Human rights violations in counterinsurgency operations: a gender perspective

Christopher M. Osazuwa

Postgraduate Student, City University, Cambodia

Maryjane Y. Oghogho

Postgraduate Student, City University, Cambodia

Opinion D. Iyamba

Postgraduate Student, City University, Cambodia

Anthony Ofoyetan

Postgraduate Student, City University, Cambodia

Sunday U. Brownson

Postgraduate Student, City University, Cambodia

Irenen I. Osayuwamwen

Postgraduate Student, City University, Cambodia

Henshaw E. Ekeng

Postgraduate Student, City University, Cambodia

Abstract: Counterinsurgency (COIN) operations are designed to restore stability and neutralize insurgencies but often result in significant human rights violations. These include extrajudicial killings, torture, sexual violence, and forced displacement, disproportionately affecting marginalized populations, especially women and girls. This study examines the gendered dimensions of these violations and seeks to uncover systemic inequalities that exacerbate their impact. The research aims to analyze human rights abuses in COIN through a gendered lens, emphasizing the necessity for gender-sensitive strategies to mitigate harm. The study adopts feminist security theories, emphasizing the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status in conflict contexts. A qualitative

research design integrates thematic literature reviews, case studies, and international reports, with data analyzed to highlight recurring patterns of gender-specific violations. Case studies from Colombia, Afghanistan, and Nigeria illustrate the disproportionate impact of COIN on women and marginalized groups, showcasing systemic issues such as sexual violence, displacement, and the lack of accountability. Findings reveal that COIN operations often intensify existing inequalities, with women facing sexual violence and men experiencing torture and forced recruitment. The neglect of gender-specific needs perpetuates cycles of violence and hinders recovery. Structural weaknesses in accountability and limited implementation of international human rights standards exacerbate these issues. This study underscores the importance of integrating gender-sensitive policies and robust accountability mechanisms into COIN frameworks. Recommendations include enhancing legal protections, supporting local organizations, and prioritizing inclusive peacebuilding efforts to ensure equity and justice for affected populations.

Introduction: Human rights frameworks establish the legal, ethical, and moral basis for protecting individual and collective dignity in armed conflicts, including counterinsurgency operations. International instruments like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) underpin these frameworks, which prioritise the safeguarding of life, liberty, and security, even in times of conflict (Hannum & Anaya, 2023). The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) complement these principles by defining the civil, political, and socio-economic aspects of rights, specifying the responsibilities of state and non-state actors in COIN operations (Wallace, 2020).

Counterinsurgency operations encompass a range of strategies that integrate military, political, and socio-economic approaches to address insurgencies and stabilise areas affected by rebellion or terrorism. COIN strategies originated in colonial and post-colonial conflicts, subsequently evolving into organised frameworks after World War II. Contemporary counterinsurgency strategies, exemplified by operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, aim to integrate military action with socio-political stabilisation by fostering local governance and development initiatives to "win hearts and minds" (Roy, 2022). COIN operations frequently lead to significant human rights violations, disproportionately impacting vulnerable populations, especially in occupied or contested areas.

International humanitarian law (IHL), especially the Geneva Conventions, stipulates the protection of non-combatants, such as women, children, and displaced persons, in times of conflict. Violations including extrajudicial killings, sexual violence, and forced displacement frequently characterise COIN operations, often rationalised by states as necessary for security (Noh, 2022). The systemic abuses underscore the conflict between operational goals and human rights responsibilities, with marginalised groups, such as women and indigenous populations, disproportionately affected by the violence.

The gendered effects of COIN are significant yet insufficiently examined. Women and children experience disproportionate impacts, including sexual violence, trafficking, and displacement, as direct outcomes of COIN activities. Insurgent groups utilise women as combatants or as representations of community honour, whereas state forces are often associated with systematic sexual violence (Cook, 2021). Gender-sensitive frameworks, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), highlight the unequal effects of armed conflicts on women and promote their protection and participation in conflict resolution (Engström & Heikkilä, 2022). United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security emphasises the necessity of incorporating gender-sensitive approaches into counterinsurgency strategies to facilitate inclusive peace processes and avert additional violations.

The implementation of COIN operations worldwide has produced varied outcomes. The U.S.-led counterinsurgency campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, while intended for nation-building, led to civilian displacement, systemic abuses, and enduring instability (Head, 2024). State-backed COIN strategies in Colombia aimed at addressing narco-terrorism and insurgencies have had a disproportionate effect on indigenous women, resulting in significant displacement and an increase in gender-based violence (Granovsky-Larsen, 2023).

In Nigeria, counterinsurgency efforts against Boko Haram have been hindered by allegations of extrajudicial killings, gender-based violence, and aggressive military tactics, which have intensified distrust among local communities (Salihu, 2021).

Statement of Problem

Counter-insurgency (COIN) operations, while ostensibly aimed at restoring security and eliminating insurgent threats, frequently result in systemic human rights violations, disproportionately impacting civilian populations. These abuses, including extrajudicial killings, torture, forced disappearances, and gender-based violence (GBV), are not isolated incidents but rather stem from militarized strategies prioritizing coercion and control. This militarized approach often dehumanizes civilians, rendering them vulnerable to widespread violence, including the strategic use of GBV as a tool of warfare to destabilize communities and reinforce patriarchal structures. While GBV disproportionately affects women and girls, exacerbating existing inequalities, men and boys also experience gender-specific violence, often reflecting societal constructs of masculinity, such as forced recruitment and emasculating torture. This broader spectrum of gendered violence is frequently overlooked in COIN analyses, which tend to focus primarily on female victimhood. Furthermore, structural and cultural factors, such as patriarchal norms and gender hierarchies, contribute to the perpetuation of these abuses and impede accountability. Despite international frameworks like CEDAW and UNSCR 1325, which advocate for the protection of women and gender-sensitive approaches in armed conflict, inadequate national-level implementation, weak institutional frameworks, and insufficient political will result in widespread impunity for perpetrators, perpetuating cycles of violence and injustice. This research addresses this critical gap by examining the specific gendered dimensions of human rights violations within COIN contexts and the systemic failures in accountability mechanisms.

