WEAPONS, IDENTITY, AND CONFLICT: INVESTIGATING THE IMPACT OF SMALL ARMS ON ETHNO-RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE IN KARIM LAMIDO, TARABA STATE

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Abstract

The proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) has emerged as a critical driver of communal instability across Nigeria's Middle Belt, with far-reaching implications for national cohesion and human security. This study examines the role of SALWs in escalating ethno-religious conflict in Karim Lamido Local Government Area (LGA) of Taraba State a region marked by deep-rooted identity cleavages, political marginalization, and recurring violence. Anchored on Relative Deprivation Theory, the research posits that perceived inequalities whether economic, political, or cultural when combined with access to small arms, significantly increase the likelihood of violent group mobilization. A survey research design was adopted, utilizing a multi-stage sampling technique to select 391 respondents across the LGA's eleven wards. Data were collected using structured questionnaires and analyzed through descriptive statistics and Chi-square tests. Findings reveal a strong consensus among respondents that the availability of SALWs has intensified both the frequency and destructiveness of ethno-religious clashes. The Chi-square analysis confirmed a statistically significant relationship between arms proliferation and conflict escalation ($\chi^2 = 204.4$, $p < 0.05$). The study concludes that SALWs serve not only as physical tools of violence but also as psychological instruments of group assertion in contexts of perceived deprivation. It recommends strengthened arms control policies, inclusive governance, community peacebuilding mechanisms, and youth empowerment programs as pathways to sustainable peace. This research contributes to the discourse on armed conflict in Nigeria by providing localized, theory-driven insights into the intersection of weapons, identity, and insecurity.

Keywords: Ethno-religious conflict, identity-based violence, insecurity, Karim Lamido, relative deprivation, Small arms, Taraba State

1. Introduction

The proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) remains one of the most pressing global security threats of the 21st century, with far-reaching implications for both national and international peace and stability (Adamson, 2019). These weapons, which include revolvers, rifles, machine guns, and grenades, have become the instruments of choice in many contemporary violent conflicts due to their portability, affordability, and lethality. Globally, it is estimated that over 875 million SALWs are in circulation (Madu, 2017), with illicit arms trade flourishing through increasingly sophisticated trafficking networks that exploit migration routes, weak border controls, and the anonymity provided by the internet.

Despite global disarmament efforts such as the United Nations Programme of Action (PoA) initiated in 2001 and the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT)

SALWs continue to spread rapidly, particularly across fragile regions like West Africa and the Sahel (UNIDR, 2020). Africa, and West Africa in particular, has become a major hotspot, with approximately 30 million SALWs present in Sub-Saharan Africa and about 8 million in West Africa alone (Smith, 2020). These weapons have not only fueled armed rebellions and criminal violence but have also deepened instability, weakened state authority, and empowered non-state actors including insurgents, private militias, and criminal gangs.

In Nigeria, the consequences of SALWs proliferation are particularly dire. With porous borders, institutional corruption, and under-resourced law enforcement, the country has become a fertile ground for the illicit trade in small arms. The availability of these weapons has intensified violent crimes such as kidnapping, banditry, armed robbery, and terrorism. Moreover, ethno-religious

tensions, historically embedded in Nigeria's pluralistic society, have been further aggravated by the widespread accessibility of arms, turning communal disagreements into full-blown conflicts (Otis, 2020; Kofi, 2017).

Taraba State, located in the North-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria, has experienced recurrent violence driven by ethnic and religious rivalries. In particular, Karim Lamido Local Government Area has emerged as a flashpoint where the proliferation of SALWs intersects with identity-based conflict. Ethnic mistrust, political manipulation, economic marginalization, and religious intolerance converge in this locality, creating fertile ground for armed confrontation. The accessibility of weapons has transformed local disputes into protracted conflicts, with devastating consequences for human security, social cohesion, and development (Adamu, 2015; Ayodele, 2017).

