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# Moral Injury: A Framework for Understanding Conflict-Related Sexual Violence Against Men

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## Abstract

Studies on conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) emphasize the need for the integration of a victim-centered lens into Feminist International Relations (IR) frameworks on sexual violence victimization in conflict or war. However, our understanding of the perpetrator-centered lens is limited. Drawing from ethnographic accounts of Nigerian security agents, male victims of CRSV, and aid workers, we analyze moral injury as a framework for discussing CRSV. In Nigeria, counterterrorism operations can lead to morally detrimental circumstances due to the government's poor management of counterterrorism operations, resulting in the loss of lives and subsequent feelings of betrayal, anger, and guilt by security agents. Some security agents often display these emotions through violent acts to others, such as CRSV against men and boys suspected of terrorism, thereby exacerbating moral injury. The guilt-based moral injury arises when security agents witness CRSV against men and boys by colleagues and fail to seek justice for victims, as this contradicts social and institutional norms. Our article broadens the concept

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of moral injury by elucidating its significance to CRSV. In doing so, it advances the concept's disciplinary focus on psychology to IR or international security—counterterrorism and CRSV—for conceptual sophistication and interdisciplinary exchange of thoughts. This article offers valuable insights into trauma-informed international humanitarian interventions for security agents and victims.

### **Keywords**

Feminist International Relations, terrorism and counter-terrorism, gender and sexual-based violence of men and boys, Boko Haram, Islamic State of West Africa Province, Nigeria and Lake Chad Region

### **Introduction**

There is some debate about whether it is necessary to incorporate context-specific knowledge of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) into current Feminist International Relations (IR) frameworks on sexual violence victimization in conflict or war. This is done to better understand the various dimensions and complexities of sexual violence in both wartime and peacetime. Theorizing the rationale and effects of CRSV through a victim-centered lens is one of the attempts to develop new frameworks that challenge and advance the current understanding of CRSV (Dolan et al., 2020). While we can argue that there is an emerging “victim turn” in understanding CRSV, there is little knowledge about the perpetrator-centered lens on the logic and consequences of sexual violence during wartime. Therefore, by drawing from the accounts of combatants in counterterrorism operations in Nigeria, we situate the logic of CRSV as a result of perpetrators' moral injuries, which have consequences for individuals caught amid violent conflicts.

Our article builds on a growing body of literature that reports the widespread nature and causes of conflict-related sexual violence against men. For example, it has been documented that sexual violence against men was evident in about 25 armed conflicts (Onyango & Hampanda, 2011). The increasing reports of sexual violence against men have ignited popular discourse on the weaponization of such violence. A central conclusion of this commonly discussed topics is the weaponization of sex for strategic objectives as the primary driver of CRSV<sup>1</sup> against men. Many of these violent acts were deployed as strategic tools aimed at emasculating, humiliating, and subduing male victims perceived to be adversaries. For instance, the U.S. war in Iraq (from 2003) and Afghanistan (from 2001) captures gendered and sexual violence perpetrated against men during the war. Explicitly, Owen (2010) argued that the United States deployed historical, anthropological texts that define Muslim men as sexual deviants and subsequently used these tropes to torture and humiliate detainees in secret detention facilities in Iraq, Afghanistan, prison facilities in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, among others. These techniques, which include rape and other acts that tend to create homosexual portrayals, are aimed at shaming and dishonoring

Muslim men (Owen, 2010). Similarly, Sivakumaran (2007) argues that same-sex sexual violence is used to psychologically weaken a man by making him look feminized in the eyes of society. In other words, male victims of CRSV are presented with a sense of deflated masculine credibility and/or low social profile. In many cultural contexts defined by ultra-masculinity and heteronormativity, same-sex violence is often equated to being emasculated, effeminized, and dehumanized in the eyes of society (Njoku, 2022; Njoku & Dery 2023; Sivakumaran, 2007). According to Eichert (2018, p. 426), abuse of men through non-heteronormative sexual performance is also about weaponizing “societal norms against the victim and strengthening the perpetrator’s view of his masculinity.” In the context of war, it is believed that a man tends to lose his resolve to fight and continuously question his sexuality or what Schulz (2018) describes as having feelings of sexual displacement. Needless to say, such men tend to experience anger at the state’s inability or failure, as it were, to protect their bodily integrity and thus isolate themselves from the community (Eichert, 2018).

Nevertheless, there is increasing criticism regarding the argument that the weapon of war explanation oversimplifies and overlooks the various motivations and complexities of conflict-related sexual violence against men (Schulz & Touquet, 2020). Thus, through the utilization of victim-centered perspectives and inclusive efforts to develop theories about CRSV, Dolan et al. (2020) tackled the “sexed story” of CRSV when faced with the challenging question posed by victims regarding the possibility of ejaculation without experiencing sexual desire. Theorizing victims’ lived experiences, Dolan et al. (2020) and Schulz and Touquet (2020) assert that male sexual violence can be about power, domination and violence, and pleasure or sexual gratification. The precariousness of the environment and the power relations between the victim and perpetrator empower the perpetrator to harness the environmental opportunity to satisfy his sexual urges and even justify his action through the broader objective and perceived honor of neutralizing, as it were, enemies of humanity. Eriksson Baaz and Stern (2013) termed it “recreational rape” or “opportunistic rape.”