Research Questions

• How do counterinsurgency operations contribute to systemic human rights violations, particularly through militarized strategies?

• What are the gender-specific impacts of human rights violations in counterinsurgency contexts?

• How can gender-sensitive frameworks improve accountability and mitigate human rights violations in counterinsurgency operations?

Objectives

• To analyze the systemic nature of human rights violations within counterinsurgency operations.

• To investigate the gender-specific dimensions of human rights violations in counterinsurgency contexts.

• To propose actionable policy recommendations for integrating gender-sensitive approaches into counterinsurgency frameworks.

Significance of the Study

The study's results will benefit multiple stakeholders. Policymakers and military strategists can employ gender-sensitive insights to formulate COIN strategies that reduce civilian harm and comply with international human rights standards. Secondly, human rights organisations and advocacy groups will acquire a nuanced comprehension of the gendered effects of COIN, allowing them to formulate targeted interventions and ensure accountability for violators. This work will be beneficial for academic researchers and students in furthering feminist security scholarship and investigating novel methods of conflict resolution. Ultimately, survivors of COIN-related abuses, especially women and marginalised groups, will benefit from policies and programs shaped by this research, as these initiatives are more likely to address their specific needs and vulnerabilities.

Theoretical Framework: Feminist Theories of Security

This study is based on feminist security theories that critique state-centric security paradigms, highlighting the impact of gender dynamics on experiences of conflict and violence. Feminist perspectives, in contrast to traditional approaches that emphasise territorial integrity and state sovereignty, prioritise the daily insecurities experienced by marginalised groups, especially women and girls (Shepherd, 2020). These perspectives contend that conflict disproportionately impacts women via direct violence, such as sexual assault, and indirect consequences, including displacement, loss of livelihoods, and the intensification of pre-existing gender inequalities (True, 2021). Feminist scholarship within counterinsurgency (COIN) operations illustrates that militarised tactics frequently reinforce patriarchal structures, resulting in heightened violence and exclusion of women. COIN strategies, including forced displacement and indiscriminate attacks, often overlook gendered vulnerabilities, leading to systemic injustices that are frequently neglected in traditional analyses (McLeod, 2022).

Structural violence, a key concept in feminist security studies, elucidates how societal structures and institutions cause harm by hindering access to essential needs and rights (Galtung, 1990, cited in Wibben et al., 2020). COIN-related human rights violations are not incidental; they are embedded within systemic inequalities that prioritise militarised approaches over human security. Women, especially in rural or indigenous communities, are disproportionately affected by these systemic breaches.

Intersectionality serves as a crucial analytical framework in feminist security studies, elucidating how overlapping identities—such as gender, race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status—intensify the effects of violence in counterinsurgency operations (Crenshaw, 1989, cited in Berry, 2021). Indigenous women may experience increased risks resulting from the intersection of state violence, insurgent activity, and societal discrimination. Identifying these intersections is crucial for formulating effective responses to human rights violations associated with COIN.

This study incorporates a gender perspective into COIN analysis, transcending gender-neutral frameworks that presuppose a uniform impact of human rights abuses. This approach highlights the unique experiences of women, men, and non-binary individuals in conflict, influenced by their social roles, cultural norms, and resource accessibility (Duncanson & Woodward, 2021). Women may encounter increased risks of sexual violence, whereas men may be subjected to forced conscription or torture. Additionally, non-binary and LGBTQ+ individuals frequently face unique forms of violence that are often overlooked in conventional security discussions. To address these varied impacts, it is essential to implement tailored policies and interventions that prioritise human security rather than relying solely on militaristic counterinsurgency strategies (Shepherd & Jarvis, 2023).

METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed for studying Human Rights Violations in Counterinsurgency Operations: A Gender Perspective is rooted in a qualitative analytical framework. This methodology integrates case studies, thematic literature reviews, and insights derived from international reports to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research topic. The qualitative approach is particularly well-suited to exploring complex phenomena, such as the interplay of human rights and gender issues in conflict contexts, as it allows for depth and contextual understanding.

Human Rights in Counterinsurgency Operations

•   The Concept of Counterinsurgency

Counterinsurgency (COIN) denotes a collection of methods and methodologies utilised by state or non-state entities to combat armed insurgencies that threaten political authority or territorial integrity. In contrast to traditional military operations, COIN prioritises a combination of military and non-military strategies designed to neutralise rebel factions while concurrently tackling the socio-political and economic factors that contribute to their creation (Kilcullen, 2020). This dual strategy emphasises the necessity of combining military power with efforts to gain public trust and re-establish governance, commonly referred to as the "hearts and minds" strategy.

The scope of COIN encompasses more than battlefield confrontations, integrating components such as intelligence collection, law enforcement, and governance changes. COIN efforts often function at the convergence of military aims, humanitarian issues, and legal principles. Counterinsurgency is equally a political and military endeavour, requiring the cooperation of many state and non-state entities to guarantee legitimacy and sustainability (Mampilly & Stewart, 2022). Nonetheless, despite these ambitions, COIN techniques frequently result in considerable human rights abuses, prompting serious questions over their legal and ethical ramifications.

