own country.

Instances of Ethno-Religious Violence in Nigeria since 1999

Nigeria has witnessed numerous ethno-religious conflicts with significant social impacts on women. Following are some of the conflicts that have occurred since the establishment of democracy in May 1999.

In July 1999, violence erupted at Shagamu city in Ogun state between the Hausas and the Yoruba people over a disagreement of the observance of the ritual of the Yoruba traditional festival. More than 100 people were killed and significant properties were destroyed on both sides. The Bodija riot took place on June 23, 1999 between the Hausa-Fulani cattle rearers and the Yoruba traders. About 10 persons died, a number of vehicles and shops were burnt, and a large number of people were displaced. In another case, violent protests were made by the Muslims following the United States invasion of Afghanistan in September 2001. The September 2001 crisis in Jos resulted in the deaths of over 1,000 people, including women and children. In November 2002, violence erupted between Muslims and Christians over the hosting of the Miss World Contest in Nigeria. Militant Muslims targeted churches and private property in Kaduna, with the unrest briefly spreading to Abuja. Minority groups also reacted violently, resulting in over 200 deaths and thousands left homeless. It is estimated that in 2001, approximately 500,000 people were displaced, and another 250,000 were displaced in 2002 following ethno-religious violence in Nigeria. During the 2004 Jos crisis, more than 1,000 people lost their lives in attacks on Muslim and Christian villages between February and May, with 250,000 displaced. In 2009, from July 26 to 30, the Boko Haram Islamic sect carried out violent attacks across Bauchi, Borno, Kano, and Yobe states, resulting in over 700 deaths, the internal displacement of 3,500 people, 1,264 orphaned children, 392 widowed women, and widespread destruction of property. The Christmas Eve bombing in 2010 in Jos, Plateau State left many injured, while the Christmas Day 2011 bombing in Madalla, Niger State, claimed approximately 50 lives. The bomb attacks in Kano in January 2012 led to at least 250 fatalities. In August 2013, according to a Christian student in Maiduguri, Boko Haram attacked on her university accommodation that led to the killings of the men, the women were separated into Muslims and non-Muslims, and the Christian women were subjected to rape. Additionally, 6 Christian women were kidnapped and raped by the insurgents again and again who described this as sexual 'jizya', a tax imposed on Christians under Islamic law. On April 14, 2014 the abduction of more than 200 girls by Boko Haram from Government Girls Secondary School in Chibok, Borno State is another case in point. In Maiduguri, North-East Nigeria, a suicide bomber on March 7, 2015 detonated himself on a cycle rickshaw near a fish market that killed about 10 people. Later, as per the official report, a series



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of five bomb blasts was carried out by suicide bombers on that very day in five distinct locations of the city, which left 58 people killed and more than 143 people wounded. Added to these, in November 2015, 20 ladies were killed by Boko Haram attack in Maiduguri, Borno State for wearing miniskirts and trousers. On 9 July, 2016, some suspected Muslim fanatics killed a female preacher named Mrs. Eunice Elisha, the wife of a Redeemed Pastor in Abuja. It is estimated that not less than 2,000 women and girls have been abducted by Boko Haram since 2014 and many of them have been coerced into sexual slavery. In December 2016, the attack by Fulani herds' men in southern Kaduna led to the deaths of about 808 people and significant properties worth billions of naira were destroyed. This violent conflict in southern Kaduna continued in February 2017 ultimately resulting into the deaths of a number of people.

Other violent conflicts in Nigeria have also resulted in loss of life, destruction of property, and increased suffering for women. On February 19, 2018, the Mamman Nur faction of Boko Haram kidnapped 110 girls from Dapchi Secondary School in Yobe State. After extensive efforts by the government, about 105 girls along with another girl and one boy were freed on March 21, 2018. It was reported that five of the kidnapped girls had died, and the only Christian girl remained in captivity. In January 2019, Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP), one of the factions of Boko Haram led by Abu Musab Al-Barnawi, attacked a number of Nigerian military bases, including those situated at Magumeri and Gajiram. The insurgents also attacked and destroyed the refugee town of Rann near the Cameroon border, which led to the displacement of several people including women and children. On 6 January 2020, the Fulani herdsmen attacked more than 10 communities in the Chikun Local Government Area, Kaduna State who killed at least 35 people and abducted over 58 people. Further, another attack in March 2020 at least killed 51 people. In 2021, about 300 girls were abducted by gunmen from a boarding school in Zamfara State in North-West Nigeria. The girls were held captive in a forest, and were eventually freed following negotiations between the state government and the abductors.

