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Suicide Squad: Boko Haram's Use of the Female Suicide Bomber

Vesna Markovic
Criminal Justice
Law and Public Safety Studies Department (JLPSS)
Lewis University
Romeoville, IL 60446 USA
VMarkovic@lewisu.edu

Abstract

Boko Haram first began using the tactic of suicide bombings in 2011, and in 2014 started using female suicide bombers. This research focuses on gender differences in the use of suicide bombers. The data was collected using open sources from June 16, 2011 to June 15, 2018. Using this longitudinal data, trends are described over that seven-year period, focusing on the use of females. A majority of the suicide bombings target civilians in Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. More than half of the bombers were women and girls, some as young as 7 years old, while more than 60 incidents where the bomber was below the age of 15. More female bombers were used to targets civilians, while men were used more often to target government, police, and military targets. Female suicide bombers were used in Cameroon, while males were used in Nigeria more often. Additionally, females used suicide belts or vests more often, while men comprised the overwhelming majority of vehicle-borne suicide bombings. There were coercive aspects in many cases in the use of the women as bombers. The unprecedented use of female suicide bombers, particularly young girls, needs to be a focal point of any policy moving forward.

Keywords: Suicide Bombing, Terrorism, Boko Haram, Nigeria

Biography

Dr. Vesna Markovic is an Associate Professor and Chair of the Justice, Law and Public Safety Studies Department at Lewis University. Her research interests include terrorism, specifically suicide bombings, financing terrorism, and vehicle ramming attacks), transnational organized crime, and comparative criminal justice. Dr. Markovic received a B.A. and M.A. in Criminal Justice from the University of Illinois at Chicago, and a Ph.D. in Criminal Justice from Sam Houston State University Huntsville, TX. She was PI on numerous grants with the Institute for the Study of Violent Groups (ISVG), and lectures regularly for the NATO Centre of Excellence Defense Against Terrorism (COE-DAT) in Ankara, Turkey.

Over the past two decades, terrorism in Nigeria has been on the rise and one of the main perpetrators has been the terrorist group which is commonly referred to as Boko Haram. The group, currently referred to as the Islamic State in West Africa (ISWA) or Islamic State's West African Province (ISWAP), was founded in 2002 and has been responsible for countless deaths in Nigeria and other West African countries. Boko Haram's ties with foreign terrorist groups, such as Al Qaeda, led to a change in their tactics which began to include suicide bombings. On June 16, 2011 the group targeted Nigerian Police Headquarters in the capital of Abuja with their first ever suicide bombing. By 2014, the group began to expand its terrorism tactics within Nigeria. On April 14, 2014 Boko Haram entered a government-run school in Chibok, Borno State and kidnapped 276 female students. Less than two months later, on June 8, 2014, the group deployed their first female suicide bomber targeting Nigerian Army barracks in Gombe. Since that first suicide bombing, the group has employed hundreds of female bombers including girls as young as 7 years old.

The changes in tactics, to include the use of women and children, have been particularly concerning. While a number of the attacks fail, the increased use of children in particular, has made it imperative to examine these trends. Prior to 2011 Boko Haram had not used suicide bombers at all, and from 2011 to 2014 had not successfully used female suicide bombers. Since 2014, Boko Haram has quickly become a group that has used the female suicide bomber more than any other terrorist group in history. Although research has found that Boko Haram suicide bombers are often not successful, by either not detonating or failing to kill anyone other than themselves, it is important to examine why they continue to use this tactic to the extent they do (Warner & Matfess, 2017). This paper will discuss and analyze Boko Haram and its use of the tactic of suicide bombers, using open source data to give a descriptive overview of suicide

bombings in the region. Further, it will pay particular attention to the use of the female suicide bomber, looking at gender differences in targeting, delivery method, and other tactics.

Defining Suicide Bombing

Even though there have been many issues in coming up with a single definition of terrorism, suicide bombing is more easily defined. Often times the terms suicide terrorism and suicide bombing have been used interchangeably. A suicide terrorist, or suicide attacker, is someone who takes their own life during the commission of a terrorist attack. Such suicides are completed by use of grenades, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), guns, or vehicles (airplanes as was the case in the September 11, 2001 attacks). Although the attackers may not necessarily die during the commission of the act, there is a high likelihood that it will result in their death. The attack will be carried out in furtherance of some political or social goals.

A suicide bomber, on the other hand, will knowingly take their own life while deploying an explosive device with the goal of killing countless others in the process (Markovic, 2009). Even though some definitions state that the bomber is willingly carrying out these attacks; research has found that there are numerous cases where a bomber is forced, coerced, or exploited into carrying them out, and therefore not willing participants. Women and children are regularly coerced or exploited in Nigeria. Journalists have often times published interviews with failed female bombers in Nigeria who have indicated that they were coerced into carrying out the attacks (Searcy, 2017; Pearson, 2018). It has been reported by the United Nation's International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) that numerous suicide bombers were age 14 or younger. In 2015, there were at least 44 child suicide bombers in Nigeria (UNICEF, 2016). By using open source collection methodology, it is not always possible to discern whether a bomber was forced, coerced, tricked, or actually willingly carried out an attack. Due to this limitation, all attacks that

were carried out, whether forced, coerced, or otherwise are counted for the purposes of this research.

Boko Haram

The Nigerian terrorist group Boko Haram¹ was founded by Mohammed Yusuf in Maiduguri, Borno State in 2002. The name Boko Haram, which is Hausa, is roughly translated to “Western Education is Sin.” The group started out by carrying out minor attacks. Their tactics began shifting with outside influence and training from other terrorist organizations. Yusuf had previously stated that he sent fighters to train with local Al Qaeda affiliate Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)² in Algeria and Mauritania (Zimet, 2017). Yusuf’s group was forming in Maiduguri and gaining followers which included students of Islam who were unemployed and underprivileged, as well as clerics, and university students (Buchanan-Clarke & Knoope, 2017).

In December of 2003, the group first targeted the police and several public buildings in Yobe State which eventually resulted in the arrest of dozens of militants and the death of 18 Boko Haram members (Pantucci & Jespersen, 2015). Over the next several years, there were a handful of attacks targeting police, and politicians, but nothing major until 2009. In February there was a violent incident between Boko Haram members and a police convoy that caused the death of several members (Buchanan-Clarke & Knoope, 2017). Things escalated from there, leading to a number of attacks targeting police, prisons, churches, and schools. Nigerian authorities arrested the Boko leader Mohammed Yusuf which ended in the death of Yusuf when

¹ The group’s name was Jama’atu Ahlus Sunnah Lid Da’awati Wal Jihad, which translates from Arabic to the People of the Sunnah for Preaching and Jihad Group.

² The group was formerly known as the Salafist Group for Call and Combat (GSPC).

he tried to escape in July 2009 (Gorman, 2009). When Yusuf was killed by Nigerian security forces he was replaced by a deputy, Abubakar Shekau.

The death of Mohammed Yusuf was expected to considerably weaken the group, but the appointment of Shekau led to a more dangerous, and more violent Boko Haram (Pantucci & Jespersen, 2015). In 2010, Shekau claimed allegiance to Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. This relationship only led to the increase in violence and more importantly a change in tactics for Boko Haram. There was also a split in factions in 2011 of Boko members. Some members split off into Ansaru (Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis Sudan, or Vanguard for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa) a group which formally appeared in Kano in January 2012 (Zenn, 2017; Pantucci & Jespersen, 2015). Ansaru was believed to have been behind various attacks in Nigeria, but many of the attacks included kidnapping foreigners, and other minor attacks (Pantucci & Jespersen, 2015). While Ansaru was operational in Nigeria, Boko Haram remained the larger, and more violent group.

On June 16, 2011, a male suicide bomber detonated a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) in the parking lot of Nigerian Police Headquarters in the capital city of Abuja. Boko Haram claimed responsibility for the attack in a statement by group spokesman Abu Zaid. He stated that the group carried out the attack to prove their capabilities and regret that they missed their target, police chief Hafiz Ringim (Jaide, 2011). A little over a month later Boko Haram struck again, this time targeting their first international target. On August 26, 2011, a male suicide bomber driving a vehicle packed with explosives detonated his VBIED at the gate of the United Nations (UN) headquarters in Abuja, Nigeria killing 23 people and wounding more than 100 others (Pantucci & Jespersen, 2015). This was just the beginning of suicide bombings and other violent attacks in Nigeria.

