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Stockholm syndrome: Causes, implications, and way out

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Abstract

The incidence of kidnapping and hostage-taking in Nigeria is a long-standing unresolved issue that has gradually progressed to becoming an epidemic. It is not uncommon for captives to develop a traumatic or terror bonding with their abductor as a means of surviving and securing their safety, resulting in a condition called Stockholm syndrome. As a result of a lack of systematic approach over the years, it has been difficult to illuminate the impacts of Stockholm syndrome on victims and society at large, particularly gender-related effects. The purpose of this review, however, is to elucidate these issues and provide possible solutions. It is important that the public are enlightened regarding this syndrome and that psychotherapy centers be established throughout the country. In the absence of urgent action, Nigerians' mental health, as well as their education, economy, and future, are at risk.

Keywords: Stockholm syndrome, kidnapping, violence, Nigeria, sexual abuse, male and female gender

Introduction

Stockholm syndrome also known as 'terror bonding' and 'traumatic bonding' is a mental reaction or behaviour that occurs when captives develop an alliance with their captors, detainer, or abuser during a kidnapping or captive situation (Clark, 2016; Healthline, 2019) [5, 6]. Most often than not, the duration of creating this alliance and developing Stockholm syndrome is often a few days, weeks, months, or a few years after imprisonment, captivity, or abuse (Clark, 2016; Healthline, 2019) [5, 6]. During this period of captivity, the abductee often has double reliance on survival. Relying on the abductor for survival and families, security agencies, or government authorities for freedom. This then makes the captive create a twofold-dependency perception (Clark, 2016; Simon & Blum, 1987) [5, 24]. Symptoms such as sleeplessness, general irritability, night terrors, problem focusing, the feeling of unreality, inability to enjoy formerly pleasurable events, wariness, and flashbacks have been recorded in individuals with Stockholm syndrome. This is in similitude to individuals pronounced of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and with this perspective, Stockholm syndrome posed a great challenge to the mental health of the abductee (Simon and Blum, 1987: Reliefweb, 2018) [24, 23].

Owing to this syndrome, over time, captives [as against the associated fear, panic, and contempt anticipated from individuals in this kind of terrific condition] usually find this condition pleasurable, thereby developing negative attitudes towards their loved ones or any individual making way for their freedom (Reliefweb, 2018; Healthline, 2019) [23, 6]. According to psychologists and medical professionals, Stockholm syndrome has been regarded as a survival mechanism imbibed by captives to handle trauma or petrified condition. It is also expressed as the positive nexus some abductees developed toward their abductor (Namnyak *et al.*, 2008; Clark, 2016; Healthline, 2019) [14, 5, 6].

Reported Kidnapping in Nigeria

One of the foremost recorded events of abduction in Nigeria can be dated back to 2006 when the militants of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria kidnapped some individuals as a sign of disapproval against government inequity, and economic and environmental injustice in this oil-rich region of the country (Ngwama, 2014) [15]. Taking people hostage and collecting ransom was then employed as a channel to equip and fund emancipation (Ngwama, 2014) [15]. Unfortunately, the government was unable to curtail this situation and the citizens do not take it seriously because it affects only the rich and foreigners.

Presently, kidnapping and abduction of various forms have escalated all over the country from the South to the North, East, and Western regions (Babaita, 2020) ^[3]. South-East and South-South regions are now regarded as the den of captors and abduction, while North-East and North-West are regarded as the den of bandits and terrorists (Babaita, 2020) ^[3]. Unfortunately, educational institutions are now the most vulnerable and the main target of these bandits are girls' schools. An unfamiliar episode of kidnapping has now become the order of the day and the most lucrative profession in Nigeria (Ngwama, 2014) ^[15]. Besides, some captives were reported to be freed unhurt after the ransom was made, while some were hurt, killed, sexually abused and maltreated, even after the payment of the ransom. Such trauma remains indelible (Ngwama, 2014) ^[15].

