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Beyond Abduction: The Strategic Weaponization of Kidnapping and Sexual Violence by Bandits in North East Nigeria

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Abstract

This study, "Beyond Abduction: The Strategic Weaponization of Kidnapping and Sexual Violence by Bandits in North East Nigeria," examines the escalating insecurity in Nigeria, focusing on how bandit groups strategically deploy kidnapping and sexual violence. Historically, kidnapping evolved from a political tool to an economic enterprise, but its current use by groups like Boko Haram and ISWAP has transformed it into a devastating weapon for terror and control, not just ransom. The rationale highlights the critical gap in understanding this weaponized approach and its profound socio-psychological impact. Drawing on Conflict Theory and the Weaponization of Sexual Violence in Conflict frameworks, the study conceptualizes these acts as deliberate tools for dominance. Objectives included conceptualizing this weaponization, evaluating its impact on women and girls, fostering discourse on survivor experiences, and proposing interventions. A qualitative methodology was employed, using an in-depth literature review and In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) with 20 displaced women, security agents, and government officials in Adamawa State IDP camps. Key findings confirm that kidnapping is now a sophisticated weapon, with mass abductions and systematic sexual violence used to inflict terror and subjugation. Survivors experience severe psychological trauma, profound stigma, and a lack of immediate care. The discussion reveals that existing governmental support is insufficient, highlighting significant gaps in comprehensive survivor services and robust civilian protection. The recommendation advocates for a multi-pronged, survivor-centered, and integrated response: strengthening security, providing comprehensive medical and psychosocial support, ensuring accountability for perpetrators, and addressing root causes to foster resilience and justice.

Keywords: Kidnapping, Banditry, Ransom, Sexual Violence, Women and Girls

Introduction

Nigeria grapples with a pervasive security crisis, manifesting in widespread violent and criminal outbreaks across the nation (Al Chukwuma & Anthony, 2019). This escalating instability is particularly acute in northeastern Nigeria, where the persistent threats of Boko Haram and various bandit groups continue despite the federal government's counter-insurgency efforts (Okoli, 2017a; Zenn, 2018). Concurrently, the north-central region faces a severe humanitarian crisis due to violent farmer-herder clashes (Okoli & Ogayi, 2018), while the southwest experiences an increase in cult-related conflicts leading to significant casualties and property damage. A particularly alarming development has been the unprecedented surge in mass abductions of schoolchildren for ransom by bandit gangs in the northeast.

The phenomenon of abduction, however, is not new. Its origins can be traced to ancient times, appearing in religious narratives such as the kidnapping of Prophet Joseph in both the Bible and the Quran (Bello & Jamilu, 2017). The modern term

"kidnapping" emerged in 17th-century Britain, referring to the practice of taking children ("kids") from affluent families for ransom while they slept ("napped") (Tzanelli, 2006, as cited in Bello & Jamilu, 2017).

In Nigeria, kidnapping has been a recurring issue since the early 1990s (Hazan & Horner, 2007). Initially, it gained prominence in the Niger Delta, where militants utilized the abduction of foreign oil workers to draw attention to environmental degradation, community hardships, and demands for greater local control over resource extraction (Hazan & Horner, 2007). Following the 2007 general elections, kidnapping gained immense traction in Nigeria's southeast, as unemployed political enforcers repurposed their skills and weapons for illicit gain (Onifade et al., 2013). The pervasive nature of this crime in Nigeria has led to the ubiquitous use of the term "kidnapping threat" in public and private discourse (AbdulKabir, 2017). It has evolved into a widespread national problem (Dodo, 2010), albeit most notably intertwined with terrorism, insurgency, and banditry movements.

Kidnapping is rapidly supplanting armed robbery as a highly profitable criminal enterprise in Nigeria (Kabir, 2017). A significant shift occurred with the abduction of over 250 female students by Boko Haram militants from a secondary school in Chibok, Borno State, in 2014. Prior to this, kidnapping targets primarily included government officials, lawmakers, influential individuals, academics, traditional rulers, and their families (AbdulKabir, 2017).

The 2014 Chibok abduction sparked international outrage. The #BringBackOurGirls hashtag, embraced by celebrities, global leaders, and former heads of state, catalyzed protests in Abuja, Nigeria's federal capital. The Nigerian federal government's response was accelerated when the then-First Lady of the United States, Michelle Obama, amplified the hashtag (Maclean, 2021). The unprecedented scale of the Chibok abduction was compounded by another mass kidnapping in Dapchi, Yobe State, where a second group of schoolchildren was abducted. Despite significant ransom payments for the release of some Chibok girls, the Nigerian government struggled to locate the remaining students. Disturbingly, many of these abducted females are forcibly married to their captors and subjected to various forms of sexual violence.

This study moves "Beyond Abduction" to examine the strategic weaponization of kidnapping and sexual violence by bandits in North East Nigeria. It specifically interrogates the profound implications of sexual violence on women and girls abducted by these groups. Among other objectives, this paper aims to stimulate intellectual discourse and gather firsthand accounts from internally displaced persons (IDPs) on the psychological and traumatic experiences of kidnapping and the subsequent sexual violence they endure.

Rationale and Theoretical Background

Rationale for the Study

The escalating security crisis in Nigeria, particularly the surge in banditry and its sophisticated tactics in the North East, necessitates a deeper examination beyond

conventional understandings of abduction. While previous studies have documented the historical prevalence and various motivations for kidnapping in Nigeria, including resource control in the Niger Delta (Hazan & Horner, 2007) and political thuggery (Onifade et al., 2013), the recent trajectory of these crimes by bandit groups presents a more sinister and complex phenomenon. The mass abductions of schoolchildren, as seen in Chibok and Dapchi, coupled with credible reports of sexual violence against female abductees, indicate a strategic shift from mere ransom-seeking to a more insidious form of warfare.

This study is critical because it moves "Beyond Abduction" to explore the strategic weaponization of kidnapping and sexual violence by bandits. This framing acknowledges that these acts are not merely opportunistic crimes but deliberate tools employed to achieve broader objectives, including psychological warfare, community subjugation, and the systematic dismantling of the social fabric. The existing literature often addresses kidnapping as a distinct criminal act (AbdulKabir, 2017) or focuses on the general impact of insurgency (Okoli, 2017a). However, there is a significant gap in understanding how kidnapping, specifically when combined with sexual violence, functions as a calculated weapon in the arsenal of non-state armed groups in North East Nigeria.

