



CHILD EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE BY TERRORIST AND VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUPS IN NORTH EAST NIGERIA: A CASE STUDY OF BORNO STATE.

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Abstract

Child exploitation and abuse by terrorist and violent extremist groups is a serious form of violence against children in the conflict zone of North East Nigeria, it is a pressing issue of Global concern. Studies show that thousands of individuals under the age of eighteen have been recruited and exploited by terrorist groups in the past years. Regardless of the means and methods used, this process results in exploitation with long-lasting consequences on children's well-being and society in general in the sense that they may become particularly dangerous instruments in the hands of those exploiting them and using them as instruments to commit criminal or terrorism-related offences. Over the past decade, Borno State has been the most affected area in the conflict zone, primarily due to Boko Haram and other terrorist groups. This study highlights the strategies employed by terrorist and violent extremist groups in targeting and recruiting children, systematically subjecting them to forced labour, sexual violence, and psychological trauma. The infliction of such violence on children subjects them to long-lasting physical, developmental, emotional, spiritual, and mental harm which they carry into adulthood. This study employs a mixed-method approach, incorporating qualitative interviews with survivors, community leaders, and humanitarian aid workers, alongside quantitative data from government sources and NGO reports. The findings uncovered the multifaceted drivers of child exploitation in the region such as poverty, poor governance, displacement, and the breakdown of social fabrics i.e. education, healthcare, justice etc. It also evaluates the effectiveness of the existing interventions and proposes actionable recommendations for policymakers, international organizations, and local stakeholders. Finally, the study concludes with a call for an integrated, child-centred approach that addresses both immediate protection needs and the root causes of exploitation. By focusing on Borno state as a case study, this study seeks to amplify the voices of affected children and inform more effective strategies to combat child exploitation in conflict-affected regions globally.

Keywords: Child Exploitation, Terrorist Recruitment, Violent Extremism, Human Rights Violations, Boko Haram



Introduction

Child exploitation by terrorist and extremist groups is a serious human rights violation and security threat, particularly in conflict zones. The recruitment of children for armed combat, forced labor, sexual slavery, and intelligence gathering has been documented globally, including in North East Nigeria. The Boko Haram insurgency and its splinter group, ISWAP, have systematically recruited and exploited children, causing severe psychological, emotional, and physical harm (Matfess, 2017; Amnesty International, 2021). Borno State is the epicenter of this crisis, with children abducted, coerced, or lured into extremist groups. UNICEF reports that since 2013, Boko Haram has recruited thousands of children as soldiers, suicide bombers, and spies (UNICEF, 2022). Insecurity, mass displacement, and the breakdown of social structures exacerbate children's vulnerability (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Economic hardship, lack of education, weak law enforcement, and societal factors further enable recruitment (Oyewole, 2020; Adeleke, 2021). The failure of government and international interventions highlights the need for a comprehensive child-centered approach.

Child exploitation by terrorist groups in North East Nigeria is a pressing humanitarian and security crisis. Since 2009, Boko Haram and its splinter faction, ISWAP, have recruited children for combat, intelligence gathering, forced labor, and sexual exploitation, particularly in Borno State (UNICEF, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2020). These groups abduct and indoctrinate children, subjecting them to brutal training and using them as instruments of violence (Amnesty International, 2021). This constitutes a grave violation of human rights and international law, with long-term security and social implications (United Nations, 2023). Despite interventions, child exploitation persists due to poverty, displacement, institutional collapse, and weak law enforcement (Oyewole, 2020). Cultural and gender norms exacerbate the crisis, with girls disproportionately subjected to forced marriages and sexual slavery (Adeleke, 2021). Counterterrorism efforts have largely been military-focused, neglecting socioeconomic root causes and long-term rehabilitation (Matfess, 2017).

