



Women and children in the Fufore Camp for internally displaced people in Nigeria.

Women as Symbols and Swords in Boko Haram's Terror

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In June 2014, a middle-aged woman riding a motorcycle approached the military barracks in the North Eastern Nigerian city of Gombe. While being searched at the military checkpoint, she detonated the explosives strapped to her body, ending her life and killing a soldier in the process. With this act, a new chapter in the destructive history of Boko Haram began: the group joined the ranks of terrorist groups around the world that have incorporated women into their organizational profiles. Since the first attack, women and young girls (between the ages of 7 and 17) have been coerced into targeting civilians at markets, bus depots, and mosques. The 89 attacks documented between June 2014 and January 2016, mostly of civilian soft targets, are responsible for more than 1,200 deaths and an even greater number of injuries. The adoption of female suicide bombers is not especially surprising as an operational adaptation to increased state surveillance of the group's activities; it has been a tactic adopted by secular and religious terrorist groups from Sri Lanka to Syria. However, Boko Haram depends on female operatives disproportionately, relative to similar insurgencies; for example, the Tamil Tigers used 46 women over the course of 10 years, whereas Boko Haram has deployed more than 90 women in a little over a year and a half.²

Though Boko Haram is known to be the most significant source of violence in Nigeria since the transition to democracy in 1999, the group's abuses against women have also earned it international notoriety. When the group abducted the Chibok Girls from their school in April 2014, impassioned advocates around the world promulgated the #BringBackOurGirls movement and popularized the hashtag on social media, demanding that former President Goodluck Jonathan mount a serious effort to rescue the victims. Not only did human rights advocates marshal support through NGOs and public awareness campaigns, but Nigeria's international partners, including the United States, also provided supplementary military support.³ The United States bolstered Nigeria's capacity to monitor the Sambisa Forest, where much of Boko Haram was

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located, and collect intelligence on the insurgency by providing drones and unmanned surveillance aircraft.⁴ The attention that the group garnered following these abductions, which facilitated the spread of its propaganda domestically and internationally, may have emboldened the group to rely more heavily on female operatives.⁵

Unfortunately, while the focus on the victimized girls helped garner international support, the effort overlooked the role that women and girls play in the insurgency's operations and ideology, depriving analysts of critical insights about the functioning of the group. The timing of the group's use of females as weapons conforms to the use of gender-based violence globally as a recruitment strategy by terrorist organizations in conflicts as diverse as Turkey, Sri Lanka, and Iraq. Further, Boko Haram's use of female suicide bombers connects it to the broader global extremist movement, which is increasingly deploying female fighters and suicide bombers.⁶ However, the forced conscription and deployment of young women and girls is a differentiating feature of Boko Haram among other terrorist organizations, many of which have benefited from willing female participation.⁷ The group's conceptualization of females has also distinguished it from other Islamist movements in North East Nigeria; given the group's origins as a dissident movement, methods of differentiation are critical aspects of the insurgency. Analyzing the group's propaganda and the local religious-political context in which it operates shows how women, and their position within the group's ideology, allow Boko Haram to differentiate itself from other Nigerian Salafi movements. Other Salafi groups have advocated for women's education and have coexisted with the Nigerian secular

state—by emphasizing its differences with such movements, Boko Haram portrays itself as the vanguard of “true Islam.”

This article analyzes the roles of women and girls within Boko Haram and its ideology to elucidate the motivations, capabilities, and strategies of the organization. Women and girls have become “swords” mobilized and weaponized to carry out attacks while also being used as powerful “symbols” of Boko Haram's ideology; understanding women in the insurgency requires an examination of ideology in the context of other Islamic actors in the region, and a determination of the factors that prompted Boko Haram's operational shift towards female operatives. Our research will explore the broader patterns of tactical violence against women globally before moving to a discussion of the diversity of female engagement in Boko Haram's militant activities, addressing women's roles as wives, coerced weapons, and willing recruiters. The article will then assess Boko Haram's rhetoric *vis à vis* women, including statements about the Chibok girls, as well as insurgents' statements about women's position within. Finally, we will address some preliminary conclusions garnered from our research and emphasize the importance of an inclusive deradicalization and counterterrorism program.

