

# The Psychological Menace of Children Formerly Associated with Non-state Armed Groups (CFANSAG) in Northeast Nigeria

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The agonising experiences of children in northeastern Nigeria, who were once associated with non-state armed groups, may affect their developmental growth. This paper highlights the consequences of children formerly associated with non-state armed groups (CFANSAG), the mechanisms of oppression suffered by children who voluntarily or were coerced to join the group, and how the children find it difficult to associate with the community. The study, using qualitative research methods including key informant interviews and focus group discussions, focuses on children's different psychological reactions while using the Social Learning Theory to explain how children model aggressive acts. The study concluded that states in the Northeast should implement the Child Rights Act, renamed Child Protection Law in the core northern states, to minimise the violence against children in Nigeria.

## INTRODUCTION

Children and adolescents in northern Nigeria who witnessed the menace of the Boko Haram insurgency that became pronounced in 2009 have grown up without knowing peace. Children have become victims and perpetrators of the life-long impact of the Boko Haram insurgency, which has exposed most of them to a horrendous amount of violence from as young as eight years old. The psychological and emotional damage has impacted their health and well-being in northern Nigeria. In 2022, the United Nations Security Council reported 1.72 million internally displaced persons in northeast Nigeria due to insecurity ravaging northern states. Sadly, UNICEF's earlier 2014 report stated that six out of ten children in the north had experienced violence that psychologically damaged their healthy development.<sup>1</sup> Thus, children's long-term mental health may elevate the risk of behavioural and emotional trauma affecting functional development. As Abodunrin (2022) noted, today's healthy and well-educated children are tomorrow's healthy and well-educated adults.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, this is not the case with children in northeastern Nigeria as Boko Haram and its factions have used children in harsher environments for combatant and non-combatant purposes, namely as child soldiers, cooks, spies, messengers, and sex slaves. The example of how Boko Haram abducted over two hundred Chibok girls<sup>3</sup> and 344 students at Government Secondary School, in Kankara, Katsina state, 2014 and 2020 respectively, are cases in point. Alas, children not meant to be in conflict situations are now involved in a war that is between the Government of Nigeria and Boko Haram and its splinter groups: the Islamic states of West Africa Province (ISWAP) Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad (JAS) and Ansaru.<sup>4</sup>

Regrettably, non-state armed groups have continued using children in the northeast despite concerted efforts by inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations and the state government. For example, the annual 2020-2021 report from the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflicts reported the verified recruitment and use of 70 children (13 boys, 57 girls) aged between 6 and 17 years. The main perpetrators were JAS (49) and ISWAP (19), followed by CJTF; although 34 children

1 UNICEF. Ending violence against children in Nigeria. A multi-sectoral response to the 2014 Nigeria Violence Against Children Survey. <https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/reports/ending-violence-against-children-nigeria>. (accessed November 28, 2022).

2 Abodunrin Hammed. Safety and Security: A study of the United Nation's child Protection Network Strategies. Ibadan: Golden-Gem Press, 2022, 22

3 Akali, Omni "The Chibok Kidnappings in North-East Nigeria: A Military Analysis of Before and After.", *Small Wars Journal*, 2017, 46, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/the-chibok-kidnappings-in-north-east-nigeria-a-military-analysis-of-before-and-after>

4 Centre for Preventive Action. "Conflict with Boko Haram in Nigeria." Accessed 23/9/2022. <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/boko-haram-nigeria>; Kolawole, Simon. "From Chibok Girls to Kankara Boys." *The Cable News*. 19 December. 2020. <https://www.thecable.ng/from-chibok-girls-to-kankara-boys>

were released or escaped during the reporting period, 36 remained associated with JAS or ISWAP. Recruiting children has become a deplorable practice that violates moral, ethical, and international legal standards. It is a crime under domestic and international law.<sup>5</sup>

It only points to the fact that when a child engages in destructive acts of killing, destruction, and sabotage, that child is already morally bankrupt. Thus, the child cannot engage in everyday social experiences because of the physical (injuries) and psychological and emotional scars.<sup>6</sup> In addition, non-state armed groups have used children as Human Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (HBIEDs). Specifically, Boko Haram in the northeast tells these children before they go on a suicide mission that they are martyrs fighting for a good cause. Not only are the children killed most often, but these non-state armed groups also push children to the frontline of conflicts or war; often, in the heat of the battle, children suffer injuries more than adults. Those fortunate to stay alive often suffer mental health issues.<sup>7</sup>

More important is the issue of the psychological implication of CFANSAG. These children experience social isolation/stigma because of the negative attitude of their host communities toward accepting them wholeheartedly,<sup>8</sup> invariably the reintegration of CFANSAG into their communities to live their lives as before is impossible. Consequently, the chances that CFANSAG may be re-recruited becomes high when they fail to reintegrate economically and socially into their civil host communities, which may cause substantial economic development issues, and a new turn in the cycle of violence becomes inevitable.