Therefore, the objectives of this study are to examine the recruitment strategies and exploitation methods used by terrorist and violent extremist groups in Borno State, analyze the socio-economic, political, and structural factors contributing to child exploitation, and evaluate the



effectiveness of existing interventions while proposing strategies for improving child protection, rehabilitation, and reintegration efforts in conflict-affected areas. Through focusing on Borno State, this research contributes to understanding child exploitation in conflict settings, offering insights into preventing recruitment, enhancing protection frameworks, and supporting rehabilitation efforts. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for informing national and international strategies that safeguard vulnerable children.

Conceptualizing Child Exploitation and Abuse in Conflict Zones

Child exploitation and abuse in conflict zones represent some of the most egregious violations of human rights, particularly affecting vulnerable populations such as children. The complexities surrounding these issues are multifaceted, involving various forms of violence, systemic neglect, and the breakdown of social structures that typically provide protection for children. According to the United Nations (2023), child exploitation includes forced labor, recruitment into armed groups, sexual violence, and other forms of abuse that violate their fundamental rights and dignity. In the context of armed conflict, children are often subjected to forced recruitment by terrorist and violent extremist groups, where they serve as combatants, messengers, spies, and even suicide bombers (UNICEF, 2022). Studies indicate that children recruited by extremist groups suffer long-term psychological trauma, social stigmatization, and developmental challenges (Matfess, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Child exploitation and abuse in conflict zones involve the systematic targeting of vulnerable children for various forms of violence, including recruitment as child soldiers, sexual exploitation, and forced labour. These children are often subjected to extreme physical and psychological harm, with long-lasting consequences on their well-being and development. It is crucial to recognize the unique challenges faced by children in conflict zones and to implement comprehensive strategies to protect their rights and provide them with the necessary support and resources. By addressing the root causes of child exploitation and abuse in these settings, we can work towards creating a safer environment for vulnerable children to thrive and recover from their traumatic experiences.



Child Recruitment and Exploitation by Terrorist Groups in Borno State

In North East Nigeria, Boko Haram and its splinter factions have institutionalized child recruitment and exploitation as part of their operational strategy. The group has used abduction, indoctrination, and coercion to integrate children into its ranks (Amnesty International, 2021). Boko Haram's tactics involve exploiting children's vulnerabilities, including economic hardship and displacement, making them easy targets for radicalization and manipulation (Oyewole, 2020). Numerous reports have documented the recruitment of children by Boko Haram in Borno State. Since 2013, the group has abducted thousands of children, using them as suicide bombers, fighters, and forced labourers (UNICEF, 2022). A report by Human Rights Watch (2020) highlighted that over 8,000 children have been forcibly recruited, many of whom were subjected to severe physical and psychological abuse. Boko Haram's recruitment strategies include:

Abduction and Coercion: Many children, particularly girls, have been abducted from schools and communities. The infamous Chibok abduction in 2014 is a notable example (Amnesty International, 2021). **Religious Indoctrination:** Boko Haram uses religious rhetoric to radicalize children, convincing them that participation in jihad is a divine obligation (Matfess, 2017). **Economic Incentives and Coercion:** Many children join extremist groups due to economic hardship and lack of alternatives (Oyewole, 2020).

Factors Contributing to Child Exploitation by Terrorist Groups

Child exploitation by terrorist groups, particularly in regions like Borno State, Nigeria, is a complex issue influenced by various structural and socio-economic factors. Poverty is one of the most significant drivers of child exploitation in conflict zones. In Borno State, widespread economic deprivation forces families to prioritize survival, often making children vulnerable to recruitment by extremist groups. Terrorist organizations exploit this economic vulnerability by offering monetary rewards, food supplies, or shelter in exchange for participation in their activities (Adeleke, 2021). The lack of economic opportunities exacerbates this issue, as some parents, out of desperation, may comply with or turn a blind eye to child recruitment, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and violence.

The absence of effective governance in rural areas of Borno State creates an environment where terrorist groups exploit weak law enforcement and provide alternative power structures



(UNDP, 2022). Corruption and inefficiencies in government institutions further weaken state presence, making it difficult to enforce child protection laws. In many cases, terrorist groups fill the void left by the state by providing basic services such as security or access to limited resources, thereby gaining the trust of local communities and facilitating recruitment efforts. Families seeking stability may align with these groups for protection, inadvertently exposing their children to exploitation.