Schulz and Touquet (2020) argue that while the weapon of war or sexual gratification arguments of CSRV of men advance our understanding of the field, it remains trapped within the binary narrative of CRSV. Additionally, empirical research and contextual analysis are still insufficient for a nuanced understanding of the effects of sexual violence on men and boys (Njoku et al., 2022). For instance, according to Dolan et al. (2020) and Schulz and Touquet (2020), there is an urgent need to theorize sexual violence victimization from victims’ lived experiences using a victim-centered lens. Drawing on the testimonies of victims of sexual violence in counter-terrorism operations in northeast Nigeria, Njoku and Dery (2021) assert that, among other factors, CRSV has been perceived as a form of ritual practice perpetuated for physical, political, and economic security. The cultural context of victims makes male-to-male sexual violence for pleasure problematic and essentially inconceivable. It can only make sense if it is termed diabolical because male sexual violence is considered abnormal and, at best, ungrievable (to borrow the

word of Judith Butler). Furthermore, Dolan et al. (2020), Schulz and Touquet (2020), and Njoku and Dery (2021) conclude that drawing on victim-centered insights can offer an alternative perspective to advance the ongoing debates surrounding understanding perpetrators' motives for CRSV. Nonetheless, the current emphasis has predominantly centered on the viewpoint of the victims, leaving us with a limited understanding of the motivations and consequences of CRSV from the standpoint of the perpetrators.

Therefore, to examine some of the ways in which perpetrators interpret—even theorize—the reasons behind and ramifications of CRSV, this article turns to the accounts of perpetrators. We examine ethnographic accounts of Counter-terrorism Security Agents (CTSAs) alongside other participants in our study, including male sexual violence victims and non-governmental organizations (NGO) workers in terrorism-affected Nigerian states. We focus on the psychological and emotional expressions of CTSAs because, in our opinion, they result from the moral injury that terrorist and counter-terrorism operations cause. These conditions create a context where transgressive acts are more likely to occur. Firstly, we contend that the Nigerian government's mishandling or misappropriation of funds designated for countering Boko Haram and the Islamic State of West African Province (ISWAP) leads to morally detrimental situations. The CTSAs may not have enough resources and support as a result of the government's actions, which will make it more difficult for them to counter the sophisticated weapons used by terrorists effectively. These actions lead to the fatalities of CTSAs and elicit feelings of betrayal, discontent, fury, and hostile behavior towards oneself and others, including the perpetration of sexual violence against individuals who are suspected of terrorism as a misguided effort to attain justice or seek revenge. These violent responses by some CTSAs further intensify emotions of guilt, shame, and frustration. Second, sexual violence occurring during counter-terrorism operations can result in guilt-based moral injury. This is a reference to the psychological distress that CTSAs experience when they witness or become aware of their colleagues committing acts of sexual violence against young men and boys but do nothing to seek justice for the victims. Guilt and shame stem from the complex interplay of sociocultural, religious, and institutional ethical principles.

An analysis of CRSV through the lens of perpetrators provides novel knowledge on its psychological and sociopolitical motivations and consequences. In doing so, this study explores the complex connections between emotions and IR. This includes recognizing the complex relationship between moral injury and power relationships, gender stereotypes, and militarized forms of masculinity. The perpetrator-centered lens enhances the complexity of ontological understanding and promotes the exchange of ideas between fields of psychology and Feminist IR in the debates on CRSV. Moreover, the article explores a comprehensive and inclusive understanding of CRSV by critically examining existing theories of sexual violence that influence laws, policies, and practices, thereby exacerbating “the gendered and racialized subjugation of both survivors and perpetrators” (Dolan et al., 2020, p. 1153). Furthermore, the valuable insights gained from the perpetrators' perspective offer concrete evidence

regarding the impact of moral injury. Policymakers and development practitioners can use this knowledge to create targeted, practical strategies for preventing risks and providing psychological interventions for combatants. Before proceeding, it is crucial to briefly explain the concept of moral injury.

## Moral Injury

Frantz Fanon was arguably one of the first to document the psychological effects of war, specifically focusing on the concept of “reactionary psychosis” that afflicted both Algerian soldiers and civilians during and after the war. Some symptoms of these conditions include lack of sleep, disturbing dreams, aggressive behavior, uncontrollable urges to commit murder, sexual dysfunction after spousal rape, and a state of extreme anxiety known as “reactionary psychosis” (Fanon, 1963, pp. 251–261). Although Fanon’s works identified symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), there are ongoing discussions regarding the connection between PTSD and moral injury. Litz et al. (2009), Frankfurt and Frazier (2016), and Barnes et al. (2019) contend that individuals can experience PTSD without necessarily experiencing moral injury. However, according to Hall et al. (2022, p. 93), similarities exist between PTSD and moral injury in terms of their symptoms and causes. In essence, a correlation exists between moral injury and sleep disturbances, particularly nightmares and insomnia (Bravo et al., 2020; Hall et al., 2022). The study by Bravo et al. (2020, p. 52) discovered a link between moral injury and adverse mental health complaints among 189 combat-wounded veterans. These include depression, anxiety, suicidal tendencies, sleep disruption, memory difficulties, and symptoms of PTSD. These symptoms are linked to the impact of “counterfactual thinking, repetitive thoughts, anticipatory thoughts, and problem-focused thoughts . . .” Irrespective, Hall et al. (2022) conclude that sleep disturbances are considered to be a stronger indicator of PTSD compared with moral injury.

The psychological consequences of war commonly manifest as PTSD, which is frequently associated with trauma induced by fear (Frankfurt & Frazier, 2016) or the harm experienced by soldiers during warfare (Dombo et al., 2013). However, a growing body of research specifically examines moral injury resulting from witnessing or participating in violent acts during periods of conflict (Breslau & Davis, 1987). In the 1990s, scholars such as Shay (1994) and Bica (1999) classified moral injury as trauma resulting from transgressive acts. In addition, Brett Litz and his colleagues offer a definition of moral injury that is arguably unambiguous. According to Litz et al. (2009), Litz (2016), and Litz and Kerig (2019), moral injury refers to the psychological effects that combatants experience as a result of participating in, refraining from, or witnessing violent acts that violate their moral and ethical principles or violate societal, legal, or personal norms during times of conflict or war. Put simply, based on Litz et al. (2009, p. 700), an important aspect of their definition involves actively participating in events that go against deeply held moral values and norms, observing, witnessing, or gaining knowledge about such actions or not taking action.