Counterinsurgency techniques focus on the dual aims of curtailing insurgent actions and ensuring civilian allegiance. To attain these aims, COIN employs a synthesis of military, psychological, and socio-political strategies. A fundamental military approach consists of targeted operations designed to neutralise insurgent groups, frequently executed by airstrikes, raids, and surveillance-based interventions. These actions are often facilitated by intelligence systems aimed at dismantling rebel networks and thwarting their reconstitution (Nagl, 2021). Moreover, security zones are created to separate insurgents from civilian populations; yet these measures may adversely affect civilian livelihoods and prompt enquiries regarding proportionality.

In addition to military operations, COIN prioritises non-violent strategies, particularly population-centric initiatives aimed at tackling the fundamental causes of insurgency. These policies typically encompass the delivery of fundamental services, including education, healthcare, and infrastructure, alongside economic reforms designed to mitigate poverty and inequality (Cohen et al., 2022). Psychological operations (PSYOP) enhance these initiatives by subverting insurgent narratives and fostering state legitimacy via media campaigns and public engagement. A crucial strategy entails involving local stakeholders, including traditional governance systems and community leaders, to promote localised solutions and bolster the state's credibility. Nonetheless, the efficacy of these measures is frequently compromised by the concurrent implementation of coercive strategies, like mass detentions and forced relocations, which estrange civilian populations (Krieg, 2020).

Although these strategies fit with the primary goals of stabilising conflict zones and reinstating governance, they are often condemned for their propensity to

intensify human rights violations. The indiscriminate use of force, capricious detentions, and the deterioration of community trust continue to pose significant issues, highlighting the necessity for a more equitable and rights-oriented strategy in COIN operations (Milanovic, 2021).

Counterinsurgency operations frequently exist in a grey zone were national security imperatives clash with international legal standards and ethical commitments. A significant legal quandary emerges from the application of force in civilian-populated regions, often leading to collateral harm and undermining the concept of difference as outlined in international humanitarian law (Geneva Conventions, 1949). Drone attacks aimed at insurgents have faced criticism due to their elevated civilian casualty rates, prompting enquiries into the proportionality of these measures (Krieg, 2020). Such techniques frequently diminish public trust and exacerbate opposition, thus compromising the long-term goals of COIN.

A significant concern is the prevalent practice of detention without trial, frequently rationalised as a counter-terrorism strategy. These activities often contravene the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and incite animosity among impacted communities (United Nations, 2021). Moreover, employing torture and other harsh methods to obtain intelligence from detainees infringes upon essential human rights and undermines the legitimacy of counterinsurgency players (Daly, 2023). Alongside imprisonment procedures, the employment of targeted murders, especially by unmanned aerial vehicles, has ignited ethical discussions regarding the absence of transparency and due process in these operations. These acts disrupt the equilibrium between safeguarding state security and maintaining the right to life and procedural fairness (Milanovic, 2021).

The socio-economic ramifications of COIN further exacerbate its ethical quandaries. Strategies including scorched-earth tactics, coerced relocations, and the obliteration of civilian infrastructure frequently yield enduring consequences for at-risk populations. These measures not only intensify humanitarian crises but also contravene international rules safeguarding the rights of displaced individuals and communities (Cohen et al., 2022). The impunity frequently afforded to state actors engaged in counterinsurgency exacerbates these problems, further estranging impacted communities and undermining the rule of law (Daly, 2023).

- Human Rights Abuses in COIN

Counterinsurgency operations (COIN) have been linked to various human rights violations, such as disproportionate force, extrajudicial killings, torture, and enforced disappearances. These violations frequently arise from the pressing security demands that COIN techniques impose on military and security forces. The excessive application of force is most apparent in situations where military personnel are assigned to swiftly eliminate perceived threats, resulting in a neglect of proportionality and necessity in their conduct. In Nigeria's struggle against Boko Haram, reports have recorded instances where military operations led to substantial civilian casualties, prompting concerns regarding the legality and ethics of these activities (Lenshie et al., 2022; Ibukun, 2020). The dependence on extensive mechanisation and weaponry, although aimed at safeguarding troops, may unintentionally intensify violence against civilian populations, as the separation caused by mechanised forces frequently results in diminished responsibility and control (Mehrl, 2022).

Extrajudicial killings and torture are prevalent in counterinsurgency environments, frequently rationalised under the pretext of national security. The normalisation of these methods can foster a culture of impunity within security personnel, rendering human rights breaches commonplace rather than extraordinary. In Nigeria, the military's counterinsurgency operations have been tainted by accusations of extrajudicial executions and torture of both suspected rebels and civilians (Ibukun, 2020; Onuoha et al., 2020). These activities not only contravene international human rights standards but also erode the legitimacy of the state's counterinsurgency initiatives, as they estrange the communities that COIN seeks to safeguard and persuade (Blair, 2022).

Forced disappearances are a serious violation of human rights linked to counterinsurgency operations. The phenomena frequently transpire in settings where security personnel function with limited supervision, resulting in the kidnapping of individuals alleged to be involved in insurgency-related activities. These activities are especially detrimental as they engender fear within communities and foster a climate of mistrust between citizens and the state (Ibukun, 2020). The absence of accountability for these activities intensifies the cycle of violence and human rights violations, leaving the relatives of the vanished without recourse or justice.

Moreover, COIN operations often violate international humanitarian law (IHL). International Humanitarian Law (IHL), which regulates armed conflict and aims to safeguard non-combatants, is frequently overlooked during counterinsurgency operations. The concepts of distinction and proportionality, which mandate fighters

to discern between military objectives and civilians while minimising civilian casualties, are frequently contravened in COIN operations (Ibukun, 2020). The indiscriminate deployment of airstrikes or artillery in populated regions might result in considerable human fatalities, violating International Humanitarian Law (IHL) (Romita, 2023).