After the implementation of the suicide bomber, Boko Haram continued to use suicide bombings as a terror tactic in Nigeria; they then started carrying out terrorist attacks in the neighboring nations of Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. On March 7, 2015, Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau claimed allegiance to the Islamic State (ISIS) in an audio message (“Nigeria’s Boko,” 2015). Several days later, a spokesman for the Islamic State made an announcement that they had expanded territory into West Africa stating that ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had accepted the pledge of allegiance from Shekau and Boko Haram. The group subsequently changed their name to the Islamic State of West Africa (ISWA).

Role of Women in Terrorism

Although Boko Haram, like many other groups, did not start out by using female suicide bombers, they eventually embraced the tactic. Prior research shows how and why groups used females as terrorists. In much of the research on violent offending, women have historically been overlooked. This is also true in terrorism research. Since women are generally considered the gentler sex, their traditional gender roles as the nurturer make them less prone to violence (Alvanou, 2006). When women engage in political violence, or other acts that are male dominated, there is a tendency to use stereotypical explanations to rationalize this behavior (Nacos, 2005). Women, however, have held varying roles within terrorist groups. Some women have held peripheral roles. Peripheral roles can include any secondary roles to their male counterparts including being a bride for militants, operating safe houses, filling any other support functions, or becoming suicide bombers. Due to the nature of gender stereotypes, female terrorists, particularly suicide bombers, are seen as very effective (Laster & Erez, 2015).

In some cases, women have been leaders of groups. Fusako Shigenobu, for example, founded the Japanese Red Army in 1971 and led the group until her arrest in 2000 (Ness, 2005).

Other examples include Ulreike Meinhof who was co-founder of the German militant organization the Baader-Meinhof Group (Red Army Faction – RAF). In many other cases, women have been active participants in terrorist campaigns. In 1969, Leila Khaled and Salim Issawi, members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), hijacked a TWA flight from Italy to Greece, forcing the plane to land in Damascus, Syria (Cunningham, 2003). Secular or separatist groups such as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka (LTTE), as well as right wing groups such as the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), and single-issue groups like the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) and Earth Liberation Front (ELF) all had female contingents (Cunningham, 2003; Ness, 2005; Markovic, 2009). These are just some of the many examples of females engaging in terrorism to varying degrees.

Though Boko Haram has used female suicide bombers more than any other group in history, they are certainly not the first group to use them. On April 9, 1985, the Syrian Socialist Party (SSNP/PPS) was the first group to use a female suicide bomber. Seventeen-year-old Sana'a Mehadli drove a vehicle packed with explosives into an Israeli army convoy in Lebanon. The attack killed two Israeli soldiers (Markovic, 2016). The Syrian PPS used females in almost half (5 of 12) of their suicide bombings in Lebanon (Schweitzer, 2000). Other terrorist groups also began to adopt this change in tactic. In 1991, the Sri Lankan Tamil Tigers (LTTE) used 17-year-old Thenmozhi Rajaratnam to assassinate the former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi during an election rally in Sriperumbudur, India. The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) dispatched their first suicide bomber in Turkey in 1996, Zeynep Kinaci aka 'Zilan,' a female. Wafa Idris, the first Palestinian female suicide bomber, carried out her attack outside of a store in

Jerusalem in 2002. Other groups have also employed female suicide bombers in Russia, Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Somalia, Syria, and of course Nigeria.

Groups such as Boko Haram have not only used women, but children as well. The use of children in armed conflict is not a recent phenomenon (Honwana, 2006). Although there were many conflicts in Africa that featured child soldiers, they have been used around the world in Afghanistan, Burma, Iraq, and Sri Lanka, just to name a few (Skinner, 1999). Just like child soldiers who are coerced into fighting, forced into fighting because of strife in their communities, or those who seek excitement (Honwana, 2006), children in Africa have been used by Boko Haram to carry out suicide bombings. In some rare cases, women used babies to circumvent checkpoints to carry out suicide bombings (Markovic, 2017). Perhaps one of the most interesting developments is the use of females as suicide bombers in “cultures that in other respects strictly adhere to defined gender role division and gender segregation” (Laster & Erez, 2015, p. 86). Groups such as the Islamic State “strongly codified gender ideology, wherein male violence was legitimized and female violence was not” (Pearson, 2018, p. 34). Therefore, how does a group like Boko Haram, who adheres to the same ideology as IS, use female suicide bombers in such great numbers?

Boko Haram’s Use of Female Suicide Bombers

In the evening hours of April 14, 2014, Boko Haram entered the town of Chibok, Borno State, Nigeria. They targeted the government-run secondary boarding school kidnapping 276 girls of varying ages. In all the commotion, 57 of the girls were able to escape, leaving 219 kidnapped. The girls were taken by Boko militants, loaded onto trucks and taken into the bush (“Nigeria Chibok Abductions,” 2017). After the incident, there was a massive campaign on the internet using the hashtag #BringOurGirlsBack. Despite the fact that this was one of the largest

social media campaigns, it was largely ineffective. The campaign lasted for several months and died down with no girls being released.

In May 2016, one of the girls was found in the Sambisa Forest with a baby, while two more escaped in 2016 and 2017 (“Nigeria Chibok Abductions,” 2017). In October 2016, and May 2017, there were mass releases that were brokered by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC); the government releasing Boko members in exchange for 21 and 82 girls respectively (“Nigeria Chibok Abductions,” 2017). Four of the released Chibok girls recently completed their degrees at American University in Nigeria. This still left 113 girls unaccounted for. In July 2018, eight Boko Haram members were arrested by police. One Boko commander stated that some of the kidnapped girls were married to Boko commanders and would not be coming back (Adebayo, 2018).

Though some girls escaped, or were released, there was a more troubling aspect to these kidnappings. Less than two months after the kidnappings, Boko Haram deployed their first successful female suicide bomber on June 8, 2014. A female suicide bomber, described by witnesses as a middle-aged woman, was riding a motorcycle and was stopped at a military checkpoint outside a military base in Gombe (Chothia, 2014). While being searched, she detonated the explosives killing herself and one policeman. In the months that followed there were several more female suicide bombers in Lagos and Maiduguri. At the end of July there were several suicide bombings in Kano, Nigeria that involved female suicide bombers. On July 27, a female bomber detonated a bomb targeting a university campus, on July 28, two bombers detonate their explosives – one at a petrol station another at a market – and on July 30 another female suicide bomber detonates her explosives at the Kano Polytechnic College. Though the first female suicide bomber was not one of the kidnapped Chibok girls, the subsequent spate of

female suicide bombers brought about the fear that the kidnapped girls may have been turned into human bombs.

Although Boko Haram successfully employed the tactic of the suicide bomber in 2014, there are previous reports of attempted attacks using females. On January 31, 2012, there was a report by journalist Esther Chivu, that a private security company, Encouragers Security Company Limited, thwarted a female suicide bomber who attempted to gain access to the Federal Capital Territory Administration (FCTA) in Abuja (“Highlights from,” 2012). A week later, a minister from the FCTA confirmed the arrested of an alleged female Boko Haram member who was attempting to gain access to the FCTA (“Selection List,” 2012). Women are oftentimes used because they can circumvent security. Though it is not confirmed that this was in fact an attempted suicide bombing, or if she was just to plant bombs in the FCTA building, Boko Haram has used females in various capacities when necessary.

There are many attempted explanations as to why females become terrorists, including why they become suicide bombers. Some studies have described women as a “vulnerable demographic” that perhaps increase their risk for becoming involved in terrorism (Horgan, 2009; as cited in Jacques & Taylor, 2013). Therefore, the population is vulnerable to be swayed into participation, particularly if they are younger. Laster & Erez (2015) argue the use of females as suicide bombers, however, particularly in patriarchal organizations and male-dominated societies indicates a shift. Boko Haram’s use of the female suicide bomber can be traced to the groups willingness to use females, “as well as a female social base willing to tolerate (and perpetrate) these attacks” (Warner & Matfess, 2017, p. 28).

Pearson (2018) enumerates reasons as to why female suicide bombers provide an advantage to groups: First, the effect of propaganda based on the shocking nature of females who

are willing to sacrifice their lives via suicide bombings; Second, women are believed to be able to circumvent security measures more easily than men because they arouse less suspicion (Warner & Matfess, 2017); Third, the use of women allows for groups to avoid using male militants thus avoiding disruption to group hierarchies; Fourth, groups who have lost many male fighters may recruit women to fill roles of suicide bombers out of desperation; and finally, the women can be used to shame men into joining the fight (Pearson, 2018, p. 36).