The reintegration process for CFANSAG requires a reasonable period, at least three to five years, of committed resources.<sup>9</sup> Family reunification or alternative family-based living arrangements, rather than centres, are the most effective strategy to reintegrate CFANSAG into the community.<sup>10</sup> However, in Northeast Nigeria, reintegration was first done when the military introduced the Deradicalization, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration programme

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5 International Humanitarian Law, n.d. Rule 149. "Responsibility for violations of International Humanitarian Law." [https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1\\_rui\\_rule149](https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1_rui_rule149). Accessed 28 August 2022

6 Gabarino J., Guttman E., and Seeley, J.W. *The Psychologically Battered Child*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1988, 131

7 Petersen, A.C. *Consequences of Child Abuse and Neglect*. In *New Directions in Child Abuse and Neglect Research*, National Academic Press, 2014, 18.

8 Betancourt, et, at. "Stigma and Acceptance of Sierra Leone's Child Soldiers: A Prospective Longitudinal Study of Adult Mental Health and Social Functioning." *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 59, no.6, (2019) 715–726

9 Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflicts. <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/global-coalition-for-reintegration-of-child-soldiers/> Accessed 15 March 2023.

10 Social Development Department, n.d. *Child Soldiers: Prevention, Demobilization and Reintegration*. <https://web.worldbank.org/archive/website00522/WEB/PDF/CPRNOTES.PDF>

(DRR) for repented insurgents in 2015 through its Operation Safe Corridor programme into society in 2015.<sup>11</sup>

Currently, Nigeria has three deradicalisation programs that support Boko Haram defectors. The Prison Program is for militants convicted of violent extremist offences or those on or awaiting trials. Second, the Yellow Ribbon Initiative supports women and children associated with Boko Haram by providing psychosocial therapy and reintegration programs. Third, Operation Safe Corridor, launched by the Nigerian military in 2015, works with Boko Haram defectors by addressing extremist ideology and providing them with trauma counselling.<sup>12</sup> The proposed legislation for the National Agency for Deradicalisation, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration of Repentant Insurgents is still a bill that the National Assembly has not passed into law.

The sad development about the CFANSAG in the northeast is that abducted people react differently from those who voluntarily join armed groups. The psychological trauma of a child Boko Haram abducted and forcefully recruited is quite traumatising compared to those who entered independently. The study showed that three out of the 15 male participants, who voluntarily joined the sect, reacted mildly, while the remaining twelve had a severe reaction. In other words, the three male participants who volunteered could regulate their emotions so that it did not affect their psychological balance. The findings from this study are discussed below in the Discussion and Findings section.

It is essential to state that children react differently to adverse environmental events that affect them. Thus, the issue of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) differs among children. Children whom armed groups forcefully recruit tend to have a severe mental disorder when diagnosed, which may require community-implemented trauma therapy. For the females that participated in the FGD, two out of the ten had medical conditions because of childbirth at an early age.

As D'Alessandra suggested,<sup>13</sup> CFANSAG who have experienced armed conflicts suffer deep psychological and emotional trauma. For example, children that experience PTSD,

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- 11 Ugwueze, M.I., Ngwu, E.C. and Onuoha, F.C.. Operation Safe Corridor Programme and Reintegration of Ex-Boko Haram Fighters in Nigeria. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, Volume 57, Issue 6, (2021) 14.
  - 12 Campbell, J. Nigeria Considers National DRR Agency Amid Boko Haram Setbacks. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/nigeria-considers-national-drr-agency-amid-boko-haram-setbacks>. Accessed January 23, 2023.
  - 13 Federica D'Alessandra. "The Psychological Consequences of Becoming a Child Soldier: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Major Depression, and Other Impairment. n.d [https://carcenter.hks.harvard.edu/files/cchr/files/dalessandra\\_pshychol\\_cons\\_of\\_childsoldiers.pdf](https://carcenter.hks.harvard.edu/files/cchr/files/dalessandra_pshychol_cons_of_childsoldiers.pdf). Accessed January 24, 2023.



re-occurrent experiences of traumatic events through nightmares, major depression, hostility, pathological anxiety disorder, sadness, problems with self-confidence and violent traumatisation cannot cope with their daily lives. A case in point is the 41,000 CFANSAG the Nigerian military rescued from non-state armed groups in the northeast.<sup>14</sup> Though the military successfully saved CFANSAG, most children that the army rescued or escapees from Boko Haram suffer dangerous consequences. CFANSAG, in terms of development, possess significant moral problems considering that many CFANSAG have a challenging time coping with repeated and cumulative effects of traumatic stress.<sup>15</sup> A respondent (name withheld) interviewed had this to say:

*“Since the military rescued many of us from Boko Haram captivity, many have nightmares. Whenever children sleep, we dream and see ourselves among children killed, crying for help. However, a few of us in the camp interact and share our ordeals. One or two persons have said they voluntarily joined the sect; the stress we are undergoing right now is unbearable.”*

Betancourt and Kashif<sup>16</sup> opined that children exposed to challenging living conditions have hardened hearts; for example, children whose teachers have indoctrinated them, children who have witnessed family members being tortured or injured, premature sexual intercourse, violent torture, direct perpetration of violent rape, and intense physical training. Sadly, most CFANSAG have significant moral and developmental problems, contributing to children’s loss of innocence.<sup>17</sup> Even though Nigeria domesticated the Child Rights Act in 2003, Nigeria has not applied the Act to non-state armed groups who mostly violate the rights of the Nigerian child. The Federal Government has not held the non-state armed groups accountable for forcefully conscripting children into armed conflicts.