Table 1: Kidnapping in Nigeria between January and June 2021 HumAngle, 2022 ^[7]. (<https://humanglemedia.com/data-more-nigerians-kidnapped-in-first-6-months-of-2021-than-all-of-2020/>)

Regions	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
North-Central	25	42	46	51	228	613	942
North-East	515	38	172	313	180	392	211
North-West	6	68	40	383	597	1449	1405
South-East	16	8	9	17	25	86	77
South-South	68	134	149	161	271	201	140
South-West	27	57	68	61	85	119	169
TOTAL	657	347	484	986	1386	2860	2944

Source: HumAngle, 2022 ^[7]

The Implications of Abduction and the Stockholm Syndrome on Gender and the Society

The negative effects of Stockholm Syndrome on any society like Nigeria are often numerous and enormous. This ranges from mental issues like memory impairment, lack of concentration, distraction, obtrusive thoughts like flashbacks, hypervigilance, and hyperarousal with an intense fear of another episode (Alexander & Klein, 2009; Clark, 2016; Kearney *et al.*, 2010) ^[33, 5, 12]. Emotional consequences like shock could lead to paralysis, anger, fear, and anxiety. Social disengagement, irritability, antagonistic behaviour, and isolation are other effects (Alexander & Klein, 2009) ^[33]. Individuals returning from a captive experience usually become strangers and shadows of their previous selves. Their ways and manners, including habits, often become different from what they used to be, coupled with a general mistrust of the people around them and getting frightened whenever they heard a loud noise or bang. According to Alexander and Klein 2009 ^[33], real psychopathology was recognized among kidnapped casualties understudy and about 50% of the victims experienced suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) while close to 30% experienced principal depression (Alexander & Klein, 2009) ^[33].

The education sector and the future of Nigeria are also under threat, as banditry has continued to force children out of schools, risking a 'lost generation' and the crumbling of human security in Africa's most populous nation, Nigeria. One in five of the world's out-of-school children is a Nigerian. The 12-year-old Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria and the more recent rise in armed banditry, kidnapping, and acts of terrorism have combined to force the closures of an estimated 600 schools as of the early year 2021 with over 2 million people displaced (Clark, 2016; MaryAnne Iwara, 2021) ^[5, 13].

Effects of Abduction and Stockholm Syndrome on Gender

In Nigeria, most victims of abduction have been girls between the ages of 11-19 years. One of the earliest reported cases of kidnapping was reported in the Chibok community of Borno state, Nigeria, popularly known as 'the Chibok girls'. This occurred on the night of 14th- 15th April 2014, where 276 girls aged 16-18 years were kidnapped (Torbjörnsson & Jonsson, 2017; Olujuwon, 2016) ^[27, 18]. Following this incident, close to 100 girls were released after negotiation and ransoms were paid to their abductors while some of the girls were reported to have escaped on their own. Seven years after this incident, as of the end of the year 2021, over 100 of these girls are still in captivity (VOA Africa, 2021) ^[32]. Subsequently, these remaining students were reported to have developed Stockholm Syndrome by showing alliance with their detainers through the slogan "we are never coming back", according to a twenty-one-minute video released by their captors; the Boko-haram insurgent (Ngwama, 2014: The Times, 2018) ^[15, 26]. Besides, some of the returnees returned home as teenage mothers after having children with their abductors. Nonetheless, they still declare preference to go back to their 'Boko Haram husbands' after freedom (Jacob Zenn, 2018) ^[11].

Another case of schoolgirls' abduction popularly known as the 'Dapchi girls' happened in Government Girls' Science and Technical College, Dapchi, Yobe State on the 19th of February, 2018, where 110 school girls aged 11-19 years were abducted (Omomia, 2021) ^[19]. To date (4 years after), some of these girls are still reported to be in the custody of their abductors.

As most of the victims of abduction are minors and girls, many of them are being exposed to rape, unprotected sexual intercourse, or sexual molestation by their abductors. Such early exposure to sexual activity may trigger increased production of sexual hormones in these girls and the urge to have sexual intercourse will increase (Trickett *et al.*, 2011) ^[28]. If such sexual desire could not be fulfilled in a sane society, it could trigger the desire of such victims, develop Stockholm syndrome and go back to being captive where sexual abuse or molestation is the order of the day. However, in cases where returning to captivity proves abortive or unrealistic, such girls could result in sexual hawkers and an increased rate of prostitution. Exposure to more sexual molestation could lead to a high risk of infection with sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancy, exposure to teenage pregnancy and abortion than could lead to womb damage or death. If this continues, then there will be an increased rate of sexually transmitted diseases, teenage pregnancy, teenage motherhood, and pregnant women mortality, among others in Nigeria (Ouédraogo *et al.*, 2017) ^[20].