The Nigerian government's responses have often been reactive and militarized, focusing more on containment than prevention. However, without addressing the root causes of SALWs proliferation and the identity-based grievances that fuel violence, lasting peace will remain elusive. Furthermore, international mechanisms such as the UN PoA and the ATT have achieved limited success in curbing the illicit flow of arms into conflict zones like Taraba State due to enforcement challenges, geopolitical interests, and persistent demand (Adebayo, 2022).

Against this backdrop, this study seeks to empirically examine the dynamics of SALWs proliferation and its role in shaping ethno-religious conflicts in Karim Lamido Local Government Area. By focusing on the local context, the study aims to uncover how weapons availability transforms communal tensions into violent clashes, explore the socio-political drivers behind arms circulation, and offer actionable insights for policy and peacebuilding interventions in Nigeria and the broader West African sub-region.

Statement of the Problem
Despite numerous international and national interventions aimed at curbing the illicit circulation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs), their proliferation remains a critical driver of ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria. Nowhere is this more evident than in Taraba State, where communities such as Karim Lamido have become theatres of recurrent violence fuelled by easy access to firearms. The widespread availability of SALWs has transformed localized communal grievances often rooted in land disputes, political marginalization, and identity-based tensions into persistent and deadly confrontations (Adamu, 2015; Ayodele, 2017).

What makes this situation particularly alarming is the manner in which SALWs serve not only as instruments of violence but also as symbols of power and resistance within fractured societies. In many cases, aggrieved groups acquire arms as a form of self-defence or ethnic assertion, thereby intensifying arms races among competing factions (Smith, 2020). This militarization of identity threatens to entrench cycles of retaliation, weaken state authority, and erode the prospects for dialogue and peaceful coexistence (Otis, 2020).

Although Nigeria is a signatory to international treaties such as the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), weak institutional enforcement, porous borders, and the complicity of political actors have allowed the illicit arms trade to flourish (Adamson, 2019; Adebayo, 2022). Yet, academic inquiry into how these structural failures interact with local ethno-religious dynamics especially in conflict-prone areas like Karim Lamid remains limited. This gap underscores the urgent need for a nuanced, context-specific investigation into the role of SALWs in fuelling identity-based violence in Nigeria's Middle Belt region.

Research Objective
To critically examine how the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) influences the dynamics of ethno-religious conflict in Karim Lamido Local Government Area, Taraba State, with particular attention to how weapon accessibility reshapes identity-based grievances and intensifies communal violence.

2. Literature Review
Global Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs)
The global proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) has emerged as one of the most pressing security challenges of the post-Cold War

era. These weapons are responsible for a disproportionate amount of fatalities in internal and cross-border conflicts, with their ease of accessibility, portability, and concealability making them the preferred tools of modern-day violence (UNIDR, 2020). According to global estimates, there are over 875 million small arms in circulation, with a significant number traded illegally across state borders (Smith, 2020). The spread of SALWs has been facilitated by weak arms control regimes, unregulated manufacturing, ineffective disarmament frameworks, and the porous nature of borders, particularly in post-conflict and developing regions.

The international community has attempted to mitigate the threat posed by SALWs through various initiatives, including the United Nations Programme of Action (PoA) adopted in 2001, and the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) enacted in 2013. However, these frameworks face significant implementation challenges, particularly in fragile states where institutional enforcement capacity is limited. Scholars argue that despite these international measures, the demand for illicit arms remains high due to unresolved grievances, socio-political instability, and the erosion of state legitimacy (Adebayo, 2022; Otis, 2020).

Regional Dynamics of SALWs in West Africa

West Africa has been significantly impacted by the proliferation of SALWs, largely due to civil wars, insurgencies, and the collapse of state authority in neighboring regions such as Libya, Mali, and the Central African Republic. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has taken notable steps toward curbing the illicit arms trade, including the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons (2006). However, the practical enforcement of such regional mechanisms remains weak due to limited resources, cross-border criminal networks, and widespread corruption (Adamson, 2019).