Even though there may be different reasons as to why people become suicide bombers, they are not insane, and in fact are rational actors (Sprinzak, 2000). In their research on Palestinian suicide bombers, Kimhi and Even (2003) found that they can be motivated because they are *religious fanatics, nationalist, avengers, or exploited*. Chechen female suicide bombers are often called “Black Widows” because they had lost their husbands (and other family) in fighting against Russian forces (Markovic, 2009). In the case, of Boko Haram however, interviews with failed bombers indicate that many seem to have been forced, threatened, or coerced into carry out attacks (Searcey, 2017).

Methodology

The author collected data for this research from open sources. This refers to any source that is not classified, and is publicly available. This includes all English-language news reports (both in print and online; and both foreign and domestic), television or radio reports, government reports, datasets, journal articles, or any other publicly available sources. Using open sources provides a time and cost-effective method to collect large amounts of data on the topic of suicide bombings. The data was collected using independent multiple open sources in an attempt to verify and triangulate data to ensure its accuracy. Multiple reports provide a more robust data collection methodology to avoid any errors. The nature of open source data may include the

possibility of inaccurate reporting, but using multiple independent sources was used as an attempt to alleviate this issue. For example, an article that reports the immediate aftermath of a suicide bombing may not have any information about the bomber, or an accurate death toll. Later articles may be more up-to-date and include information about the suicide bomber, how the attack was carried out, group claims of responsibility, and death tolls that reflect updated numbers.

The data collected spans from June 16, 2011 until June 15, 2018 which includes a full 7-year period. During this time period, any suicide bombings that occurred and were reported in the open sources were collected not only in Nigeria, but in surrounding countries in West Africa that have been targeted by suicide bombings suspected to be perpetrated by Boko Haram. Though in some cases there may be an attribution error, it is difficult to determine based on open sources, who actually perpetrated the suicide bombings. Therefore, any bombing that was carried out by an individual(s) who killed themselves during the commission of the attack, were included in the dataset. The data also collected the following variables in relation to the suicide bombings: Date; Time of Day; Location of Bombing; Target Type (Commercial-Civilian, Military, Police, Government, Other, and Unknown); Delivery Method (Vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) or Individual-carried improvised explosive device (IC-IED), Other, and Unknown); Gender of Perpetrator(s); Age of Perpetrator(s); and Number Killed. (Markovic, 2009).

Results

The data set starts with the first suicide bombing carried out in Nigeria on June 16, 2011 and ends June 15, 2018 representing a full 7-year period of attacks that were carried out. Although in some cases Boko Haram did not claim responsibility for the attack, security forces

believe that they were responsible for a majority of the attacks. There were also two suicide bombings carried out in Niger by a group called Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA), who are an offshoot of Al Qaeda in in Islamic Maghreb.³ During this time period, there were approximately 377 suicide bombings carried out, most of them in Nigeria which experienced a total of 303 attacks. Figure 1 below shows the breakdown of suicide bombings including the four countries that Boko Haram has been operational in, broken down by reported gender of the perpetrator.

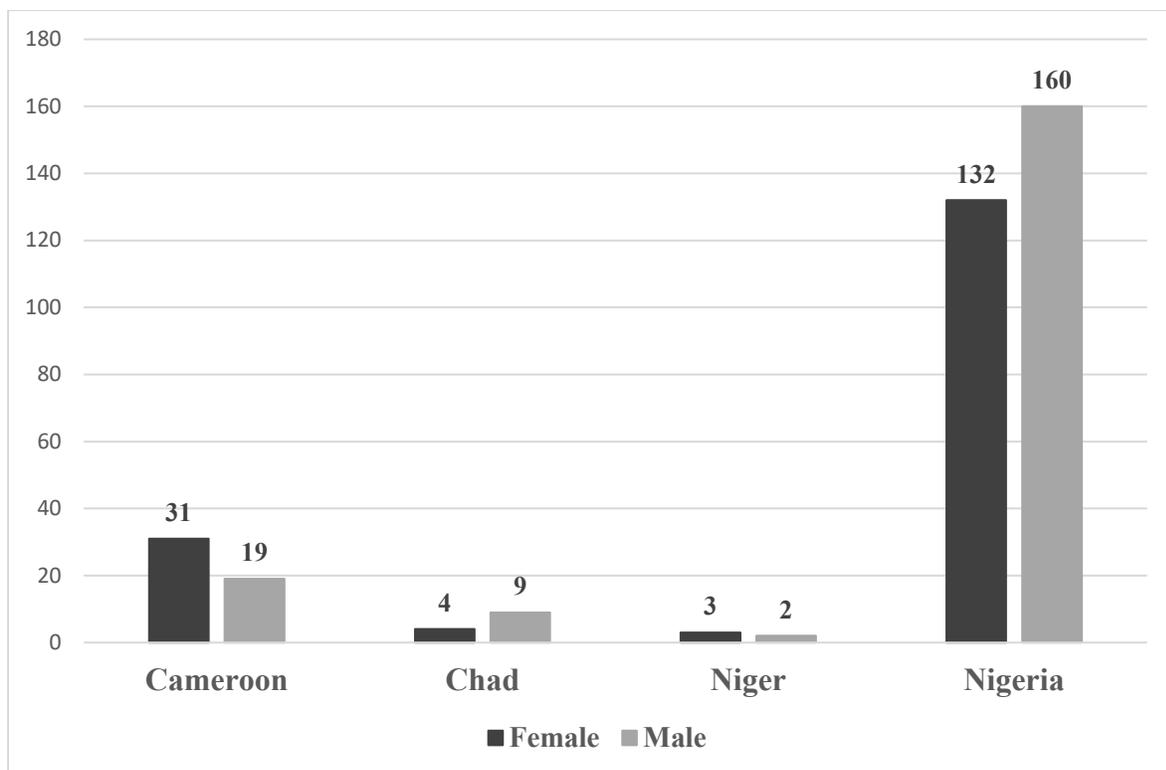


Figure 1. Suicide bombings between June 16, 2011 and June 15, 2018 (hereinafter, 2011-2018), breakdown by country and gender.

Based on the gender breakdown, men were used in Nigeria more often than women. Women, however, seemed to be a better choice when attacking targets in Cameroon, particularly commercial and civilian targets; 28 of those suicide bombings perpetrated against commercial or

³ These attacks were not included in the dataset.

civilian targets were carried out by women, while only 15 were carried out by males. Chad had a slightly larger number of male suicide bombers, Niger had only 5 attacks. There were an additional nine suicide bombings that had both male and female suicide bombers. Also, there were several in which the gender was not known. Since the numbers were not large enough to warrant their own grouping, they were not included in this chart.

As mentioned, during the 7-year period there were 377 suicide bombings carried out. Figure 2 illustrates those attacks over time, starting with June 2011. In Figure 2, some months during this time period had only five or less suicide bombings. Other months, however, had an extremely high number of suicide bombings. July 2015, for example, had the most suicide bombings carried out with 25. June, 2015 and October, 2015 had 19, and December, 2015 had 18 suicide bombings carried out. This was followed by February 2015 and June 2017, each with 15, and the remaining months had fourteen or less suicide bombings carried out.

