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SCHOOL ABDUCTIONS AND GIRLS' EDUCATION IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED NIGERIA: EVIDENCE FROM FOUR COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

School abductions in Nigeria's conflict-affected communities have transformed schools from safe learning spaces into environments of fear and insecurity and threatened the realization of girls' right to education. This study examined the implications of school abductions for girls' education in selected conflict-affected communities in Nigeria. The study specifically examines the prevalence and patterns of school abductions, assesses their effects on girls' access, participation, and continuation of education, and evaluates the effectiveness of existing interventions aimed at protecting girls' right to learn. The study adopted mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative survey data from 638 respondents (students, teachers, school administrators, parents, and community stakeholders) with 16 in-depth interviews. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis, guided by the Conditioning Theory of Fear. Findings revealed that 77.1% of respondents had experienced or witnessed school abductions, with 68.3% reporting that incidents occur occasionally or frequently. Girls were perceived as the most vulnerable group (55.8%). The educational consequences included irregular attendance (30.7%), dropout (27.0%), complete withdrawal from education (23.8%), and school transfer (18.5%). Although interventions such as security deployment, Safe School Initiative, and community policing exist, 41.4% of respondents rated them as ineffective, while 43.6% considered them only moderately effective. The study concludes that school abductions significantly undermine girls' educational trajectories through fear-induced disengagement and systemic insecurity. It recommends strengthened preventive security systems, expanded Safe Schools coverage, and integration of psychosocial support to restore trust in education in conflict-affected areas.

Key Words: School abductions, Girls' education in conflict, Safe school initiative, Conflict education Nigeria, Educational insecurity.

Introduction

Education is universally recognized as a fundamental human right and a critical instrument for social transformation, economic development, and human empowerment. Globally, access to safe and quality education is enshrined in major international frameworks, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and Sustainable Development Goal-4, which seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2024). In conflict-affected settings, however, the realization of this right is increasingly threatened by violence directed at educational institutions, students and teachers. Across several regions of the world, armed conflicts, terrorism and organized criminal activities have transformed schools from spaces of learning into sites of insecurity and fear. Recent global evidence indicates that attacks on education have increased substantially in countries affected by conflict, with school abductions emerging as one of the most devastating forms of educational violence due to their long-term effects on learners' safety, well-being and educational trajectories (Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack [GCPEA], 2024; UNESCO, 2024). These attacks disproportionately affect girls, who often face heightened risks of sexual violence, forced marriage, stigmatization and permanent exclusion from education following abduction experiences (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2024; United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research [UNIDIR], 2025). Consequently, the ability of children, particularly girls, to exercise their right to learn has become increasingly dependent on the security conditions within their communities.

In Nigeria, the right to education is guaranteed under several legal and policy frameworks, including the Child Rights Act (2003), the Universal Basic Education Act (2004) and the National Policy on Education. Despite these protections, persistent insecurity has severely undermined educational access and participation, particularly in conflict-affected communities across Northern Nigeria. Since the early 2000s, the country has witnessed a significant escalation in attacks on educational institutions perpetrated by insurgent groups, armed bandits and criminal networks (GCPEA, 2024). International attention was drawn to this crisis following the 2014 abduction of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok by Boko Haram, an incident that symbolized the vulnerability of educational institutions within conflict zones and generated the global #BringBackOurGirls campaign (GCPEA, 2018). Since then, numerous school abductions have occurred across states such as Borno, Kaduna, Katsina, Niger, Sokoto, Zamfara and Kebbi, reflecting the evolution of school-targeted violence into a recurring national security challenge (Targba & Ribah, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2024).

