

Full Length Research Paper

Sex and irregular warfare: Understanding the place of girls in Boko Haram insurgency

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Accepted April 08, 2018

Abstract

Irregular warfare between the Nigerian Army and Boko Haram insurgents occurred in less secured environment which left the most vulnerable (children, women, elderly and harmless young men) to become victims during counterinsurgency operations. Girls were deliberately targeted by terrorists so as to sustain the war against the Nigerian government. Some joined voluntarily while others were captured. Many girls served as domestic servants while others were trained to become suicide bombers. Since irregular warfare is usually a prolonged war, Boko Haram has adopted it as a guerrilla strategy to use girls not only as servants or bombers but as 'baby producing agents'. Furthermore, leaders of the sect have come to realize that girls, particularly the Chibok girls are war assets who can be used in buying time, swapped for top Boko Haram prisoners, exchanged for ammunitions, sold into black market, motivate terrorists as war bounty, spy communities and carry out complex terrorist attacks. Unfortunately, the Nigerian government is yet to fully situate the place of girls in its counterinsurgency operations. Historical research method and a population-centric counterinsurgency approach were adopted in the study. Understanding how girls experience the conflict, not only as victims but also as perpetrators, needs to directly inform policies and programs to tackle the roots of the insurgency and strategies for curbing it, as well as facilitate girls' contribution to lasting peace.

Keywords: Boko Haram, Chibok Girls, irregular warfare, Nigerian Army.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of violent groups in Nigeria such as Maitatsine sect (formed in 1980), Boko Haram (formed in 2002), Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (formed in 2005), the Ombatse militia group (formed in 2013), The Avengers (formed in 2016), Herdsmen killers (2017) is traceable to the political environment of Nigeria which is dictated by bad governance, religious extremism, poverty, corruption and ethnic rivalry over resource control. However, of all these violent groups that have waged irregular warfare against the Nigeria populace, Boko Haram remains the only group that uprooted large

number of girls as war bounty who became suicide bombers, sex slaves, reproducing agents, and psychological war assets.

On 14 April 2014, over 270 schoolgirls were abducted in the town of Chibok, North-East Nigeria. The world was shocked. A global movement (#BringBackOurGirls) started demanding their return. Similarly, a set of 110 girls were abducted on the 19th of February 2018 at the Government Girls Science Secondary School in Dapchi, Yobe State and were in captivity until 21st of March, 2018 when the Federal Government of Nigeria announced that Boko Haram terrorists had returned 105 girls (Vanguard, 2018). Thus, between 2009 and 2018, over 1.3 million children have been uprooted by Boko Haram insurgency across four countries in the Lake Chad region. Focusing on girls who have been kidnapped, this paper turns to the

roles they have played in solidifying the position of Boko Haram. It gives a balanced appraisal of the place of girls in irregular warfare; and how the Nigerian government can check the flow of girls into Boko Haram's camp as a means of countering the insurgency.

Girls as Suicide Bombers

Since Boko Haram's foundation in 2002, the group has attacked churches, mosques, markets, banks, telecommunication facilities, military barracks, police stations, schools, local government secretariats, among others. However, capturing girls has been one of the most effective strategies of Boko Haram. There are several reasons why girls are targeted during insurgency operations. Some joined voluntarily while others were captured. Many girls have been taken to serve as domestic servants while others were trained to become suicide bombers. Others have become 'baby producing agents'. Boko Haram have also used girls in buying time, swapped for top Boko Haram prisoners, exchanged for ammunitions, sold into black market, motivate terrorists as war bounty, spy communities and carry out complex terrorist attacks.

In the area of suicide bombing, girls are chosen as bombers, one being that they carry out attacks with high potency, killing more civilians during suicide attacks than their male counterparts. This assertion is supported by UNICEF (2017), which suggests that one in every five Boko Haram suicide bombers is a child, with three-quarters of child bombers being female. On December 9, 2016, two paired female suicide bombers, described as "schoolgirls," detonated in a market in Madagali, killing 56 and wounding more (Washington Post, 2016). The next deadliest attacks involving children had 20 fatalities each. The first attack was perpetrated by a 12-year-old girl in Maroua, Cameroon, on July 25, 2016. She set off an explosive device in a bar, injuring 79 in addition to the 20 killed (China Daily, 2015). The second attack serves as perhaps the most interesting and troubling case. A 10-year-old girl detonated in a crowded market in Damaturu, Nigeria, on July 26, 2015, with the explosion killing 20. However, there are doubts to whether the girl knew that she was going to explode or whether the explosion was triggered by a remote control.