The implications of this weaponization are profound. Beyond the immediate trauma and economic disruption, the use of sexual violence against abducted women and girls inflicts severe psychological damage, contributes to the stigmatization of survivors, and perpetuates cycles of violence within affected communities. It undermines trust in governmental protection, displaces populations, and exacerbates humanitarian crises (Okoli & Ogayi, 2018). Furthermore, the unique vulnerability of women and girls in conflict zones, often overlooked in broader security analyses, demands specific scholarly attention. This research aims to fill this gap by providing a nuanced understanding of these complex dynamics, contributing to more targeted interventions and support for victims. By focusing on the weaponization aspect, the study seeks to highlight the deliberate and strategic nature of these atrocities, pushing for a more comprehensive response from both national and international actors.

Theoretical Background

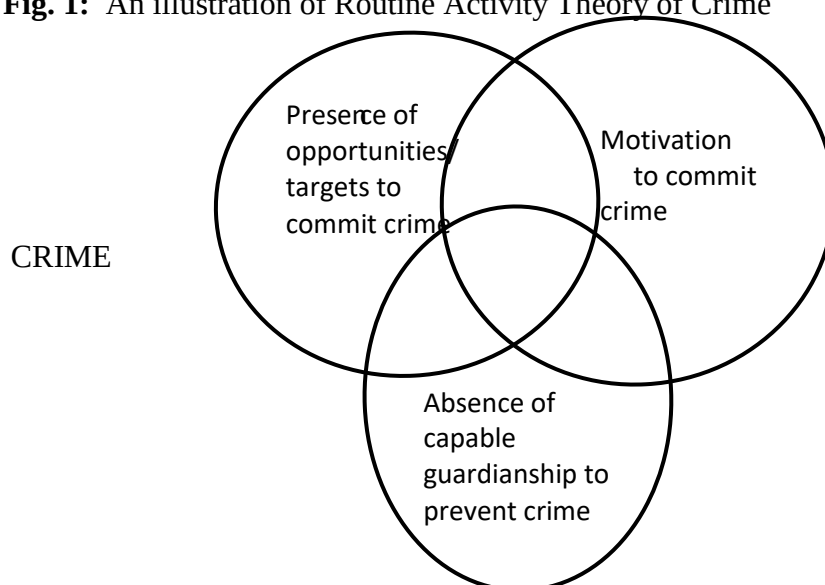
This study draws upon a multifaceted theoretical framework to understand the strategic weaponization of kidnapping and sexual violence by bandits in North East Nigeria. Key theories that will inform this research include:

1. **Conflict Theory and Non-State Armed Actors:** Conflict theory, particularly as applied to non-state armed actors, provides a foundational lens. This perspective posits that conflict arises from power imbalances and competition over scarce resources (Collins, 1975). In the context of North East Nigeria, bandit groups, often emerging from socio-economic grievances and marginalization, are engaged in a struggle for power, resources, and control against the state and local communities. Their use of violence, including kidnapping and sexual violence, can be understood as a means to achieve these objectives. Specifically, this study will leverage Andreas Schuller's (2009) concept of "violence as governance". Schuller argues that in areas where state authority is weak or

absent, non-state armed groups often employ violence not just as a means to an end, but as a form of governance. By terrorizing populations through abductions and sexual violence, bandits establish their dominance, enforce compliance, and create a climate of fear that allows them to operate with impunity. This "governance by violence" also includes extracting resources (e.g., ransom), controlling movement, and imposing their will on communities.

2. **Routine Activity Theory (RAT):** In an effort to “understand the patterns and upward trends of predatory criminal events in the historical context of changing economy,” Cohen & Felson (1979) developed the Routine Activities Theory (RAT) (Hsieh & Wang, 2018, 335). According to the hypothesis, crime is more likely to happen when three crucial components come together: an attractive target, a motivated criminal, and the lack of effective guardianship. The idea states that motivated offenders are those who are able and ready to commit a crime, and suitable targets are objects or people that offenders find appealing or susceptible. Conversely, a person or thing under guardianship may be able to successfully prevent a crime or offense from happening. Al Chukwuma and Anthony Chinedu (2019) claim that the mere physical presence of guardianship in space and time might delay the commission of a crime. A few fundamental presumptions form the foundation of the Routine Activity Theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Felson & Cohen, 1980). When three crucial components of crime come together—a motivated criminal, an alluring target, and the lack of adequate guardianship—crime is more likely to happen. The characteristics that make a specific target desirable depend on the location and type of crime. Anyone with the ability to commit a crime and access to a vulnerable target can commit it; victims choose not to become victims primarily by possibly avoiding situations in which they could be the target of a crime.

Fig. 1: An illustration of Routine Activity Theory of Crime



Source: Adapted from Samonas (2013) used in Al Chukwuma and Anthony Chinedu (2019). Note: the three interrelated variables shown in Fig. 1 need physical convergence in space and time.

3. **The Weaponization of Sexual Violence in Conflict:** Building on conflict theory, this study will heavily rely on the growing body of literature concerning the weaponization of sexual violence in armed conflict. While sexual violence has

historically been a tragic byproduct of war, contemporary scholarship highlights its deliberate and strategic deployment as a tool of warfare (Carpenter, 2006; Human Rights Watch, 1993; Mackinnon, 2006). Charli Carpenter's (2006) work on "women and children as spoils of war" is particularly relevant. Carpenter argues that sexual violence in conflict is not merely an act of individual perversion but often serves strategic purposes, including:

- a. **Ethnic cleansing and social control:** By targeting women and girls from specific groups, perpetrators aim to destroy community cohesion, instill fear, and force displacement.
- b. **Humiliation and demoralization:** Sexual violence against individuals is often intended to humiliate and demoralize not only the direct victims but also their families and communities, thereby breaking resistance.
- c. **Reward for combatants:** In some contexts, sexual violence can be used as a reward for fighters, contributing to group cohesion and loyalty.
- d. **Intimidation and punishment:** It serves as a potent tool to punish perceived enemies or those who resist the armed group's authority.