Schools have increasingly become strategic targets because many educational facilities in vulnerable communities lack adequate security infrastructure, emergency preparedness mechanisms, and protective personnel. Armed groups frequently exploit these weaknesses to attack schools for ideological, political and economic purposes. Boko Haram has historically targeted schools due to its opposition to Western education, while armed bandit groups have increasingly adopted school kidnappings as a lucrative source of ransom payments (Ahmed et al., 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024). For example, recent attacks on educational institutions in Oyo State, South-West Nigeria, have involved the abduction of students and teachers, resulting in prolonged captivity and loss of life (Olumide et al., 2026). These conditions have created an environment in which girls face disproportionate educational risks because of prevailing gender inequalities and socio-cultural vulnerabilities. Beyond the threat of abduction itself, girls are frequently exposed to forced marriage, sexual exploitation, forced conversion, and social exclusion, all of which threaten their educational continuity and future opportunities (Ahmed et al., 2024; UNIDIR, 2025). From a human rights perspective, the persistence of these attacks directly undermines the right to education by restricting access to safe learning environments and discouraging school attendance.

The consequences of school abductions extend far beyond immediate physical insecurity. Research demonstrates that exposure to educational violence often results in profound psychological and emotional trauma among victims and affected communities. Survivors commonly experience anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), fear and long-term emotional distress, which can significantly impair learning outcomes and educational engagement (Sadiq, 2021; UNICEF, 2024). Furthermore, repeated attacks on schools foster a climate of fear that discourages parents from sending their children to school and compels many learners to abandon their education altogether. Reports from conflict-affected communities indicate that many girls who survive abduction or witness attacks on schools develop a lasting reluctance to return to formal education due to fear of re-victimization and insecurity (GCPEA, 2018). Reintegration challenges are often compounded by stigma and discrimination, particularly among girls who return from captivity with children conceived through sexual violence or forced relationships (UNIDIR, 2025). Consequently, school abductions not only violate children's right to education but also compromise their psychosocial development and future life prospects.

The educational implications of these attacks are profound and far-reaching. Persistent insecurity has contributed to school closures, disrupted learning processes and increased dropout rates across conflict-affected communities. Nigeria continues to record one of the largest populations of out-of-school children globally, with girls accounting for a substantial proportion of those excluded from formal education (UNESCO, 2024; Ugwu & Ugwu, 2024). Educational disruptions resulting from insecurity frequently trigger broader social consequences, including child marriage, adolescent pregnancy, economic dependency and intergenerational poverty (Ahmed et al., 2024; Ugwu & Ugwu, 2024). These outcomes not only affect individual learners but also undermine national human capital development, gender equality objectives and sustainable economic growth. Without effective protection mechanisms, the continued targeting of schools threatens to create a generation of young women whose educational aspirations and future opportunities are permanently constrained by conflict and insecurity.

Recognizing the growing threat to education, the Nigerian government has adopted several initiatives aimed at strengthening school safety and protecting learners. These include the endorsement of the Safe Schools Declaration in 2015, the implementation of the Safe Schools Initiative and the establishment of the National Safe Schools Response Coordination Centre (NSSRCC) to coordinate responses to attacks on education (GCPEA, 2025; Global Business Coalition for Education, 2015). In addition, substantial financial resources have been committed toward improving school security infrastructure, enhancing community resilience and strengthening emergency response systems in vulnerable regions (News Central TV, 2026). International organizations have acknowledged Nigeria's efforts to implement aspects of the Safe Schools Declaration framework and improve educational protection mechanisms (GCPEA, 2025). Nevertheless, attacks on schools continue to occur, raising concerns about the adequacy, effectiveness and sustainability of existing interventions. The persistence of school abductions suggests that significant gaps remain in the protection of learners and educational institutions, particularly in rural and conflict-affected communities within Nigeria.

Although existing literature has extensively documented the prevalence of school attacks and the security dimensions of educational violence in Nigeria, relatively few studies have systematically examined how the persistent threat of school abductions shapes girls' educational aspirations, school retention, completion prospects and long-term educational futures (Ahmed et al., 2024; Targba & Ribah, 2025). Much of the available scholarship focuses on the occurrence of attacks and immediate humanitarian consequences, with limited attention given to the broader implications for girls' educational trajectories and future life opportunities. Furthermore, there remains insufficient empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of

existing safe-school interventions in safeguarding girls' right to learn within conflict-affected communities. This gap underscores the need for comprehensive investigation. Consequently, this study examines the implications of school abductions for girls' educational futures in Nigeria. Specifically, the study seeks to: (i) examine the prevalence and patterns of school abductions in conflict-affected communities in Nigeria; (ii) assess the effects of school abductions on girls' access to, participation in and continuation of education; and (iii) evaluate the effectiveness of existing interventions aimed at protecting girls' right to learn in conflict-affected communities.