In accordance with NGOs and press reports, violence and insecurity escalated in 2022, particularly in the predominantly Muslim North-West, where a growing number of criminal groups were responsible for thousands of killings, kidnappings, and armed robberies. As per information on its website, ACLED reported 3,953 civilian deaths from violence nationwide during the year in comparison with 3,699 in 2021. This included a rise in violence targeting Christians, who accounted for 5 percent of all incidents. ACLED reported that attacks against Christians, which began in previous years, continued in 2022. On June 5, attackers killed about 50 people, including children, at St. Francis Catholic Church in Owo, Ondo State. On September 23, armed men killed at least 15 people at a mosque in Zamfara State. That same month, militants attacked Cherubim and Seraphim churches in Niger and Kaduna States, abducting around 120 individuals. Around Christmas 2023, at least 300 Christians were killed in Plateau State, with no perpetrators held accountable. In Benue State's Diocese of Makurdi, at least 500 Christians were killed throughout 2023. Around Easter



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2024, another massacre in Plateau State claimed 39 lives, while at least 239 people were killed in Benue State during the first three months of 2024. In May 2024, gunmen from the al-Qaeda-affiliated group 'Ansaru' reportedly kidnapped 160 mostly Christian children and killed 8 people in a village in Niger State. In June, suspected JAS/ Boko Haram insurgents killed 18 people and injured 42 in Borno State, with female suicide bombers targeting a wedding ceremony and separate attackers targeting the funeral for those killed in the wedding blast. All these ethno-religious violence led to profound and far-reaching social impacts on women in Nigeria. In June 2025, a major wave of ethno-religious violence in Benue State resulted in over 200 deaths in multiple coordinated attacks, while UN-linked humanitarian reporting recorded at least 218 fatalities and noted that most of the displaced populations were women and girls. In February 2026, armed attackers raided Kauru village in Kaduna State on 7 February, killing three civilians and abducting 11 people, including a Catholic priest, during a predawn attack on a Christian community. The incident was documented by international media and confirmed in statements from church authorities reporting the abduction and casualties.

Social Impacts of Ethno-religious Violence on Nigerian Women

The social impacts of ethno-religious violence on women in Nigeria are profound, multifaceted and devastating. As a matter of fact, in regions affected by such conflicts, women endure traumatic experiences, including the loss of loved ones, physical displacement, and in many cases, sexual violence. These events leave lasting scars, contributing to mental health crises, which are often left untreated due to limited access to healthcare facilities. The loss of family members and friends in violent attacks leaves women grieving, while the destruction of homes and communities uproots their lives. This instability disrupts their roles as caregivers and guardians, further deepening the social fracture. Cases like 2004 Jos crisis has had profound and detrimental impact on women. They have encountered displacement and loss of livelihood in Plateau, Nigeria. In reality, women and children make up the majority of IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons) in Plateau state. Displacement disrupts women's lives profoundly, stripping them of their homes, livelihoods, and social networks. The destruction of property and loss of livelihoods during violence disproportionately affect women, who often bear the primary responsibility for their families' welfare. Further, the women who have experienced violence and the loss of loved ones often suffer from severe mental health issues including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. These problems affect their overall well-being and hinder their ability to participate fully in society.