Applying this to the North East, the weaponization of sexual violence by bandits can be seen as a deliberate strategy to:

- i. **Subdue communities:** The fear of sexual violence can deter communities from resisting bandit demands or reporting their activities.
- ii. **Displace populations:** The threat of sexual violence can force mass displacement, creating a power vacuum that bandits can exploit.
- iii. **Recruitment and control:** Abducted women and girls may be forced into marriages or sexual slavery, effectively expanding the bandits' "human resources" and creating a captive population.
- iv. **Psychological warfare:** The knowledge that women and girls are vulnerable to sexual violence creates widespread terror and despair, crippling community resilience.

4. **Gender-Based Violence in Conflict (GBV in Conflict):** This theoretical lens specifically examines the disproportionate impact of conflict on women and girls, recognizing that gender roles and power dynamics exacerbate their vulnerability during periods of instability (Enloe, 2000). GBV in conflict frameworks underscores that sexual violence is a continuum, encompassing rape, sexual slavery, forced marriage, and other forms of sexual exploitation. It highlights how pre-existing gender inequalities are amplified and exploited in conflict settings, making women and girls targets for specific forms of violence that are not only acts of aggression but also tools of social control.

Cynthia Enloe's (2000) analysis of the gendered nature of militarism informs this perspective, revealing how armed groups often exploit traditional gender roles to assert control and maintain their power structures. By targeting women and girls, bandits exploit societal norms and perceptions of honor and shame, further traumatizing individuals and destabilizing communities.

5. **Rational Choice Theory (with limitations):** While not the primary theoretical underpinning, Rational Choice Theory (Becker, 1968) offers a limited, yet valuable, perspective on the decision-making of individual bandits or their leadership. This theory posits that individuals make decisions that maximize

their self-interest, weighing the costs and benefits of their actions. In this context, the decision to engage in kidnapping for ransom is clearly a rational economic choice for bandits seeking financial gain.

However, its applicability to the weaponization of sexual violence is more nuanced. While some aspects of sexual violence might be "rational" in achieving strategic objectives (e.g., terrorizing a community to secure compliance), it often involves severe human rights violations that go beyond purely economic or military logic. Therefore, rational choice theory will be used cautiously, acknowledging that the motivations for sexual violence are often complex and intertwined with power, control, and depravity, rather than purely rational cost-benefit analyses.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how kidnapping and sexual violence are strategically weaponized by bandits in North East Nigeria, shedding light on the complex motivations, methods, and devastating consequences of these actions.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to investigate the strategic weaponization of kidnapping and sexual violence by bandits in North East Nigeria, focusing on its profound implications for affected populations and potential solutions. Specifically, the objectives are to:

1. **Conceptualize the Strategic Weaponization of Kidnapping and Sexual Violence:** To develop a robust conceptual framework that defines and contextualizes the strategic employment of kidnapping and sexual violence by bandit groups in North East Nigeria, distinguishing it from opportunistic criminality and exploring its specific functions within their operational tactics and broader objectives.
2. **Analyze the Mechanisms of Weaponization:** To critically examine how kidnapping and sexual violence are strategically employed as weapons by bandit groups in North East Nigeria, beyond mere ransom demands, to achieve broader objectives such as territorial control, community subjugation, and psychological warfare.
3. **Evaluate the Socio-Psychological Impact on Survivors:** To deeply interrogate the implications of sexual violence on the mental health and social well-being of women and girls who have been kidnapped by bandits in North East Nigeria, including the long-term psychological trauma, social stigma, and challenges to reintegration. This will involve gathering qualitative data directly from survivors where feasible and ethical.
4. **Facilitate Discourse on Survivor Experiences:** To stimulate an intellectual discourse, potentially through interviews with affected Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and relevant stakeholders, to gain firsthand insights into the psychological and traumatic experiences of kidnapping and sexual violence endured by women and girls in the North East. This objective seeks to amplify the voices of survivors and inform policy.

Propose Context-Specific Interventions: To identify and recommend effective, community-led, and context-specific solutions aimed at preventing the

weaponization of kidnapping and sexual violence against women and girls in North East Nigeria, and to enhance support systems for survivors.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to deeply explore the strategic weaponization of kidnapping and sexual violence by bandits in North East Nigeria. This approach was chosen to capture the nuanced experiences, perceptions, and complex dynamics of this phenomenon from the perspectives of those most affected.

Study Area and Population

The research was conducted in Adamawa State, North East Nigeria, specifically focusing on two Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps: Malkohi IDP Camp and Damare National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) Camp. These camps were selected due to their significant populations of individuals displaced by kidnapping and banditry attacks, providing direct access to the target population.

The study population comprised several key groups to ensure a comprehensive understanding:

- **Displaced women affected by kidnapping and banditry attacks:** These women were the primary focus, as they have direct, lived experience of the phenomena under investigation.
- **Vigilante security agents within the camps:** These individuals offer insights into the security landscape, the operational tactics of bandits, and the immediate responses within the camps.
- **Personnel from the Ministries of Women Affairs and Social Development in Adamawa State:** These officials provide a broader perspective on governmental responses, support mechanisms, and policy implications concerning gender-based violence and displacement.

Sampling Strategy and Size

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants. This non-probability method allowed for the deliberate selection of individuals who possessed specific knowledge and direct experience relevant to the study's objectives. Participants were chosen based on their unique perspectives as survivors, security providers, or policymakers involved in addressing the impacts of banditry and sexual violence.

A total of twenty (20) participants were selected for the study. This sample size was deemed appropriate for a qualitative inquiry, aiming to achieve data saturation—the point at which no new themes or insights emerge from additional interviews—thus ensuring the depth and richness of the collected data.

Data Collection

In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) served as the primary data collection method. This approach facilitated rich, detailed conversations, allowing participants to share their experiences and insights in their own words.

- **Language of Interaction:** Interviews were conducted in both English and Hausa, depending on the participant's preference and fluency. This flexibility ensured clear communication and allowed participants to express themselves comfortably and authentically.
- **Translation:** Data collected in Hausa was meticulously translated into English by a competent translator, ensuring accuracy and retaining the original meaning and nuances of the participants' narratives for subsequent analysis.