Terrorist groups deliberately target schools and healthcare institutions to destabilize communities and undermine state authority (UNICEF, 2022). The destruction of schools deprives children of education—a crucial factor in preventing recruitment. Without access to structured learning environments, children lose opportunities for personal development and are more susceptible to extremist ideologies. The absence of formal education and social support systems means that children lack guidance, making them easy targets for indoctrination and exploitation by violent groups.

Consequences of Child Exploitation in Conflict Settings

One of the most severe consequences of child exploitation in conflict is the psychological trauma experienced by former child soldiers. Many are exposed to extreme violence, abuse, and loss, leading to disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety (Horgan et al., 2017). Symptoms include intrusive memories, nightmares, and heightened arousal responses, which hinder reintegration into society. Additionally, cultural stigma surrounding mental health prevents many from seeking psychological support, exacerbating their distress.

Former child soldiers often face community rejection due to fears that they may still pose a threat (Amnesty International, 2021). This distrust leads to discrimination, exclusion from social and economic opportunities, and negative labeling. Social ostracism further entrenches feelings of worthlessness, increasing the risk of re-recruitment into violent groups. Divisions within communities grow, making reconciliation efforts more difficult in post-conflict settings.

The recruitment of children into armed groups has long-term security implications. Many become desensitized to violence, internalizing extremist ideologies and later becoming perpetrators themselves (Matfess, 2017). This contributes to sustained instability, where violence is normalized as a conflict resolution method. Additionally, the presence of militarily trained,



traumatized youth poses a regional security threat, as they may join other militant factions or engage in transnational terrorism.

Assessing Existing Interventions and Policy Responses

Child exploitation, particularly in conflict zones like Borno State, Nigeria, poses significant challenges to national and international organizations. The ongoing insurgency led by Boko Haram has exacerbated the vulnerability of children, leading to their recruitment as child soldiers, sexual exploitation, and other forms of abuse. In response, various interventions have been initiated by the Nigerian government alongside international partners such as UNICEF. The Nigerian government, in collaboration with UNICEF and other agencies, has implemented disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs to rehabilitate former child soldiers (UNICEF, 2022). These programs are designed to disarm combatants, facilitate their reintegration into society, and provide psychosocial support. UNICEF plays a crucial role in these initiatives by providing technical assistance and funding for rehabilitation efforts.

However, challenges remain, including inadequate funding, lack of community acceptance, and weak enforcement of child protection policies (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Despite these interventions, gaps exist in addressing the root causes of child exploitation. Current counterterrorism efforts focus heavily on military operations, neglecting socio-economic development programs that could provide alternative pathways for vulnerable children (Adeleke, 2021).

The exploitation of children by terrorist and violent extremist groups in Borno State remains a critical issue with profound implications for regional security and human rights. While efforts have been made to address this crisis, significant gaps persist in preventing child recruitment and ensuring long-term rehabilitation. Therefore, a comprehensive strategy that combines security efforts with developmental initiatives is crucial for creating sustainable solutions that protect vulnerable children from exploitation.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Social Learning Theory, developed by Bandura (1977), which explains how individuals, particularly children, learn behaviors through observation, imitation, and



reinforcement. The theory posits that behavior is acquired by observing role models and is reinforced positively or negatively (Bandura, 1986). In conflict settings, children exposed to violence often adopt these behaviors as survival mechanisms, leading to their integration into extremist networks (Horgan et al., 2017).

In the context of child exploitation by terrorist groups in Borno State, Social Learning Theory provides a framework for understanding how children are socialized into violent ideologies. Many witness brutality, abductions, and destruction, with terrorist groups serving as dominant authority figures, shaping their perceptions of power, loyalty, and survival (Horgan et al., 2017). Repeated exposure to extremist rhetoric normalizes violence, reinforcing radical ideologies from an early age (Bandura, 2001).