The Child Rights Act only gives directives to the Nigerian armed forces and government agencies against using children in hostilities. However, when Nigeria enacted the Child Rights Act, the issue of CFANSAG was not in the picture; hence, there was no mention of a non-state armed group in the Child Rights Act. However, since 2009 when the insurgency began in the northeast, the Federal Government of Nigeria have not mentioned any punishment for

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14 Musa, C. The Military and Child Soldiers in Borno State, Operation Hadin Kai Headquarters, Maiduguri, Borno State. (P. H. Kerry, Interviewer). June 3, 2022.

15 Bikila, Gerida. “A harrowing escape from Boko Haram in Nigeria.” UNICEF. 11 April 2016. <https://www.unicef.org/stories/harrowing-escape-boko-haram-nigeria>.

16 Betancourt, Theresa. Schick. and Kashif, Tanveer. Khan. “The mental health of children affected by armed conflict: Protective processes and pathways to resilience.” PMID: PMC2613765. NIHMSID: NIHMS81745. PMID: 18569183. 2008 Jun;20(3):317–28, Int Rev Psychiatry. DOI: 10.1080/09540260802090363.

17 Briggs, J. Innocents lost: When Child Soldiers go to War. New York: Basic Books, 2005, 43–46

non-state armed groups who engage these children in armed conflicts.<sup>18</sup> Instead of punishing former Boko Haram members and those who voluntarily surrendered, the Government gave them amnesty.<sup>19</sup> The Nigerian Government has not held the non-state armed groups accountable for the psychological abuses these children face in society, considering that children below eighteen are still developing as human beings.

In 2021, the Borno state government actively engaged with commanders of JAS. One of its press statements also indicated that the Government would not prosecute or proceed with any judicial procedures against the defector of JAS when its leader Abubakar Shakau died in 2021.<sup>20</sup> The implication of the above statement from the Borno state government is that the Government is carefree concerning the well-being and welfare of children. If Boko Haram and its splinter groups surrender, the Government will give them amnesty.

The author believes that the state government's step is a dangerous precedent as it encourages non-state armed groups to keep recruiting children. CFANSAG faces severe psychological consequences whether the non-state armed groups forcefully conscripted, or these children voluntarily joined the armed groups. Unfortunately, the Government has not considered prioritising the psychological effect of armed conflicts among children, especially those in the north who experience violence as a norm.

On the part of the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), the organisation made various child interventions through its Child Protection Network (CPN). The CPN aims to rescue and rehabilitate children after falling victim, providing them with medical care, counselling, education, vocational training, and a safe place to live. At the same time, the CPN ensure the CFANSAG recover from the trauma they have experienced. However, UNICEF's position has always been that "the best way to protect children is to empower them to protect themselves".<sup>21</sup> The only way to protect themselves is when Government give children the needed and recognised rights to protection, provision, and participation. Government must consider children's best interests above all other considerations.

Despite Nigeria's government efforts to acquire the attention of state and non-state armed groups through collaborations with intergovernmental organisations, there are still a few challenges as Boko Haram continue to recruit children, and the Government urgently need

18 Ogunniran, Iyabode. "Protection of the Rights of Children Victims of Armed Conflicts in North-Eastern Nigeria Under International Humanitarian Law." [NAUJILJ 12 (1) 2021], 1-15.

19 NexTier. "Accepting Ex-Boko Haram Fighters." 1 July 2020. <https://nextierspd.com/accepting-ex-boko-haram-fighters/>. Accessed August 22, 2022.

20 United Nations Security Council Report, 2022. : S/2022/596, S/AC.51/2020/8 and A/76/871-S/2022/493. <https://5dok.org/document/y961no5d-security-council-s.html>. Accessed January 24 2023.

21 Abodunrin, 2022.

to address the psychological menace. The study, therefore, aims to discuss the agonising experiences of CFANSAG and the psychological danger of recruiting children into non-state armed groups. The paper is structured into seven parts: the conceptualisation of child soldiers, the theoretical framework, the history of child soldiers and the recruitment process in Nigeria, discussions of findings, the psychological dangers of child soldiers in the northeast, conclusions, and recommendations.

## METHOD

The study adopted a qualitative method to explore the detailed description of the phenomena using the purposive sampling technique for data collection.<sup>22</sup> The study collected data from the Nigerian Military, Borno State Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development (WASD), Grow Strong Foundation (GSF), and a UNICEF focal person in Maiduguri. The study added the semi-structured interview method to conduct direct physical person-to-person and telephone interviews with key respondents, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussion (FGD) with CFANSAG. Moreover, using the key informant interview (KII) will enable the study to get first-hand information from experts knowledgeable about the conflicts in Borno state.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, the study deemed it necessary to use the FGD in line with Article 12 of the UNCRC, which gives rights to children to participate. Moreso, CFANSAG have experienced the psychological menace and have rich information about their feelings, opinions, ideas, interpretations, range of views, inconsistencies, variations in beliefs, and their experiences and practices, especially as CFANSAG. The study had ten KII and twenty-five children participating in the FGD in Borno state. The study collected secondary data from relevant published and unpublished materials, such as peer-reviewed articles.