In addition, they propose that individuals who experience moral harm may be able to distinguish between their personal values and the sense of moral transgression which can result in internal conflict.

In addition, according to Griffin et al. (2019) and Okulate et al. (2021), guilt can also stem from a violation of confidence by individuals in positions of authority or higher up and in this context, the military organizational hierarchy. While those mentioned earlier have been identified as the primary symptoms of moral injury, other symptoms that have been identified as secondary include feelings of wrath or hostility, reliving the experience, self-harm, sadness, social issues, anxiety (Jinkerson, 2016), disgust, disdain, and resentment (Farnsworth et al., 2017; Linden, 2003). Although there are uncertainties or gaps over the relationship between moral injury and aggression towards others, research has linked military personnel's moral injury and aggression or violence (Frankfurt & Frazier, 2016; Jinkerson, 2016; Killgore et al., 2008; Maguen et al., 2010; Molendijk et al., 2018). Despite the growing body of research on moral injury, research on the symptoms or outcomes of moral injury still needs to be fully theorized. Frankfurt and Frazier (2016) argue that there is uncertainty regarding moral injury's definition, causes, and consequences, especially its relationship with various emotions. Additionally, Litz and Kerig (2019) have advocated for further research on moral injury in various contexts to acquire a more contextual and thus nuanced understanding of the multifaceted nature and impacts of this concept.

In light of the preceding, there is a noticeable gap in the literature in studying the nature and consequences of moral injury in the context of wartime sexual violence, specifically in terms of both perpetration and victimization in feminist IR. Debates on the symptoms related to moral injuries, such as guilt, shame, betrayal, frustration, and anger, have been identified; further research is needed to expand our understanding of moral injury beyond the field of psychology. Thus, this article pushes the concept's disciplinary boundary to encompass socio-political aspects in order to achieve conceptual sophistication and an interdisciplinary exchange of ideas. Thus the study delves into the intricate link between emotions and IR, as proposed by Hutchison & Bleiker (2014). Studying the connection between moral injury and CRSV against men can enhance our knowledge of the complex dynamics of violence in conflict areas. It can offer valuable perspectives for trauma-informed interventions and contribute to healing for both survivors and perpetrators.

## **Contextual Background: Conflict-Related Sexual Violence in Nigeria**

For over a decade, Boko Haram and the ISWAP terrorist groups have posed a significant security challenge in Nigeria and the Lake Chad region. The Nigerian government responded by implementing laws, policies, and institutions to combat the activities of these terrorist groups in the country. The government has instructed the



Office of the National Security Advisor to lead counterterrorism efforts in cooperation with various security agencies, such as the Seventh Division of the Nigerian military, the Nigerian Police, the Department of State Security Service, and the National Security and Civil Defense Corps. This study will refer to the security agencies as CTSA.

In the ongoing counter-terrorism operations, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and mass media have reported various forms of human rights violations such as sexual violence, illegal detention, torture, mutiny, and suicide by CTSA. For instance, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch reported that women and children were being sexually abused by security agents and inmates in detention centers across Nigeria (Amnesty International, 2018; Human Rights Watch (2016, 2019)). However, according to Njoku and Akintayo (2021) the counterterrorism security agencies and leadership has consistently refuted the allegations of sexual violence in counterterrorism operations in Nigeria. In addition, some members of CTSA who were interviewed pointed out that sexual violence by colleagues are unprofessional and criminal behaviors.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, there were also reports of violence, mutiny, and self-harm incidents within the CTSA during counterterrorism operations. In 2014, the Premium Times reported that a second group of approximately 54 soldiers had been sentenced to death for conspiring to engage in mutiny against the military authorities of the Seventh Division of the Nigerian Army (Premium Times, 2014). According to Sahara Reporters (2022, 2023), soldiers have killed colleagues or committed suicide between 2019 and 2023 raising concerns about the mental state of CTSA.

The internal challenges within the counterterrorism security institutions in terms of human rights violations, violations of rules of engagement, and self-harms cases by some CTSA can be linked to misappropriating funds to combat terrorism for their personal enrichment (Njoku, 2020; Oriola, 2023). These factors mentioned earlier have led to inadequate welfare of CTSA (Ikem et al., 2022), inadequate compensation and decreased morale (BBC, 2015), and insufficient weaponry to curb terrorism (Njoku, 2020). For example, a security agent reported that ammunition has been rationed and restrictions have been imposed on their usage, even when they face adversaries armed with advanced weaponry (Njoku, 2020). Consequently, this has resulted in a significant increase in the mortality rate among CTSA. In addition, reports indicate that apprehended Boko Haram members, including leaders, are well-treated—including being paid a monthly stipend within the framework of the Operation Safe Corridor programme by the Nigerian government.<sup>3</sup> The act of paying, safeguarding, rehabilitating, and reintegrating individuals who have previously engaged in acts of terrorism, resulting in killings and injury to CTSA as well as members of the broader society, intensifies feelings of anger and resentment (Ugwueze et al., 2022).

There are arguments that broader circumstances, rather than singular events, frequently influence moral transgressions and the ensuing moral injury (Litz & Kerig, 2019). Hence, the poor management of counterterrorism operations by the Nigerian



government and the outcomes earlier present possibilities for a spiral of moral injury, given that morality is intrinsically linked to the ethical dimensions of military operations (Beneda, 2012; Molendijk et al., 2018). For moral injury to manifest, “the individual must experience a sense of transgression, wherein they see that either themselves or another person has violated the boundaries of their moral convictions.” (Jamieson et al., 2020, p. 1055). Therefore, it is imperative to investigate the Nigerian context, as there is currently a dearth of research on the implications of moral injury arising from counterterrorism efforts in Nigeria (Okulate et al., 2021). Therefore, the Nigerian case will yield applicable conclusions in other political contexts.