Furthermore, the rationalisation of military operations under the guise of national security frequently results in a more extensive deterioration of legal standards and human rights safeguards. Presenting COIN as an essential reaction to existential threats may foster a permissive atmosphere for human rights abuses, as nations prioritise military goals over legal and ethical principles (Ibukun, 2020). This weakens the rule of law and maintains a cycle of violence that may incite additional insurgency, as communities grow disillusioned with the state's ability to safeguard their rights and welfare (Blair, 2022).

• Institutional Challenges

The institutional challenges associated with human rights in counterinsurgency operations (COIN) are significant, particularly regarding weak accountability mechanisms and the resulting impunity for perpetrators of human rights abuses. These challenges undermine the effectiveness of COIN strategies and perpetuate cycles of violence and mistrust between state forces and civilian populations.

Weak accountability mechanisms are a pervasive issue in COIN contexts. The lack of robust systems to hold military and security personnel accountable for their actions often leads to a culture of impunity. In many cases, military operations are conducted with minimal oversight, allowing abuses such as excessive use of force, extrajudicial killings, and torture to occur without repercussions (Buzdar et al., 2023; Karakas, 2022). For instance, in Nigeria's ongoing conflict with Boko Haram, reports indicate that military personnel have engaged in human rights violations, yet few have faced disciplinary action or legal consequences (Buzdar et al., 2023; Karakas, 2022). This absence of accountability not only emboldens perpetrators but also discourages victims from reporting abuses, as they may fear retaliation or believe that their complaints will be ignored (Buzdar et al., 2023; Karakas, 2022).

The lack of justice for victims is another critical aspect of the institutional challenges faced in COIN operations. Victims of human rights abuses often encounter significant barriers when seeking redress. These barriers include bureaucratic delays, a lack of resources within the judicial system, and societal stigma associated with reporting abuses (Buzdar et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2023). In many instances, victims

may feel that pursuing justice is futile, particularly when political figures or military leaders are involved, as they may exert influence to downplay or dismiss allegations of misconduct (Buzdar et al., 2023; Karakas, 2022). This perception of futility can lead to a broader sense of disillusionment with the state and its institutions, further alienating communities that COIN operations aim to protect (Buzdar et al., 2023; Karakas, 2022).

Moreover, the psychological impact of impunity on victims cannot be overstated. The absence of justice and recognition for their suffering can exacerbate feelings of trauma and helplessness, perpetuating a cycle of victimization (Karakas, 2022; Niezen, 2022). Victims may experience a profound sense of betrayal when the very institutions meant to protect them fail to deliver justice, leading to long-term psychological effects and diminished trust in state authorities (Karakas, 2022; Niezen, 2022). This erosion of trust complicates COIN efforts, as effective counterinsurgency relies on the cooperation and support of local populations.

Gendered Dimensions of Human Rights Violations

The gendered aspects of human rights breaches, especially during armed conflict, expose a troubling trend of targeted gender-based violence (GBV) that disproportionately impacts women and girls. This violence occurs in multiple forms, including the utilisation of rape as a weapon of war and sexual exploitation and abuse by both state and non-state entities. Comprehending these processes is essential for tackling the wider ramifications of gender-based violence in conflict environments.

• Targeted Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

The use of rape as a weapon of war has been thoroughly documented across numerous conflicts, functioning both as a form of physical violence and as a mechanism for psychological warfare and social destabilisation. Sexual violence is systematically utilised to humiliate and demoralise communities, with a particular focus on women as representations of ethnic or national identity (Wieringen, 2020). In the Democratic Republic of Congo, armed groups have employed rape as a strategic tool to instil fear and exert control over populations, resulting in extensive suffering and trauma among survivors (Wieringen, 2020). This type of violence is not incidental; it is frequently premeditated and carried out to attain military goals, thus underscoring the idea that sexual violence is a fundamental component of warfare (Wieringen, 2020).

The repercussions of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) reach well beyond the immediate physical injuries sustained by survivors. Studies demonstrate that survivors frequently encounter enduring psychological and social consequences, intensified by

detrimental gender norms and societal stigma (Rubini, 2023; Hourani et al., 2021). The normalisation of gender-based violence in conflict settings fosters an environment in which such acts are tolerated or justified, thereby further entrenching gender inequality and violence (Rubini, 2023; Hourani et al., 2021). The cycle of violence persists due to insufficient accountability for perpetrators, which deters survivors from pursuing justice and healing (Hourani et al., 2021).

Sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) by both state and non-state actors constitute a significant dimension of gender-based violence (GBV) in conflict zones. Reports from diverse humanitarian contexts indicate that peacekeepers, military personnel, and armed groups exploit vulnerable populations, especially women and girls, for sexual favours or services (Ellsberg et al., 2020; Quadri, 2020). Exploitation frequently takes place in situations where individuals are marginalised as a result of displacement, economic instability, or the disintegration of social structures (Ellsberg et al., 2020; Murphy et al., 2021). The power dynamics present in these situations facilitate abuse, as individuals in positions of authority exploit their power over vulnerable persons (Ellsberg et al., 2020; Quadri, 2020).