The study conducted the FGD in Pulka town with participants selected from Camps A, B, Bulumkutu Interim Care Centre (BICC), Hajj camp, Shukori Camp, and other transit camps. The twenty-five children (comprising fifteen boys and ten girls) came from the crisis affected local communities of Pulka, Gwoza, and Bama Local Government Area of Borno states based on the research priorities to discuss the psychological menace of CFANSAG. The data for the analysis was collected during the researcher's PhD field report conducted in 2022 in Borno state. The study used the appropriate channels to get approval for the study. Moreso, the study ensured that it protected the children's privacy and confidentiality while it obtained consent from the participants through officials in various camps.

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- 22 Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research. *Administration and policy in mental health*, 42(5), 533. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y>
- 23 UCLA. Section 4: Key Informant Interviews. UCLA Center For Health Policy Research. Health DATA Program – Data, Advocacy and Technical Assistance.



The study conducted the FGD in the form of a participatory workshop that adopted qualitative methods of FGDs that explored information on child soldiers and the dynamics of how the communities treated the children after their return. Six participants came from Pulka and Gwoza local Governments and the camps have continued to experience a high influx of internally displaced persons because of heightened insecurity. The children selected from the identified cases of CFANSAG from those communities have been living with the non-state armed groups for years.

The study conducted the FGD in person and grouped the children and their age range as the unit of analysis. For example, age 8-10 years in one group, 11-15 years in another group, and 16-17 years. CFANSAG agreed to participate because of their pre-existing relationship with camp officials they know and trust. Coincidentally, the officials who assisted in conducting the FGD have also worked with various non-governmental organisations in northeast Nigeria. The study collected data via recording in Kanuri and Hausa dialects which the researcher later transcribed into English.

The study used a note-taker, a facilitator, and a technician; the note-taker observed and wrote and did not interact with the group. He identified how the children made comments, and the facilitator managed the pace and encouraged the participants to speak up. The technician was in charge of recording and transcribing it into English. The study conducted the FGD for three days, and each day lasted for 60 minutes to enable the children to relax and not overbore them with questions.

The study asked the CFANSAG questions that assessed their experiences during captivity, the psychological danger of forceful recruitment and voluntary recruitment of former child soldiers, and their expertise on how community members accept them. In addition, how NGOs and other parties are helping them or responding to their needs if the government passage of the Child Protection Law has resulted in any changes to their situation. The study conducted participatory FGD based on the developed questions. The study used pseudo-names for the FGD in place of their real names and some other relevant key informants to protect their identities, respect their privacy, and for the respondents to express themselves on the subject matter without restriction. The respondents in the FGD wanted anonymity for security reasons. At the same time, some key informants preferred not to mention their names. As such, the study did not mention the names of the CFANSAG respondents.

## THE CONCEPTUALISATION OF CHILD SOLDIERS

Haer and Böhmelt<sup>24</sup> defined child soldiers as “persons below the age of 18 associated with armed groups, whether state or non-state actors, actively performing combatant and non-combatant roles, which include laying mines and explosives; scouting, spying, acting as decoys, couriers or guards; training, drilling or other preparations; logistics and support functions, pottering, cooking and domestic labour; and sexual slavery or other recruitment for sexual purposes.”

Additionally, the Paris Principles<sup>25</sup> declaration in 2007 defined a child soldier as “any person below eighteen years of age who is or has been associated with an armed force or armed group through combat and non-combatant roles, for example, cooks, porters, sex slaves, and others.” The definition of a child adopted for this study is the Child Rights Act enacted in 2003, which defines a child as any person below the age of 18 years.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Albert Bandura proposed the social learning theory in 1977, based on behavioural thought that looks at internal and external thought processes.<sup>26</sup> Bandura suggested studying the human character in a social context rather than a laboratory. The theory sees the importance of modelling and communication (verbal and non-verbal) for children and their developmental growth through social learning. The approach determined that children would model those around them through observation, attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation.

The theory further explains that an individual generates ideas about probable rewards and punishments before engaging in observed behaviour. The study used reactions from others to develop implicit rules applied in a comparable situation in the future. As a result, learning often occurs through direct experience, with individuals learning guidelines for behaviours more complex than the specific action observed. So, children adopt violent behaviour as a response because direct and indirect experiences suggest that the desired rewards, not negative sanctions, will be the anticipated outcome or reaction.<sup>27</sup>

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24 Haer, Roos and Böhmelt, Tobias. 2016. “The impact of child soldiers on rebel groups' fighting capacities.” *Conflict Management and Peace Science* Vol. 33, No. 2 (April 2016), pp. 153-173.

25 Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Child and armed conflicts. Child Recruitment and Use. <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/six-grave-violations/child-soldiers/>. Accessed February 2023.