Background

Boko Haram's adoption of suicide bombing and its increasing reliance on female operatives occurred against a backdrop of mounting sexual violence against women for political ends throughout the African continent; according to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), “rates of rape used as a weapon of political violence have been higher than average...since late 2012.”⁸ While this

may be the result of increasing availability of reports on the issue, ACLED's assessment suggests that there has been a significant rise in politicized sexual violence against women. This corroborates research conducted by Dara K. Cohen, which found that the overwhelming number of cases she studied in Africa have occurred during political conflicts, such as the one that initially triggered the creation of Boko Haram. Cohen also finds that rape leads to "peace fragility, primarily through the destruction of social trust," suggesting that conflicts that rely on sexual violence arise from and contribute to the unraveling of the social fabric, even following the cessation of the fighting which further complicates the already tortuous process of post-conflict reconciliation.⁹

While Cohen's research is concentrated geographically, her findings can be applied

more generally. Understood as a means of fostering cohesiveness among forcibly conscripted soldiers, while simultaneously undermining external social bonds and instilling fear, violence against women is particularly suited to the goals of terrorist organizations. This issue is not confined to Africa, nor is it a novel development; sexual violence against women is an unfortunate feature of many conflicts worldwide.

Despite the longevity of this issue, the seeming acceleration in the adoption of this tactic prompted the United Nations to release a report in April 2015 highlighting wartime sexual violence—focused on rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, and forced pregnancy of women and girls—in 19 countries.¹⁰ The UN expressed "grave concern" over the numerous accounts of rape, sexual slavery, and forced



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Women and children comprise the majority of those living in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in Nigeria.

marriage perpetrated by jihadist groups like ISIL and Boko Haram, as well as widespread gender-based violence by armed groups in Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Nigeria, Mali, Libya, and Yemen.¹¹ This is especially disturbing as many jihadi groups herald women's "purity," defined in an oppressive and patriarchal way, as a main goal for the movement and emphasize in their propaganda the need to protect "their sisters in Islam" from abuse by secular communities. In light of the increasing prominence of gendered violence in jihadist groups that claim to operate in the name of Islam, understanding the operational and symbolic role of women is critical to counter the threat posed by these groups globally.

But women have not merely been disproportionately victimized by modern conflicts, they are playing an increasingly important role in the tactical operations of terrorist groups and insurgencies. Many, including one of the authors, have highlighted the role that revenge or retribution plays in galvanizing female participation and note the prevalence of widows among female militants.¹² Interestingly, some have suggested that economic incentives can motivate participation; in underdeveloped countries, economic growth "might be linked to women's diminishing share of the labor market," pushing them to join "terrorist groups out of desperation," whereas in advanced economies, "women may be attracted to terrorist groups more by their ideological or religious determination," rather than out of coercion or necessity.¹³ Indeed, anthropologist Scott Atran reflects that suicide attackers in general "are rarely ignorant or impoverished."¹⁴ While it is unclear what prompts women to join such groups (when they do so willingly), the value they add to the organizations is clear. As Angela Dalton and

Victor Asal assert, when discussing female suicide bombers:

*The very fact of being female is proven to enjoy several tactical advantages. First, women suicide terrorists capitalize and thrive on the "element of surprise." They can take advantage of cultural reluctance toward physical searches to evade detection. Given their seemingly feminine facade, they are categorically perceived as gentle and non-threatening. Further, they constitute a potentially large pool of recruits, a resource that terrorist organizations can draw from and cash in on. Symbolically, the death of women bombers is more likely to evoke a feeling of desperation and sympathy.*¹⁵

While in previous conflicts secular groups (particularly Marxist) were more likely to make use of female suicide bombers than religious groups, modern jihadist groups have increased their dependency upon female recruits and participation.¹⁶ Boko Haram and ISIL are perhaps at the cutting edge of this Salafist-jihadi tactical experimentation with religion, patriarchy, and war. While sexual violence against women and their incorporation into armed movements is a worldwide phenomenon, the increase of female participation in Boko Haram has taken on novel characteristics, specific to this insurgency's objectives and operational tactics.

The incorporation of women into Boko Haram's activities builds upon a history of tactical experimentation, undertaken in response to cyclical government responses and opportunities posed by regional trends in arms availability.¹⁷ Additionally, the symbolism of female-led attacks has been a means by which Boko Haram has distinguished itself from

similar movements and local rivals. Understanding Boko Haram's use of women is particularly critical, as it is the most lethal insurgency on the continent, having claimed an estimated 29,000 lives since 2002, and shows no signs of abating.

Operational Uses – Women as Swords

Boko Haram has used women and girls for a multitude of operational purposes. This section will review, briefly, how females have been used by the group to increase insurgent cohesion, add reproductive capacity, carry out attacks, maintain order within the camps, and as bargaining chips with the Nigerian government.

However, before discussing how women and girls have been used, it is critical to note that the vast majority of women within the organization are not participating of their own volition. Boko Haram's reliance upon women and girls is a part of an organizational shift that includes forced conscription as a means of generating support. The abductions of women and girls parallel abductions of young men, who were also forcibly conscripted into the movement in night raids—though there have not been reports of the young men being subjected to sexual violence. The abductions, both of males and females, followed the May 2013 declaration of a state of emergency in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa States.