Terrorist groups reinforce violent behavior through rewards such as food, shelter, protection, and social acceptance. Children who demonstrate loyalty gain privileges, while those who resist face coercion or punishment (Masten et al., 2015). Older recruits act as role models, making recruitment more effective (Horgan et al., 2017). By applying Social Learning Theory, this study highlights how terrorist groups exploit children's learning processes to sustain violent movements. Understanding these mechanisms is crucial for designing effective interventions that counter radicalization, promote positive social learning, and support long-term reintegration and rehabilitation efforts.

Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-method research design, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a comprehensive analysis of child exploitation by terrorist groups in Borno State. This approach enables triangulation, enhancing the validity and reliability of findings through multiple data sources and perspectives (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The target population includes government officials, security personnel, humanitarian workers, community leaders, and survivors with firsthand knowledge of child recruitment. A purposive sampling technique is used to select participants based on their expertise and experiences with child exploitation and conflict dynamics. A sample of 20 participants ensures diverse perspectives while allowing for an in-depth exploration of research themes. This sample includes key



stakeholders involved in child protection, counterterrorism, and rehabilitation efforts, enabling triangulation and strengthening the study's validity.

Below Table 1 shows the description of the study's participants:

Participants	Description	Number
Government Agencies	Respondents from the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons, Ministry of Women Affairs	4
Security Agencies	Personnel from the Nigerian military, Civilian Joint Task Force	4
Humanitarian Organizations	Respondents from UNICEF, the International Rescue Committee, NGOs working with children in conflict	3
Community Leaders	Selected respondents with knowledge of affected communities	4
Survivors of Child Exploitation	Selected respondents from former child soldiers	5
Total		20

Source: Researchers' Field Survey (2025)

This study employs semi-structured in-depth interviews to collect firsthand accounts from key informants. This method ensures flexibility in probing deeper into specific issues while maintaining consistency across interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Interviews were conducted face-to-face where possible or via secure virtual platforms for remote participants. Additionally, secondary data sources include reports from international organizations (e.g., UNICEF, UNHCR, and Human Rights Watch), government policy documents and security reports, academic research, and media reports from reputable sources (e.g., BBC, Al Jazeera, Nigerian newspapers). These sources provide historical context, corroborate interview findings, and offer insights into policy responses. For data analysis, thematic analysis was used to identify patterns in qualitative data, while descriptive statistical methods analyzed quantitative data from government and NGO reports. Findings from both analyses were triangulated to enhance validity and reliability.



Data Analysis

Objective One: To Examine the Strategies and Methods Employed by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups in Recruiting and Exploiting Children in Borno State

One of the most prevalent methods employed by terrorist groups, particularly Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), is forced recruitment through mass abductions. Participants, particularly security officials and humanitarian workers, emphasized that thousands of children have been forcibly taken from their homes, schools, and communities.

A security officer recounted:

"Many children are kidnapped during attacks on villages and schools. These children are often taken deep into the Sambisa Forest or across the border, where they are indoctrinated and trained for combat or forced labor."

Reports from UNICEF (2023) confirm that children abducted in Borno State are subjected to brutal initiation processes, including beatings and forced participation in attacks. Data from and Human Rights Watch (2022) indicate that over 8,000 children have been recruited by Boko Haram and its factions in North-East Nigeria since 2015. The highest recruitment rate was recorded in 2017, with 1,500 children abducted or forcibly recruited.

A recurrent theme in the interviews was the use of ideological indoctrination and psychological coercion to recruit children. Religious leaders and former child combatants revealed that terrorist groups exploit religious narratives to justify violence and instil extremist ideologies.

A community leader stated:

"They tell children that they are fighting a holy war, that dying in battle will make them martyrs. Many of these children do not have access to proper religious education, making them vulnerable to manipulation."