Scholarly works have identified Nigeria as a principal flashpoint within the West African arms landscape. It serves as both a destination and transit country for illicit weapons, many of which are smuggled in from war-torn regions or manufactured locally (Kofi, 2017). Furthermore, regional instability has transformed West Africa into a trafficking corridor for weapons that are used to fuel intercommunal violence, terrorism, and political repression (Madu, 2017).

SALWs and Identity-Based Conflict

The link between SALWs and identity-based violence has been widely documented in the conflict and security literature. Ethnic and religious identities are often politicized and weaponized in fragile contexts where state authority is either absent or compromised. Scholars have emphasized that in such environments, SALWs not only enhance the capacity for violence but also embolden aggrieved groups to pursue their objectives through militarized means (Otis, 2020; Smith, 2020).

The symbolic and strategic value of SALWs in identity conflicts is significant. Beyond their tactical utility, they serve as expressions of resistance, dominance, or self-defense in contexts marked by perceived marginalization and historical injustice (Madu, 2017). As a result, arms proliferation tends to deepen social polarization and entrench identity boundaries, thereby creating self-reinforcing cycles of fear and hostility.

Otis (2020) further argues that the presence of SALWs alters the conflict calculus by incentivizing pre-emptive violence and retaliatory attacks, particularly in ethnically segmented societies. This transformation of grievance into armed resistance is often compounded by the failure of the state to provide impartial security, leading to the emergence of ethnic militias and community defence forces.

The Nigerian Context: Structural Weaknesses and Armed Violence

Nigeria provides a critical case for examining the intersection of small arms proliferation, weak governance, and ethno-religious conflict. The country is plagued by systemic corruption, poorly regulated borders, and fragmented security architecture, all of which create fertile ground for arms trafficking (Ayodele, 2017). Moreover, political elites have historically exploited ethnic and religious cleavages for electoral advantage, at times sponsoring armed groups or enabling the distribution of weapons to loyalist factions (Adamson, 2019).

The availability of SALWs has had a multiplier effect on Nigeria's security crisis. It has escalated communal conflicts in the Middle Belt,

intensified terrorism in the North-East, and fueled separatist violence in the South-East and militancy in the Niger Delta (Adebayo, 2022). According to Kofi (2017), the proliferation of arms has redefined violence in Nigeria not merely as a tool of contestation but as a currency for power, survival, and influence.

Importantly, the state's response to SALWs proliferation has often been reactive and militarized, with limited investment in preventive diplomacy or conflict-sensitive development. This approach has proven ineffective, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas where the state's presence is weak, and the legitimacy of law enforcement is often questioned (Otis, 2020).

Ethno-Religious Conflict and SALWs in Taraba State

Taraba State, located in Nigeria's volatile Middle Belt, is characterized by ethno-religious diversity and contested claims over land, identity, and political representation. The state has witnessed multiple waves of communal violence, particularly in the Karim Lamido Local Government Area, where disputes among the Jenjo, Wurkum, Fulani, and other ethnic groups have escalated in recent years (Adamu, 2015). These conflicts are often framed in terms of ethnic or religious incompatibility but are deeply rooted in structural grievances such as marginalization, competition over resources, and political exclusion.

The proliferation of SALWs in Taraba State has fundamentally altered the nature and scale of these conflicts. Weapons are not only used in direct confrontations but are also employed to intimidate, displace, and dominate rival communities. Local elites, political actors, and youth militias are often implicated in arms stockpiling, using these weapons to enforce territorial claims or influence electoral outcomes (Adebayo, 2022).
Ayodele (2017) notes that the saturation of SALWs in rural Taraba has rendered traditional conflict resolution mechanisms obsolete. The erosion of trust in state and customary authorities has led communities to resort to self-help strategies, further entrenching cycles of violence and revenge. In this context, arms serve as both a defensive necessity and a political tool, with profound implications for long-term peace and security.