## **Method and Materials**

This qualitative study uses both empirical and secondary data. It also includes reports on sexual violence and/or torture in both peacetime and areas affected by terrorism. These include newspaper articles and reports by AI and HRW. Furthermore, primary data were sourced from semi-structured interviews with selected participants, such as male survivors of sexual violence, NGOs working on social services, and security agents involved in counterterrorism operations in northeast Nigeria. The study locations include two northeast states: Borno and Adamawa. The study sites also encompass Abuja and Lagos, where the headquarters of NGOs dedicated to addressing sexual and gender-based violence and counterterrorism security institutions. Fifteen (15) respondents participated in the study. These include six respondents who identified themselves as survivors of conflict-induced sexual violence, four security agents, and five NGO workers.<sup>4</sup> Purposive sampling was used in selected NGO staff and CTAs. In addition, because male victims of CRSV are a hard-to-reach population, a purposive sampling technique was adopted. This involved talking to people who might be aware of the violent experiences of others. Due to the critical services provided by the NGOs, the team also contacted them to facilitate the recruitment of potential participants. The research topic is sensitive, and some participants who were initially contacted declined to participate, and some were unwilling to discuss male sexual violence issues.

## **Interview Procedure**

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the National Health Research Ethics Committee, Department of Health Planning, Research and Statistics, Federal Ministry of Health, Abuja, in October 2020. We worked with gender and sexual violence-focused NGOs that, among other things, provided psychosocial counseling to the survivors and victims before and after the interview. We also interviewed security agents and aid workers. It is important to note that the security agents interviewed for this study are not the direct perpetrators of CRSV against men, but some of their colleagues were alleged to be involved in perpetrating such violence.

Interviewing security agents helped estimate their colleagues' motivations for perpetrating sexual violence against male victims. Each of the interviews lasted a maximum of 65 minutes.<sup>5</sup> The Hausa language, which is the dominant language spoken in northeastern Nigeria, was used for interviews with survivors and victims as well as with a community leader. A research assistant who is a native speaker of Hausa assisted in the interviews and their subsequent translation, transcription, and interpretation. Moreover, we interviewed other categories of participants in English. In writing the study participant's statements presented in the article, we made edits for clarity and ease of reading.

Furthermore, we used identifiers such as "Survivor 1-6" throughout the work for anonymity purposes and ease of identification. The professional background of other categories of respondents were used to identify their narratives. For the survivors, the interview questions comprised a range of issues such as their experiences of sexual violence, the perpetrators of such violence, the effects of sexual violence on their physical, social, and psychological selves, and views on societal and government treatment.

We asked security agents about the report of sexual violence and/or torture practices by their colleagues in detention facilities and the motivations behind sexual violence and/or torture of suspects of terrorism. Moreover, we asked NGO workers questions on the occurrence of male sexual violence victimization in the northeast and their humanitarian and advocacy activities; the perpetrators of sexual violence and why they engage in it; reportage of incidences of male sexual violence; and the physical, psychological, and social consequences for survivors/victims.

## Data Analysis

Professional interpreters were given audio recordings of the interviews in the Hausa language to interpret and transcribe. The research assistant double-checked the transcription to ensure that they stayed close to the stories and narratives shared by participants. Professionals also transcribed recorded English-language interviews. Afterward, the interviews were coded using both inductive and deductive approaches. We triangulated the findings from the multiple interviews to ensure rigor and validity. A discourse analytical lens was deployed to make sense of the contextual meanings of the violent subjectivities of male victims of CRSV. Discourse refers to the social process of creating meaning that extends beyond literal language. People's perceptions of the world are influenced not just by written or spoken language but also by how those words are "delivered" (Åhäll, 2018, p. 43). Wetherell (2012, p. 4) describes the delivery of discourse as the practice of structuring emotive "textures and activities in everyday life." Our method is based on Dolan's definition of discourse analysis, which looks at how the violent experiences of male victims of CRSV are understood in their social contexts as gendered practices that challenge and change common ideas about CRSV (Dolan et al. 2020).

Therefore, by using the same approach, we also employ perpetrator-centered perspectives to understand the motivations and outcomes of how moral injury interacts with CRSV against men and boys.

## **Moral Injury and CRSV in Detention Centers in Northeastern Nigeria**

Studies have indicated that moral injury is prevalent in various types of violent conflicts, including warfare. However, it has been observed that the likelihood of experiencing moral injury is elevated in asymmetric warfare situations, such as guerilla warfare, insurgency, and terrorism. The above can be attributed to the utilization of unconventional strategies by opposing forces, which consequently increases the risk faced by both combatants and non-combatants (Litz et al., 2009; Okulate et al., 2021). Therefore, despite receiving instruction on the ethical considerations of warfare and conflicts, including rules of engagement designed to prevent the misuse of power by state combatants, a dilemma arises as they strive to determine the most appropriate course of action when confronted with the enemy, non-state violent actors, or individuals whom they perceive as potential threats (Litz et al., 2009). According to Okulate et al. (2021), moral injury in the context of asymmetric warfare can result in the intentional killing of non-combatants. Long-standing ethnic or religious disagreements between opposing groups frequently contribute to deliberately targeting and killing civilians. Such actions, including acts of rape, represent a violation of established rules of engagement (Okulate et al. 2021).