Humanitarian workers and government officials highlighted the use of indoctrination tactics, where abducted children are subjected to religious extremism, propaganda videos, and isolation from their families to reprogram their beliefs. Former child recruits revealed that terrorist groups



train children to view violence as a religious duty, making them more susceptible to engaging in suicide bombings and attacks.

A security officer noted:

“These groups manipulate young minds by portraying their violent acts as acts of martyrdom, making it harder for children to resist.”

Secondary data from UNICEF (2023) indicates that terrorist groups use Qur'anic schools (Almajiri system) as recruitment grounds, especially in displaced communities where formal education is inaccessible.

Another prevalent method employed by terrorist groups is economic incentives and exploitation of poverty in the region. The economic hardships in Borno State, exacerbated by the conflict, have created an environment where monetary incentives are used to lure children into terrorist groups. Interviews with humanitarian workers highlighted the role of poverty in recruitment.

A humanitarian worker explained:

“Some children are promised money or food for their families. They join because they see no other means of survival. Others are given small gifts or payments in exchange for spying or carrying out errands for the group.”

A former child soldier noted that:

“Some children, particularly from poverty-stricken backgrounds, voluntarily join terrorist groups due to financial promises such as food, money, and protection.”

Reports from Amnesty International (2022) suggest that children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are disproportionately targeted, as their families are often unable to provide basic necessities.

Furthermore, many interviewees noted that family and peer pressure play significant roles in child recruitment. In some cases, entire families are either forced to join terrorist groups or are placed under immense pressure to surrender their children.



A former child recruit shared:

"My older brother joined first. When he came back, he told me I had to join too. If I refused, they would kill my family."

Academic literature Matfess (2019) highlights that Boko Haram has increasingly used women and children as recruiters, leveraging their familial connections to bring in new members.

The findings indicate that terrorist groups employ multifaceted strategies, including coercion, ideological indoctrination, economic incentives, and direct abduction, to recruit and exploit children in Borno State. The prevalence of child recruitment remains a significant security and humanitarian concern, necessitating urgent interventions to prevent further exploitation.

Objective Two: To Analyse the Socio-Economic, Political, and Structural Factors Contributing to Child Exploitation by Terrorist Groups in Borno State

A recurring theme in the interviews was the high levels of poverty in Borno State, which makes children and their families more susceptible to exploitation by terrorist groups. Many families lack the means to provide basic necessities, pushing children into situations where they are easily recruited.

A humanitarian worker explained:

"Many children are recruited simply because they have no means of survival. The terrorists offer food, money, or protection, which is more than what their families can afford."

According to a UNICEF (2023) report, over 70% of households in Borno State live below the poverty line, making children particularly vulnerable to economic incentives provided by extremist groups.

Additionally, the insurgency has displaced millions of people, disrupting traditional livelihood systems such as farming, fishing, and trade. Displaced families struggle to provide for their children, increasing their risk of exploitation.

A community leader noted:



"Before the crisis, families could feed themselves through farming and trading. Now, many are in IDP camps with no jobs, no education for their children, and no future. Terrorist groups take advantage of this hopelessness."

Reports from the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2022) indicate that Borno State hosts over 1.8 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), with children making up more than 60% of the displaced population.

Furthermore, education is a crucial factor in preventing child recruitment, but terrorist groups have deliberately targeted schools, leading to widespread educational disruption.

A government official stated:

"Boko Haram means 'Western education is forbidden.' They attack schools, kill teachers, and abduct students. Without education, children are left with limited choices, making them more vulnerable."

According to the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (2023), over 1,500 schools have been destroyed, and more than 1,000 teachers have been killed in Northeast Nigeria since 2009.

Weak governance and ineffective state institutions have contributed to the persistence of child exploitation. The government's inability to provide security, education, and social welfare has created an environment where terrorist groups operate with relative ease.

A security official observed:

"The government has failed to fully secure many rural areas. Where the state is absent, terrorists take control and impose their own rules, including child recruitment."