Theoretical Framework: Relative Deprivation Theory

This study is anchored on Relative Deprivation Theory (RDT), a social-psychological and sociological framework that explains how perceived disparities between expectations and actual living conditions can lead to grievance, agitation, and collective violence. The theory, initially developed by Ted Gurr (1970) in his seminal work "Why Men Rebel", posits that individuals or groups who perceive themselves as unfairly deprived relative to others whether materially, politically, or socially are more likely to resort to aggression and violence as a means of redress or protest.

Relative deprivation is not merely about absolute poverty or exclusion, but about perceptions of inequity and injustice. Gurr defines it as "the perceived discrepancy between men's value expectations and their value capabilities." That is, when groups expect better treatment, representation, or access to resources than they receive, and when they see others (especially rival groups) achieving these goals, it breeds resentment and potentially violent mobilization.

In the context of Karim Lamido, Taraba State, Relative Deprivation Theory provides a powerful lens through which to analyze the drivers and escalation of ethno-religious violence facilitated by small arms and light weapons (SALWs). Several dimensions of relative deprivation are relevant.

Many residents of Karim Lamido are rural farmers and traders. The perception of neglect, underdevelopment, and inequitable access to agricultural resources or government interventions creates conditions for grievance. In conflict settings, such grievances are often expressed through violence especially when exacerbated by access to SALWs.

Ethnic and religious minorities in the LGA may perceive themselves as marginalized in political appointments, land allocation, or access to state services. According to Mustapha (2014), such political exclusion often aligns with identity markers, increasing the likelihood of group-based mobilization.

The presence of SALWs has led to the privatization of security, with communities increasingly arming themselves for self-defense. The

state's inability to ensure public safety further amplifies perceptions of abandonment, leading to community armament and retaliatory violence. Alimba (2014) observes that when state security fails, citizens often turn to arms for personal or collective protection.

Ethnic and religious groups may feel that their identity is under threat either culturally, territorially, or demographically. The proliferation of SALWs enables these groups to assert dominance or resist perceived encroachments. According to Higazi (2011), in Middle Belt states like Taraba, ethnic identity is often weaponized, especially when historical injustices remain unresolved.

In this framework, SALWs function as the means through which relatively deprived groups express grievance and assert power. These weapons lower the threshold for violence and enhance the ability of groups to translate frustration into organized confrontation. This supports Otis (2020), who noted that in Nigeria, weapon availability often tips grievances into outright violence.

Relevance to the Study

Relative Deprivation Theory explains why the mere availability of small arms does not lead to violence in every context, but why in contexts of perceived exclusion, inequality, or injustice, those weapons become tools of retaliation or assertion. This aligns with the central hypothesis of the study that the proliferation of SALWs has significantly contributed to the escalation of ethno-religious conflicts in Karim Lamido LGA.

By applying this theory, the study is able to move beyond descriptive accounts of violence to explain the motivations, group psychology, and mobilization mechanisms that drive conflict in armed and divided societies.

3. Methodology

Thisstudy adopted a survey research design, which is widely used in social science research to gather quantitative data from a representative sample of a larger population. According to Barran (2004), survey design enables the systematic collection and analysis of information regarding individuals' attitudes, experiences, and perceptions, and is particularly appropriate for exploring social issues across broad, diverse populations. The design supports generalization and is adaptable to various data collection modes, including questionnaires and interviews.

The study was conducted in Karim Lamido Local Government Area of Taraba State, Nigeria a region marked by ethno-religious diversity and recurrent inter-communal violence. The area's complex sociocultural composition, coupled with its exposure to small arms proliferation, presents a critical context for investigating how illicit weaponry influences identity-based conflicts.