Data Analysis

The collected data from the in-depth interviews underwent thematic transcription. This systematic process involved transcribing the recorded interviews verbatim. Following transcription, a thematic analysis approach was used to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within the data. This involved familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming them, and finally producing a comprehensive report aligned with the study's objectives. This method allowed for a deep understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and underlying mechanisms of the weaponization of kidnapping and sexual violence as conceptualized in the study.

Study Findings

Objective 1: Conceptualizing the Strategic Weaponization of Kidnapping and Sexual Violence

The literature review reveals that while kidnapping and sexual violence are distinct crimes, their convergence and strategic deployment by bandits in North East Nigeria elevate them to a level of "weaponization." This conceptualization goes beyond mere criminal acts for financial gain or individual gratification, highlighting a deliberate and calculated use to achieve broader objectives. Consequently, the following key findings emerged regarding the conceptualization of the strategic weaponization of kidnapping and sexual violence by bandits:

a. Kidnapping as a Multi-faceted Weapon:

- i. **Beyond Ransom:** While the literature predominantly defines kidnapping as the unlawful seizure and detention of a person, often for a ransom (Uzorma & Nwanegbo-Ben, 2014; Abdulkabir, 2017; Inyang & Abraham, 2013), the review identifies additional motives. Kidnapping serves as a tactic for political aims, a struggle for self-determination (Fage & Alabi, 2017), and even ceremonial purposes (Abdulkabir, 2017). This broad spectrum of motives establishes kidnapping itself as a versatile tool, already adapted for various purposes beyond simple financial extraction.
- ii. **Coercive Control:** The act of forcibly removing individuals against their will inherently serves as a tool of coercion, establishing the perpetrators' power and disrupting the victim's autonomy and community stability (Okoye, Joe-Akunne & Chire, 2016).

2. Sexual Violence as a Deliberate Instrument of Harm and Control:

- i. **Non-Consensual Coercion:** Sexual violence is consistently defined as any non-consensual sexual engagement, involving compulsion, force, threats, or the exploitation of vulnerability (John, 1998; WHO, 2001; Achunike et al.,

2014). This emphasizes the coercive and harmful nature of the act itself, irrespective of its strategic intent.

- ii. **Act of Humiliation and Punishment:** Beyond sexual gratification, the literature highlights rape as a "horrible crime" and a "violent act" primarily used to humiliate and degrade victims (Achunike et al., 2014), particularly against marginalized and vulnerable populations. Its criminalization under Nigerian law (Criminal Code Section 375, Penal Code Section 282) and international humanitarian law (Rome Statute, Geneva Conventions) underscores its severe status as torture and a human rights violation.

3. The Conflation of Kidnapping and Sexual Violence as a Strategic Weapon (Weaponization):

- i. **Strategic Adaptation for Advantage:** Drawing on the definition of "weaponization" as adapting something for use as a weapon or a "means of attack or harm... to gain an advantage over an adversary," the review posits that the combination of kidnapping and sexual violence by bandits is a deliberate strategic choice.
- ii. **Maximized Terror and Subjugation:** When sexual violence is perpetrated against kidnapped individuals, particularly women and girls, it transforms kidnapping from a mere act of abduction (for ransom or political gain) into a potent instrument of psychological warfare. The threat and actual experience of sexual violence amplify terror, leading to increased community compliance, fear, and displacement.
- iii. **Beyond Financial Gain:** While financial ransom remains a significant motive for kidnapping, the consistent inclusion of sexual violence suggests objectives beyond mere economic gain. This strategic conflation aims to break the spirit of communities, punish perceived defiance, assert dominance, and potentially serve as a means of controlling future behavior or exploiting captive populations for non-financial ends (e.g., forced marriage, forced labor, intelligence gathering through coercion).
- iv. **Undermining Social Fabric:** The weaponization of sexual violence within kidnapping specifically targets the social fabric and perceived honor of communities, creating profound and long-lasting psychological and social trauma that extends far beyond the immediate victims. This serves the bandits' interest in destabilizing regions and asserting their de facto authority.

In essence, the literature suggests that the "strategic weaponization" of kidnapping and sexual violence by bandits is a calculated synergy of two distinct criminal acts, transformed into a potent tool of terror, control, and subjugation, with objectives that extend beyond traditional ransom demands to encompass a broader agenda of destabilization and power assertion in North East Nigeria.

Contextual Factors Contributing to the Prevalence of Kidnapping and Banditry in North East Nigeria

The literature review identifies several intertwined socio-economic, governance, and environmental factors that fuel the proliferation of kidnapping and banditry in

North East Nigeria, creating an environment conducive to the strategic weaponization of these acts:

1. Entrenched Poverty and Economic Hardship:

- **Finding:** Poverty and severe economic hardship are identified as fundamental drivers compelling individuals, particularly youth, to engage in criminal activities like kidnapping (Adesina, 2013). The near-complete absence of manufacturing enterprises and governmental presence in many impoverished towns of North East Nigeria exacerbates this issue, pushing young people towards illicit means of survival.
- **Implication:** This widespread economic deprivation creates a fertile ground for recruitment into bandit groups and incentivizes the practice of kidnapping for financial gain, forming the base upon which the strategic weaponization is built.

2. Insufficient Employment Opportunities for Youth:

- **Finding:** The severe dearth of legitimate and accessible work opportunities for the burgeoning youth population in North East Nigeria is a major contributing factor to the rising incidence of kidnapping. The region's high rate of unemployed youth is directly linked to economic vulnerabilities that make engagement in risky, illicit activities more appealing.
- **Implication:** A large pool of unemployed and disenfranchised youth provides a ready source of manpower for bandit groups, who leverage these vulnerabilities to expand their operations and perpetrate various forms of violence, including strategically weaponized abductions.

3. Ineffective and Dysfunctional Policing:

- **Finding:** The presence of dysfunctional, ineffective policing and poorly managed, ungoverned spaces within North East Nigeria significantly fosters kidnapping and other criminal activities. The region's vast, geographically isolated rural villages, farmlands, and schools are severely underpoliced (cf. Gaye, 2018a), creating an ideal environment for criminals to operate with impunity.
- **Implication:** The weak state presence and law enforcement vacuum allow bandit groups to establish "underworld fiefdoms" (Al Chukuma & Anthony-Chenedu, 2019), operate unhindered, and carry out mass kidnappings without immediate consequence, thus enabling the expansion and refinement of their strategic criminal tactics.