In our interviews with individuals who had experienced sexual violence, survivors One-Five gave various accounts of their arrest and detention experiences after government security agents rescued them from Boko Haram's camps. These five survivors also shared their experiences of sexual violence by older inmates, CTAs, including the Civilian Joint Task Force—a vigilante group that assists the military in combating terrorism.<sup>6</sup> For instance, survivor one responded when asked who the perpetrators of sexual violence were:

Yes, the security operatives are part of them; one of the reasons why I do not report these problems is because they [security operatives] are part of the perpetrators; I see many times when my friends report to them, they are either beaten up or threatened to kill them.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, Survivor 2, a young boy that CTAs sexually violated, stated that: “what they do is that they pretend as if they are taking you in for questioning and they abuse you sexually instead.”<sup>8</sup> Survivor 3 recounted how older inmates raped him when he was detained in Giwa Barrack—one of the numerous detention centers. He recounted in the following words: “At Giwa barracks too, same thing happened in the bathroom. Many of us bathed at the same time, and some people touched others and raped them. I was raped like that too.”<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, all the male survivors

stated that they were threatened with guns and other dangerous objects, leaving them with no option but to give in for fear of their lives.<sup>10</sup> For example, Survivor 2 also stated that:

[t]hey always threaten to get what they want. I do not think anyone will willingly do this. They threatened that they would kill me, some promised to get me out of the barracks, I had no option than to do what they wanted.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, survivor four alleged that:

The same thing (rape) happened when security personnel rescued us and took us to Giwa barracks. They came in at night with their guns and threatened to kill me if I refused them.<sup>12</sup>

Survivor 5, a victim of a sexual violence by Boko Haram militants, responded in the affirmative when asked if CTSAAs had sexually violated him while he was in custody, saying: “Yes, they also do it.” They threaten and even beat you up because they are also perpetrators. . . They threaten you just like the Boko Haram do.”<sup>13</sup>

It is worth noting that many of these young men and boys were kidnapped, indoctrinated, and sexually abused by Boko Haram and ISWAP while they were held captive in terrorist camps (Njoku, 2022). In addition, even after being rescued, these boys were placed in detention centers where security agents also sexually violated them, while some of them faced other forms of sexual violence, such as torture. Furthermore, a community leader and three NGO workers operating in the northeast also confirmed the incidences of sexual violence and/or torture of the survivors.<sup>14</sup> In the words of an NGO worker who was interviewed:

most of the security personnel, the Civilian Joint Task Force—a vigilante group that works alongside the military—and other workers do rape these children, but because it is the government, they have a way of covering up, and they do not bring them to book.<sup>15</sup>

A security and development NGO added that:

In prison, I could remember—when I was in, when we were in one forum of discussion on the issue (gender-based violence) of the victims of Boko Haram—many reports indicated that some of the prison staff were abusing the victims, forcing them to have sex with them. Some of the high-profile criminals in prison also force the low-profile people there to have sex with them.<sup>16</sup>

The accounts of survivors/victims and NGO workers affirm Amnesty International’s report on the rise in sexual violence against young boys women and girls in detention centers in the Northeast, including Giwa barracks. According to a report from Amnesty International, several boys who were detained in Maiduguri Prison were

sexually abused between late 2016 and early 2017. Amnesty International interviewed a Maiduguri Prison detainee and a former prison warder confirmed that sexual abuse was widespread in prison (Amnesty International, 2019).

Our interactions with some CTSAAs reveal that sexual violence takes place in detention centers in the northeast. However, they were quick to point out its illegality and describe such practices by some of their colleagues as “unprofessional” conduct. It is a common but unsanctioned practice to extract information from a tough criminal in a peacetime environment. Hence, the CTSAAs may construe terrorist suspects as hardened criminals. For instance, the CTSA stated that, “it is not professional, but do not forget the society where we are coming from. . . when you want to extract information from a hardened suspected criminal, it is very difficult, and so you may use the other hard way (sexual torture) to get information from them.”<sup>17</sup> A security agent who was interviewed attributes sexual torture in the northeast to the abuse, arguing that:

Over time, our security forces have developed some level of impunity when it comes to how they implement law enforcement. Torture has become a method of interrogation and investigation. Security agents have been found to carry out human rights violations because there are all forms of human rights violations in the North-East.<sup>18</sup>

The findings mentioned previously provide evidence of CRSV committed against men and boys during counter-terrorism operations. Even with international and national agreements in place to tackle sexual violence and promote professional conduct in Nigeria’s military institutions, the complexities of terrorist violence can create challenges in counter terrorism efforts, which may result in moral injury. It is a significant challenge to differentiate between individuals labeled as “enemies” and those who are not, which can result in a higher risk of extra-judicial killings of non-combatants, causing moral injury (Litz et al., 2009). In addition, the idea that terrorist groups abduct and indoctrinate young people from their communities before training them to carry out their agenda is one possible explanation inner turmoil amongs CTSAAs. This situation engenders a moral injury and has the potential to inflict psychological harm on individuals involved, as counter terrorism troops are compelled to defend their own lives while being confronted with the distressing choice of either witnessing or engaging in the sexual torture or murdering of minors who, through no fault of their own, have become adversaries of the state. According to Okulate et al. (2021, p. 1049), many Nigerian soldiers face moral challenges as their societal norms clash with the demands of the battlefield. While harming others can generally create symptoms of moral injury, with children, these feelings can be heightened. Due to sociocultural norms that place a high priority on protecting children and their beliefs, this situation could make CTSA feel guilty. Some CTSAAs may have children themselves or have young cousins, nieces, and so on, which further intensifies their emotional response as they struggle to envision their children in similar circumstances.