The target population, based on the 2022 projection by the National Population Commission, is approximately 305,100 residents. In accordance with Comrey and Lee's (1992) guidelines for multivariate research, a sample size of 400 respondents classified as "very good" was determined for the study.

To ensure representativeness, a multi-stage sampling technique was employed. In the first stage, Karim Lamido's eleven (11) political wards were stratified. In the second stage, three communities were randomly selected from each ward using simple random sampling. In the final stage, individual respondents within the selected communities were systematically chosen based on availability and relevance, ensuring gender balance, ethnic representation, and knowledge of conflict-related issues.

Primary data were collected using structured questionnaires and interview schedules, while secondary data were sourced from academic journals, policy reports, books, and government publications. The questionnaire was designed to capture respondents' perceptions of arms proliferation, patterns of ethno-religious conflict, and community security dynamics.

The data collected were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Frequency distributions and percentages were used for summarizing demographic and thematic responses. Mean analysis was employed to assess trends and dominant perceptions. To test the study's hypotheses, the Chi-square (χ^2) statistical test was applied at a 5% significance level, using standard formulae to determine expected frequencies and degrees of freedom. The decision rule was based on the comparison of calculated χ^2 values against

critical values, guiding the acceptance or rejection of null hypotheses.

This comprehensive methodological framework ensures empirical rigor, enhances the validity of the findings, and provides a solid basis for understanding the interaction between SALWs proliferation and ethno-religious conflict in Karim Lamido.

4. Results and Discussion

Table 1: Demographic Information of the Respondents

Variables	Parameter	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Sex	Male	247	63.0%
	Female	144	37.0%
	Total	**391**	**100**
Age	18 – 25 years	107	27.4%
	26 – 35 years	133	34.9%
	36 – 45 years	76	19.9%
	46 – 55 years	56	14.6%
	55 years and above	14	3.2%
	Total	**391**	**100**
Marital Status	Single	170	43.7
	Married	199	52.3%
	Widow/widower	11	2.1%
	Divorced	9	1.9
	Total	**391`**	**100**
Religion	Muslim	164	36.3%
	Christian	225	63.0%
	Others	2	1.7%
	Total	**391**	**100**
Occupation	Famers	176	45.0
	Traders	137	35.0
	Civil Servant	79	20.0
	Total	**391**	**100**
Educational Qualification	FSLC/SSCE	81	20.7
	OND/ND/NCE	108	27.7
	HND/B.A/B.Sc.	152	38.7
	PGDE/M.Sc./Ph.D.	52	13.3
	Total	**391**	**100**

Source: Field work 2024

The demographic distribution of the 391 respondents in Karim Lamido Local Government Area offers important contextual insights into how small arms proliferation and identity-based conflicts manifest and are experienced across different segments of the population. Understanding these socio-demographic patterns is critical in exploring the nuanced relationship between weapon access and ethno-religious violence, as each variable potentially shapes exposure to, participation in, and perceptions of conflict.

Sex Distribution and Conflict Dynamics

The study revealed that 63.0% of the respondents were male, while 37.0% were female. This aligns with research by Alimba (2014), which notes that in many conflict-prone regions of Nigeria, men are often the primary actors and victims in armed conflicts, particularly due to traditional gender roles that assign men the responsibility of defense, leadership, and confrontation. Furthermore, males are more likely to be members of vigilante groups, militias, or recruited into local self-help security arrangements, often involving small arms (Aghedo & Osumah, 2012). The gender distribution is thus significant for understanding the direct engagement

with SALWs and conflict practices in Karim Lamido.

Age Distribution and Youth Involvement in Armed Violence

The age group with the highest representation was 26–35 years (34.9%), followed by 18–25 years (27.4%), indicating that over 62% of respondents were youth or young adults. This finding resonates with the argument that youth bulges in conflict-affected areas tend to correlate with high incidences of violence, especially where economic marginalization and political exclusion are prevalent (Urdal, 2006). According to Nwagboso (2012), the proliferation of SALWs in northern Nigeria has provided tools for youth mobilization in violent ethno-religious disputes and criminal activities. The youthful demographic in Karim Lamido is therefore not just a passive indicator but an active driver in the cycles of violence, as young men are more vulnerable to manipulation by political actors and more likely to be recruited into militias.