The prevalence of SEA is exacerbated by institutional shortcomings in addressing and preventing these abuses. Victims of sexual exploitation and abuse often encounter substantial obstacles to reporting incidents, such as fear of retaliation, distrust in authorities, and societal stigma (Ellsberg et al., 2020; Murphy et al., 2021). The lack of accountability for perpetrators fosters a culture of silence and complicity (Murphy et al., 2021). The absence of justice adversely affects individual survivors and diminishes the credibility of institutions responsible for safeguarding human rights and ensuring peace (Ellsberg et al., 2020; Murphy et al., 2021).

• Impact on Women and Girls

The gendered aspects of human rights violations, especially in conflict and post-conflict contexts, significantly affect women and girls. These dimensions are evident in various forms of violence and exploitation, such as displacement, trafficking, forced marriages, and the social stigma and marginalisation that frequently accompany these violations.

Armed conflict-induced displacement frequently intensifies the vulnerabilities faced by women and girls, rendering them more prone to exploitation, such as trafficking and forced marriages. In regions affected by conflict, the disintegration of social structures and the loss of livelihoods may compel families to engage in desperate measures, such as marrying off daughters at young ages for economic survival (Ellsberg et al., 2020; Murphy et al., 2021). This practice is notably common in situations where traditional norms are challenged, and families encounter heightened economic pressures resulting from conflict (Ellsberg et al., 2020; Murphy et al., 2021). Additionally, population displacement fosters conditions conducive to the proliferation of trafficking networks, which exploit vulnerable women and girls in their pursuit of safety or economic opportunities (Ellsberg et al., 2020; Bourey, 2024). Reports from South Sudan indicate that women and girls displaced by conflict face an increased risk of trafficking for sexual exploitation or forced labour (Ellsberg et al., 2020; Khalaf et al., 2022).

The repercussions of these violations extend beyond immediate physical injury, encompassing enduring psychological and social impacts. Individuals who have survived trafficking and forced marriages frequently encounter considerable difficulties in reintegrating into their communities, often facing stigma and marginalisation (Mitiku, 2023; Murphy et al., 2021). The societal perception of women who have faced violence or exploitation may result in their exclusion from social, economic, and political domains, thereby reinforcing gender inequalities (Quadri, 2020; Murphy et al., 2021). The marginalisation is exacerbated by cultural norms that frequently assign blame to victims for the violence they endure, thereby perpetuating a cycle of silence and shame that hinders survivors from pursuing assistance or justice (Gutiérrez, 2020; Ocktaviana & Kamaruzzaman, 2021).

The stigma linked to gender-based violence can adversely impact the mental health of survivors. Numerous women and girls encounter feelings of shame, isolation, and hopelessness after experiencing violence, potentially resulting in enduring psychological trauma (Rubini, 2023; Jong, 2023). Insufficient support systems, such as mental health services and social reintegration programs, intensify these challenges, forcing survivors to manage their recovery in isolation (Khalaf et al., 2022; Young & Anazodo, 2020).

• Marginalized Masculinities

In conflict settings, the notion of marginalised masculinities underscores the distinct vulnerabilities and experiences of men and boys, who frequently face violence and exploitation that contest conventional understandings of masculinity. Forced recruitment into armed groups is a significant issue, especially in areas affected by extended conflict. Young boys are often subjected to recruitment efforts and coerced into joining militias or armed forces through threats of violence or death. This forced induction removes their

agency and subjects them to significant psychological and physical trauma, as they are frequently compelled to engage in violent acts against their will. The implications of these experiences are significant, resulting in an identity crisis as these boys contend with societal expectations of masculinity that emphasise strength and aggression, even as they face victimisation.

The torture of men and boys in conflict settings complicates the understanding of masculinities. Reports from multiple conflict zones indicate that men frequently endure severe treatment, including physical and sexual torture, which undermines their perceived masculinity. This violence serves as a mechanism for control and a strategy to induce fear in communities, with the humiliation of men potentially disrupting family dynamics and undermining community cohesion. The psychological effects of torture can result in enduring mental health problems, such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which are frequently intensified by societal stigma related to male victimhood.

The convergence of masculinity and victimisation highlights the societal pressures experienced by men following incidents of violence. Men subjected to torture or forced recruitment may encounter considerable social stigma, as prevailing norms typically assert that men ought to exhibit strength and resilience. The stigma may result in marginalisation, as individuals may be perceived as less masculine or as failures in their societal roles. As a result, numerous men may feel pressured to hide their experiences, thereby continuing cycles of trauma and isolation.

The immediate effects of violence should be examined alongside the broader societal implications of marginalised masculinities in conflict contexts. The normalisation of violence against men may foster a culture of impunity, resulting in the neglect or minimisation of the suffering experienced by male victims. This dynamic impacts not only the individuals directly involved but also has implications for peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts, as communities endeavour to address the needs of all victims of violence.

- Intersectionality in COIN-Related Violations

In COIN operations, individual experiences are influenced not only by gender but also significantly by race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. Women from marginalised ethnic groups frequently encounter heightened vulnerabilities in conflict situations. Women may encounter both gender-based violence (GBV) and ethnic violence, which can present as targeted attacks, sexual violence, and forced displacement. Sánchez et al. (2020); Nsabimana (2024). The convergence of gender and ethnicity results in distinct manifestations of violence that existing frameworks, which examine gender independently, fail to adequately address. During the Rwandan Genocide, Tutsi women experienced systematic sexual violence as a component of a broader strategy aimed at the eradication of their ethnic group, demonstrating how ethnic identity can intensify gendered violence in conflict situations (Munala, 2023).

Furthermore, socio-economic status significantly influences individuals' experiences of violence and their access to resources and support. Women and girls from lower socio-economic backgrounds exhibit increased vulnerability to gender-based violence due to limited access to education, healthcare, and legal protections (Mingude & Dejene, 2021). Economic instability during COIN operations may compel families to engage in detrimental practices, including forced marriages or transactional sex, as strategies for survival (Paudel R, 2020). Such practices violate human rights and perpetuate cycles of poverty and inequality, further marginalising vulnerable populations.