Reports from the African Centre for Strategic Studies (2022) highlight that many communities in Borno State remain under the influence of insurgents due to weak government presence.

Another factor contributing to child exploitation by terrorist groups in Borno State is corruption and mismanagement of resources. Corruption within the government has undermined efforts to



combat child exploitation and insurgency. Many interviewees emphasized that funds meant for social welfare and counterterrorism operations are often mismanaged.

A humanitarian worker noted:

"There are programs meant to help vulnerable children, but corruption prevents resources from reaching those in need. This failure leaves children exposed to recruitment."

According to Transparency International (2023), Nigeria ranks 150th out of 180 countries in the Corruption Perceptions Index, with reports indicating significant misappropriation of funds allocated for counterterrorism and IDP welfare programs.

Among the structural factors is a breakdown of social and community structures. The insurgency has severely disrupted traditional social structures, which previously played a role in protecting children from exploitation.

A religious leader noted:

"In the past, communities took collective responsibility for raising children. Now, displacement and conflict have broken those structures, leaving children without proper guidance or protection."

Research from the African Child Policy Forum (2022) indicates that disruptions in family and community life increase children's vulnerability to radicalization and recruitment.

Inadequate Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programs are another structural factor contributing to child exploitation by terrorist groups in Borno State. Even when children escape from terrorist groups, many lack proper support systems to reintegrate into society.

A former child soldier recounted:

"When I escaped, I had nowhere to go. People were afraid of me. I had no school, no job. That's why some children go back to the insurgents."



Reports from the International Committee of the Red Cross (2022) indicate that many rescued or escaped children face stigmatization, lack of psychological support, and difficulty reintegrating into their communities.

The influence of Cross-Border and Transnational Terrorist Networks are critical factors that emerged as a theme in the study. Borno State's proximity to Cameroon, Chad, and Niger has facilitated the movement of terrorist groups across borders, making it difficult to curb child recruitment.

A security analyst explained:

"These groups operate across borders, making it hard for security forces to track them. Some children are taken to camps outside Nigeria, where they are trained and radicalized."

Reports from the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (2023) highlight that the Lake Chad Basin region has become a hub for cross-border terrorist activities, including child recruitment and trafficking.

The analysis indicates that child exploitation by terrorist groups in Borno State is driven by a combination of socio-economic, political, and structural factors. These findings underscore the urgent need for multi-sectorial interventions, including poverty alleviation, improved governance, community-based resilience programs, and cross-border security cooperation to address child exploitation comprehensively.

Objective Three: To Evaluate the Effectiveness of Existing Interventions and Propose Strategies for Improving Child Protection, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration Efforts in Conflict-Affected Areas

Several government, non-governmental, and international interventions have been implemented to address child exploitation and support affected children. However, the effectiveness of these programs varies due to logistical, financial, and structural challenges.

First, there is a Government-Led Initiative known as the Safe Schools Initiative (SSI) launched in 2014 following the Chibok girls' abduction, this initiative aimed to protect schools from terrorist attacks and encourage education. Interviews with education officials revealed that while some



schools received security reinforcements, many remain vulnerable to attacks due to funding shortages and security lapses.

A local teacher stated:

"The Safe Schools Initiative helped some schools, but many remain unprotected. Fear of attacks still prevents parents from sending their children to school."

A report by UNICEF (2023) found that more than 1,500 schools in Borno State remain closed due to security concerns, limiting the program's effectiveness.

Another Government-Led initiative known as Operation Safe Corridor (OSC) is a deradicalization, rehabilitation, and reintegration (DRR) program that was established by the Nigerian government to reintegrate former child soldiers and ex-combatants. Interviews with security officials indicate that the program has successfully rehabilitated some children; however, concerns remain regarding community acceptance and reintegration challenges.

A former child soldier explained:

"I went through the rehabilitation program, but when I returned home, my community rejected me. People still see us as Boko Haram members."

A report by the International Crisis Group (2022) highlights that the lack of proper reintegration programs has led some rehabilitated children to rejoin terrorist groups.