According to a study by Trickett *et al.* 2011 ^[28], sexually abused females do have premature onsets of puberty, cognitive deficits, depression, dissociative symptoms, maladaptive sexual development, hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal attenuation, asymmetrical stress responses, dropping out of high school, continuous posttraumatic stress disorder, self-mutilation among others (Trickett *et al.*, 2011) ^[28]. Therefore, increases in the rate of SS will affect the mental stability of these girls who are mostly teenagers. Besides, before this time, priority is not placed on girls' education in Nigeria due to the notion that girls are meant for the kitchen

as they will eventually go to their husband house. This is a war that has been in existence for decades, however, with more enlightenment, Nigerians have been allowing their girls to go to school, nonetheless, incessant attacks on schoolgirls will bring a major setback to girls' education in Nigeria. It will make many girls drop out while others will not even attempt to start.

Effects of Abduction and Stockholm Syndrome on Male Banditry and the development of Stockholm syndrome are not limited to girls alone. In recent times, these bandits have started invading boys' schools. The 'Kankara boys' were kidnapped on the 11th of December 2020 with over 300 students in a secondary school in Kankara, Kastina state (The Economist, 2020) [25]. On July 5th, 2021, 121 students were also kidnapped from Bethel Baptist High School in Kaduna state. As a fact, 120 of these students have so far been released after paying a ransom of 250 million naira, however, the remaining one student has declared he's now enjoying himself in captivity and he's no longer coming home (Vanguard, 2022) [31]. One of the major findings regarding kidnapping male students is for recruitment into banditry (Clark, 2016) [5].

Like the case of the Bethel Baptist school student who decided not to come back home due to the way, their captors lavished money and care (Vanguard, 2022) [31]. After release, some of these boys might develop Stockholm syndrome with a desire to go back (Vanguard, 2022) [31]. This could create a more aggressive and hostile society thereby resulting in rural banditry, stealing, armed robbery and even kidnapping. Some may even form a formidable allegiance with the abductors to create a more terrific society as they stand as an informant.

Besides, around 12:05 am on the 3rd of October 2019, six students and two teachers were reported to have been kidnapped at Engravers College in Kakau Daji a village in Kaduna state (ICIR, 2019) [9]. Similarly, on March 11th, 2021, 39 students of Greenfield University and College of Forestry in the Kaduna State of Nigeria were abducted (Premium Times, 2021) [22]. On May 30, 2021, at around 4P.M, over 200 students were also kidnapped in one Islamiyya school in Niger State. This school consists of nursery and primary school pupils, and also hosts Islamiyya students in the evening and at weekends (ICIR, 2021) [10].

Effect of Stockholm Syndrome and Abduction on The Society

From January to August 2021, over 1000 children were reported to be abducted in Nigeria, with so many of them still in the hands of their abductors. Between 2015-2019, there were 100 reported attacks on schools in Nigeria (Premium Times, 2021) [22]. These attacks have been on the increase between 2020 and 2021. Between January and July 2021, 1,065 students have been kidnapped, 6 were killed, and over 273 were still held captive (Vanguard, 2021) [29, 30]. Going by this, we can say that the major contributing factors to Stockholm Syndrome in Nigeria are insecurity and poverty (Brainard & Chollet, 2007) [4].

As of the time of this research in February 2022, there is no part of the country that is safe including the federal capital territory in Abuja, which is the seat of power. Insecurity and the fear of the unknown as being a major psychological challenges for almost every citizen of Nigeria (over 200 million population) including the poor and the rich

(Adebayo, 2014) [1]. Bandits are taking over communities, schools, religious gatherings, and major highways among other vital parts of the country, targeting school children and minors (Vanguard, 2021) [29, 30]. This is a major threat to the future of Nigeria and may have a serious negative psychological effect on the citizens and the sanctity of society.

Besides, due to the high rate of insecurity, living in the den of the kidnappers seems to be safer than being at home. Security operatives look to have been overpowered by the bandits. At least there will be no fear or anxiety of being re-kidnapped in the kidnapper's den. The fear of being re-kidnapped might also be one of the reasons why many captives that have initially gained freedom developed Stockholm syndrome and preferred going back to enjoy the safety in the arms of the abductors than living with the fear of being re-kidnapped. Continuation of hunger and thirst coupled with insecurity could also be among the reasons for preferring to go back to captivity.

