

## Leah Sharibu

On 19 February 2018, 110 girls were abducted from the Government Girls Science and Technical College in Dapchi, Yobe state by terrorists belonging to ISWAP. Credible sources allege the security forces failed to act on warnings of an impending attack. On 21 March 2018, following negotiations with the government, ISWAP returned 104 girls, warning townsfolk never to enrol their children in school again, or they would be seized permanently. Five had died enroute to the terrorists' hideout. However, Leah Sharibu, aged 14 at the time and the sole Christian among them, remains in captivity, declared a 'slave for life' for her refusal to convert as a pre-condition for release.

## The Chibok girls

14 April 2026 marked the 12th anniversary of the abduction of 276 girls from the Government Girls Secondary School in Chibok, a town in southern Borno State, where the population is around 35% Christian. 217 of the abductees were members of the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria. Several have been released, allegedly for significant payments, during prisoner exchanges, while others have escaped, initially in the wake of the government's announcement of an amnesty for repentant fighters in 2015, and particularly following the defeat of Boko Haram by IS in 2021. However, 82 Chibok girls are still missing. Several Chibok girls who returned with children alongside Boko Haram fighters purporting to be their husbands were housed with these men in government deradicalisation centres, a development that has been likened to criminals benefiting from their crimes. Although the Borno State government asserted the returnees were not coerced into staying with these men, none appear to have received the psychosocial interventions necessary to assist them in processing their ordeal and coming to informed decisions.

## Conflict Related Sexual Violence in Nigeria

The continued captivity of Leah Sharibu and the unresolved cases of the remaining Chibok schoolgirls highlight a wider pattern of sexual and gender-based violence affecting women and girls in conflict-affected regions of Nigeria. While these particular cases have attracted international attention, they are not isolated incidents. Rather, they form part of a broader context in which abduction, subjugation, sexual violence, forced marriage, coercion and psychological abuse are used by terrorist factions and other armed non-state actors to humiliate communities and exert control over vulnerable populations.

In northern and central Nigeria women and girls abducted during attacks on schools, villages, places of worship and farming communities are particularly vulnerable to rape, forced marriage, forced labour, forced pregnancy and religious coercion. Sexual violence is often accompanied by physical violence, psychological torture, threats of execution and efforts to strip victims of their dignity and agency. Such abuses occur within a wider environment of insecurity, displacement and limited access to justice.

*'Motivated by political, military or economic objectives to control territory or resources, Conflict-related Sexual Violence (CRSV) is frequently and deliberately used to target civilians, inflicting long-term trauma and humiliation, fracturing families and the social fabric, triggering displacement and fuelling armed actors' activities. Such violence is also used as a tactic of violent extremism and terrorism. Women and girls continue to be those primarily affected by CRSV, not least due to patterns of gender discrimination and inequality predating the conflict.'*

[United Nations](#)

The situation in Southern Kaduna illustrates the aspects of CRSV articulated by the UN. The region has experienced largescale attacks, mass killings, kidnappings, forced displacement and land occupation by armed non-state actors of Fulani extraction since 2011, which increased exponentially during the administration of former governor Nasir el Rufai (2015-2023).

Alongside the killings, abductions, destruction of livelihoods and forced displacement, an unknown number of women and girls have been subjected to severe forms of sexual violence while in captivity in a significantly underreported conflict in which thousands may have suffered repeated rape and other forms of sexual abuse while in captivity. Many survivors remain reluctant to speak openly about their experiences due to stigma, fear and deep but unwarranted feelings of shame.

Testimonies gathered by CSW from survivors willing to share their experiences on condition of anonymity reveal the systematic and deeply traumatic nature of these abuses. One young mother who was abducted alongside her five-year-old daughter endured beatings, witnessed the mock hanging of her child and was repeatedly raped over the course of a week. The sexual violence began after she was taken to an area where bodies of victims of summary executions were deposited and instructed to prepare for her own death. During her captivity, her husband was tormented with calls from her captors informing him that his wife had become their "new wife". Following her release, she reported that one of her greatest fears was that she may have contracted HIV, yet the financial burden imposed by ransom demands left her family unable to access testing or treatment. She was also pregnant with a child that could belong either to her husband, or to one of her captors. Fortunately her husband accepted the child and resisted pressure from members of his family to divorce her.