Materials and Methods

The study adopted a mixed-methods design. It combined quantitative and qualitative approaches. The study was guided by John B. Watson and Rosalie Rayner (1920) Conditioning Theory of Fear, which explains how repeated exposure to violent attacks fosters fear-based avoidance. The study was conducted in selected states across Nigeria's geopolitical zones, with one key study location selected per zone to capture variation in insecurity dynamics. In the North-East, Chibok community in Borno State was selected; in the North-West, it was conducted in Kankara community in Katsina State; in the North-Central, it covered Kagara community in Niger State; and in the South-West, it focused on Baptist school communities in Oyo State. These locations were selected based on documented cases of school abductions, differences in the nature and drivers of insecurity and practical accessibility for field engagement.

The quantitative sample size was determined using Cochran's (1977) formula for estimating sample size in large or unknown populations. It is given as $n = \frac{Z^2 * p * q}{e^2}$. At a 95% confidence level (Z = 1.96), a 5% margin of error (e = 0.05), and an assumed proportion of 0.5 (to maximize variability in the absence of prior prevalence data), the minimum required sample size was 384 respondents. However, considering the multi-site nature of the study across four conflict-affected locations, anticipated non-response due to insecurity, displacement and trauma-related reluctance and the need to ensure adequate representation across respondent categories (students, teachers and school administrators), the sample size was increased to 638 respondents through proportional allocation across study sites. This adjustment was guided by established practice in conflict and hard-to-reach population studies, where oversampling enhances statistical robustness and analytical power for subgroup comparisons.

The study had a slightly higher proportion of females (53.3%) than males (46.7%), and the age distribution showed that 33.5% were aged 15-18 years, representing the primary school-going adolescent group most affected by insecurity, while others included children (10–14 years), young adults, and older respondents (25 years and above). The sample comprised in-school girls (29.5%), out-of-school girls (16.0%), teachers (21.3%), school administrators (14.7%) and parents/guardians (18.5%). Geographically, respondents were fairly evenly distributed across Chibok (27.0%), Kankara (26.3%), Kagara (23.5%), and Oyo (23.2%) to allow for comparative analysis across conflict-affected areas. 43.6% of the sample had secondary education, 33.5% primary education, while 22.9% were out of school.

A multi-stage sampling procedure was then employed to access the respondents for the study. Qualitative data were obtained from 16 in-depth interviews conducted with selected stakeholders, including students, parents/guardians, teachers, school administrators and community leaders, until thematic saturation was reached. Data were analyzed using SPSS Version 20 for quantitative data and thematic analysis for qualitative data following Braun and Clarke's framework. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages were used to address the objectives of the study. Data quality was ensured through expert validation of instruments, pilot testing, and triangulation of quantitative and qualitative findings. Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection and strict ethical protocols were observed,

including informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, voluntary participation and the right to withdraw.

Results

A total of 638 respondents comprising students, teachers, school administrators, parents/guardians and community stakeholders successfully participated in the survey.

Prevalence and Patterns of School Abductions

This section presents findings on the prevalence and patterns of school abductions in conflict-affected communities in Nigeria. Responses from the 638 respondents are summarized in Table 1 and Table 2 below.

Table 1: Prevalence of School Abductions in Nigeria's Conflict-affected Areas (N = 638)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Experience or witness of school abduction	Yes	492	77.1
	No	146	22.9
Frequency of abduction incidents	Once	68	10.7
	Rarely	134	21.0
	Occasionally	221	34.6
	Frequently	215	33.7

Source: Field Survey, 2026

The data in Table 1 shows that the majority of respondents (77.1%) reported that they have either directly experienced or witnessed at least one school abduction incident in their community. This suggests that school abductions are not abstract or distant occurrences but are deeply embedded in the lived realities of residents across the study locations, cutting across students, parents, teachers and community members.