4. Proliferation of Rural Banditry:

- **Finding:** The emergence and entrenchment of numerous sedentary and territorial bandit groups, characterized by their "merciless authority" and the establishment of "underworld fiefdoms" in the jungles of North East Nigeria, are a direct cause of the exacerbation of abduction for ransom. Specific examples, like the involvement of kingpin-bandits such as Buharin Daji in mass kidnappings, and data showing 227 victims in Yobe State alone between December 2018 and March 2019 (Gusua, 2019), underscore the organized and pervasive nature of this threat.
- **Implication:** Rural banditry provides the organizational structure and operational capacity for carrying out large-scale abductions. The

established control by these groups over specific territories facilitates the systematic application of kidnapping, allowing for its evolution into a strategic weapon used not only for ransom but also for broader objectives of control, terror, and subjugation.

The in-depth literature review confirms that kidnapping is not merely a transient crime but a deeply entrenched and evolving security challenge in Nigeria, consistent with its conceptualization as an unlawful forceful abduction (AbdulKabir, 2017). The findings highlight the significant scale, historical evolution, shifting motives, and increasing severity of kidnapping incidents across the nation, laying the groundwork for understanding its strategic weaponization.

- a. **Pervasiveness and Global Recognition of the Kidnapping Threat:** The data unequivocally indicate the widespread nature of kidnapping in Nigeria. With over 1,000 reported cases annually and a likely higher number of unreported incidents (Catlin Group, 2012), kidnapping is a pervasive threat that has positioned Nigeria as one of the worst global locations for its frequent occurrences. This underscores the severity of the challenge and its significant national and international implications.
- b. **Historical Evolution and Regional Shifts:** While the global roots of kidnapping are traced to 17th-century England (Turner, 1998), its current wave in Nigeria can be specifically linked to the Niger Delta region. The emergence of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger-Delta (MEND) in late 2005 marked a turning point, where the abduction of expatriate oil workers was weaponized to draw international attention to environmental degradation, exploitation, and underdevelopment (Nwagboso, 2012). This period established kidnapping as a potent tool for political and socio-economic agitation, facilitated by the government's perceived inability to address underlying grievances.

Following the 2007 general elections, the phenomenon spread rapidly from the Niger Delta to the Southeast. Militants, initially employed as political thugs, repurposed their skills for economic survival, targeting prominent indigenous people and state citizens for ransom (Onifade, Imhonopia, & Urim, 2013). This expansion demonstrated the adaptability of kidnapping as a profitable criminal enterprise beyond its initial political motives.

- c. **Diversification of Perpetrators and Targets:** Initially concentrated with groups like MEND, the landscape of kidnapping has diversified, increasingly involving sophisticated terrorist organizations. The entry of Boko Haram, its splinter group Ansaru (led by Khalid al-Barnawi), and later the Islamic State in West African Province (ISWAP) profoundly transformed the nature of abductions. These groups initially targeted foreign nationals (e.g., US, Spanish, Italian, British, and Lebanese citizens, as reported in 2012 incidents by Bello & Jamilu, 2017, and Catlin Group, 2012) for high-value ransoms, sometimes resulting in fatalities during rescue attempts.

A significant shift occurred with the targeting of Nigerian citizens, including students, relief workers, and religious figures. The abduction of Reverend Andimi (EYN) in January 2020 and Pastor Bulus Yakura in December 2020 by Ansaru,

leading to execution in one case and ransom payment in another, exemplify the deliberate targeting of specific groups for ideological or financial leverage. Similarly, ISWAP's abduction and execution of five relief workers in Borno in July 2020 further demonstrate the ruthless and strategic nature of these groups.

- d. **The Emergence of Mass Abduction as a Tactic:** A critical finding is the escalation to mass abduction, particularly of schoolchildren. The attack on the University of Maiduguri in February 2014, resulting in the murder of 29 schoolboys, foreshadowed the infamous Chibok Girls abduction of approximately 250 female students in April 2014 (Shuaibu, Salleh & Shehu, 2015). This event drew unprecedented global attention and condemnation, highlighting the devastating impact of such acts. The subsequent abduction of 110 schoolgirls from Dapchi in February 2018 further solidified this tactic, demonstrating a clear pattern of targeting educational institutions to maximize psychological impact, gain international leverage, and secure significant ransoms.

Evolution towards Weaponized Kidnapping: The findings reveal a clear trajectory where kidnapping, initially driven by economic or specific political demands, has evolved into a more complex and strategic tool. The involvement of ideologically driven terrorist groups (Boko Haram, Ansaru, ISWAP) in mass abductions and the execution of hostages for alleged non-compliance or to send a message signifies a shift towards weaponized kidnapping. This goes beyond merely extracting financial gain; it encompasses instilling fear, disrupting societal functions (like education), generating global outcry, and using human lives as leverage in broader conflict strategies. This conceptualization is crucial for understanding how kidnapping serves as a direct means of attack and harm to gain an advantage over the Nigerian state and its citizens.

Key Findings from In-Depth Interviews (Objectives 2-5)

The in-depth interviews with displaced women, Ministry of Women Affairs personnel, healthcare professionals, and vigilante security agents provided rich qualitative data, illuminating the profound implications of the weaponization of kidnapping and sexual violence, the discourse around survivor experiences, and avenues for intervention.

Objective 2: Evaluate the Socio-Psychological Impact on Survivors

The findings unequivocally demonstrate that the weaponization of sexual violence by bandits inflicts severe and long-lasting socio-psychological trauma on women and girls in North East Nigeria.

- a. **Profound Psychological Trauma:** Displaced women consistently reported suffering from significant psychological anguish. A 28-year-old survivor, for instance, presented with clear Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms following rape during a bandit attack. The experiences of kidnapping and sexual violence leave victims with deep-seated fear, anxiety, and mental health challenges. One displaced woman (Age 36) highlighted the "terrible

predicament" and ongoing struggle for survival, indicative of the persistent mental burden.