26 Smith, Mark. A. 2020. “Social Learning and Addiction.” *Behavioural Brain Research* Volume 398, 1 February 2021, 112954. Department of Psychology, Davidson College, Davidson, NC, 28035, United States. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bbr.2020.112954>.

27 Zlatka Rakovec-Felse. Domestic Violence and Abuse in Intimate Relationships from Public Health Perspective. *Health Psychol Res.* Nov 6; 2(3): 2014 1821. Retrieved from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4768593/>. Accessed January,24, 2023.

Accordingly, modelling and reinforcement are two of the most critical processes in learning aggressive behaviour. Individuals with intimate and frequent contact, and those with higher social power, are the ones children are most likely to observe and imitate such behavioural traits from. Hence, learning often occurs through interactions with significant others. Children are more likely to replicate what they see in an individual or persons they strongly identify with or are familiar with that demonstrate approval for their actions. The theory found that children can model adult males performing violent acts, and familiarity influences boys more than girls.<sup>28</sup>

The CFANSAG is a case in point; the non-state armed groups have tortured and forced these children to kill, rape, and a few have lost empathy for human lives because of the violent environment they have experienced. The males are more likely to model this behaviour with those around them. A respondent from the Department of Child Development gave a story of a CFANSAG. The respondent told the story of a boy who had reintegrated with his family in Maiduguri town after completing the deradicalisation programme in Bulumkutu Camp, relapsed and killed his mother and sister. It goes to show the psychological danger that CFANSAG faces.

In a famous study by Albert Bandura in 1961, the author studied children at the Stanford University Nursery School using a doll named “Bobo”. During this study, children watched researchers act aggressively toward the doll. Subsequently, when the children were alone with the doll, they saw such violent behavioural traits that they modelled that behaviour and extended that aggression toward other toys.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the study by Albert Bandura shows the extent to which children can model what they see, hear, or witness.

Although the theory focuses on children, it does not ignore the roles of teachers, parents, and the elderly in children’s lives. Instead, the theory encourages them to be models to children and engage in children’s behaviour learning process. Thus, the theory explains interaction patterns that foster violence; when Boko Haram exposes children to violence from adolescence, they may see violence as a usual way of life. Again, Boko Haram trains children to model violent acts for the children to see themselves as future Jihadists.

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28 Cumming, A.J. 2014. The Influence of Person Familiarity on Children’s Social s Social Information Processing. UNLV Theses, Dissertations, Professional Papers, and Capstones 8-1-2013. Retrieved from: <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2926&context=thesesdissertations>.

29 Kendra Cherry. “What the Bobo Doll Experiment Reveals About Kids and Aggression.” 16 March. 2020 <https://www.verywellmind.com/bobo-doll-experiment-2794993>. Accessed January 23, 2023.

Despite Skinner's (1980) and Berk's (2014)<sup>30</sup> criticism that the theory underestimates the child's contribution to their development and fails to explain why it rewards or punishes certain behaviours; Bandura's view remains valid because children's personalities can develop through learning. However, Bandura disagrees with Skinner's strict behaviourist approach to personality development because he feels that thinking and reasoning are essential learning components. In contrast, Skinner believes the environment alone determines behaviour. Other Biological theorists criticised Bandura's theory based on the idea that the theory ignores biological states and autonomic nervous system responses. It is a fact that some behaviours and responses are not only learned but partly inherited. Durkin (1995) also criticised the Bobo doll experiment for being too artificial.<sup>31</sup> We can however still say that children's response to environmental events depends on their ability to understand different emotions and the different self-regulation methods that can help them deal with difficult situations.

In addition, the developmental growth of children differs as a child who grows up in violent environments have their behaviours psychologically affected in their approach to life circumstances; even if these children do not watch violent movies, they may still act violently compared to those who grow up in an atmosphere of peace and tranquillity. The experiences and body language of the CFANSAG interviewed revealed the danger of growing up in a violence-prone environment. For instance, the findings show that 23 of the 25 participants in the FGD have had severe or mild PTSD.<sup>32</sup>

## THE HISTORY OF CHILD SOLDIERS AND THE RECRUITMENT PROCESS IN NIGERIA

Child soldiers began with Ustaz Mohammed Yusuf, a former Boko Haram leader who started attacking the state government and violently carried out a political upheaval in 2009. The media alleged that he recruited madrassa beggars, also known as Almajiris, in Maiduguri to join the group to fight the Nigerian state. Unfortunately, after the death of Yusuf, Abu Bakr Shekau took over the leadership and used children as Human Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (HBIEDs) before his death. In recent times, the Boko Haram faction Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS) and the Islamic State West Africa (ISWAP) are not just recruiting children as fighters but also training these children to take over from them as future Jihadists.<sup>33</sup>

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- 30 Skinner, B.F. 'Selections from Science and Human Behaviour'. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1980; Berk L. E. 'Development through the lifespan'. 6th ed. Boston: Pearson. 2014.
- 31 Durkin K. 'Developmental Social Psychology: From Infancy to Old Age'. Wiley Blackwell. 1995.
- 32 Focus group discussion with CFANSAG, Grow Strong Foundation office, Maiduguri, Borno State, June 23-26, 2022.
- 33 Malik Samuel and Oluwole Ojewale. "Children on the battlefield: ISWAP's latest recruits." 10