Jason and Hilary (2017) analyzed the 434 suicide bombings carried out by Nigeria-based militants Boko Haram since 2011, and found that at least 244 of the 338 attacks in which the bomber's gender could be identified were carried out by female. As well as regularly employing women to carry deadly explosives, Boko Haram is also "at the forefront of normalizing the use of children as suicide bombers,".

Girls as Baby Producing Agents

Boko Haram Islamic extremists stormed and

firebombed the Government Girls Secondary School at Chibok on April 14, 2014, and seized 276 girls who were preparing to write science exams. Dozens escaped in the first hours, some hanging on to tree branches from the back of an open truck, but 219 remained missing. Stephanie (2017) estimates that up to 9,000 young girls have been kidnapped by Boko Haram since the start of the insurgency even though a large number of these girls are unaccounted for. But Boko Haram rarely killed girls, unless they were accused of being spies. Instead, the militants abducted them and took them to base camps in their stronghold in the Sambisa Forest near the Cameroon border. According to the Robyn (2016), women and girls who escaped Boko Haram are dubbed "*annoba*," meaning "epidemic," by their communities, suggesting they can spread dangerous extremist ideas. They're also stigmatized and feared as "Sambisa women," "Boko Haram blood" and "Boko Haram wives." Hence, most of the girls do prefer to stay back as mothers in Boko Haram camp than return home.

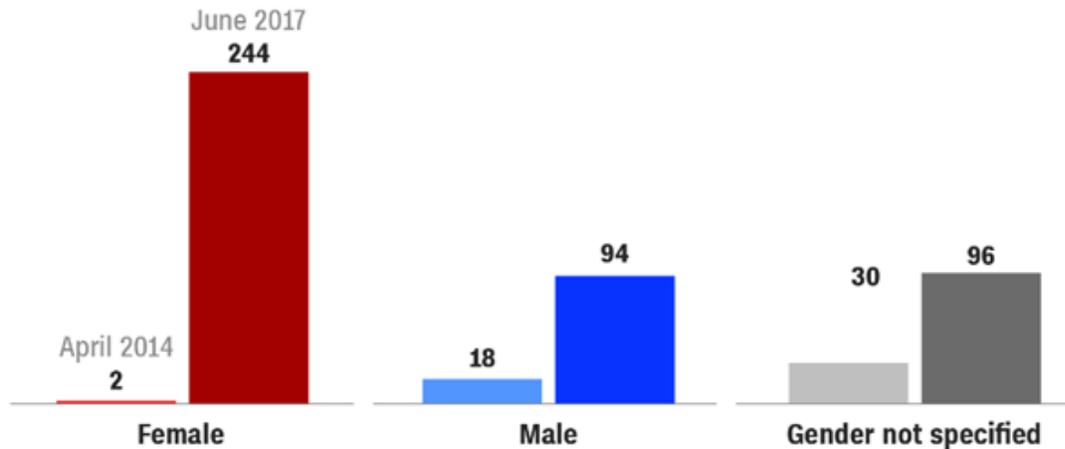
To attract male recruits and motivate combatants, Boko Haram awards these girls as "wives" to fighters. As these girls reach puberty, forced marriages often turn them into unwilling mothers; their children are destined to become the next generation of fighters, raised with their fathers' twisted ideology. Children of Boko Haram insurgents therefore become the products of forced marriage, sexual slavery and rape.

Understanding Girls in Counterinsurgency Strategy

A prolonged irregular warfare between non-State armed group (i.e Boko Haram) and the State armed group (i.e Nigerian Army) is far more complex than conventional international armed conflict between two or more states. Hence, the counterinsurgency strategy places great demands on the ability of Nigerian bureaucracies to work together, with strategic allies within the international community, in augmenting the military operations against the insurgents through tactical reforms designed to address shortcomings and the root causes of the insurgency. By definition, counterinsurgency means 'comprehensive civilian and military efforts taken to simultaneously defeat and contain insurgency and address its root causes' (US Government, 2009).