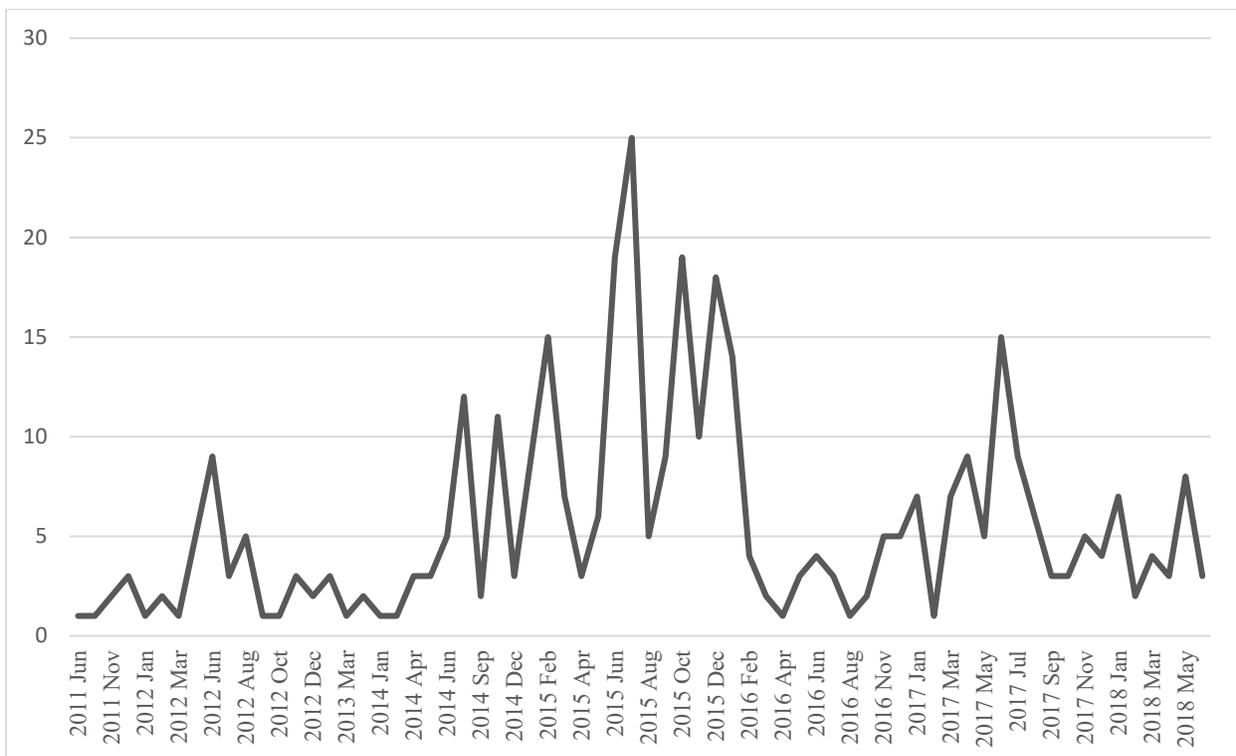


Figure 2. Suicide bombings carried out in Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger 2011-2018.

The reason that July 2015 in particular is high can be attributed to the renewed effort by the Nigerian government to target the group. In March 2015, Nigeria held general elections with incumbent Goodluck Jonathan losing to current President Muhammadu Buhari. The President-elect was sworn into office on May 29, 2015 in Nigeria's capital Abuja, and in his inaugural speech vowed to target Boko Haram (Stein, 2015), specifically stating that the command center would move from Abuja to Maiduguri until Boko Haram is defeated. Maiduguri became the focus not only because it is the capital and largest city in Borno State in northeastern Nigeria, but it was the center of Boko Haram's operations. There were hundreds of cities that were targeted by these suicide bombings, but the city with the most was Maiduguri with 166 carried out. The next city is Potiskum with only 24. Most of the top cities are in northern Nigeria, however, Kolofata and Mora are in Cameroon. The top ten cities are depicted in Figure 3 below.

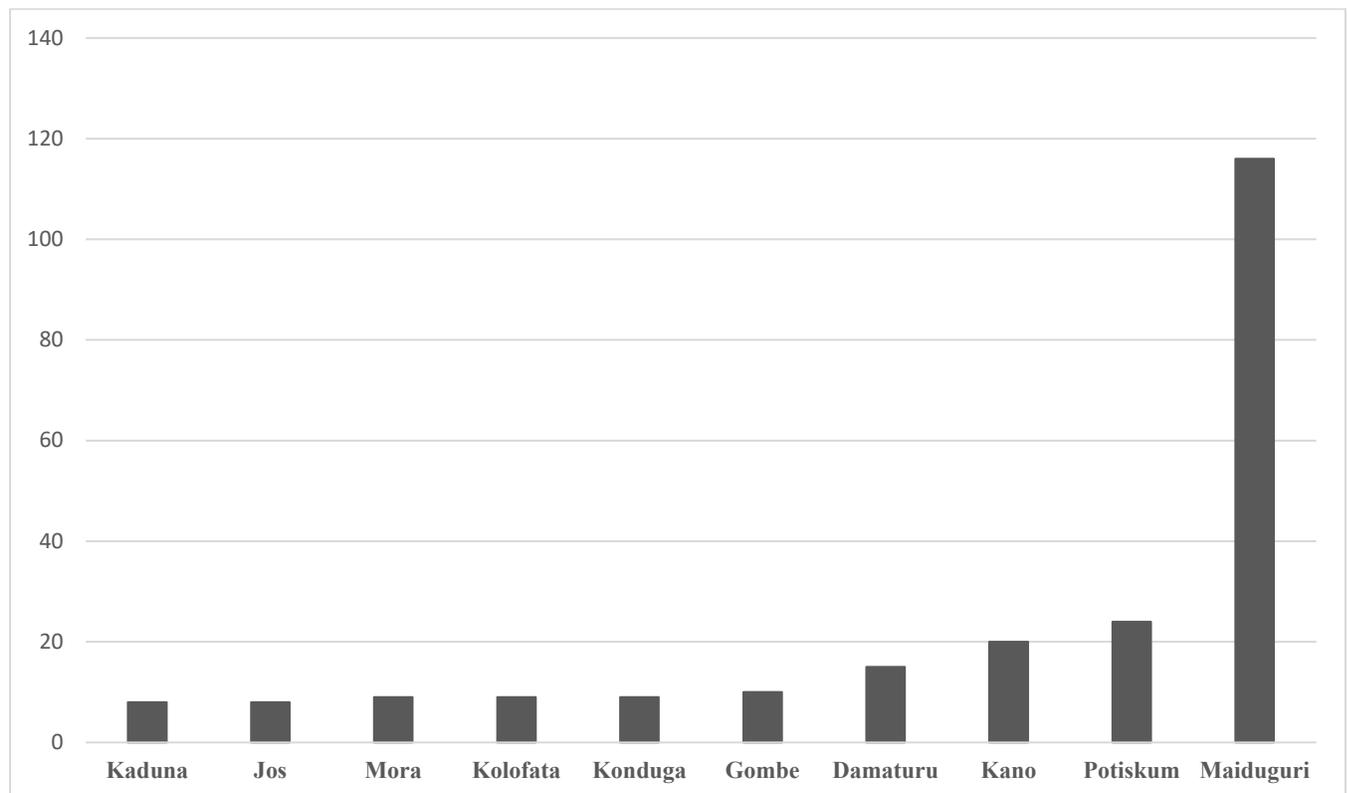


Figure 3. Top ten cities for suicide bombings carried out in 2011-2018.

Since Maiduguri accounted for more than half of all suicide bombings in Nigeria, a closer look is warranted. The first suicide bombing in Maiduguri took place in November 2011. From 2011, there were only male suicide bombers in Maiduguri. The first successful female suicide bomber in Nigeria carried out an attack in Gombe Nigeria on June 6, 2014 before they also started appearing in the capital of Maiduguri. The first female suicide bombing in Maiduguri took place in July 2014, and remained exclusively female bombers until March 2015. There was a spike in both male and female bombers in June 2015. This is likely due to President Buhari's decision to move the command center to Maiduguri. This included four suicide bombing attacks in which the perpetrators were female. After August 2015, there were more female suicide bombers than there were male bombers until May the following year (see Figure 4 below).