Another survivor described being raped repeatedly while in captivity and reported that her captors threatened to sell her to Boko Haram fighters, where she would be forcibly converted. She also recounted efforts by her captors to desensitise her to violence, including forcing her to participate in the abuse of an elderly detainee. Following her release, she struggled with severe psychological trauma and reported violent reactions whenever men approached

her closely, alongside episodes of intense anger and distress that were not part of her behaviour before her abduction.

The consequences of CRSV often continue long after physical captivity has ended. In one particularly tragic case, a young woman returned home pregnant following repeated rape while in captivity. According to testimony received, she became increasingly withdrawn from her family and community, refused food and isolated herself from those around her. She subsequently died while giving birth.

CRSV is not weaponisation solely against women and girls. Reports have also emerged of sexual violence targeting male abductees, including cases so severe that survivors required hospitalisation following release, and/or were obliged to utilise incontinence pads. The extreme stigma associated with such crimes means cases remain hidden and unreported, presenting significant challenges for survivor support, accountability and justice.

Survivors also report ongoing intimidation after release. Former captors have continued to contact victims using the same telephone numbers employed during ransom negotiations, monitoring their movements, issuing threats and warning of future attacks. In the absence of effective protection from the authorities, many survivors continue to live under conditions of fear and insecurity long after escaping captivity. As one survivor noted, reporting such threats can feel impossible when perpetrators appear able to operate with impunity and victims lack confidence that adequate protection will be provided.

The persistence of these abuses highlights broader concerns regarding protection, accountability and survivor support.

Similar violations, including CRSV are replicated in Nigeria's northwest, where armed assailants of Fulani extraction target ethnic Hausa communities in a campaign of violence and subjugation involving mass killings, abduction, extortion and CRSV.

## Analysis

Human rights are universal, inalienable, indivisible, interdependent, interrelated and mutually reinforcing. Consequently, CRSV is not solely a women's rights issue. In many contexts it intersects with religious persecution, ethnic targeting, forced displacement, poverty and the collapse of community structures.

In Nigeria women and girls from communities targeted by extremist organisations have been particularly vulnerable to abduction, sexual violence and coerced conversion. The continued captivity of Leah Sharibu remains emblematic of these intersecting vulnerabilities. Her case serves as a reminder that sexual and gender-based violence is frequently deployed not merely as a by-product of conflict, but also as a tool of intimidation, domination and persecution.

Despite the profound physical, psychological and social consequences of CRSV, accountability remains limited. Survivors continue to face barriers to justice, access to

healthcare and psychosocial support, while many affected communities report inadequate protection from security agencies. Greater attention is therefore required not only to securing the release of those who, like Leah Sharibu, remain in captivity, but also to ensuring comprehensive support for survivors and meaningful accountability for perpetrators.

*'This International Day reminds the world that sexual violence in conflict is not an unfortunate side effect of war, it is a deliberate tactic of terror, a crime against humanity that destroys lives, families, and communities. Leah's continued captivity is a stark symbol of this evil. She is not just a statistic; she is our daughter, a young woman of faith whose body and spirit have been subjected to years of exploitation because she would not deny Jesus.'*

### The Parents of Leah Sharibu – 19 June 2026

The continued captivity of Leah Sharibu, more than eight years after her abduction, demonstrates the enduring vulnerability of women and girls in conflict-affected regions of Nigeria. Her case has become emblematic not only of freedom of religion or belief violations, but also of the broader risks faced by women and girls who are targeted by terrorist organisations and armed non-state actors.

The experiences of Leah Sharibu, the Chibok schoolgirls and survivors of abduction in communities such as Southern Kaduna illustrate how CRSV is frequently weaponised for coercion, intimidation, control and humiliation. It is often accompanied by other abuses, including forced displacement, religious coercion, forced marriage, forced labour, physical violence and psychological torture. These abuses have a profound impact not only on individual survivors, but also on families and communities, undermining social cohesion, educational opportunities, economic resilience and long-term development.

Particularly concerning is an ongoing lack of accountability for perpetrators and the limited access to comprehensive support services for survivors. Women and girls who return from captivity often face significant barriers to accessing healthcare, psychosocial support, education and economic opportunities. Survivors may also experience stigma, social exclusion and continuing insecurity. In some instances, the absence of effective protection mechanisms leaves survivors vulnerable to further intimidation by their former captors.

The persistence of abductions and CRSV raises broader concerns regarding civilian protection in areas affected by insurgencies. While security challenges in Nigeria are complex and multifaceted, the continued existence of cases such as Leah Sharibu demonstrates the need for sustained attention from both the Nigerian government and international partners.