More than two-thirds of respondents (68.3%) reported that such incidents happen either occasionally (34.6%) or frequently (33.7%). This demonstrates that in many of the conflict-affected communities studied, school abductions have evolved from isolated security breaches into a recurring insecurity phenomenon that continues to shape perceptions of safety around education. It further reflects the persistence and normalization of insecurity in some of the most affected locations.

Table 2: Patterns of School Abductions in Nigeria's Conflict-affected Areas (N = 638)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Most common targets of abduction	Students	421	66.0
	Teachers	74	11.6
	Both students and teachers	123	19.3
	Not sure	20	3.1
Perceived vulnerability to abduction	Girls	356	55.8
	Boys	82	12.9
	Both equally	168	26.3
	Not sure	32	5.0

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 2 indicates that the majority of respondents (66.0%) identified students as the main victims of abduction incidents, while 19.3% reported that both students and teachers are targeted. Only 11.6% of respondents indicated teachers alone as targets. The import of the result is that schools are not only being attacked as institutions but that learners constitute the central focus of such violent disruptions. Data also showed that more than half of the respondents (55.8%) identified girls as the most vulnerable group to abduction, compared to 12.9% who considered boys more vulnerable, while 26.3% believed both genders are equally

at risk. This implies that girls are disproportionately exposed to the risks associated with school-based insecurity more than every other group.

A school administrator in the Kankara community affirmed that: *"Whenever these attacks happen, it is mostly the girls who are feared for the most because they are the ones the attackers tend to separate or keep aside during mass abductions."* Gender influences both targeting and outcomes during abduction incidents. Similarly, a community leader in Chibok emphasized the strategic focus on learners, stating that: *"They don't come for buildings or teachers alone; they come for the students because they know it will create fear everywhere and shut down the school system.*" Students are the primary targets and this stresses further the broader intention of disrupting education through the creation of fear.

Effects of school abductions on girls' education

This section presents data on how school abductions affect girls' access to, participation in and continuation of education in conflict-affected communities in Nigeria.

Table 3: The Effects of School Abductions on Girls' Education (N = 638)

Effects of School Abductions on Girls	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Dropout from school	172	27.0
Irregular attendance	196	30.7
Transfer to other schools	118	18.5
Complete withdrawal from education	152	23.8
Total	**638**	**100**

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 3 shows that irregular attendance (30.7%) is the most frequently reported effect of school abductions on girls' education. Closely following this is dropout from school (27.0%), complete withdrawal from education (23.8%), and transfer to other schools (18.5%). Apparently, while many girls remain enrolled in school, they experience unstable schooling patterns characterised by fear-induced absenteeism, irregular attendance, complete disengagement, disrupted routines, parental withdrawal and reduced classroom participation.

A school principal from Kankara community observed that: *"After every attack or rumour of attack, attendance drops drastically. Some parents keep their daughters at home for weeks until they feel safe again, but many never return fully."* Similarly, a teacher from Kagara community noted that: *"We see a pattern where girls start missing classes frequently, and after some time they stop coming completely. Parents often say it is better for them to stay at home than risk abduction."* In most cases, irregular attendance often transitions into dropout or withdrawal. A community leader from Chibok further explained that: *"Even when families want education for their girls, the fear is too strong. Some transfer them to distant schools, but not everyone can afford that, so many just withdraw them completely."* A parent from Oyo Baptist school added that:

> Since the recent incident where more than 40 students and some teachers have been kidnapped and one was even beheaded, I could not allow my daughter to continue. The fear is too much, and we have no guarantee it would not happen again because even the ones who were taken have not been released by the abductors.

There is a direct link between perceived insecurity and interruptions in girls' educational participation. The enduring psychological impact of abductions influences parents' decisions to send their children, especially girls, to school in conflict-affected communities in Nigeria.