The increased or high rate of poverty in Nigeria is another major factor contributing to the development of Stockholm syndrome which is now in Nigeria (Ibrahim & Mukhtar, 2017) [8]. As over eighty per cent (80%) of Nigerians are living in abject poverty, this has made kidnapping to be a lucrative job in the country (Awojobi, 2014) [1]. Based on statistical records, only a few Nigerians can afford 2 square meals per day. This rate of poverty has made kidnapping to be a major tool of survival from ransom collection and has also become a major tool in enticing the kidnapped victims by spending lavishly on them to buy or change their minds (Ibrahim & Mukhtar, 2017) [8]. This has also led to an increased rate of developing Stockholm syndrome. 'If three square meals can be gotten in captivity, why wouldn't the captive prefer captivity to freedom?

The Nigerian economy is also at stake as a record had it that over 18 million dollars were paid as ransoms between 2011 to 2020 (Olujobi, 2021) [17]. Living daily with a fear of where to get ransom peradventure you or your loved one get kidnapped is another psychological or mental stress to Nigerians 'operation gets your Ransome ready'. Besides, issues related to banditry and kidnapping used to surface probably once in two every other year, however, this has escalated to a yearly occurrence, bi-monthly to monthly, and now daily. From midnight to broad daylight, from secondary school students to tertiary school; from public schools to private schools; ransom is being paid in millions and everything is getting messier daily (Olaniyi & Aminu, 2021) [16].

Fake news and exaggeration of the act of kidnapping, banditry, and terrorism under the pretext of reporting, have also worsened the situation and built-up anxiety in the mind of the citizens. Cover up by the Nigerian governments and those in charge of the security and safety of the citizens, the act of kidnapping and banditry have been completely neutralized and the non-existence of such activity has also been a major setback in conquering the Stockholm syndrome pandemic.

The Way Out

The physiological and psychological effects of abduction could be traumatic due to seclusion and deprivation from loved ones. It is of great necessity to explore captive experiences among the victims to understand how captive-abductor relationships are. This is imperative as victims of

kidnapping are usually not ready for therapy as physicians are envisaged as an enemy due to previous abduction experiences which makes psychiatric therapy to be perceived as a psychological blow to traumatic injury (Simon and Blum, 1987; Ngwama, 2014) ^[24, 15].

There should be public enlightenment on the treatment for Stockholm syndromes such as short-term counselling, psychological therapy for post-traumatic stress disorder (depression and worry), lots of tender love, care, and fun to make former captives feel at home and forget the captive experience and exposure, engagements, private discussions, de-programming their confused mind to discover their real identity, among other treatments that can assist to ameliorate issues related to recuperation (Namnyak *et al*, 2008) ^[14]. Long-term mental therapy can further assist with rehabilitation. Authorities concerned should not leave rescued captives to themselves as this may be dangerous to society. Hence, there should be a proper follow-up by a professional psychiatrist or psychological therapist (Namnyak *et al.*, 2008) ^[14].

Government and private organizations should help in creating counselling and therapy areas in strategic locations within communities. Religious organizations also have a major role in the rehabilitation process. There is also a need for the provision of specially trained psychiatric units across the health care centers in the country to treat rescued captives. The security and safety of Nigerians should not be traded for anything. Where government seems to be overwhelmed in achieving a safer society, private organizations and individuals should also take up this issue of security by assisting the government.

Conclusion

Developing a heart of love or allegiance for one's abductor is as bad as being an abductor. The act of abduction will directly or indirectly be tantamount to recruiting people into the act, to further increase the level of insecurity in the country. Therefore, the government and concerned authorities should be alive of their responsibilities and stop this menace. Sharing one's captive experience with family or loved ones could also trigger Stockholm Syndrome in them due to a false perception of reality and negative exposure. Whether this Stockholm syndrome was developed during the period of captivity or after, its negative effects are better imagined than experienced. It's high time the Nigerian government and concerned authorities stop the hide-and-seek game with the bandits or terrorists and clean the mess up. The psychological or mental state of citizens will go a long way in determining the serenity of the country. Once insecurity can be tamed, and poverty is reduced, then Stockholm Syndrome will subside and be eradicated.

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