## UK Foreign Policy

Nigeria is one of the United Kingdom's most significant strategic partners in Africa, with cooperation spanning trade, investment, security, education, development and migration. As implementation of commitments arising from the March 2026 State Visit progresses, the long-term sustainability of UK-Nigeria cooperation will depend not only on economic growth and security collaboration but also on improvements in governance, rule of law, accountability and civilian protection.

Freedom of religion or belief violations, conflict-related sexual violence, abductions and insecurity should therefore not be viewed solely as human rights concerns. They are also indicative of wider governance challenges which affect stability, social cohesion, economic resilience and sustainable development. The continued captivity of Leah Sharibu more than eight years after her abduction remains a stark reminder of the need for stronger protection mechanisms, improved accountability and sustained political attention.

The UK Government has consistently championed the importance prevention of sexual violence in conflict through initiatives such as the Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative (PSVI). The experiences of women and girls abducted in Nigeria demonstrate the continuing relevance of this agenda and the importance of ensuring that survivor-centred approaches remain embedded within UK engagement with conflict-affected countries.

The International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict provides an important opportunity to draw attention to the experiences of women and girls who remain in captivity, survivors who continue to live with the consequences of sexual violence, and communities that remain vulnerable to further attacks. The case of Leah Sharibu should therefore be viewed as part of a wider challenge requiring coordinated action to promote accountability, protection and survivor-centred support.

## Recommendations to the UK Government:

### **1. Embed freedom of religion or belief and conflict-related sexual violence within all UK-Nigeria strategic engagement**

As the UK and Nigeria deepen cooperation on trade, security, education, migration and economic development in the wake of the March 2026 State Visit, the UK Government should ensure that FoRB, civilian protection and CRSV are integrated into all relevant bilateral discussions rather than treated as stand-alone human rights concerns.

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) should ensure that discussions on security, governance and development cooperation include regular consideration of attacks on religious communities, abductions, forced marriage, conflict-related sexual violence and the protection of vulnerable populations.

### **2. Integrate human rights benchmarks into the UK-Nigeria Enhanced Partnership**

As implementation of agreements reached during the March 2026 State Visit progresses, the UK Government should ensure that bilateral cooperation frameworks include measurable indicators relating to freedom of religion or belief, conflict-related sexual violence, civilian protection and accountability for serious human rights violations.

Progress against these indicators should be reviewed regularly through ministerial and senior official engagement to ensure that increased cooperation is accompanied by meaningful improvements in the protection of vulnerable communities.

### **3. Establish a formal UK-Nigeria Human Rights Dialogue**

The UK Government should establish a dedicated UK-Nigeria Human Rights Dialogue with a standing agenda that should include:

- Freedom of religion or belief.
- Conflict-related sexual violence.
- Abductions and kidnappings.
- Civilian protection.
- Strengthening the rule of law through accountability.
- Protection of women and girls.

The dialogue should occur regularly and include clear reporting mechanisms to Parliament. This recommendation builds directly upon previous proposals for a formal bilateral human rights mechanism between both countries.

### **4. Secure formal updates on Leah Sharibu and remaining Abductees**

The FCDO should seek regular formal updates from the Government of Nigeria regarding efforts to secure the release of Leah Sharibu and others who remain in the captivity of extremists.

The UK Government should also encourage the inclusion of abductee cases within relevant UK-Nigeria bilateral discussions and request updates on measures being taken to prevent future abductions and support survivors.

### **5. Introduce accountability benchmarks into UK-Nigeria security cooperation**

Future security cooperation should include measurable civilian protection and accountability benchmarks.

The UK Government should seek regular updates from Nigeria regarding:

- Arrests and accountability connected to kidnappings and abductions.
- Prosecutions relating to CRSV.
- Investigations into attacks on schools and places of worship.

- Convictions for mass killings and terrorist attacks on civilians.

Progress against these benchmarks should form part of ongoing bilateral engagement. The FCDO should seek periodic reporting against these benchmarks and incorporate progress assessments into future discussions concerning security cooperation and capacity-building support.

#### **6. Require annual ministerial reporting to Parliament**

The Foreign Secretary should provide an annual written update to Parliament on:

- The situation of Leah Sharibu.
- The status of remaining Chibok girls.
- Trends relating to conflict-related sexual violence.
- UK engagement with Nigeria on civilian protection and FoRB.
- Progress made through UK-supported security cooperation programmes.

This would create a mechanism through which Parliament can monitor progress and hold government accountable.