Effectiveness of interventions to support girls' education in conflict-affected areas

The section presents data on existing safety interventions and their effectiveness at protecting girls' right to learn in conflict-affected communities in Nigeria.

Table 4: Interventions Aimed at Protecting Girls in School (N = 638)

Interventions	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Safe School Initiative	178	27.9
Security deployment (military, police, vigilante presence)	221	34.6
Community policing/community vigilante groups	132	20.7
Early warning systems	76	11.9
Others	31	4.9
Total	**638**	**100.0**

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 4 indicates that the most frequently reported intervention was security deployment (34.6%), with presence of military personnel, police officers, and local vigilante groups constituting the primary strategy used to safeguard schools and learners from attacks and abductions. 27.9% of the respondents identified Safe School Initiative. This means that there is moderate level of awareness of programmes designed to improve school safety through protective infrastructure, emergency preparedness and coordinated security measures. In addition, 20.7% of the respondents identified community policing and vigilante arrangements as important interventions supporting school protection efforts. However, 11.9% of the respondents reported the existence of early warning systems. This implies that preventive mechanisms for detecting and communicating security threats are relatively limited in many affected communities. Furthermore, 4.9% of the respondents identified other interventions, including school fencing, relocation of vulnerable schools, security awareness campaigns and support programmes implemented by non-governmental organizations.

When asked about the interventions currently being implemented to protect girls from school abductions, a School Principal from Chibok, Borno State, stated that: *"After the previous attacks, security personnel were deployed around schools, especially during school hours. Their presence has helped parents regain some confidence, although the fear has not completely disappeared."* The presence of security operatives appears to provide a degree of reassurance to parents and learners, and supports school attendance and educational continuity. A Community Leader from Kankara, Katsina State also emphasized the role of the Safe School Initiative, noting that: *"The Safe School programme has helped improve some school facilities and introduced safety measures, but many schools in remote communities are yet to benefit fully from the programme."* Safe School Initiative has contributed to strengthening school safety but its coverage and implementation remain uneven across affected communities. Consequently, some schools continue to operate under vulnerable conditions despite the existence of the programme.

Respondents also emphasized the contribution of local communities to school protection efforts. A Parent from Kagara, Niger State, remarked that: *"Community vigilante groups help monitor movement around schools and report suspicious activities. Without their support, many parents would be afraid to send their daughters to school."* Community policing and local surveillance mechanisms significantly complement formal security structures. In many rural communities where government security personnel are limited, community participation appears to play a critical role in enhancing school safety. However, concerns are raised regarding the limited availability of preventive security mechanisms. An Education Officer from Oyo State observed that:

> Many communities do not have functional early warning systems. That is why the attack that happened last month (May, 2026) even occurred in the first instance. Most responses happen after an incident has already occurred and the damage has been

done, rather than being proactive and averting the attacks in the first place.

The preventive approaches to school security remain underdeveloped and this could potentially limit the effectiveness of broader school protection efforts across conflict affected areas in Nigeria.

Table 5: Respondents' Assessment of the Interventions (N = 638)

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very Effective	96	15.0
Moderately Effective	278	43.6
Ineffective	264	41.4
Total	**638**	**100.0**

Source: Field Survey, 2026.

Table 5 showed that 43.6% of the sampled respondents considered the safety interventions to be moderately effective while 41.4% perceived the interventions as ineffective. Only 15.0% of the respondents rated the interventions as very effective. The implication is that the existing security measures including the Safe Schools Initiative, security deployments, community policing and early warning systems have achieved partial success in addressing the persistent threat of school abductions in conflict-affected communities in Nigeria.

Discussion

The findings show that school abductions have become more than episodic security incidents; they now constitute a structural barrier to girls' education in conflict-affected communities in Nigeria. The widespread experience of abductions among respondents suggests that insecurity has become embedded in everyday educational life, fundamentally altering how schools are perceived by learners, parents and communities. This reinforces earlier studies that describe attacks on education as an increasingly persistent feature of Nigeria's security landscape (GCPEA, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024). It also supports the observations of Targba and Ribah (2025) and Ahmed et al. (2024) that repeated attacks gradually normalize educational insecurity. This study extends this understanding by showing that normalization does not imply acceptance; rather, it institutionalizes fear, making school attendance a continual risk assessment for families.