- b. **Social Stigma and Silence:** A particularly distressing finding is the pervasive shame and fear among survivors, which prevents them from disclosing their experiences. As one displaced woman (Age 30) stated, "Many victims are afraid to tell their tales because they feel ashamed of what happened to them." This silence perpetuates a cycle of unaddressed trauma and hinders access to support.
- c. **Loss of Dignity and Identity:** Survivors reported being treated "like nothing more than objects of lust" by armed bandits, leading to a profound loss of dignity and self-worth. The violation goes beyond the physical act, impacting their perception of themselves and their place in society.
- d. **Exacerbated Vulnerability and Widowhood:** Women are disproportionately affected, often becoming **widowed** (Displaced Woman, Age 34; Age 36), which compounds their vulnerability. They are left as sole caregivers for their children, facing constant threats and lacking primary providers, pushing them into "difficult living conditions, inadequate shelter, hunger, and malnourishment" (Displaced Woman, Age 30).
- e. **Lack of Immediate Medical Care:** Many victims, especially those recently released from captivity, did not receive proper medical care immediately after their ordeal, leading to unaddressed physical injuries and complications, as highlighted by the displaced woman (Age 36) and corroborated by the Health Care Professional's account of gynecological difficulties.

Objective 3: Facilitate Discourse on Survivor Experiences

The interviews successfully stimulated discourse, providing critical insights into the lived realities and challenges of women and girls, and the need for greater understanding and support.

- **Firsthand Accounts of Atrocities:** The IDIs provided chilling firsthand accounts of the specific horrific crimes perpetrated by bandits, including rape, molestation, killings, harassment, and the destruction of homes and livelihoods. This confirms that sexual violence is not an isolated incident but a common and brutal component of bandit attacks.
- **Targeting for Sexual Gratification and Humiliation:** Displaced women from Borno State specifically noted that women in rural communities are targeted by bandits "seeking sexual gratification" (Displaced Woman, Age 30). The vigilante security agent also described "disgraceful activities against men in front of their families" and the sexual abuse of girls and women, indicating a deliberate intent to humiliate and terrorize the entire community.
- **Age and Socioeconomic Scope of Victimization:** The discourse revealed that rape victims span a "range of age groups and socioeconomic backgrounds" within impacted areas (Displaced Woman, Age 34), indicating that no woman or girl is truly safe from this particular form of violence.
- **Call for Attention and Support:** The collective voices from the interviews underscore the urgent need for a more comprehensive and compassionate response to the silent suffering of survivors, emphasizing the critical importance of creating platforms where their experiences can be heard and acknowledged.

Objective 4: Propose Context-Specific Interventions

The findings highlight existing efforts and critical gaps, providing a basis for proposing more effective and context-specific interventions.

- a. **Recognition of Vulnerability by Authorities:** The Ministry of Women Affairs Director acknowledged that women's vulnerabilities are "much more acute by the general insecurity" and that "more than any other demographic, women are most affected." This recognition is a crucial first step toward targeted interventions.
- b. **Governmental Engagement and Psychosocial Support:** The Ministry of Women Affairs in Adamawa State (and across BAY states) is actively addressing incidences of sexual violence, indicating institutional awareness. The presence of "Safe Spaces" and staff in IDP camps to provide psychosocial support to displaced women and girls is a significant existing intervention.
- c. **Urgent Need for Comprehensive Support Networks:** The healthcare professional's account of a survivor struggling to access emergency medical attention and counseling highlights a critical gap. There is an urgent need to establish thorough support networks that integrate immediate medical care, long-term psychosocial support, and legal aid for victims of sexual assault in conflict-affected areas.
- d. **Strengthening Security and Protection:** Displaced women consistently identified security personnel as their "only means of support" during bandit attacks (Displaced Woman, Age 34). This underscores the need to strengthen the capacity and responsiveness of security forces to prevent attacks and protect vulnerable populations.
- e. **Community-Led Solutions:** While not explicitly detailed in the provided text, the pervasive fear and shame suggest a strong need for community-based interventions that build trust, encourage reporting, and provide culturally sensitive support. The ministry's collaboration with the Ministry of Social Development also hints at inter-agency efforts for holistic support.

Objective 5: Identify Solutions to End Weaponization and Kidnapping

The findings point towards multifaceted solutions that address both the immediate impacts and the root causes of weaponized kidnapping and sexual violence.

- **Addressing the Root Causes of Insecurity:** While the provided text focuses on the *impact*, the historical context of kidnapping in Nigeria (e.g., government's inability to address Niger-Delta agitation, Nwagboso, 2012) implicitly suggests that long-term solutions must tackle underlying issues such as poverty, unemployment, marginalization, and lack of basic amenities that fuel banditry and insurgency.
- **Enhanced Security Operations and Civilian Protection:** The descriptions of bandit tactics (ambushes, shooting, poisonous weapons, large-scale raids) by the vigilante security agent, coupled with the vulnerability of women, emphasize the need for more effective and proactive security operations focused on civilian protection. This includes disrupting bandit networks, intelligence gathering, and timely intervention to prevent attacks.

- **Strict Enforcement of Laws and Accountability:** The GBV Officer and the general legal framework highlighted (Nigerian Criminal Code, Penal Code, International Humanitarian Law, Rome Statute) underscore the importance of holding perpetrators accountable for "clear breach of both International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights Laws." This requires robust investigation, prosecution, and appropriate sentencing to deter future acts.
- **Integrated Multi-Sectoral Response:** The complexity of the issues, ranging from physical injuries to psychological trauma, food insecurity, and displacement, demands a coordinated, multi-sectoral response. This involves collaboration between security agencies, ministries of women affairs and social development, health organizations, and humanitarian aid groups to provide comprehensive support for survivors and affected communities.

Empowerment and Reintegration Programs for Women: Given the disproportionate impact on women (widowhood, loss of providers, stigma), solutions must include empowerment programs that facilitate their economic independence and social reintegration, reducing their vulnerability to future exploitation and building community resilience.

Discussion of Key Findings

This study aimed to move "Beyond Abduction" by conceptualizing and examining the strategic weaponization of kidnapping and sexual violence by bandits in North East Nigeria, alongside its profound implications for survivors and potential solutions. The detailed analysis of both existing literature and primary data from in-depth interviews with affected women, security agents, and government officials reveals a harrowing and complex landscape.

1. Conceptualizing the Strategic Weaponization of Kidnapping and Sexual Violence

The findings robustly conceptualize kidnapping and sexual violence as strategically weaponized tools by bandit groups, transcending their traditional definitions as mere criminal acts for ransom.