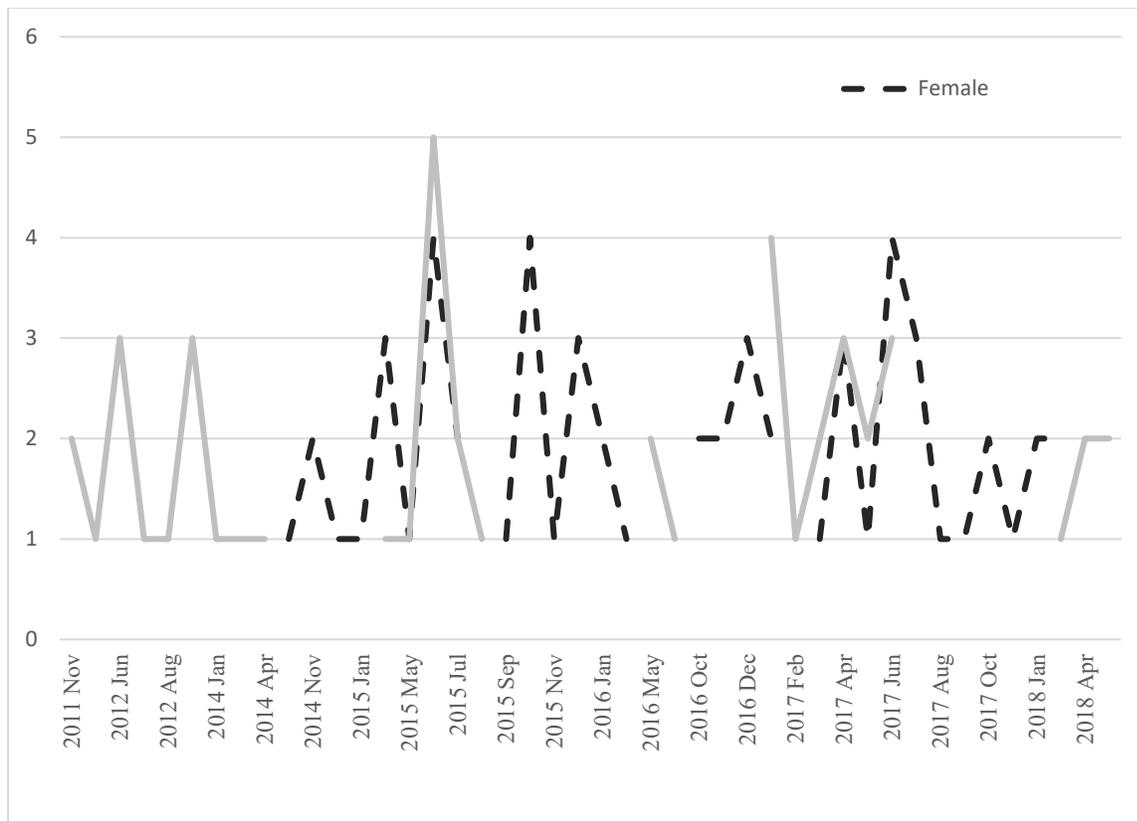


Figure 4. Suicide bombings carried out in 2011-2018 in the capital Maiduguri by female and male bombers.

One tactic Boko Haram commonly employs is the use of multiple bombers in single attacks. Warner and Matfess (2017) found that in exactly half of the suicide bombing attacks, multiple suicide bombers were used. A woman or girl walking alone may cause suspicion. There were several documented cases where a mob would beat girls to death because the people were fearful of female suicide bombers. In 2015, for example, a young girl refused to be frisked at a checkpoint and was subsequently beaten to death by locals and set on fire because they believed she had explosives concealed in water bottles under her head scarf (Kaplan, 2015). She was not actually carrying any explosives. Due to the increased fear of suicide bombings, particularly those carried out by younger girls, have security forces and the community fearful of young ladies.

Of the 377 suicide bombings carried out over the seven-year period, however, many of the attacks involved multiple bombers. This became a common tactic for the group, particularly with the female suicide bombers, where two or more bombers would target locations together to avoid arousing suspicion. During this time period, there were a total of approximately 578 suicide bombers. Figure 5 below depicts the difference, over time, between the number of suicide bombings carried out, and the number of suicide bombers. In the beginning, the chart below indicates that there were the same number of suicide bombers as there were suicide bombings. Starting in 2015, however, that shifted, giving way to the tactic of using multiple suicide bombers in each attack. The group did not start using female bombers until June 2014, and by 2015 had switched their tactics to ensure that the females would avoid suspicion by traveling together rather than alone.

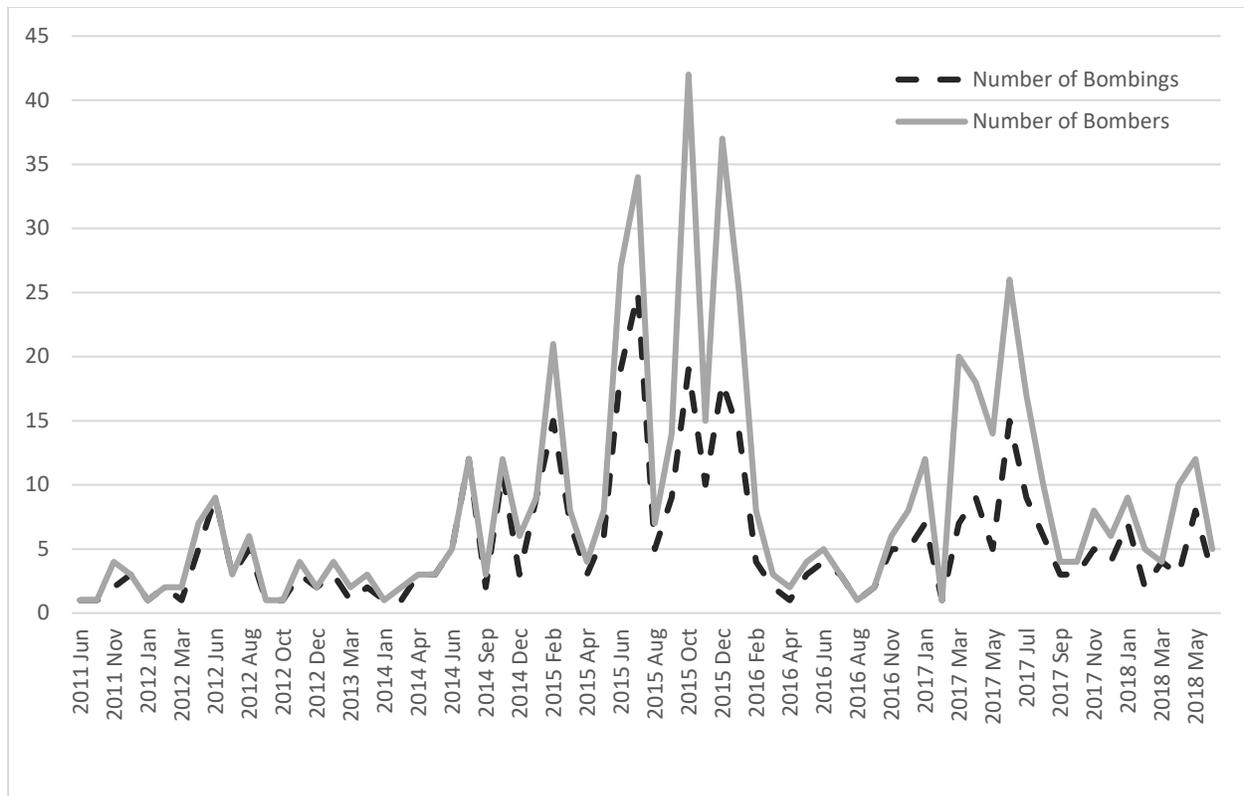


Figure 5. Comparing the number of suicide bombings carried out and total number of bombers, 2011-2018.

Of the total number of suicide bombers who carried out attacks during the 7-year time period for whom the gender was notated, there were more female bombers than males.

Historically, among the various groups who have used female suicide bombers worldwide, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, also known as the Tamil Tigers, was the group that had used them more than any other group (Markovic, 2009). There were also many female suicide bombers used in Iraq, although the attacks were often not claimed by any group (Markovic, 2009). Unlike any other terrorist group in the world, however, Boko Haram has used more female suicide bombers and have done so in a short period of time. Figure 6 below shows the breakdown between male and female suicide bombers.