In recent times, the modus operandi of the JAS and ISWAP is through the abduction of school children, some of the girls kidnapped are married forcefully, and these children give birth as young as 12 years to Boko Haram members, who, after six months impregnate the mothers again for more babies.<sup>34</sup> Boko Haram trains these babies for future-generation insurgents while Boko Haram lures the Almajiris through welfare packages, like foodstuff, motorcycles, and tricycles, and promises the children guaranteed security for their family, amongst others. For those who refused to join the armed group, Boko Haram killed their parents right before their eyes, causing fear and panic among the rest of the children. Jamil (Pseudo name), a former child soldier, had this to say:

*"The Boko haram informant knows everybody that lives in each community. Boko Haram forced me to choose; either I join them, or they kill my parents."*

## DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS

The area of concern for this study is former child soldiers who have endured harsher psychological consequences. Unfortunately, some female children as young as 12 years rescued by the Nigerian military forces reported that they have given birth having preterm deliveries, severe neonatal conditions, Preeclampsia, anaemia, contracting STDs (sexually transmitted diseases), and delivering at low birth weight. Young female CFANSAG gave birth in Boko Haram camps and developed Vesicovaginal Fistula (VVF). Luckily, the military rescued some of these children and eventually treated the VVF's medical conditions.<sup>35</sup>

*"When we rescued some of the children, we noticed that four girls as low as 12 years old had children and required medical attention because of the state we found them. We had to rush them to the military hospital quickly."<sup>36</sup>*

The statement above from the representative of the Joint Investigation Centre in Operation Hadin Kai, Maiduguri, showed that the doctor treated four female children for VVF and other diseases.

It is worrisome that government officials spread mentally unstable CFANSAG across Bulumkutu Interim Care Centre (BICC), Hajj camp, and Shukori Camp without any designated base with the required psychological and psychospiritual counselling and care for

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March.2022 <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/children-on-the-battlefield-iswaps-latest-recruits>.

34 Musa, C. The Military and Child Soldiers in Borno State, Operation Hadin Kai Headquarters, Maiduguri, Borno State. (P. H. Kerry, Interviewer). June 3, 2022.

35 Musa, C. The Military and Child Soldiers in Borno State, Operation Hadin Kai Headquarters, Maiduguri, Borno State. (P. H. Kerry, Interviewer). June 3, 2022.

36 Azuikpe, O. Child soldiers and the Military. Joint Intelligence Centre, Operation Hadin Kai Maiduguri Borno state. (P. H. Kerry, Interviewer). June 3, 2022.

these children. The statement buttresses the participants' point of negligence on the part of officials at the various camps during the FGD. Male children between the ages of 11-17 during the FGD recorded cases of mentally unstable children in the camps.

Above all, the neuropsychiatric professionals who visit the centres may not have the time to study CFANSAG as they are not living in these camps. The neuropsychiatric cannot measure symptoms of depression, anxiety, PTSD, general psychological difficulties, and daily functioning of former child soldiers in these camps without adequate time. The reason is that children who have experienced alteration in their mood and cognition may not have professional doctors available when hyperarousal symptoms occur in the child. Moreover, in the state government, these children are left in the camp without proper medical attention to help them with these symptoms. Instead, the doctor may give children general diagnoses because of the lack of time. Here is what Aliyu (Pseudo name), a camp official had to say:

*“The government can only afford to bring doctors to the camp once in a while because the state must pay these specialists handsomely, and the state government officials are not ready to spend that kind of money.”*

Additionally, CFANSAG have had cases of relapse already living in the communities despite the Government's post-return psychological assistance. An anonymous respondent from the Ministry of Women Affairs, Abuja, Nigeria, claimed that some state officials reintegrate children into the community without a proper medical check. He told how a young man aged 14-17 killed his mother and sister, and the military took him captive. The story may not be far from the truth, as in 2021, the Borno state government closed five internally displaced person camps within Maiduguri and relocated the IDPs. Perhaps the Government cannot sustain the disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration process for IDPs, including children. The deradicalisation, rehabilitation, and reintegration (DRR) programme initially started with the Nigerian Military Operation Safe Corridor programme, established in September 2015 and aimed at de-radicalising, rehabilitating, and reintegrating repentant Boko Haram members.<sup>37</sup>

The relocation of IDP camps is risky as it creates room for negligence, especially for children. When CFANSAGs are re-recruited due to negligence on the part of the state, the impact of re-conscription doubles regardless of the disarmament, reintegration, or rehabilitation programme CFANSAG underwent in camps. The emotional consequences of CFANSAG include mood swings, preoccupations, suicidal thoughts, and fear. However, the child's experiences and environment play a crucial role in children's developmental traits.<sup>38</sup>

37 Ugwueze, M.I., Ngwu, E.C. and Onuoha, F.C. Operation Safe Corridor Programme and Reintegration of Ex-Boko Haram Fighters in Nigeria. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, Volume 57, Issue 6, 2021.