This study adopts a population-centric approach in analyzing the place of girls in counterinsurgency strategy. The population-centric approach assumes that the center of gravity is the government's relationship with and support among the population (US Government, 2009). Unlike the enemy-centric approach which emphasizes defeat of the enemy as its primary task and other activities as supporting efforts.

Boko Haram suicide bombers by gender



Source: Jason Warner Hilary Matfess (2017) *Exploding Stereotypes: The Unexpected Operational and Demographic Characteristics of Boko Haram's Suicide Bombers*. Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, United States Military Academy.

From all indications, the Nigerian government has invested more in the enemy-centric approach in waging war against Boko Haram than using the population-centric approach. The inability of the Nigerian Army to defeat, in totality, the Boko Haram insurgents is a reflection that a purely enemy-centric approach might not be effective in countering the insurgents in the long term. Also, the adopting of population-centric approach does not mean that military option would be left out. In fact, the best counterinsurgency strategy is a combination of enemy-centric and population-centric approach.

Insurgents see girls as the most strategic weapon of war. Capturing girls is therefore part of the larger guerrilla tactics used by Boko Haram to force the Nigeria government to the negotiation table. In 2017, the President Muhammadu Buhari picked the option of swapping 82 Chibok school girls with Boko Haram prisoners over paying a ransom to the terrorist group (DailyPost, May 8, 2017). In the black market, girls kidnapped by Boko Haram have been reportedly sold into slavery or marriage for as little as \$12 (NBCNews, May 1, 2014). More worrisome is that girls are exchanged for ammunitions and, as war bounty, are serially raped by insurgents. While in the act, the jihadists provided specific instructions to the young militants. Philip (2016) reported that senior Boko Haram militants not only rape girls but 'provide specific instructions' to younger boys for raping older women and very young girls at gunpoint. New recruits are taught to hold girls on both hands, pinned them to the floor, beat them, threaten to blow their head with gun and insert their penis into their vaginal tract by force. Girls, aside from being raped,

married off by insurgents or used as baby producing agents, are specially trained to spy communities, infiltrate military bases and carry out complex terrorist attacks.

Winning the support of the population against capturing of girls should be the goal of the Nigerian government. To do this, the government would seek to break the ideological and financial linkages between the segment of population who voluntarily join Boko Haram; and, use of military in the protection of schools, religious centres and vulnerable villages that are prone to Boko Haram attacks.

The tragedies of irregular warfare demand a comprehensive population-centric counterinsurgency approach that covers four major components: first, the *Economic and Development Component* which includes immediate humanitarian relief and development of agricultural, industrial, educational, medical, commercial and other governmental activities in communities prone to Boko Haram attacks. Second, the *Information Component* which deals with acquiring knowledge about Boko Haram recruitment patterns, funding, tactical operations and providing communities the necessary security gadgets that will help in quick response during Boko Haram attacks. Third, the *Political strategy* which will provide framework for political reconciliation of aggrieved persons, prompt genuine reform in the government, promote popular mobilization, and enhance governmental capacity-building in communities affected by Boko Haram insurgency. Fourth, the *Security Component* which provides physical security against insurgent violence, though often imperative, is only one step in progressing towards 'Human Security' which also encompasses the maintenance of laws,

human rights, freedom to conduct economic activity, public safety and health (US Government, 2009; Tomes, 2004). Based on the population-centric approach, the following recommendations were made:

A. Upgrade Screening of all women in a Boko Haram conquered Territory

In a war in which one side has relied massively on forced recruitment, the distinction between victim and perpetrator is not easy. The authorities should ensure that the army does not systematically detain all women found in areas newly recovered from Boko Haram. The ambiguous tactics some women have had to adopt to survive should not be held against them indiscriminately. Necessary security screening should also make use of protection officers of both genders who are provided by national civil society organisations and trained by UNHCR. Those in charge should be sensitive to the difficult situation many women faced.