#### **7. Review UK-supported security assistance against civilian protection outcomes**

Where UK security assistance is provided, the FCDO and the Ministry of Defence should assess whether programmes are contributing to improved protection for civilians and vulnerable communities.

Evaluation should include:

- Civilian harm mitigation.
- Human rights compliance.
- Protection of women and girls.
- Protection of religious minorities and ethnic communities.

Security cooperation should strengthen protection rather than simply increase operational capacity.

#### **8. Expand support for survivor-centred rehabilitation**

The UK Government should increase support for trauma-informed programmes assisting survivors of conflict-related sexual violence, including:

- Medical treatment.
- Psychosocial support.
- Education.
- Economic reintegration.
- Community-based rehabilitation.

Particular attention should be given to women and girls returning from captivity and children born as a result of rape.

#### **9. Consider targeted sanctions where credible evidence exists**

Where credible evidence exists that individuals or entities have committed, facilitated or enabled severe human rights violations, including CRSV, the UK Government should consider the imposition of sanctions under the Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime.

#### **Recommendations to the Government of Nigeria:**

1. Prioritise efforts to secure the release of Leah Sharibu and all remaining abductees.
2. Develop a national strategy on conflict-related sexual violence, including survivor support, accountability and prevention measures.
3. Improve investigations and prosecutions relating to abduction, rape, forced marriage and other gender-specific abuses.
4. Ensure survivors have access to comprehensive healthcare, psychosocial support and livelihood assistance.
5. Publish regular data on abductions, conflict-related sexual violence and accountability outcomes.
6. Enhance protection for communities vulnerable to terrorist attacks, kidnappings and militia violence.
7. Combat impunity further by finding, arresting and enforcing maximum legal penalties on identified sponsors and facilitators of the extremist violence that provides the enabling environment for CRSV.
8. Address the stigma affecting survivors of sexual violence and children born as a result of CRSV.

## Appendices

### **Full Statement from the Parents of Leah Sharibu – Voices for Justice, 19 June 2026:**

*We are Nathan and Rebecca Sharibu, the parents of Leah Sharibu. Today, as organizations within the Religious Liberty Partnership gather under the powerful banner of “Voices for Justice” to mark the International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict, we speak with heavy hearts but unwavering hope.*

*Our daughter Leah, abducted as a 14-year-old Christian schoolgirl from the Government Girls Science and Technical College in Dapchi, Yobe State, on February 19, 2018, remains in the captivity of Boko Haram/ISWAP terrorists for more than eight long years. Leah was taken alongside 109 other girls. Most were eventually released, but our daughter was held back solely because she refused to renounce her Christian faith and convert to Islam. She stood firm in her belief, choosing to remain true to Christ even at the cost of her freedom.*

*For this courage, she has endured unimaginable hardship in the wilderness, reports from those who escaped speak of forced marriage, repeated trauma, childbirths in captivity, and the constant shadow of sexual violence used as a weapon of war and control.*

*As her parents, every day without Leah is a wound that deepens. We miss her and her dreams of a better future. Birthdays pass in silence, milestones are stolen, and our family lives with a pain no words can fully capture. Yet we hold onto our faith. We believe, as we have always told Leah and the world, that God who sees the oppressed will bring her home. Rebecca often says, our request morning and night is that people continue to pray and speak for Leah.*

*This International Day reminds the world that sexual violence in conflict is not an unfortunate side effect of war, it is a deliberate tactic of terror, a crime against humanity that destroys lives, families, and communities. Leah’s continued captivity is a stark symbol of this evil. She is not just a statistic; she is our daughter, a young woman of faith whose body and spirit have been subjected to years of exploitation because she would not deny Jesus.*

*We call on the Nigerian government, regional leaders, the international community, and all people of conscience to intensify efforts for Leah’s immediate and unconditional release. Negotiations, diplomatic pressure, intelligence sharing, and targeted rescue operations must not fade. Leah’s freedom is a matter of national urgency and moral imperative. Her case highlights the broader plight of countless girls and women suffering in similar conflicts across Nigeria and beyond.*

*To Leah, wherever you are, we love you beyond measure. We are proud of your steadfast faith. Stay strong. Help is coming. The voices for justice are rising.*

*We thank the ‘Voices for Justice’ community - the Religious Liberty Partnership and all participating organizations - for shining a light on these forgotten captives and for giving us this platform to be heard. May this day strengthen global resolve to end sexual violence in conflict and bring every Leah home.*

**CSW everyone  
free to believe**