Marital Status and Vulnerability

The majority of respondents were married (52.3%), while 43.7% were single. Marital status may influence one's vulnerability to conflict and perception of security threats. Married individuals often report higher concern for community safety and stability due to family responsibilities, making them more sensitive to the disruptions posed by armed violence (Okereke, 2014). Conversely, single and unemployed youth especially in rural conflict zones are often targeted for recruitment into armed groups, as they are seen as dispensable and easily radicalized (Akinwale, 2010).

Religious Affiliation and Conflict Polarization

The religious composition showed 63.0% Christians, 36.3% Muslims, and 1.7% others, which reflects the religious diversity of Taraba State and is consistent with the historical ethno-religious cleavages in the Middle Belt region (Higazi, 2011). Several studies have observed that religion in northern Nigeria has become a politicized identity marker, with arms proliferation amplifying existing tensions between communities along religious lines (Egwu, 2001; Mustapha, 2014). In Karim Lamido, religious identity intersects with ethnic affiliation and access

to political power, thus intensifying the potential for armed conflict when small arms are readily available.

Occupational Status and Access to SALWs

Occupationally, the majority of respondents were farmers (45.0%), followed by traders (35.0%) and civil servants (20.0%). The dominance of agriculture is indicative of the rural and resource-dependent character of the local economy. Studies (e.g., Okoli & Orinya, 2013) have shown that farmers, particularly in the Middle Belt, are increasingly exposed to armed attacks due to land disputes with pastoralist communities, leading some to resort to arming themselves for self-defence. Traders, who often serve as informal networks in both legal and illicit economies, may also play indirect roles in arms circulation through transport or information exchange (Aghedo & Osumah, 2012).

Educational Qualification and Conflict Perception

The educational attainment of respondents indicates a relatively high level of literacy, with 38.7% holding tertiary degrees and 27.7% having post-secondary certifications. Education plays a dual role in conflict dynamics: while it may enhance awareness of peacebuilding and rights-based approaches to conflict resolution, it may also increase political mobilization and ideological radicalization in highly contested spaces (Adesoji, 2010). Furthermore, respondents with higher education levels are more likely to critically assess state responses to SALWs proliferation and may advocate for institutional reforms or disarmament interventions.

The demographic composition of the sample provides strong empirical grounding for the study's central thesis: that the proliferation of SALWs in Karim Lamido is not just a security issue but a deeply embedded socio-political phenomenon shaped by gender, age, occupation, religion, and education. These factors mediate both the motivations behind armed conflict and the strategies for mitigating its impact. Therefore, policies aimed at arms control and conflict resolution must be sensitive to these socio-demographic realities and tailor interventions accordingly.

Table 2: Does the proliferation of small arms and light weapons contribute to rise in ethno-religious conflict in Karim Lamido LGA Taraba State, Nigeria?

Responses	(SA)	(A)	(SD)	(D)	Total
The availability of small arms and light weapons has directly contributed to the escalation of ethno-religious conflicts in Karim Lamido LGA	82(19.9%)	262(68.8%)	-	47(11.3%)	**391(100%)**
The proliferation of small arms and light weapons in Karim Lamido LGA has fueled tensions between different ethnic and religious groups in the region	151(38.4%)	168(43.3%)	23(5.6%)	49(12.6%)	**391(100%)**
The spread of small arms and light weapons has made it easier for ethno-religious conflicts to become more violent and destructive in Karim Lamido LGA	91(23.9%)	182(47.8%)	62(15.3%)	52(12.9%)	**391(100%)**
The presence of small arms and light weapons has exacerbated the frequency and intensity of ethno-religious clashes in Karim Lamido LGA.	114(28.5%)	145(37.6%)	35(9.1%)	97(24.7%)	**391(100%)**

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Analysis and Interpretation of Respondents' Perception on the Role of Small Arms in Ethno-Religious Conflicts

To examine how the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) influences ethno-religious conflicts in Karim Lamido Local Government Area, respondents were asked to express their level of agreement with a series of conflict-related statements. The Likert-scale response options included Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). The findings are interpreted thematically below.