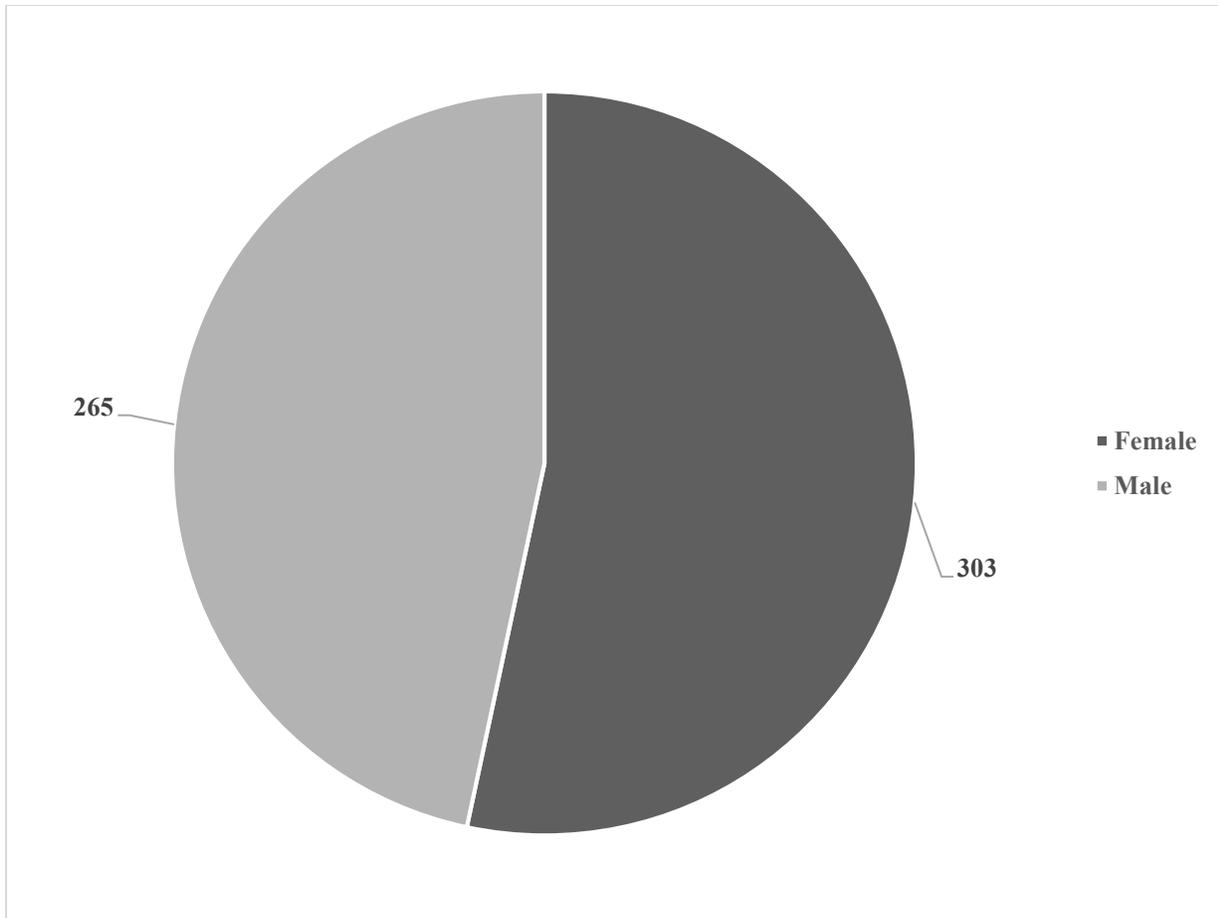


Figure 6. Comparing the number of male and female suicide bombers for attacks carried out, 2011-2018.

Boko Haram has not only used more females than males in carrying out their suicide bombings, they have quickly become the only group in the world that has used this number of females. This was not the case initially. As many other groups had in the past with the exception of the PKK, most groups began carrying out suicide bombings with male militants. Boko Haram was no different in this respect. They had attempted to use females earlier on, but some of them were caught at checkpoints before detonating and then arrested. To view the gender differences over time, Figure 7 below shows the breakdown between male and female suicide bombers dispatched by Boko Haram over the seven-year period. It is clear that in some of the months the use of female suicide bombers far surpassed that of male suicide bombers.

These only represent the attacks that were carried out. There were many more where the male and female bombers were arrested after failing to carry out the attacks.

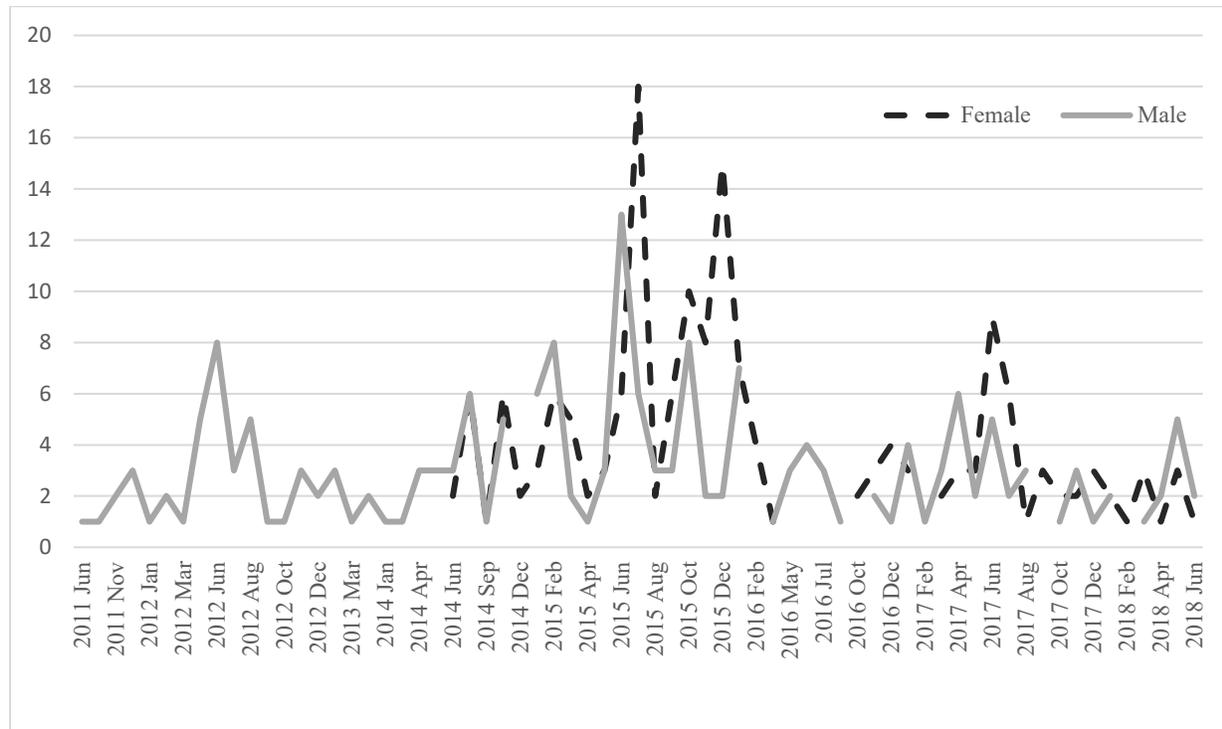


Figure 7. Comparing the number of male and female suicide bombers for attacks carried out, 2011-2018.

A large number of the suicide bombers, both male and female, were relatively young in age. Although the ages were not available for all bombers, many of them were described by witnesses as being youth or teenagers. Some articles gave age ranges for multiple bombers, for example four bombers between the ages of 8 and 12. While there were some male's that were young, many of these were young girls. An additional four were classified as being "young." There were approximately 61 suicide bombers, over 10%, who were described as being under the age of 15. Twenty-nine of the bombers were referred to as "teenagers," and 11 more who were between the ages of 16 and 19. There were some bombers who were in their 20s and 30s, very few described as "middle-aged" and two described as "elderly."

It is also important to examine the gender differences in relation to the targets of these suicide bombings. Although there were attacks against the government, police, and military, they only accounted for a smaller percentage of attacks. The targets of the suicide bombings that have been carried out were mainly against commercial and civilian targets. Targeting civilians has become quite common. In Iraq, for example, as the impact of suicide bombings when targeting military forces decreased, the targeting of ‘soft’ targets increased (Hafez, 2006). Many of the bombers in Nigeria were dispatched to target mosques, markets, and camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs). This was also the case for the suicide bombings carried out in Cameroon as well where many Nigerian’s fleeing from Nigeria were targeted in IDP camps. Figure 8 below shows the breakdown of targets based on gender. Male suicide bombers were primarily used target government, police, and military, while more female suicide bombers attacked commercial and civilian targets. There were nine suicide bombings that included both male and female bombers and were not included in the figure below.