38 Healthy Children. n.d. Inheriting Mental Disorders. <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Inheriting-Mental-Disorders.aspx>.



Unfortunately, children born in Boko Haram camps tend to become violent, including those abducted and those who voluntarily joined the group after undergoing rigorous training.<sup>39</sup> In an interview with one of the Directors of Peace and Conflicts Institutions, Ochugu had this to say:

*“There are generations of children who were born in combat, and these children are associated with the extremist groups, trained to become fighters; all they have known is the culture of violence.”*

## THE PSYCHOLOGICAL DANGERS FOR CHILD SOLDIERS IN THE NORTHEAST, NIGERIA

The CFANSAG face consequences of psychological disorders. During the FGD, former child soldiers revealed that doctors occasionally visit children to evaluate their mental state. However, the neuropsychiatric professionals refer children discovered to have critical mental health to the neuropsychiatric hospital Maiduguri for admission. This claim was collaborated by one of the state officials interviewed; here is what he had to say:

*“It is not true that children with mental disorders are not cared for here in the camp. The state government had taken the children whose cases are severe from the camp to a neuropsychiatric hospital here in Maiduguri for effective treatment administration.”*

CFANSAG in the various camps not only suffer maltreatment in terms of survivors living from hand to mouth but also these children have to cope with rape from violent abusers who live with them in the same camp. During the FGD, two female respondents collaborated on this claim.

*“One man in the camp raped me, and when I went to report him to the camp officials, the official told me to keep quiet. Nothing is new. After all, I came from a Boko Haram camp; my life is useless”.*

The second respondent could not hold back her tears because she said she was also a victim of molestation by men in the camp, and nobody was doing anything about it, as it is the norm.

Considering the plight of former child soldiers, it is essential to state that education plays a pivotal role not just for those in the camps but for children generally. A child who knows they can report any abnormal behaviour targeted at them will raise the alarm even if nobody wants to listen. The culture of silence has kept many children psychologically naive and intimidated.

<sup>39</sup> Ochugu, M. Director, , Institute for Peace and Conflicts Resolution, Abuja. (P. H. Kerry, Interviewer). July 5, 2022.

Northern religious belief is that children have no rights even if they disagree with an adult; the parents can punish the child if they offend the parents. So, anything the adults instruct the child to do is what they must do without question.

The findings from the FGD reviewed that the non-state armed groups forcefully recruit most females between the ages of 11-15 years into the armed groups with threats of killing their parents. Some participants stated that the Boko Haram leaders later returned to pay their bride price. It is essential to state that five out of the ten girls confirmed that they were forcefully taken at a tender age during attacks in their villages and married off to the armed group members; three girls reported to have joined as a result of intimidation, threats to living and excessive fears, and the non-state armed group abducted the remaining two. The females mostly had negative experiences of forced marriage from the age of 12 years, depending on the section of the armed groups that abducted them. At the same time, some female children who gave birth in Boko Haram camps had complications while giving birth without access to healthcare infrastructure. In addition, the findings show no special camps for children in Borno State as government officials spread child soldiers with mental disorders across the three centres: Bulumkutu Interim Care Centre (BICC), Hajj camp and Shukori Camp. At the same time, neuropsychiatric professionals visit the centres from time to time.

In contrast, the male children between the ages of 11-17 stated that the major causes of children's recruitment into the armed group were forceful recruitment, illiteracy, deception, and lack of awareness. Notably, Boko Haram's recruitment method for boys is through deception. Boko Haram deceived the boys that they would have many wives in paradise if they died during the battle against infidels, and the girls also had the guarantee of places in heaven. Some children get involved in many ways, including serving as informants, as children will be seen as less suspicious when people pay attention to them. Boko Haram used the female children as HBIEDs to carry out suicide attacks detonating improvised devices; in the process, they killed themselves and others, believing they were doing it for greater purposes. Some children that participated in the FGD described their experiences while in the forest with Boko Haram:

*“Boko Haram sent out some girls from age 9-13 years, strapped them with bombs and told them they are Martyrs and that when they sacrifice themselves, Allah will welcome them in paradise with joy. We saw or heard nothing about some of these girls again.”*

The FGD reviewed that some of the children joined the armed groups and did their bidding out of pressure to ensure Boko Haram did not harm their parents kept in captivity. In addition, Boko Haram trained boys as young as 9 to 15 years as combatants in their camps. Some children joined the non-state armed groups believing that the Government was responsible

for the death of their parents and thus used that medium as an avenue to take revenge. One of the respondents affirms this claim.