The influence of intersectionality is apparent in the experiences of men and boys within COIN contexts. Marginalised masculinities, especially among individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds or minority ethnic groups, may result in coerced recruitment into armed groups or exploitation as child soldiers (Cuxart et al., 2021). These experiences contest conventional understandings of masculinity, as young men frequently face pressure to assume roles that conflict with societal norms of strength and independence. Forced recruitment has significant psychological consequences, resulting in trauma and identity crises that hinder reintegration into society after conflict (Nabaggala et al., 2021).

The stigma linked to being a victim of violence varies considerably according to race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. Men and boys subjected to sexual violence in conflict situations often encounter increased stigma, especially in cultures that prioritise hypermasculinity and notions of strength (Flannigan et al., 2022). This stigma may inhibit individuals from seeking assistance or reporting abuses, thereby perpetuating a cycle of silence and suffering.

Cases Studies

Case Study 1: Columbia

Colombia is a country located in South America, bordered by the Caribbean Sea to the north, Venezuela to the east, Brazil to the southeast, Peru to the south, Ecuador to the west, and Panama to the northwest. It is known for its diverse culture

Indigenous women in Colombia have encountered distinct challenges throughout the prolonged conflict, frequently positioned at the convergence of various forms of violence. The Colombian government has implemented counterinsurgency strategies to address guerrilla groups, including the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN). These strategies have often led to human rights violations, especially concerning indigenous populations (Ismiati, 2023). The militarization of indigenous territories has resulted in heightened violence, with armed groups competing for control over land and resources, frequently neglecting the rights and autonomy of indigenous communities.

Indigenous women exhibit heightened vulnerability in this context, frequently experiencing both gender-based violence and the wider consequences of armed conflict. Evidence suggests that state forces and paramilitary groups have perpetrated sexual violence against Indigenous women as a wartime strategy, intended to instil fear and assert control over communities (Angeletti, 2021). This violence infringes upon the individual rights of women and undermines the social structure of Indigenous communities by disrupting traditional roles and relationships (Foláyan et al., 2022). Sexual violence employed as a weapon in conflict results in significant psychological and social consequences, contributing to the stigmatisation and marginalisation of survivors in their communities (Chaney, 2022).

The displacement of indigenous communities in Colombia has intensified due to COIN strategies, as military operations frequently result in forced evacuations and the destruction of homes and livelihoods. Indigenous women experience elevated risks during displacement, facing greater vulnerability to sexual violence and exploitation in refugee camps or urban environments (Jang & Kim, 2022). The insufficient protection and support services for displaced women exacerbate their vulnerability, limiting their access to healthcare, legal assistance, and social support networks (Jang & Kim, 2021).

The intersection of gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status significantly influences the experiences of displaced indigenous women. Indigenous women encounter systemic discrimination that restricts their access to resources and opportunities, hindering their ability to reconstruct their lives following displacement (Amanullah et al., 2022). The cumulative impacts of violence, displacement, and marginalisation may result in enduring trauma and obstruct initiatives aimed at recovery and empowerment (Guo et al., 2021).

Case Study 2: Afghanistan

The counterinsurgency efforts led by the United States in Afghanistan have significantly impacted the human rights situation, especially regarding the rights of Afghan women. This case study examines human rights violations committed by international forces and insurgents, emphasising the gender-specific consequences of these violations.

The counterinsurgency in Afghanistan, led by the United States and initiated following the September 11 attacks, sought to dismantle the Taliban regime and establish a stable democratic government. The intervention, presented as a mission to liberate Afghan women from Taliban oppression, has revealed a more complex reality. Although there have been initial advancements in women's rights, such as enhanced access to education and healthcare, the persistent conflict has sustained a cycle of violence and instability that disproportionately impacts women (Head, 2023).

International forces have been associated with numerous human rights violations in the course of their operations. Instances of civilian casualties resulting from airstrikes and military operations have been documented, often indicating a failure to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants (Agbiboa, 2021). These actions have led to loss of life and fostered a climate of fear and mistrust among local populations, especially women who may already be vulnerable due to their gender (Worabo, 2024). The presence of foreign troops can exacerbate gender-based violence, as the influx of military personnel may lead to increased exploitation and abuse of women in host communities (Sharifi et al., 2020).

The Taliban and various insurgent groups have perpetrated significant human rights violations against women. The resurgence of the Taliban has resulted in a reimplementation of oppressive practices, such as forced marriages, mobility restrictions, and violence against women for alleged violations of social norms (Nabizada, 2024). Evidence suggests that women who oppose these oppressive measures encounter significant consequences, such as physical violence and social ostracism (Hamidi et al., 2021). Insurgents have employed sexual violence as a wartime strategy, specifically targeting women to induce fear and assert dominance over communities (Dadras et al., 2020).

The convergence of these violations establishes a precarious condition for Afghan women. The violence enacted by both international forces and insurgents frequently results in women's vulnerability, as they receive insufficient protection from either party. The duality of threat hinders their capacity to advocate for their rights and pursue justice for the abuses

experienced (Dadras et al., 2020). The ongoing instability has impeded the establishment of effective legal and social support systems for survivors of violence, thereby exacerbating gender inequalities (Dadras et al., 2020).