SALWs and Escalation of Ethno-Religious Conflict

"The availability of small arms and light weapons has directly contributed to the escalation of ethno-religious conflicts in Karim Lamido LGA." 82 (19.9%) strongly agreed, 262 (68.8%) agreed, while 47 (11.3%) disagreed. A combined 88.7% of respondents acknowledged a strong link between SALWs availability and conflict escalation. This overwhelming agreement suggests a widespread public perception that small arms are a key catalyst for violent ethno-religious clashes in the area. This finding aligns with Otis (2020) and Madu (2017), who argue that SALWs intensify communal disputes by lowering the threshold for violence and enabling retaliatory attacks. It also supports Egwu (2001), who observed that arms proliferation in Nigeria has

redefined local conflicts from confrontational to militarized.

SALWs as a Source of Ethnic and Religious Tension "The proliferation of small arms and light weapons in Karim Lamido LGA has fueled tensions between different ethnic and religious groups in the region." 151 (38.4%) strongly agreed, 168 (43.3%) agreed, 49 (12.6%) disagreed, and 23 (5.6%) strongly disagreed. Combined agreement: 81.7%

The data reveal that a significant proportion of respondents believe that SALWs are not just outcomes of conflict but precursors and active fuels of ethnic and religious tensions. This perspective aligns with Mustapha (2014) and Higazi (2011), who assert that access to weapons often strengthens group identity boundaries, leading to "us versus them" mentalities that destabilize inter-group relations.

SALWs and Conflict Intensity

"The spread of small arms and light weapons has made it easier for ethno-religious conflicts to become more violent and destructive in Karim Lamido LGA." 91 (23.9%) strongly agreed, 182 (47.8%) agreed, 62 (15.3%) strongly disagreed, and 52 (12.9%) disagreed. Combined agreement: 71.7%

This data reinforces the previous finding, with over two-thirds of respondents affirming that the destructiveness of conflict is exacerbated by arms availability. According to Alimba (2014), the widespread access to firearms in Nigeria's conflict zones has increased the lethality of attacks, often resulting in mass displacement and long-term trauma. This further substantiates claims that arms proliferation transforms minor disputes into large-scale disasters (Aghedo & Osumah, 2012).

SALWs and Frequency of Clashes

"The presence of small arms and light weapons has exacerbated the frequency and intensity of ethno-religious clashes in Karim Lamido LGA." 114 (28.5%) strongly agreed, 145 (37.6%) agreed, 97 (24.7%) disagreed, and 35 (9.1%) strongly disagreed. Combined agreement: 66.1%

Although slightly lower than previous responses, the result still indicates that two-thirds of the respondents recognize that SALWs contribute not just to the severity but also to the frequency of violent clashes. This validates Urdal's (2006) youth-

conflict model and supports Okoli & Orinya (2013), who argue that the repeated availability of weapons creates a pattern of retaliatory violence in rural Nigerian communities.

Synthesis and Implication for the Study

Overall, the empirical data show strong consensus among respondents that the proliferation of small arms and light weapons is a central driver of ethno-religious conflict in Karim Lamido. The consistency in agreement across all four statements reflects a deeply rooted concern within the community about how the easy access to weapons transforms social tensions into cycles of violence.

This finding confirms the theoretical postulations that SALWs serve as both instruments of physical violence and psychological empowerment in ethnically fragmented societies (Smith, 2020). It also reveals a critical policy gap, as current disarmament measures appear ineffective in limiting the circulation of arms in rural areas of Nigeria.