The finding that girls are perceived as the most vulnerable targets further demonstrates that educational insecurity in Nigeria is strongly gendered. Consistent with UNICEF (2024) and UNIDIR (2025), the results indicate that the consequences of abduction extend beyond physical harm to include long-term educational exclusion and heightened social vulnerability. Within the Nigeria where cultural expectations already constrain girls' educational opportunities in some communities, the threat of abduction reinforces parental decisions to prioritize safety over schooling. Consequently, insecurity amplifies pre-existing gender inequalities, making girls disproportionately likely to experience interrupted educational trajectories.

Viewed through the Conditioning Theory of Fear, these findings suggest that repeated exposure to violent attacks conditions communities to associate schools with danger rather than opportunity. Fear therefore becomes a social rather than merely individual response, influencing parental decisions, students' willingness to attend school and community confidence in educational institutions. This theoretical interpretation helps explain why educational disruption persists even where schools remain physically open, because psychological insecurity can be as influential as actual violence in shaping educational behaviour.

The study also reveals that the educational consequences of school abductions follow a cumulative pattern, beginning with irregular attendance and progressing to dropout or complete withdrawal. This finding is consistent with earlier evidence that conflict-related

violence undermines educational participation and contributes to rising school dropout among girls (GCPEA, 2018; Ahmed et al., 2024). However, the present study provides additional insight by demonstrating that absenteeism is not simply a temporary reaction to insecurity but often represents the first stage of progressive disengagement from formal education. This progression has important implications because prolonged educational interruption increases the likelihood of child marriage, economic dependence and reduced life opportunities, as similarly reported by Ugwu and Ugwu (2024) and UNESCO (2024).

Although respondents acknowledged the presence of interventions such as security deployment, the Safe Schools Initiative, community policing, and early warning systems, their mixed assessment of effectiveness indicates that existing measures have not sufficiently restored confidence in school safety. This finding aligns with previous studies that highlight implementation challenges and uneven coverage of school protection initiatives (GCPEA, 2025; Global Business Coalition for Education, 2015; Human Rights Watch, 2024). The results suggest that current interventions remain predominantly reactive, responding after attacks rather than preventing them. Sustainable protection of girls' education therefore requires a shift from temporary security responses to integrated strategies that combine preventive intelligence, community participation, psychosocial support and consistent implementation across vulnerable communities.

Conclusion

This study examined the prevalence and patterns of school abductions, their effects on girls' access, participation and continuation of education and the effectiveness of existing interventions aimed at protecting girls' right to learn. Findings revealed that school abductions are widespread and recurrent across the selected communities, with a high proportion of respondents reporting direct experience or witnessing of such incidents. The study also established a clear gendered dimension, with girls perceived as more vulnerable targets. Results showed a progression from irregular attendance to dropout and eventual complete withdrawal from schooling. Furthermore, while interventions such as security deployment, Safe Schools Initiative, community policing, and early warning systems exist, their effectiveness was largely perceived as moderate or ineffective.

The evidence that repeated abductions normalize fear within communities stresses the need to move beyond reactive security responses toward preventive and resilience-based protection systems. The dominance of irregular attendance and dropout as outcomes indicates that insecurity not only disrupts schooling but also produces long-term human capital losses, particularly for girls. Therefore, strengthening early warning systems, improving rapid response capacity and expanding the reach of the Safe Schools Initiative to underserved rural communities are vital. In addition, interventions must integrate psychosocial and trauma-informed support to address fear conditioning and restore confidence in schooling. In addition, community-based protection structures should be reinforced through better coordination with formal security agencies to ensure sustainability and trust. Finally, it is important to address gendered vulnerabilities through targeted policies that protect girls from secondary victimization such as forced marriage, stigma and educational exclusion.

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