The ramifications of these violations go beyond immediate physical injury. Women in Afghanistan frequently encounter social stigma and marginalisation due to violence, resulting in prolonged psychological trauma and economic instability (Ibukun, 2020). The absence of access to education and healthcare, intensified by conflict, restricts women's potential for empowerment and self-sufficiency, thereby sustaining cycles of poverty and dependence (Ahmadi et al., 2020).

Case Study 3: Nigeria

Boko Haram, an extremist organisation, has perpetrated extensive human rights violations, encompassing mass killings, abductions, and sexual violence. The group has focused on civilians, especially women and girls, as a strategy to instil fear and exert control over communities (Umamaheswar, 2020). Reports indicate that Boko Haram has systematically employed sexual violence as a weapon of war, abducting women and girls to serve as "wives" for fighters or as sex slaves ("The Correlates of Violence against Women and Surveillance of Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic Outbreak Globally: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," 2020). This practice infringes upon the rights of victims and simultaneously reinforces the ideological agenda of the group, which aims to enforce a stringent interpretation of Islamic law.

The Nigerian state has been implicated in human rights violations during counterinsurgency operations. Accusations against the military include excessive use of force, extrajudicial killings, and torture of suspected insurgents, frequently occurring without due process (Oladeji et al., 2021). These actions have resulted in considerable civilian casualties and have intensified the humanitarian crisis in the region. The absence of accountability for these abuses has cultivated a culture of impunity, which further erodes trust between the state and the communities it seeks to protect (Paudel R, 2020)

The violence targeting specific genders linked to the Boko Haram insurgency significantly affects women and girls in Nigeria. Insurgents' use of sexual violence causes immediate physical and psychological damage, along with enduring repercussions for survivors and their communities. Women subjected to sexual violence frequently encounter stigma and marginalisation, impeding their reintegration into society and restricting their access to education and economic opportunities (Aziz et al., 2022). The marginalisation is exacerbated by prevailing gender inequalities in Nigeria, where cultural norms frequently prescribe women's roles and limit their autonomy (Cardoso, 2023).

The conflict has resulted in a rise in forced marriages, especially among women and girls who have been abducted. Numerous individuals are compelled into marriages with Boko Haram fighters, which undermines their autonomy and exposes them to additional violence and exploitation (Falana, 2020). The implications of these practices extend beyond individual survivors, influencing family structures and community dynamics as well. The normalisation of violence can perpetuate cycles of abuse and discrimination, hindering community recovery and reconstruction following conflict Kelly Imafidon (2023).

Impact Analysis of Human Rights Violations in Counterinsurgency

• Psychological and Social Implications

Individuals who have endured human rights violations, especially women and girls subjected to gender-based violence in conflict situations, frequently experience significant psychological trauma. The psychological effects may encompass post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety, which can endure long after the cessation of immediate violence. Susan et al. (2020). Research demonstrates that trauma experienced by survivors may result in enduring mental health challenges, which can hinder their reintegration into society and participation in daily activities (Okech, 2021). The stigma surrounding sexual violence survivors can intensify mental health challenges, as victims often encounter social ostracism and discrimination in their communities (Okech, 2021).

The disintegration of community structures resulting from conflict and COIN strategies can profoundly impact conventional gender roles and social dynamics. Insurgency often results in violence and displacement, which disrupts familial and community ties, thereby diminishing social cohesion (Ugwueze et al., 2021). This disruption may lead to changes in gender roles, with women frequently assuming new responsibilities as heads of households or primary earners in the absence of men (Idris, 2023). This empowerment may benefit certain women; however, it can simultaneously heighten their vulnerability as they assume new roles amidst persistent violence and instability (Curiel et al., 2020).

• Socioeconomic Implications

The socioeconomic impacts of COIN strategies are

significant, especially for women and marginalised populations. The destruction of infrastructure and population displacement frequently lead to the loss of livelihoods, complicating self-sustainability for families (Awa, 2021). Access to education is significantly hindered, as schools may be destroyed or deemed unsafe due to conflict. The reduction in educational opportunities disproportionately impacts girls, who may face early marriages or other exploitative situations as families attempt to manage economic difficulties (Kassim, 2024).

Survivors of gender-based violence encounter considerable obstacles to reintegration within their communities. Barriers may encompass social stigma, inadequate access to healthcare and psychological support, and economic instability (Oghuvbu, 2021). The lack of effective legal frameworks to protect survivors and ensure accountability for perpetrators complicates the reintegration process (Toltica, 2021). Consequently, numerous survivors may be ensnared in persistent cycles of poverty and violence, hindering their ability to assert their rights or reconstruct their lives.

• Legal and Policy Considerations

The quest for justice and reparations for victims of human rights violations presents numerous challenges. In numerous conflict-affected areas, legal systems are often weak or absent, hindering survivors' ability to obtain redress (Musab & Agofure, 2021). The culture of impunity associated with COIN operations can discourage victims from reporting incidents due to fears of retaliation or a lack of confidence in the seriousness with which their cases will be addressed (Illo, 2023). The absence of accountability adversely affects individual survivors, undermines the rule of law, and perpetuates cycles of violence.

The inadequacy of gender-blind COIN strategies underscore the necessity for a more nuanced comprehension of the intersection between gender dynamics and conflict. Gender-blind approaches frequently neglect the distinct needs and vulnerabilities of women and marginalised groups, resulting in insufficient responses to gender-based violence and other human rights violations (Chigudu, 2024). Integrating gender analysis into COIN strategies is crucial for recognising and addressing the rights and needs of all individuals, thereby enhancing the effectiveness and equity of peacebuilding initiatives (Amao, 2020).