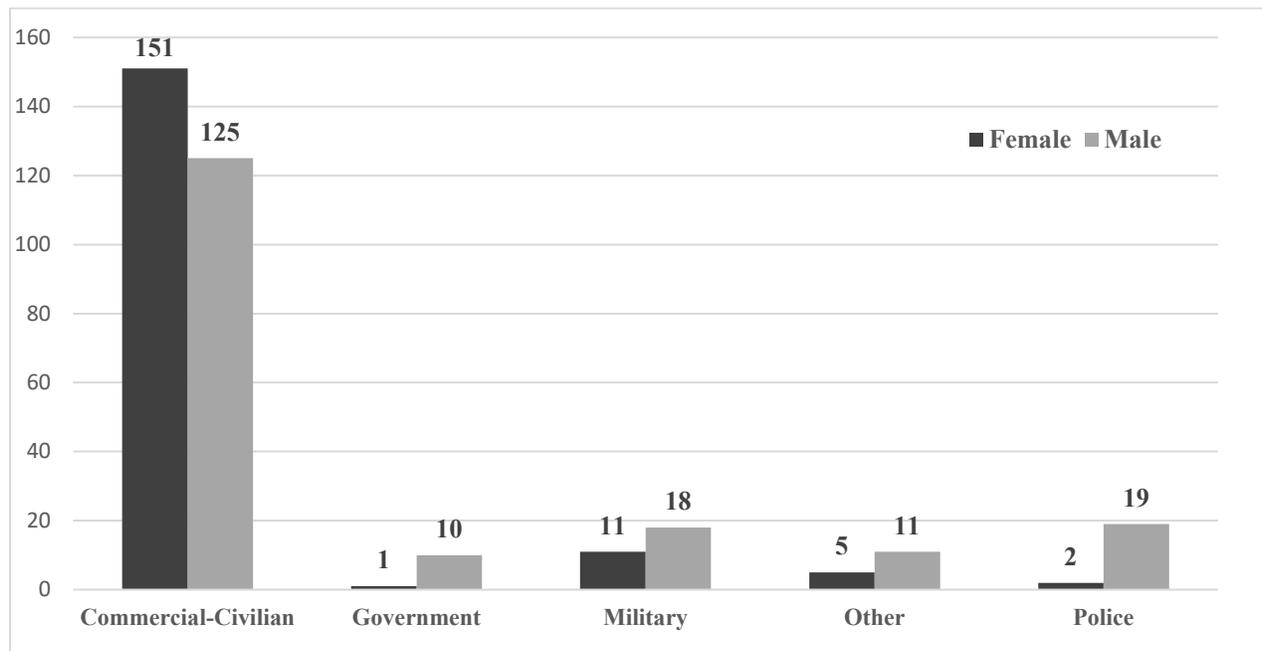


Figure 8. Comparing the number of suicide bombings for attacks carried out based on gender and target type, 2011-2018.

The delivery method indicates whether the bomber had the bombs strapped to themselves (individual carried improvised explosive device or IC-IED) or if the explosives were in a motorized vehicle, whether it be a truck, car, van, etc. (vehicle-borne improvised explosive device or VBIED). A majority of attacks in Nigeria and surrounding countries used bombs strapped to an individual by either using a suicide belt or suicide vest, for example. When breaking it down by gender, an overwhelming majority of vehicle-borne suicide bombings were carried out by male bombers, while a majority of the individual-carried IEDs were more female. This makes sense in light of the culturally accepted gender roles in certain societies (Laster & Erez, 2015). In cultures where women typically do not drive cars, we do not expect to see a large number of female suicide bombers using a vehicle-borne IED.

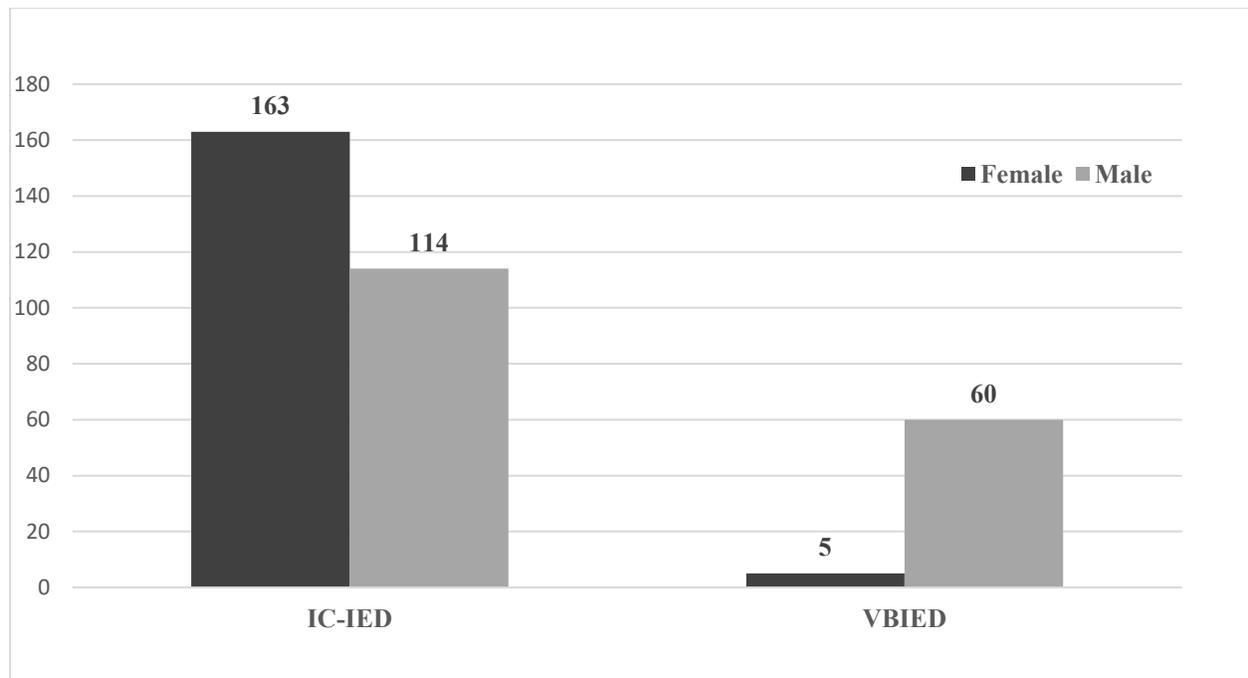


Figure 9. Comparing the number of suicide bombings for attacks carried out based on gender and delivery method, 2011-2018.

Discussion

Few countries have experienced the level of violence that has plagued Nigeria for the last ten years. There are only a few countries that have seen more suicide bombings than Nigeria (Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan); but none that have seen as many female suicide bombers. The first female suicide bomber was 17-year-old Sana'a Mehadli, who killed two Israeli soldiers in Lebanon on behalf of the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party (Markovic, 2016). Other groups have employed female suicide bombers as a tactic as well. While some of these groups have continued to carry out suicide bombings using females, none have reached the level of attacks perpetrated by Boko Haram.

Over the seven year period there have been several peaks in Boko Haram's use of suicide bombings as a tactic. As mentioned previously, when Buhari was being sworn in at the end of May 2015, he vowed to target Boko Haram (Stein, 2015). Boko Haram responded by making June and July 2015 the deadliest period with the most suicide bombings ever in Nigeria. When breaking it down by gender, June 2015 had the most male suicide bombers, while July 2015 had the most female suicide bombers. While Buhari specifically mentioned moving headquarters to the city of Maiduguri, many of the attacks in June and July happened outside of the city. Maiduguri was the city with the most attacks in June and July with 13 total, however, other cities around Nigeria and in Chad accounted for 31.

The data shows that there were more female suicide bombers than males overall in Nigeria and surrounding countries. Just like most other groups, with the exception of groups such as the PKK, Boko Haram started using the tactic by first employing the male suicide bomber. Although some of Boko's female suicide bombers may have been willing, many were

also coerced. This is a differentiating factor between Boko Haram and some of the other terrorist groups who have benefited from the willing female suicide bomber (Bloom & Matfess, 2016).

Many stories emerged of the coercive nature in Boko Haram's use of the female suicide bomber. One failed bomber, 15-year-old Aisha, stated that Boko members asked her "Are you going to sleep with us, or do you want to go on a mission?" prior to her becoming a suicide bomber (Searcey, 2017). Another 16-year-old recalled a similar incident. Hadiza was asked to marry a Boko Haram militant and when she refused she was later told she would become a suicide bomber (Searcey, 2017). Thirteen-year-old Zahharau Babangida was arrested in Kano after two other bombers detonated, but she failed to detonate (Akingbala, 2014). She stated that her father had given her to Boko Haram militants. The problem is evident in statements made by military officials. Brigadier-General Sani Usman made a statement in 2017 telling Nigerians to stop "donating their daughters" for suicide missions carried out by Boko Haram ("Stop donating," 2017).