### *“I Can Allow Any Opportunity to Make You Suffer Directly or Indirectly”*: Betrayal, Bitterness and Anger as Motivations for CRSV

Experiencing situations that are harmful to one’s morality can lead to a variety of symptoms, including feelings of guilt, shame, betrayal, and anger humiliation. In addition to these emotions can lead to behaviors that can intensify these emotions. The above demonstrates the downward cycle of moral injury that Molendijk et al. (2018) articulated. The findings of our study shed light on the spiral of moral injury, which can be attributed to internal challenges within military institutions, including inadequate welfare provisions, misappropriation of defense funds, insufficient weaponry, and inadequate intelligence. These elements play a role in CTSA’s loss of colleagues and the subsequent feelings of helplessness. Consequently, the emergence of rage, bitterness, and emotions of betrayal leads to a transformation in the behavior of CTSA. They exhibit aggression towards themselves, colleagues, superiors, and non-combatants, resorting to acts of sexual violence against individuals whom they perceive or suspect to be terrorist, adversaries or potential adversaries. An interview with a CTSA in the Nigerian Police stated that:

The northeast’s counter-terrorism campaign has a psychological effect on security agents. Some of them behave like mentally derailed people. Thus, whenever he [security officer] sees a terrorist suspect, he concludes that this is not a person that is supposed to exist.<sup>19</sup>

Similar to this, a former senior military officer commented on the danger that Boko Haram’s actions pose, saying that:

Boko Haram and ISWAP commit savagery, so when they are captured by security forces, a lot of things happen that are outside the control of the commanders. In situations where commanders have zero tolerance for the torture of suspects of terrorism, they (junior CTSA) will not bring it to their attention.<sup>20</sup>

Another security agent who was interviewed corroborated the views mentioned previously:

security agents have also been part of Boko Haram casualties. Hence, when you are fortunate enough to get hold of a few terrorist suspects, you will take it out on them. There are instances where our soldiers have taken out their anger on the terrorist suspects.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, in exhibiting anger and vengeance, some security agents deploy a variety of tools or extrajudicial punishments, such as sexual violence or other forms of torture, to inflict harm or pain on terrorist suspects in detention centers and the theater of violence. In addition, a CTSA’s stated that both revenge and the need to get vital information from terrorist suspects explain the use of torture. (See Note 17)

Hence, “they (security officers) now descend on people that they swore to protect through sexual harassment, extracting information through torture, such as inserting objects into the anus, and other private parts (sexual organs).”<sup>22</sup> Another security agent stated that many of the security agents have suffered losses due to Boko Haram violence

pure emotions and anger, at that point, some officers tend to throw away the rules of engagement and carry out a lot of rights abuses, including sexual abuse. Any opportunity to make you suffer if I can’t allow it to happen directly or will allow it to happen indirectly. . . I will allow them to rape the hell out of you.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, a security officer with the military intelligence unit also stated that:

Some could do it as a revenge measure—not all of them; some could decide to engage in some of those acts as a way of breaking their (suspect) will, as a form of revenge or as a form of punishment, you know. . . So, different elements play a role. They could insert a weapon in the suspect’s anal tract to vent their anger. Some of them become hardened, and they could kill you carelessly; they could torture you to death. These are some of the ways they express their trauma.<sup>24</sup>

The aforementioned observations encompass the emotional and symptomatic manifestations of moral injury, including wrath, betrayal, and bitterness, which arise from witnessing the murder of colleagues or friends. These experiences might afterward contribute to various forms of violence and traumatic tendencies, including those of a sexual nature, perpetrated against terrorist suspects, including minors. For instance, a CTSA stated that: “terrorist groups who have killed your partners, friends, and people you have fought battles with over the years; your barracks (military cantonment) and security posts were overrun by them,”<sup>25</sup> hence leading to feelings of bitterness and anger. According to the CTSA, some security agents who committed acts of sexual violence validated their actions, irrespective of the reports that some of the suspects could have been among the young men and boys kidnapped, indoctrinated or forced to join Boko Haram and ISWAP.

Hence, we contend that corrupt practices, specifically the misappropriation of security funds, have led to a shortage of necessary weapons to combat well-equipped Boko Haram and ISWAP terrorists. The terrorist’s adequate weapons, combined with firm ideological motivations, have caused a substantial loss of life among the CTSA’s and subsequently diminished their morale. Furthermore, the indulgence with which the Nigerian government treated terrorist members through the Operation Safe Corridor programs that provide clemency and reintegration of terrorist members further affects the social attitude of CTSA’s, who feel betrayed, frustrated, and resentful due to the loss of their colleagues. This results in a feeling of injustice and rage within CTSA’s, which can lead to improper reprisals, such as sexual violence



against captured terrorist combatants, including young men or boys as a misguided form of retribution. These reprisals through sexual violence further create and intensify feelings of guilt and shame for those perpetrating, witnessing, or doing nothing about the violent behaviors of their CTSA colleagues. According to Litz et al. (2009), inability of combatants to resolve this emotional conflict is a significant predictor of the harm in question. Moreover, the preceding expands upon the findings of Okulate et al. (2021), who argue that individuals who were involved in counter-terrorism operations in the north-eastern region of Nigeria and perceived the fight as unjust or inadequately supported displayed emotions of anger, betrayal, and frustration. Consequently, these individuals experienced a decline in morale and directed their anger towards themselves, military authorities, commanders and civilians, thereby breaching the rules of engagement. In addition, our study builds upon the findings of Hoge et al. (2004) and the studies presented in the 2006 report by the Mental Health Advisory Team, as referenced by Litz et al. (2009) in their investigation of counter-terrorism operations conducted in Iraq and Afghanistan. These studies revealed that soldiers and Marines acknowledged accountability for the fatalities of enemy combatants, attributing it to the uncertain nature of the adversary. Furthermore, the study mentioned above found that 45% of soldiers and marines expressed the viewpoint that non-combatants ought to be treated in a manner that upholds their dignity and commands respect. Interestingly, a smaller proportion of 17% believed that civilians should be treated as if they were insurgents.