- a. **The Evolution of Kidnapping as a Multi-faceted Weapon:** Historically, kidnapping in Nigeria, as seen with MEND in the Niger Delta from late 2005, was initially driven by socio-political grievances, aiming to draw attention to environmental degradation and marginalization (Nwagboso, 2012). This established kidnapping as a tool for political leverage. Following the 2007 elections, it evolved into a widespread economic enterprise, especially in the Southeast, where former political thugs turned to abduction for financial survival (Onifade, Imhonopia, & Urim, 2013). This trajectory demonstrates that kidnapping, even before its widespread combination with sexual violence, was already adapting as a flexible "means of attack or harm" to gain advantage (as per the definition of weaponization).

However, the findings reveal a more sinister transformation with the involvement of ideologically driven groups like Boko Haram, Ansaru, and ISWAP. These groups escalated the tactic beyond financial demands. High-

profile abductions of expatriates (Bello & Jamilu, 2017) and, critically, **mass abductions of schoolchildren** (e.g., Chibok in 2014, Dapchi in 2018) signify a deliberate shift towards a terror-inducing, psychologically devastating form of warfare. Such acts aim not just for ransom but for maximum psychological impact, international leverage, and the disruption of societal functions like education. The execution of kidnapped individuals, such as the two engineers in March 2012 or Reverend Andimi in January 2020, by Ansaru, further underscores that the lives of hostages are strategically expendable or leveraged for broader ideological or power objectives, solidifying the concept of kidnapping as a fully weaponized tool.

- b. **Sexual Violence as a Deliberate and Humiliating Instrument of War:** The conceptualization extends significantly to sexual violence. While definitions from John (1998) and WHO (2001) emphasize its non-consensual and forceful nature, the study's findings from direct testimonies reveal its systematic and intentional deployment by bandits. It is not merely a byproduct of chaos but a calculated tactic. Displaced women explicitly stated that bandits "rape women before leaving" and target them "seeking sexual gratification" in rural communities. The chilling account of bandits "raping anyone they come across" and performing "disgraceful activities against men in front of their families" highlights that sexual violence is used as a tool for humiliation, subjugation, and the breaking of community spirit. It transforms the act of abduction into a more potent form of psychological warfare, inflicting deep shame and terror that extends beyond the immediate victims to the entire community. This deliberate and pervasive use of sexual violence against vulnerable populations—spanning "a range of age groups and socioeconomic backgrounds"—firmly establishes it as a weapon in the bandits' arsenal, a clear breach of both International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights Laws, as affirmed by the GBV Officer.

2. The Devastating Socio-Psychological Impact on Survivors

The qualitative data from displaced women vividly illustrate the profound and multi-layered socio-psychological consequences of weaponized kidnapping and sexual violence, far beyond physical injury.

- a. **Profound Psychological Trauma and Mental Health Crisis:** Survivors consistently reported experiencing intense psychological anguish. A 28-year-old woman's case, presenting with "gynecological difficulties and indications of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)" after being raped, exemplifies the severe mental health toll. The displaced women expressed living in a "terrible predicament," battling a daily struggle for survival compounded by the invisible wounds of trauma, fear, and anxiety. The loss of loved ones, particularly husbands who were family providers, deepens the emotional distress and creates immense new responsibilities and vulnerabilities.
- b. **Pervasive Stigma and a Culture of Silence:** A critical finding is the overwhelming **shame** felt by many victims, leading to a profound silence around their experiences of sexual violence. As one displaced woman articulated, "Many victims are afraid to tell their tales because they feel ashamed of what happened to them." This pervasive stigma acts as a

significant barrier to disclosure, support-seeking, and healing, creating a hidden crisis within the camps and communities. This silence is often compounded by the fear of further reprisal from perpetrators or social ostracization.

- c. **Erosion of Dignity and Heightened Vulnerability:** Beyond physical violation, survivors reported being treated as "nothing more than objects of lust" by their captors. This dehumanization severely impacts their sense of dignity and self-worth. Furthermore, the attacks disproportionately affect women, leading to increased rates of widowhood, which places immense burdens on them as sole caregivers for their children amidst displacement and economic precarity. Their lives are "constantly at danger" due to the ongoing threat of attacks and their "helplessness against such aggression."
- d. **Inadequate Immediate Medical and Psychosocial Care:** A significant gap identified is the lack of immediate and comprehensive medical care for survivors, particularly those recently released from captivity. One displaced woman noted that "many victims, including those who were in captivity, did not receive proper medical care before we were relocated." This critical delay in intervention exacerbates physical injuries and psychological trauma, highlighting the urgent need for integrated emergency response mechanisms.

3. Institutional Responses and Remaining Gaps in Support

The study revealed a mixed picture regarding institutional responses, with some proactive measures alongside persistent gaps in comprehensive support.

- a. **Official Recognition and Active Engagement:** The Ministry of Women Affairs personnel demonstrated clear recognition of women's acute vulnerability, acknowledging that they are "most affected by this phenomenon." This awareness has translated into active efforts by the Ministry of Women Affairs in Adamawa State (and across the BAY states) to address incidences of sexual violence. The establishment of "Safe Spaces" within IDP camps and the provision of psychosocial support by dedicated staff are commendable existing interventions aimed at lessening the suffering of displaced women and girls.
- b. **Critical Gaps in Comprehensive Support Networks:** Despite existing efforts, significant gaps remain. The account from the healthcare professional, detailing a survivor's struggle to access "emergency medical attention and counseling," underscores the urgent need for thorough and integrated support networks. These networks must seamlessly connect immediate medical care, specialized mental health services, and trauma-informed counseling from the point of rescue or displacement. The current system appears fragmented, potentially leaving many survivors without timely and adequate care.
- c. **Persistent Security Deficits and Reliance on Vigilantes:** The testimony from the vigilante security agent, describing "ambushes, shooting, and the use of poisonous weapons" by bandits, and the women's reliance on security personnel as their "only means of support," highlights persistent security vulnerabilities within and around IDP camps. This indicates that while local vigilantes offer some protection, a more robust, proactive, and coordinated

security strategy is needed to deter bandit attacks and ensure the safety of displaced populations, particularly women and girls.

4. Pathways to Solutions and the Imperative of Accountability

The findings point towards the necessity of multi-faceted solutions that encompass both immediate protective measures and long-term systemic changes, underpinned by a strong commitment to accountability.