Chi-Square Hypothesis Testing and Interpretation

Hypothesis Statement

Null Hypothesis (H_0): There is no significant relationship between the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) and the escalation of ethno-religious conflict in Karim Lamido Local Government Area.

Alternative Hypothesis (H_1): There is a significant relationship between the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) and the escalation of ethno-religious conflict in Karim Lamido Local Government Area.

Test of Hypothesis

To test this hypothesis, a Chi-square (χ^2) test of independence was employed to examine the relationship between respondents' perceptions of SALWs availability and their perceived link to ethno-religious conflict escalation.

Using the first Likert-scale item:

"The availability of small arms and light weapons has directly contributed to the escalation of ethno-religious conflicts in Karim Lamido LGA"

Decision and Interpretation: Since calculated $\chi^2=204.4$ is far greater than critical $\chi^2=5.991$ we reject the null hypothesis.

The result of the chi-square analysis provides strong statistical evidence that the proliferation of small arms and light weapons is significantly related to the escalation of ethno-religious conflict in Karim Lamido Local Government Area. This finding corroborates earlier descriptive statistics and supports the theoretical framework that arms availability not only facilitates violence but intensifies group-based conflict, particularly where historical grievances and identity tensions exist (Otis, 2020; Higazi, 2011).

This outcome reinforces the need for targeted disarmament policies, community peacebuilding strategies, and robust border security reforms as core elements of conflict mitigation in Taraba State and other parts of Nigeria's Middle Belt.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study confirms that the proliferation of small arms and light weapons has a direct and significant impact on the dynamics of ethno-religious conflict in Karim Lamido LGA. The presence of these weapons enables individuals and groups especially those feeling marginalized, excluded, or threatened to mobilize violently in pursuit of perceived justice or self-preservation.

Ethno-religious groups in the region, driven by perceptions of unequal access to resources, political representation, and security, have resorted to self-help strategies, with SALWs serving as both instruments and symbols of power. The results illustrate that insecurity in the area is not simply a product of inter-ethnic hostility, but a complex interplay of deprivation, identity, and militarization.

This underscores the argument by Gurr (1970) that relative deprivation, when combined with enabling factors like arms access, is a powerful driver of collective violence. In essence, where expectations exceed reality, and the means for violent expression exist, conflict becomes almost inevitable.

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are offered for policy intervention, peacebuilding, and arms control in Karim Lamido and similar conflict-prone areas:

1. Strengthen Arms Control and Border Security: The Nigerian government, in collaboration with ECOWAS and international partners, must intensify efforts to control the flow of SALWs through enhanced border surveillance, community policing, and disarmament campaigns.

2. Address Root Causes of Relative Deprivation: Development interventions must target the structural grievances underlying perceived deprivation, such as poor infrastructure, inequitable land distribution, and lack of youth employment. Government programs should focus on inclusive governance by ensuring equitable representation of ethnic and religious minorities in local political structures.

3. Promote Inter-Group Dialogue and Peacebuilding: Civil society organizations, traditional rulers, and religious leaders must be supported to initiate community-level peace dialogues aimed at rebuilding trust between conflicting groups. Peace education and conflict sensitivity training should be introduced in local schools, religious centers, and civic forums.

4. Reinforce Local Security Structures: Community-based security initiatives, such as vigilante groups, must be formalized, trained, and monitored to prevent abuse of power and misuse of arms. Local government authorities should create early warning systems and response mechanisms to monitor tension and prevent escalation.

5. Empower Youth through Engagement and Economic Opportunities: As the study shows a high concentration of youth in conflict dynamics, targeted youth empowerment initiatives such as vocational training, micro-credit schemes, and peace ambassador programs are vital. Collaboration with NGOs and donor agencies can support alternative livelihoods and reduce the allure of armed group recruitment.

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