Furthermore, there are International and NGO-Led Interventions such as the UNICEF and International NGO Child Protection Programs. Various child protection agencies provide psychosocial support, education, and vocational training for affected children. Interviews with humanitarian workers indicate that while these programs have helped thousands of children, funding limitations and security risks hinder their reach.

A UNICEF official noted:

"We have programs in place, but reaching remote areas remains a challenge. Some children in terrorist-controlled territories are still unreachable."



Community-Based Child Protection Committees (CBCPCs)

These committees involve local leaders, religious figures, and community members in identifying and supporting at-risk children.

A community leader explained:

"We try to protect our children, but without resources and government support, there is only so much we can do."

A study by Save the Children (2023) found that CBCPCs have helped reduce child recruitment in some areas but require stronger institutional backing.

Despite ongoing efforts, several challenges limit the effectiveness of child protection, rehabilitation, and reintegration programs in Borno State. Many areas remain under terrorist control, preventing humanitarian access. Security forces struggle to protect rehabilitation centres and reintegration programs.

A humanitarian worker stated:

"Insecurity prevents us from reaching the most vulnerable children. If they are in terrorist-controlled areas, we can do nothing."

Also, rescued children face rejection from their families and communities, making reintegration difficult.

A former child soldier explained:

"When I came back, people refused to associate with me. They called me a terrorist, even though I was forced to join them as a child."

Research from Human Rights Watch (2023) indicates that many communities fear that rehabilitated children may still hold extremist ideologies.

Furthermore, many children, especially those who have been in terrorist groups, lack job opportunities or vocational training creating lack of long-term economic support.

A government official noted:



*"The programs provide temporary rehabilitation, but what happens next?
Without jobs or education, these children remain vulnerable."*

According to the World Bank (2022), over 65% of youth in Borno State remain unemployed, increasing the likelihood of re-recruitment.

While Nigeria has signed several child protection agreements, implementation remains weak due to poor coordination and corruption.

A legal expert noted:

*"There are policies on paper, but enforcement is inconsistent. Corruption
and bureaucracy slow down interventions."*

Reports from Transparency International (2023) highlight fund mismanagement in programs aimed at supporting vulnerable children.

Proposed Strategies for Strengthening Child Protection, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration

To improve the effectiveness of child protection programs in conflict-affected areas such as Borno State, it is essential for stakeholders to adopt a more integrated and sustainable approach. Strengthening security measures and expanding safe zones around schools and rehabilitation centers would ensure the safe passage of humanitarian aid to vulnerable communities. Military and community-based security, when combined, can create secure corridors, enhancing access to essential services. Furthermore, promoting community engagement and social reintegration programs, including awareness campaigns to reduce stigmatization of rehabilitated children, is critical for facilitating their acceptance back into society. Strengthening traditional justice and reconciliation mechanisms can foster community acceptance and promote social cohesion. Economic empowerment and educational programs should be expanded to support long-term solutions for affected children. This includes introducing vocational training and job placement initiatives, as well as reinforcing alternative learning programs for children who have missed significant years of schooling.

The role of education and economic empowerment in breaking the cycle of child exploitation is paramount. As a UNICEF official aptly noted, "Education and economic



empowerment are key to breaking the cycle of child exploitation." Engaging children in structured learning environments not only prevents recruitment by armed groups but also builds resilience by promoting critical thinking, conflict resolution skills, and civic engagement (UNICEF, 2023). Schools can also serve as safe spaces where children receive psychosocial support, thus mitigating trauma that may increase susceptibility to recruitment by terrorist groups (Save the Children, 2020). Additionally, addressing gaps in policy implementation and ensuring accountability is vital for protecting vulnerable children. The weak enforcement, lack of transparency, and poor coordination among various stakeholders have hindered the effectiveness of existing policies. Strengthening oversight mechanisms and fostering better inter-agency collaboration will ensure more efficient use of resources and improve outcomes for child protection. A transparent, coordinated, and results-driven approach will not only enhance protection efforts but also restore public trust in government interventions, ultimately contributing to a more sustainable strategy for breaking the cycle of exploitation by terrorist and violent extremist groups.