B. Provide Appropriate Care and Protection for Female Victims

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) camps may seem an appropriate solution for people found in areas newly seized from Boko Haram, if only to protect them from retaliation and community suspicion until reintegration is worked out. It is essential, however, to give appropriate assistance to these new IDPs, as well as to the ones long settled in safer areas, and their host communities. There should be greater accountability in distribution of food and aid and to facilitate the access of local and international humanitarian organisations. The National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), which runs the official camps, should ensure IDP protection, notably from SGBV. The management of access to the camps, currently controlled by the military, should be transferred to civilian organisations as soon as possible.

Addressing the particular vulnerability of the predominantly female IDP population requires special attention to sexual and gender-based violence and ensuring access to sexual and reproductive health information and services. The authorities should activate referral mechanisms for women and girls in IDP camps and host communities. Allegations of abuses committed by security forces and/or CJTF should be properly investigated, with attention to ensuring proper judicial procedures and publicising appropriate cases.

The predominantly male composition of organisations involved in protecting and managing mostly female IDP camps is a weak point. Federal and state governments and international partners should

cooperate urgently to develop programs to increase women's recruitment in local police forces and other bodies involved in operating IDP camps. International experts should also provide gender-sensitive civilian-protection training to soldiers, police and NEMA officials and the Borno state Emergency Management Agency (SEMA) deployed to the camps.

C. Treat Suspected Female Perpetrators of Violence Fairly

While not ignoring accountability for suspected female perpetrators, the government should ensure a fair and transparent process in handling all Boko Haram cases; distinguishing Boko Haram ideologues from those who joined from other motives will be vital. Detention of those who, after screening, are held before they appear in court should be civilian, not military, and in acceptable conditions, with access to humanitarian agencies. Children should be granted adequate care. Given the scope of the violence, involvement in abuses by both the insurgents and security force elements and judicial system weaknesses, a proper adjudication procedure must be devised for all suspects, who cannot be left in legal limbo indefinitely. That procedure should include participation of women, particularly from the North East.

D. Reintegrate Female Victims into Community Life

The reunification of families, the only safety net for many, should be a priority. A federal database should be established to facilitate the search for missing persons and more resources made available to reunite families. Likewise, an effort is needed to combat stigmatisation. To help with reintegration and rehabilitation of women and girls released from Boko Haram, a community-based reconciliation process with significant female participation should be encouraged, notably by inviting women's groups from different parts of Borno to participate in dialogue.

All development and reconstruction plans, public and private, should be based on gender-sensitive analysis of the insurgency and counter-insurgency. Programming should acknowledge that in the North East religion can facilitate assistance and be a driving force for promoting positive change for women generally. Muslims and Christians should be involved together, to help bridge the divisions that have increased with the insurgency. Programs are needed to ease women's access to credit and land. Single female-headed households require particular support to restart productive activities, for example in crafts, trade or agriculture.

Widows should receive special attention, because isolated women are more susceptible to manipulation by jihadists. As in Rwanda, plans should be made to

provide a monthly allocation to war widows for a number of years, and local NGOs should be supported to give free legal assistance for inheritance and property matters. That the families of soldiers killed in the conflict often receive little support has the potential to damage military morale. The widows of soldiers should receive a stipend from the federal government, eventually covering accommodation if they are made to leave the barracks.

Children fathered by Boko Haram members and their mothers must not be allowed to become outcasts. Community-based approaches and sensitivity training are needed, as is a significant increase in educational investment overall and prioritisation of the integrated education of these children with other children in the region.

E. Step Up Efforts to Empower Women in the North East

With a view to more structural changes in gender imbalances, effort is needed in three main directions. Attention should be paid to programs to strengthen women's participation in politics and local governance, including consideration of an affirmative action policy with quotas, as in many other West African countries. Increasing girls' access to primary and secondary schools should be a priority, but given the interest in and legitimacy of Quranic education in the North East, it should also be upgraded by introducing a dual curriculum (as in Kano state) and paying teachers' salaries so pupils do not need to beg for upkeep. Strict provisions should apply to the intake of supported schools in order to encourage gender balance.

Mainstream Islamic groups should empower female members to do their part to help alleviate the humanitarian crisis. They could also play an important role in countering violent religious ideologies and building support for women's education and civic participation. Lastly, the state should take steps to combat gender discrimination and stereotypes rooted in law and practice, to ensure women and girls have more control over their lives.

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