### *“The Warrant Officer Was Uncomfortable”: Guilt-Based Moral Injury as a Consequence of CRSV*

Perpetrators who acknowledge committing sexual violence and exhibit feelings of guilt and shame for their misdeeds are a difficult demographic to access. However, a specific CTSA shared his experiences, providing us with valuable insights into the guilty-based moral injury in counter-terrorism operations and the various strategies employed by security agents to address it. He described an event in which he and a group of CTSA were unable to handle their feelings of guilt from not taking action and, therefore, sought justice for a youngster who had been sexually abused by a soldier. According to his statement:

I witnessed one, and it was disgusting and shameful because our role is to protect life while also protecting property and those who are vulnerable. However, this incident occurred in Fika, Yobe State. We used to send some boys on errands to obtain water so we could bathe when we returned from work (counter-terrorism operations). We call them *camp boys*. So, when they pay us our allowances at the end of the month, we find a stipend to give them. We treat them like our younger ones. While we were on special duty over there, one soldier forcefully had carnal knowledge (raped) on one of the boys, and the boy came out shouting. We could see that sperm was still present in the boy's

anus. One officer had to summon some of us who were more senior, and once we arrived, we began to look at the situation from a much broader perspective because the soldier was denying it. However, the boy's parents asked that we not bring up this matter due to stigma, but we insisted. A Warrant Officer in charge of the camp stated that he could not condone such behavior because he has children of his own and a conscience. So, we took the accused soldier to Potiskum (a City in Yobe State), where he was detained, although he was released much later. After three months, the Warrant Officer was uncomfortable with the soldier's release and had to report back to the superior officer, who took it upon himself to dismiss the soldier and give him to the police for proper investigation.<sup>26</sup>

It is crucial to acknowledge that, in this specific instance, we lack information regarding the soldier's motive for raping the boy and whether the boy had been previously abducted and forced to serve as a soldier for Boko Haram or ISWAP before being reintegrated into the community. Nevertheless, this experience provides us with a deeper understanding of the vulnerabilities and atrocities associated with terrorism and counter-terrorism operations, including the possibility of moral injury among CTSAAs. When describing the event mentioned, the CTSA expressed strong disapproval towards colleagues who are meant to protect yet end up victimizing the vulnerable. His words shed light on the personal and institutional values or moral standards of certain CTSAAs and how they interpret such behavior. In addition, when discussing their relationship with the "Camp boys," the CTSA emphasized that they view and care for them as they would their siblings or children, stating, "We treat them like our younger ones." They also highlighted the importance of protecting them, saying, "you wouldn't want such a thing (sexual violence) to happen to your children." The notion of caring for and protecting children who are not your biological offspring is rooted in socio-cultural norms in Nigeria and Africa. Within the Nigerian context, a shared duty in child-rearing exists, encapsulated in the proverb "It takes a village to raise a child." This implies that individuals are expected to treat children or younger individuals as if they were their own, regardless of biological relationship (Ntarangwi, 2012, p. 1; Reupert et al., 2022, p. 1). Therefore, if CTSAAs witness or become aware of sexual violence victimization by colleagues and choose not to take action, it has the potential to cause moral injury. The injury occurs because their personal, social, or institutional moral ideals are believed to have been violated.

In addition, the study participant said that a junior officer displayed bravery by calling upon some of his superiors inside the security agency. It is essential to recognize that the action of the CTSA goes against the military ethos, which usually gives authority and control to senior officers. Luckham (1971, p. 393) asserts that the idea of order in military organizations is frequently demonstrated through the authority of specific personnel to issue commands. The junior officer's decision to call upon his senior colleagues can be attributed to situations where personal, social, and institutional moral dilemmas take precedence over the traditional military chain of command.

After the soldier was released following the incident, it took 3 months for the military camp administrator, a Warrant Officer, to take decisive action. The study participant mentioned that the warrant officer showed signs of discomfort over 3 months, making statements like “he cannot condone this,” “that he has children of his own,” and “he has a conscience,” along with mentioning other potential consequences. In Nigerian culture or slang, “having a conscience” refers to a person’s moral principles resulting from their socio-religious upbringing. The preceding offers a glimpse into the emotional battle with guilt over not acting. Some CTSA may feel moral distress when they become aware of and do not intervene in instances of sexual violence against men and boys. Moral injury occurs when individuals struggle to rationalize their transgressive actions (Litz et al., 2009). The study participants’ description aligns closely with the arguments presented by Okulate et al. (2021) regarding moral injury stemming from atrocities in terrorism-affected Northern Nigeria. Okulate and colleagues described a case involving a soldier who initially worked in the chaplaincy and provided welfare support but later joined the armored and infantry units, participating in atrocities. Upon returning from the theater of warfare, the soldier displayed feelings of guilt and shame due to a preexisting religious moral code that amplifies feelings of guilt and shame when involved in, witnessing, or ignoring transgressive acts in asymmetric warfare. In addition, it builds upon Brémault-Phillips et al. (2019) argument regarding the interconnectedness of spirituality or religion and moral injury, highlighting how they can alleviate and intensify moral injury while being influenced by it.

## Concluding Remarks

This study aims to expand the understanding of “moral injury” by transcending disciplinary borders and integrating knowledge from psychology to feminist IR. It seeks to achieve this by addressing two main questions: How can we get insight into and develop theories about the psychological and socio-political motivations behind sexual violence against men and boys in conflict and post-conflict settings? How might a deeper understanding and the development of theoretical frameworks contribute to the complexity of current academic discussions on the experiences of men and boys affected by sexual violence in conflict, as well as the importance of policy interventions? We agree that the past two decades have produced a considerable body of scholarship on conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence, particularly in various conflict-pronged contexts. Such scholarship has offered important insights into understanding the everyday experiences and subjectivities of predominantly women as victims of conflict-induced violence, but also a segment of men’s population, especially male victims. As far as the literature on conflict-related or wartime sexual and gender-based violence is concerned, male combatants have become increasingly demographically dominant perpetrators or villains, as it were. What is curiously missed in the literature and to which our paper intends to contribute is a careful engagement with the layers of violence perpetrated by combatants,

especially in counter-terrorism operations, as forms of moral injury. This article offers a critical reading of these actions as transgressions of normative cultural norms and argues that such experiences contribute to moral injuries that continue to linger in the minds of perpetrators and create a circle of violence.