Ethno-religious violence in Nigeria has also created devastating effects on education, particularly in violence-prone regions. Nigeria's staggering figure of over 11 million out-of-school children, more than 50% have never attended school. This figure underscores the severity of the crisis in Nigeria. Violence aggravates this issue as parents fear sending their children to school in insecure circumstances. Girls are inexplicably affected owing to societal fears for their safety and risks of



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abduction or assault. The Statista 2024 report highlights glaring inequalities of female literacy rates zone wise. The female literacy rate in South-West is 80.6%, compared to 29% in the North-West. This divide arises from persistent neglect, cultural attitudes, and the effects of ongoing violence. Education is a proven route to overcoming poverty. The absence of education for women sustains cycles of poverty and restricts opportunities for future generations. On the other hand, educated women are more likely to contribute to improved family well-being and societal development. It is true that education empowers women to challenge discriminatory practices, engage in peace building, and advocate for their rights. It also equips them with knowledge to address issues like maternal mortality, HIV/AIDS, societal development.

In the case of Boko Haram's continued killings of Christians and rampage, particularly in the North, there have been profound social impacts on women in the affected regions and Nigeria as a whole. The persistent social hostility between Muslim and Christian communities presents a major impediment to building trust and unity. Due to ongoing attacks on Christian communities, several cities in Nigeria, especially in the northern regions have become divided with Christians residing in one part and Muslims in the other. Further, the attacks on churches by Boko Haram have worsened religious tensions in northern Nigeria. This has intensified distrust and animosity between Muslim and Christian communities, making peaceful coexistence and interfaith dialogue more challenging. The displacement of women and girls due to Boko Haram insurgency in 2009 in the northern region of Nigeria has caused severe social implications. Displaced women often face dire consequences, including lack of access to adequate shelter, food, healthcare, and education. Moreover, women are particularly more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Likewise, the abduction of over 200 girls from Chibok, Borno state in April 2014 highlights the specific targeting of women and girls in Boko Haram's insurgency. The attacks on educational institutions have instilled fear in both parents and children, especially girls, regarding attending school. This has further led to the gender gap in education, depriving many children of their right to learn and hindering long-term human capital development. These violent acts perpetuate gender-based oppression, violate women's rights, and inflict enduring socio-psychological trauma on survivors and their families. Many survivors endure grief, fear, and societal stigma, which impede their reintegration into communities. Numerous families continue to live in fear of further attacks that hampers their ability to reconstruct their lives. Broadly, the violence disrupts vital services like education, healthcare, and housing with women and girls being especially impacted, restricting their future prospects and reinforcing cycles of poverty and dependence. Healthcare services, particularly those related to maternal and reproductive health, are often significantly reduced during times of violence, increasing risks for pregnant women and new mothers. The November 2015 Maiduguri attack by Boko Haram shows how women were deliberately targeted, reflecting gender inequality and control over women's bodies. The violence in Benue State in 2025 killed over 200 people and displaced many, with women and girls being most affected. The Kauru village attack in Kaduna State in 2026 caused deaths and abductions, increasing



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fear and insecurity in communities. Overall, these incidents reveal weak protection for women, lack of justice, and long-term damage to social cohesion in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Ethno-religious violence is widespread in Nigeria. Women, as a vulnerable demographic, often bear the brunt of such violence, experiencing numerous social repercussions. One of the most significant impacts is the displacement of women, leaving them exposed to homelessness, loss of livelihoods, poverty, and exploitation. These atrocities not only violate women's basic rights but also dismantle the social structures that support their well-being. Women in conflict zones often face sexual violence, leaving survivors with severe physical injuries, emotional trauma, and societal stigma. The acts of violence perpetuate gender-based oppression, undermine women's autonomy, and create the socio-religious marginalization of women in society. The breakdown of familial and community networks further isolates them, reducing their capacity to recover and thrive. Moreover, as caregivers and guardians, women face immense pressure to sustain families under dire circumstances, often with inadequate support. Overall, the country is plunging into an abyss of violence and lawlessness. Addressing these impacts requires a holistic approach to empower women, promote gender equality, and foster justice and peace-building that prioritize women's voices and needs. The government needs to make consistent and positive policies in this regard and due actions need to be taken in order to protect women from violations of human rights they deserve. By tackling the root causes of ethno-religious violence, Nigeria can move towards sustainable peace and social stability.

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