- a. **Addressing Root Causes and Enhancing Civilian Protection:** While not explicitly detailed in the direct interviews, the historical context of kidnapping in Nigeria, linked to issues like poverty, unemployment, and marginalization (Nwagboso, 2012), implicitly suggests that sustainable solutions must go beyond symptoms to tackle these underlying drivers of banditry. Crucially, the pervasive nature of bandit attacks necessitates enhanced and proactive security operations focused on civilian protection. This includes intelligence gathering, rapid response, and strategic deployment of forces to prevent abductions and protect vulnerable communities within and outside the camps.
- b. **Strengthening Legal Frameworks and Ensuring Accountability:** The legal professionals' emphasis on national (Criminal Code, Penal Code) and international (Rome Statute, Geneva Conventions) laws against sexual assault highlights the existing legal framework. The key finding here is the imperative of effective enforcement and accountability. Rape and other forms of sexual violence are recognized as torture and grave violations; thus, rigorous investigation, prosecution, and appropriate sentencing of perpetrators are essential to deter future crimes and provide justice for victims. The current context often lacks the consistent application of these laws, contributing to impunity.
- c. **Comprehensive, Survivor-Centered Support and Empowerment:** The profound socio-psychological impacts necessitate integrated, survivor-centered support systems. This includes not only immediate medical and psychosocial aid but also long-term counseling, economic empowerment programs for widowed and displaced women, and reintegration support that addresses stigma. Creating truly safe spaces where women feel empowered to speak without fear of shame or reprisal is crucial. The state government's stated commitment to "actively supporting the victims in their attempts to cope and heal" must translate into concrete, accessible, and sustained resources.

In conclusion, the study's findings paint a stark picture of kidnapping and sexual violence as weaponized tools of terror and control in North East Nigeria, inflicting devastating and multifaceted trauma on women and girls. While institutional recognition and some support structures exist, significant gaps remain, underscoring the urgent need for comprehensive, integrated, and accountability-driven interventions to protect vulnerable populations and facilitate their healing and recovery.

Recommendations

Based on the detailed findings, which underscore the strategic weaponization of kidnapping and sexual violence by bandits and its devastating, multi-faceted impact on women and girls in North East Nigeria, the following recommendation is put forth:

1. **Implement a Comprehensive, Survivor-Centered, and Integrated Response to Counter the Weaponization of Kidnapping and Sexual Violence:** To effectively address the complex and evolving threat of weaponized kidnapping and sexual violence, it is imperative for the Nigerian government, in collaboration with international partners, humanitarian organizations, and local communities, to adopt a multi-pronged, coordinated, and survivor-centered approach that encompasses the following pillars:

- a. **Strengthen Proactive Security and Civilian Protection:**

- **Enhanced Counter-Banditry Operations:** Deploy specialized, intelligence-led security operations to proactively dismantle bandit networks, rescue captives, and disrupt their strategic use of kidnapping and sexual violence as tools of warfare.
 - **Community-Based Protection Mechanisms:** Invest in and empower local vigilante groups and community policing initiatives with appropriate training and oversight, integrating them into broader security strategies to ensure localized civilian protection, particularly for women and girls in vulnerable rural areas and IDP camps.
 - **Safe Passage and Rescue Protocols:** Develop and implement clear, trauma-informed protocols for the safe rescue, reception, and immediate care of survivors of kidnapping and sexual violence, prioritizing their dignity and well-being.

- b. **Establish Comprehensive and Integrated Survivor Support Systems:**

- **Immediate Medical and Psychosocial Care:** Ensure timely access to emergency medical services, including forensic medical examinations, STI prevention, and post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) for all survivors of sexual violence immediately upon rescue or displacement. This must be coupled with immediate and sustained psychosocial support, including culturally sensitive counseling and trauma therapy, within IDP camps and host communities.
 - **Long-term Rehabilitation and Reintegration:** Develop and fund programs that provide long-term psychosocial support, educational opportunities, and vocational training for survivors, particularly widowed women and adolescent girls. These initiatives should aim to foster economic independence and facilitate successful social reintegration, combating stigma and preventing revictimization.
 - **Safe Spaces and Confidential Reporting Mechanisms:** Expand and adequately resource existing "Safe Spaces" within IDP camps and establish similar accessible facilities in affected communities. These spaces must ensure confidentiality and provide secure, discreet channels for survivors to report incidents without fear of reprisal or shame, connecting them directly to legal and support services.

c. Ensure Accountability and Strengthen Legal Frameworks:

- **Vigorous Prosecution of Perpetrators:** Prioritize the investigation, arrest, and prosecution of individuals and groups involved in the weaponization of kidnapping and sexual violence under national criminal law and relevant international humanitarian and human rights laws. This includes holding commanders and leaders accountable.
- **Capacity Building for Justice System:** Provide specialized training for law enforcement, judicial officials, and prosecutors on gender-based violence, conflict-related sexual violence, and trauma-informed justice approaches to ensure effective legal redress for survivors.
- **Legal Aid and Advocacy:** Provide free legal aid to survivors seeking justice and advocate for legislative reforms that strengthen protections against sexual violence and ensure consistent application of severe penalties across all Nigerian states, reflecting the gravity of these crimes.

d. Address Root Causes and Foster Community Resilience:

- **Socio-Economic Development:** Implement long-term development strategies focused on poverty reduction, job creation (especially for youth), education, and improved access to basic amenities in conflict-affected regions. Addressing these root causes can diminish the pool of recruits for bandit groups and reduce the drivers of insecurity.
- **Community Engagement and Peacebuilding:** Foster inclusive dialogue and peacebuilding initiatives at the local level to mend fractured social fabrics, promote reconciliation, and empower communities to resist recruitment and stand against violence. Engage traditional and religious leaders as key actors in combating stigma and advocating for survivor support.
- **Research and Data Collection:** Support continuous research into the evolving tactics of bandit groups and the long-term impacts of weaponized violence to inform policy, track progress, and adapt interventions effectively.

By implementing this comprehensive, survivor-centered, and integrated response, Nigeria can move beyond merely reacting to abductions to strategically counter the weaponization of violence, protect its most vulnerable citizens, and lay the groundwork for lasting peace and stability in the North East.

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