We emphasize an urgent need to nuance, reframe, and revitalize the literature on gendered subjectivities engendered by conflict and post-conflict settings. This study contributes to the ongoing debates surrounding conflict-related or wartime sexual and gender-based violence. It does so by delving into the power structures and mental health of perpetrators and provides empirical evidence on the roots and outcomes of the moral injury.

Therefore, this situation presents a concerning image and necessitates the resolution of mental health challenges within counter-terrorism operations in Nigeria. MacNair (2001, 2002, 2015) underscored the imperative of academic scrutiny being directed toward both education and prevention. This holds particular significance due to the assertion made by a high-ranking military official on the insufficiency and lack of prioritization of resources dedicated to addressing mental health concerns inside the Nigerian military. According to his statement, “We have very few clinical psychologists within the military. Most of the time, when they exhibit violence at home, their families report it to military authorities, but there are no deliberate efforts to evaluate those who are mentally fit to continue and those who are in need of care.”<sup>27</sup> Therefore, it is now necessary to implement proactive and preventive measures to effectively address the mental health challenges experienced by counter-terrorism security personnel in Nigeria and the Lake Chad region.

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## Notes

1. We build on existing debates and international and domestic legal frames that describe sexual violence and torture as two sides of the same coin. In other words, both forms of violence produce “interrelated harms that blur into and across one another in multiple ways” (Gray et al., 2020, p. 208).
2. Interview: Counter-Terrorism Security agents in the Nigerian Police, Lagos: October 11, 2020; Interview: Counter-terrorism security Officer, Military Intelligence, Cross River: July 11, 2021; Interview: former senior officer in the Nigerian Military, United Kingdom: May 14, 2023.
3. The Nigerian government launched the Operation Safe Corridor project in 2015 with the objective of engaging in the de-radicalization, rehabilitation, and reintegration of repentant Boko Haram terrorists back into society (Ugwueze et al., 2022).
4. This forms part of a more extensive data set of 31 interviewed respondents: 14 victims, 5 legal experts of gender-based violent laws, 8 gender-based violence-oriented NGOs, and 1 community leader in northeast Nigeria.
5. For some survivors who could not speak much about their experiences, the interview lasted for 5 min.
6. Interview: Survivor 1, Borno: October 28, 2020; Interview: Survivor 2, Borno: October 30, 2020; Interview: Survivor 3, Borno: October 29, 2020; Interview: Survivor 5, Borno: October 28, 2020; Interview: Survivor 4, Borno: October 30, 2020.
7. Interview: Survivor 1, Borno: October 28, 2020.
8. Interview: Survivor 2, Borno: October 30, 2020.
9. Interview: Survivor 3, Borno: October 29, 2020.
10. Interview: Survivor 1, Borno: October 28, 2020; Interview: Survivor 2, Borno: October 30, 2020; Interview: Survivor 3, Borno: October 29, 2020; Interview: Survivor 5, Borno: October 28, 2020 Interview: Survivor four, Borno: October 30, 2020.
11. Interview: Survivor four, Borno: October 30, 2020.
12. Interview: Survivor four, Borno: October 30, 2020.
13. Interview: Survivor five, Borno: October 28, 2020.
14. Interview: Program Officer, Human rights advocacy, Borno: October 27, 2020; Interview: Program Officer, Human rights advocacy, Abuja: October 10, 2020; Interview: Program Officer/Medical Practitioner of a Reproductive health-focused NGO, Adamawa: October 10, 2020; Interview: Community Leader in Internally Displaced Person Camp, Borno: October 30, 2020; Interview: Program Officer, development and Security-focused NGO, Abuja: October 12, 2020.
15. Interview: Program Officer, Human rights advocacy, Borno: October 27, 2020.
16. Interview: Program Officer, development and Security-focused NGO, Abuja: October 12, 2020.
17. Interview: Counter-Terrorism Security agents in the Nigerian Police, Lagos: October 11, 2020.
18. Interview: Counter-terrorism Security officer in the National Security and Civil Defense Corps, Abuja: October 26, 2020; Interview: Counter-terrorism security Officer, Military Intelligence, Cross River: July 11, 2021.
19. Interview: Counter-Terrorism Security Agents in the Nigerian Police, Lagos: October 11, 2020.
20. Interview: former senior officer in the Nigerian Military, United Kingdom: May 14, 2023.

21. Interview: Counter-terrorism Security Officer in the National Security and Civil Defense Corps, Abuja: October 26, 2020.
22. Interview: Counter-Terrorism Security Agents in the Nigerian Police, Lagos: October 11, 2020.
23. It is essential to note that the respondent was not referring to himself but generally speaking about the emotions and anger among some of his colleagues involved in these acts  
Interview: Counter-terrorism Security officer in the National Security and Civil Defense Corps, Abuja: October 26, 2020.
24. Counterterrorism security Officer, Military Intelligence, Cross River: July 11, 2021.
25. Interview: Counterterrorism Security Officer in the National Security and Civil Defense Corps, Abuja: October 26, 2020.
26. Interview: Counter-Terrorism Security Agents in the Nigerian Police, Lagos: October 11, 2020.
27. Interview: former senior officer in the Nigerian Military, United Kingdom: May 14, 2023.

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