Summary of Key Findings

This study examined the exploitation and abuse of children by terrorist and violent extremist groups in Borno State, Nigeria, with a focus on recruitment strategies, socio-economic and structural factors driving exploitation, and the effectiveness of existing interventions. The findings indicate that terrorist groups such as Boko Haram and ISWAP employ various recruitment methods, including abduction, ideological indoctrination, economic incentives, and coercion through familial and community pressure. Recruited children are forced into combat, intelligence gathering, forced labor, and sexual exploitation, with some deployed as suicide bombers. Socio-economic challenges such as extreme poverty, food insecurity, displacement, and lack of access to education further exacerbate children's vulnerability, making them more susceptible to recruitment. Weak governance, corruption, and inadequate law enforcement contribute to the persistence of child exploitation, while the breakdown of social and community structures due to prolonged conflict has deepened the crisis. Additionally, cross-border terrorist networks facilitate child recruitment across Nigeria and neighboring countries such as Chad, Cameroon, and Niger.

The study also highlights significant challenges in existing intervention efforts. While government-led programs, including the Safe Schools Initiative and Operation Safe Corridor, aim



to rehabilitate and reintegrate affected children, their effectiveness is hampered by funding constraints, insecurity, and community rejection of rehabilitated children. International organizations and NGOs play a crucial role in providing education, psychosocial support, and vocational training; however, logistical difficulties and limited resources restrict their reach. Furthermore, social stigma, lack of long-term economic support, and ineffective reintegration strategies contribute to the re-recruitment of former child soldiers. Weak oversight mechanisms, corruption in funding allocations, and poor coordination among government agencies, NGOs, and international organizations undermine child protection efforts, highlighting the need for a more comprehensive and sustainable approach to addressing child exploitation in conflict zones.

Conclusion

This study has provided an in-depth examination of the recruitment and exploitation of children by terrorist and violent extremist groups in Borno State, Nigeria. The findings highlight that Boko Haram and ISWAP employ multiple strategies—including abduction, ideological indoctrination, economic incentives, and coercion—to recruit and exploit children, subjecting them to forced labour, combat, intelligence gathering, and sexual abuse. The study further establishes that poverty, displacement, lack of education, weak governance, and the breakdown of social structures are key drivers of child exploitation in the region. Despite the implementation of government, NGO, and international interventions, significant challenges persist, including insecurity, lack of funding, community stigmatization, and poor coordination between stakeholders. Existing programs such as the Safe Schools Initiative and Operation Safe Corridor have had limited success due to logistical constraints and weak policy implementation. Furthermore, the absence of long-term economic empowerment and reintegration programs has led to the re-recruitment of some children, perpetuating the cycle of exploitation.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance efforts in preventing child exploitation, improving rehabilitation programs, and ensuring sustainable reintegration in Borno State:

- i. The Nigerian government should increase security around schools and vulnerable communities to prevent child abductions and forced recruitment. Implement stricter legal



frameworks and law enforcement measures to hold perpetrators accountable for child exploitation.

- ii. There is a need to scale up the safe schools initiative by rebuilding and securing educational facilities and integrate vocational training and entrepreneurship programs in conflict-affected areas to equip at-risk children with skills for self-sufficiency.
- iii. There is a need for the government to establish long-term reintegration programs that address stigma and provide former child soldiers with psychosocial counseling, family reunification, and social rehabilitation. Increase awareness campaigns and community dialogues to foster acceptance of rehabilitated children and prevent their re-recruitment.
- iv. There is a need for improving coordination, accountability, and funding for Child Protection Initiatives. This can be achieved by developing a centralized coordination framework to align the efforts of government agencies, NGOs, and international organizations. Establish independent monitoring bodies to track the utilization of child protection funds and ensure transparency in program implementation.

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