*“Initially, I was angry with the Government for allowing Boko Haram to kill my parents without protecting my village. So, when I saw the opportunity to join Boko Haram, I took advantage. Although I regret my actions today, I now face the consequences because those people I killed hurt me. When I close my eyes, I see them. I am afraid to stay alone.”*

Another respondent whom Boko Haram forcefully recruited had this to say:

*“I feel pain due to the injuries inflicted on me; Boko Haram forced me to take up arms, I had to do it, or else Boko Haram would kill me. Right now, my past is hurting me, and for me to sleep, the doctor gave me [pills] because I cannot sleep naturally. Now and then, I suffer depression when I remember the horrific events I went through.”*

It is important to note that the psychological dimensions of trauma that CFANSAG face is appalling. Twenty-three out of the twenty-five children who participated in the FGD confirmed that children between the age of 11-17 who are forcibly recruited by non-state armed groups, had one psychological issue or another. Twelve participants live on medication to sleep at night because of horrible nightmares. Three children who voluntarily joined claim they do not have any symptoms. Despite the menace involved, Boko Haram and its factions still recruit children, especially in areas like Abadam, Marte, Askira/Uba, Guzamal, Goza, Bama, Konduga, Damboa, and Kukawa Local Government Areas and some locations around the Sambisa forest area, in Borno state where Boko Haram strongholds are situated. The armed group uses financial means to enable them to manage their day-to-day activities, which ordinarily would have been impossible.<sup>40</sup> The Civilian Joint Task Force sector commander in Maiduguri, corroborated the above claim. In his words:

*“Boko Haram gives the parents of the children they recruit welfare packages like 5000 naira and Bicycles to trade. In turn, the parents allow Boko Haram to recruit their children for information.”*

Although some children joined the sect to gain the manners and sense of respect the armed groups enjoyed in places under their control, they also joined for conformity and peer pressure. Some children believed what the armed groups told them about injustices meted out

40 Abdulgani: B. (2022). The Tactics Boko Haram Used to Loin children. (P. H. Kerry, Interviewer). June 2.

by the Government; hence they stood more to gain by fighting the Government.

The non-state armed group recruited boys who brutally killed their friends who opposed them from joining the group, making an example out of them publicly and instilling fear. The remaining boys who fail to join suffer the same fate. So far, from the focus group discussion, Boko Haram did not release any of the children; they were either rescued by the military during raids or ran away during attacks to save themselves. NGOs like UNICEF and others have contributed to helping rescue children. From the discussion, there is still a concern regarding the stigmatisation of CFANSAG, which has contributed to psychologically damaging children's mental health.

Although some community leaders and camp elders have been incredibly supportive and even prioritise them in some cases for support, some families and local communities reject them when returning to find another place. As for the girls, the members of the communities tagged them as Boko Haram wives. Consequently, this resulted in some returning to Boko Haram, and some boys relapsed and killed relatives. Psychiatrists are treating some former child soldiers for psychological illness as they still have nightmares. The whole idea that Government have not established any law against the non-state armed groups for offences committed against Nigerian child is a reason why the non-state armed group continues to recruit and use child soldiers at every opportunity, believing that the Government cannot punish them.

Although the BAY states (Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe) have signed the Child Rights Act into law, the difference is that those core northern governors disagreed with the principles of the Child Rights Act. As such, the Government modified some of the Child Rights Act guidelines and changed the name to the Child Protection Law. However, the various state governments must adhere strictly to the Child Protection Law signed by the various states, especially in the BAY states. The Child Protection law will protect children from being victims of state and non-state armed groups. The various Governments must, as a necessity, meet out punishment to violators of the Child Rights Act and give special medical attention to children who have been victims of the non-state armed groups.

## CONCLUSIONS

The study introduced its audience to the emotional and psychological damages that non-state armed groups have inflicted on children in the north since it became pronounced in 2009. The study further acknowledges that the forceful conscription of children into armed groups internationally violates moral, ethical, and international legal standards and is a war crime. However, it observed that there are no laws in Nigeria with established punishment for non-state armed groups. Even when the military capture some members of the non-state armed groups, the Government gives them amnesty through its deradicalisation, rehabilitation, and

reintegration (DRR) programme. The state government has not given former child soldiers who have witnessed or undergone torture or lost family members adequate medical attention.

The research revealed strategies used by Boko Haram, JAS, ISWAP, and Ansaru, to recruit children and various reasons why children join the deadly groups, the psychological menace it has caused the state and Nigeria, which have affected the children's development and well-being. The study concluded that the state in the northeast should implement the Child Rights Act, renamed the Child Protection Law by the core northern states, to prevent Boko Haram and other violators of children's rights from recruiting children as child soldiers. Accordingly, the findings from the fieldwork conducted suggest four responses that are likely to reduce recruitment:

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Borno state government should conduct a psychiatric evaluation of CFANSAG from time to time by creating centres with psychological and psychospiritual counselling units.
2. The Borno state government should hold Reconciliation programmes for community leaders, Islamic teachers, and village heads with CFANSAG, who are now adults. The process will bring physical and spiritual healing to children. The government should tag it "the Societal Acceptance of CFANSAG." Communities, villages, towns, and families need to accept CFANSAG and shun resentment and rejections in the reintegration process.
3. The state government should create continuous awareness of the risks of joining armed groups through radio programmes in Hausa and Kanuri, as many of the CFANSAG are from the Hausa and Kanuri ethnic groups.
4. The State government should establish camps strictly for CFANSAG, mentally unstable children, with Neuropsychiatric professionals monitoring the children's health, academics, and psychological wellness.

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