While some of the female and child bombers were "donated" to Boko Haram, others were kidnapped and used as bombers. On November 18, 2016, for example, a group of suicide bombers targeted the Saint Hillary Catholic Church in Maiduguri. As the bombers approached the checkpoint, one detonated, two were shot, and one surrendered. The failed female suicide bomber that was arrested told police that she had been kidnapped by Boko Haram from Gwoza, in Borno State, two years prior to the attempted attack (Musa, 2016). Other failed bombers who were interviewed also stated that they had been kidnapped and held against their will, and told of how members of their families had been killed during their capture (Searcey, 2017).

Boko Haram's use of female suicide bombers may be tied to the group's use of the tactic of kidnapping women and girls. Other conflicts in Africa, such as in Rwanda and Sierra Leone,

have seen the tactic of abducting females who are then raped, forced into marriage, and some forced into combat (Mazurana & McKay, 2001, as cited in Pearson, 2018). Mass kidnappings of school girls was first carried out by groups such as the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda, although the group never resorted to suicide bombings as did Boko Haram (McKay, 2005, as cited in Pearson, 2018). It was estimated in 2015 that Boko Haram has kidnapped over 2,000 women and young girls, but many believe that the actual number is much higher than that estimate (Matfess, 2016).

As mentioned previously, in April 2014, the infamous kidnapping of the Chibok girls took place. Boko Haram's leader Abu Bakar Shekau claimed responsibility for the kidnapping, but also used it as symbolic of their adherence to Shariah law (Bloom & Matfess, 2016). It is unclear how many of them were turned into suicide bombers. What was clear, through many accounts by failed attackers, was Boko Haram's coercive tactics to force young females to become suicide bombers. In some cases the girls were able to report that they were carrying explosives to police or military and had them safely defused. Even those 'failed' bombers, that defied Boko Haram by not detonating, were worried that they would still be viewed as supporters of the group (Searcey, 2017). Attempting to approach authorities to ask for help could potentially be deadly as the fear of the female suicide bombers has caused soldiers, police, and civilians to be extremely cautious (Searcey, 2017). In some cases, young women were killed by villagers for fear they were attempting an attack.

The data showed that women were employed as suicide bombers more often in Cameroon than men, while more men were used as suicide bombers in Nigeria than were women. More women were employed to target commercial and civilian targets whereas men were used more often to target police, military, and government targets. While men were used

more often to target security forces and the government, they didn't account for a large percentage of the attacks overall. Due to gender stereotypes, women are used as bombers because they are less threatening and can circumvent security. If women are believed to provide a strategic advantage because they can circumvent security (Warner & Matfess, 2017; Pearson, 2018) why were they not used to target military, police, and government targets. It seems that based on location of some barracks and other military targets, women and girls in particular, may not blend into their surroundings and actually be cause for more suspicion. Therefore, using the female suicide bombers to attack civilian targets would provide the group with a greater strategic advantage.

Though women are viewed as less suspicious and therefore perfect candidates for suicide bombers, Boko Haram has also taken to using small children. The use of young children in conflict is not a new phenomenon in Africa. Boko Haram has used kids, both boys and girls, as young as 7 years old. In one attack, for example, two female bombers detonated the bombs strapped to their bodies in Madagali, Nigeria. One of the women was carrying an infant with her allowing her to pass through security with little suspicion, killing six people and injuring another 17 in the attack (Markovic, 2017). There have been very few cases of using babies in suicide bombings, but it is not a common tactic. The shock factor alone by using women and children has cause panic in many communities in Nigeria and surrounding countries. Local populations have in some cases taken matters into their own hands and have killed young girls they thought were suicide bombers, but turned out they actually were not (Kaplan, 2015).

The younger females are generally paired with other females so that two to four females can be in a group carrying out a suicide bombing. The bombers are carrying out suicide bombings against civilian targets. According to the dataset, not counting the 500+ suicide

bombers, there have been nearly 4,000 deaths from the suicide bombings in Nigeria and surrounding countries. A majority of the bombings were carried out using suicide belts, vests, carried in bags, or strapped to the body of the bombers. As evidenced in the data more women use the individual carried IEDs than men, while more men use the vehicle-borne, while only five women were involved in VBIEDs.

Boko Haram has used the female suicide bomber in unprecedented numbers, far surpassing any other group who has used suicide bombers. There are various reasons that groups choose to employ female suicide bombers. Sometimes it is out of necessity, or in some cases women are chosen because they are expendable, while other times it is viewed as an act of desperation (Pearson, 2018). One failed suicide bomber named Halima stated that she was married at 14 and her husband became a member of Boko Haram (Mayer, 2019). In fact, her husband was supposed to carry out the attack, but he declined, and she was to then carry out the attack in Chad (Mayer, 2019). She and other women attempted to escape, but were captured and she says they were drugged; they were told to carry out the suicide bombing otherwise they would slaughter them like animals (Mayer, 2019). A group of them traveled at night but were surrounded by village guards and someone detonated killing all in their group except Halima, who lost both of her legs in the failed attack (Mayer, 2019).

There may be many reasons and motivations as to why females become suicide bombers, such as revenge or personal tragedy (Bloom, 2007), or be *religious fanatics, nationalist, avengers, or exploited* in some form (Kimhi & Even, 2003). In the case of Boko Haram, however, the personal motivations of the women may be different. As interviews with failed bombers indicate, many seem to have been forced, threatened, or coerced into carry out attacks

(Searcey, 2017). Therefore in this case, it may be more important to focus on the reasons why Boko Haram is motivated to use female suicide bombers.

President Buhari proclaimed that they had “technically” defeated Boko Haram in December 2015, however, the group was still carrying out suicide bombings and posing a significant threat to the local populace (Markovic, 2017). Since this technical defeat, according to the dataset, there have been 153 suicide bombings carried out by some 268 suicide bombers, killing at least 1,074 people. Since Buhari took office, the government has made some significant progress in fighting Boko Haram, but there is a long way to go. When discussing suicide bombers, Pedahzur (2005) found that the reason groups stop using the tactic of suicide bombings for one of three reasons: the group achieves their goals, the tactic is not working, or if the group loses public support. Boko Haram’s use of suicide bombers, particularly female and young girls as suicide bombers, has continued at a very alarming rate. Besides suicide bombings, Boko Haram continues to use armed assaults, and raid villages killing dozens, sometimes hundreds of people.

Limitations

Even though every effort was made to record every instance of a suicide bombing carried out by Boko Haram in Nigeria and West Africa, the collection was done using open sources and therefore some cases may have been missed inadvertently. Additionally, on days with a heavy news cycle, minor attacks, with little to no casualties, may not have been covered by media and would therefore not be reflected in the collection. Due to the nature of open source collection, some information may be missing or erroneously reported. There were numerous cases where one article recorded the incident was carried out by a male bomber, while another stated it was a female bomber. Even when looking at government sources, often times the police would report

one number of casualties, while the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) would report different numbers. Although this does cause some issues in confirming information, the use of multiple sources - including local sources and NGOs, as well as various news outlets – allowed for some ability to rectify some of these issues in reporting.

Moving Forward

Since the first modern suicide bombing was carried out in Beirut, Lebanon in December 1981, there have been thousands of suicide bombings carried out in over 55 countries. Suicide bombing is a tactic that many groups believe is the best way to target a government, however, it is primarily carried out targeting civilians because they are the most vulnerable. Boko Haram's use of the tactic includes the use of women and children in large numbers, and the tactic has crossed into Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. Besides addressing the security issues in Northern Nigeria where most of the attacks are occurring, there is also a humanitarian crisis in terms of the numbers of people displaced by the conflicts. The data shows that those displaced by the conflict have also been regularly targeted by Boko Haram.

Economic aid to northern Nigeria is necessary, as using military force exclusively may not solve the problem. Even after President Buhari announced the 'technical' defeat of Boko Haram, the data showed that the group was still able to carry out a large number of suicide bombings killing over a thousand people. Due to the fact that the group targets civilians most often, more effort has to be placed on the protection of civilians who are targeted by the group. The unprecedented use of female suicide bombers, particularly young girls, needs to be a focal point of any policy moving forward. Further research delving into the reasons why some terrorist groups use female suicide bombers, while others do not, may be worth exploring.

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