DISCUSSION

Counterinsurgency (COIN) operations frequently result in systematic human rights violations that disproportionately affect women and marginalised populations. Women and girls frequently encounter targeted gender-based violence (GBV), such as sexual violence, forced marriages, and trafficking, as demonstrated in the contexts of Colombia, Nigeria, and Afghanistan. In Colombia, state and paramilitary forces have employed sexual violence as a means to suppress indigenous communities, thereby undermining the social and cultural cohesion of these groups (Ismiati, 2023). In Nigeria, the abduction and sexual exploitation of women and girls by Boko Haram have been exacerbated by reports of abuse and excessive force employed by state forces during counterinsurgency operations (Lenshie et al., 2022).

The research highlights the widespread utilisation of gender-based violence as a strategic component in counterinsurgency, perpetuated by both insurgent factions and state entities. This underscores the dual threats encountered by women in conflict zones, which intensify pre-existing gender inequalities and hinder justice and recovery efforts (Ellsberg et al., 2020).

The findings underscore notable institutional challenges in COIN, specifically inadequate accountability mechanisms and widespread impunity. Reports indicate systemic failures in addressing human rights violations by state actors during counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan and Nigeria (Salihu, 2021). The lack of strong legal and institutional frameworks creates a culture of impunity, resulting in victims lacking recourse and communities becoming disillusioned with state protection mechanisms. The absence of accountability sustains cycles of violence and mistrust, thereby undermining the legitimacy of counterinsurgency strategies (Buzdar et al., 2023).

The research indicates that the effects of COIN-related human rights violations are considerably influenced by intersectional factors such as ethnicity, socio-economic status, and cultural norms. Indigenous women in Colombia experience heightened vulnerabilities stemming from their ethnic identity and marginalised status, increasing their susceptibility to displacement and sexual violence (Angeletti, 2021). Socio-economic disparities in Nigeria intensify the challenges encountered by women and girls, as poverty and restricted access to education increase their vulnerability to gender-based violence and exploitation during counter-insurgency operations (Mingude & Dejene, 2021).

Intersectional analysis indicates that men and boys experience unique forms of violence, including forced recruitment and torture, which disrupt traditional concepts of masculinity and lead to enduring psychological trauma (Cuxart et al., 2021). These findings highlight the importance of a detailed

comprehension of the varied experiences of all impacted groups to develop effective and inclusive COIN strategies.

The findings underscore the significant psychological and social impacts of human rights violations associated with COIN operations. Survivors of gender-based violence, forced displacement, and other forms of abuse often encounter stigma, social exclusion, and enduring trauma. Women and girls in conflict zones, such as Afghanistan and Nigeria, frequently face challenges in reintegrating into their communities due to societal stigma and insufficient support systems (Rubini et al., 2023). The disintegration of traditional gender roles in conflict-affected regions assigns new responsibilities to women, which can empower some individuals but frequently subjects them to increased risks in unstable settings (Idris, 2023).

Recommendations

Policy Changes

• **Integrating Gender-Sensitive Policies**: Incorporate gender-sensitive approaches into counterinsurgency (COIN) frameworks to address the specific vulnerabilities and experiences of women, men, and marginalized groups. These policies should ensure the protection of survivors, promote gender equity, and prioritize the prevention of gender-based violence (GBV) in COIN operations.

• **Enhancing Accountability Mechanisms**: Strengthen accountability measures to ensure that perpetrators of human rights violations, including sexual violence and extrajudicial actions, face justice. Implement robust monitoring and reporting systems to hold military and security forces accountable for their actions.

Capacity Building

• **Training Security Forces**: Develop and implement comprehensive training programs for security personnel focused on human rights, gender sensitivity, and adherence to international humanitarian law. These programs should equip forces to recognize and address gender-specific violations effectively.

• **Supporting Local Women's Organizations**: Empower and collaborate with local women's organizations and community-based groups to provide resources and platforms for survivors of human rights violations. Support these organizations in advocacy, capacity building, and delivering survivor-centred services.

International Advocacy

• **Strengthening Global Mechanisms**: Enhance international monitoring frameworks to oversee human rights violations in COIN contexts. Facilitate collaboration among states, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations to address abuses and promote adherence to international standards.

• **Promoting Gender-Inclusive Peacebuilding**: Advocate for the inclusion of women and marginalized groups in peace negotiations and COIN policymaking to ensure that diverse perspectives contribute to sustainable conflict resolution.

Research Agenda

• **Encouraging Gender-Focused Research**: Prioritize research that examines the gendered impacts of COIN operations, with attention to intersectional dimensions such as ethnicity, socio-economic status, and regional disparities. Such studies can provide evidence-based insights for developing inclusive policies and interventions.

• **Evaluating Best Practices**: Conduct longitudinal studies to evaluate the effectiveness of gender-sensitive policies in reducing human rights violations during COIN operations and improving outcomes for affected populations.

CONCLUSION

Counterinsurgency (COIN) operations, despite their objective of fostering stability and security, frequently culminate in pervasive human rights violations. Such acts encompass extrajudicial killings, torture, forced displacement, and gender-based violence, with a disproportionate impact on women, girls, and marginalised communities. Such violations are deeply rooted in militarised strategies that emphasise dominance rather than compliance with international human rights and humanitarian law. The gendered aspects of these abuses highlight the necessity for a discerning and comprehensive approach to tackling COIN challenges.

Successful counterinsurgency necessitates evolving frameworks that prioritise gender sensitivity and human rights considerations. Incorporating accountability frameworks, emphasising the safeguarding of at-risk groups, and tackling systemic disparities are crucial measures to alleviate harm. Integrating human rights and gender equity into COIN strategies enables stakeholders to cultivate more sustainable and equitable conflict resolution methods, thereby promoting peace and human dignity.

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