The state of emergency was accompanied by the deployment of security forces to the region and prompted the group to abandon urban guerilla tactics in favor of holding territory. Reports of mass kidnappings emerged during this period, alongside stories of individuals being abducted. Though both men and women were abducted, the novelty of female

abduction by the group drew the lion's share of attention.

The availability of women for sexual purposes became a means of satisfying insurgents and cultivating loyalty. A Civilian Joint Task Force commander, who participated in a raid that liberated women and girls, linked the abduction of women to the Nigerian government's counterterrorism deployment of security forces to urban centers; he asserted that when Maiduguri (Borno's capital) became "too hot" for the insurgents, they abandoned their urban wives and began "picking up women anywhere and using them to satisfy themselves."¹⁸ A Human Rights Watch report published in November 2013 claimed that Boko Haram raided villages and "after storming into the homes and throwing sums of money at their parents, with a declaration that it was the dowry for their teenage daughter, they would take the girls away."¹⁹

The women were not always abducted by men for the latter's own purposes; rather, some of the abducted women and girls were "gifted" to Boko Haram fighters for "marriage." This euphemism for sexual violence belies the strategic aspect of the abuse. Prior to the group's descent into violence, Boko Haram's founder Mohammed Yusuf helped arrange marriages for local men struggling to muster the necessary social and economic capital to marry; however, the group has since evolved and the new class of marriages constitutes sexual slavery. There is a horrific logic at play in the institutionalization of sexual slavery; research suggests that sexual violence may be effective for building group cohesion and fostering camaraderie, particularly in insurgencies that rely on forced conscription.²⁰

The "marriages" to abducted girls thus served multiple tactical purposes: increasing

group cohesion through the provision of women as prizes, cultivating loyalty through the enhanced status following “marriage,” and increasing local fear of the insurgents. Boko Haram’s violence against women is similar to other groups’ use of sexual violence as “a conscious strategy...employed by armed groups to torture and humiliate opponents, terrify individuals, destroy societies through inciting flight from a territory, and to reaffirm aggression and brutality, specifically through an expression of domination.”²¹

Stories of women being abducted were eventually followed by accounts of female conditions in captivity; as women escaped from Boko Haram and the military recovered territory from the insurgents, journalists provided graphic details of the women’s lives in Boko Haram. Reports found that hundreds were raped, many repeatedly, in what relief workers described as “a deliberate strategy to dominate rural residents and create a new generation of Islamist militants.”²² Despite Boko Haram’s strident declarations that many of the abducted women were brought into the Islamic fold, conversion did not necessarily improve a woman’s status. Regardless of religion, during their captivity almost all the women were repeatedly raped, gang raped, and subjected to sexual slavery. An internally displaced person who had lived under Boko Haram for two years reported that many of the footsoldiers have more than one wife.²³ Female captives were also subjected to non-sexual violence that served the insurgents’ needs; as a part of this, the women were denied food, forced to carry the insurgents’ possessions and weapons, deprived of sleep, and forced to cook.²⁴ The psychological trauma that these women have suffered is difficult to overstate. One escapee burst into tears

while telling reporters, “I can’t get the images out of my head. I see people being slaughtered. I just pray that the nightmares don’t return.”²⁵

While following in the pattern of other terrorist groups, Boko Haram has also exhibited particular characteristics unique to Northern Nigeria in its conceptualization of women’s roles and its use of rape as a weapon of war. In addition to rape for the purposes of torture, punishment, or humiliation, the group appears to be using rape to produce the next generation of extremists that will pursue Boko Haram’s particular brand of jihad.²⁶ The governor of Borno State, Kashim Shettima, insists that, “the sect leaders made a conscious effort to impregnate the women...Some...even pray before mating, offering supplications for God to make the products of what they are doing become children that will inherit their ideology.”²⁷ It appears that Boko Haram’s fundamentalist ideology is being treated in the same manner that ethnicity was considered in conflicts in Rwanda and Serbia: a hereditary characteristic that can be bred into the population.

It is possible that this belief is being justified by a perverse interpretation of one of the *hadiths* narrated by Quranic scholar Abu Zayd, which contends that, “every infant is born with a natural disposition to accept Islam, but parents can socialize their infants to accept other religions.”²⁸ Prior to his extrajudicial execution, Boko Haram’s founder, Mohammed Yusuf, used this *hadith* as evidence for the detrimental effects of Western education in turning children away from Islam; the *hadith* was offered as a justification of the organization’s activities which he argued were a return to the “natural” order. Boko Haram has not issued a public statement regarding its impregnation campaign or religious justification of it, which

limits an exact analysis of its motives, however Boko Haram's systematic sexual abuse of women suggests that women's reproductive capacity is a critical aspect of its strategy as children would bolster the insurgency's strength by inflating its ranks.

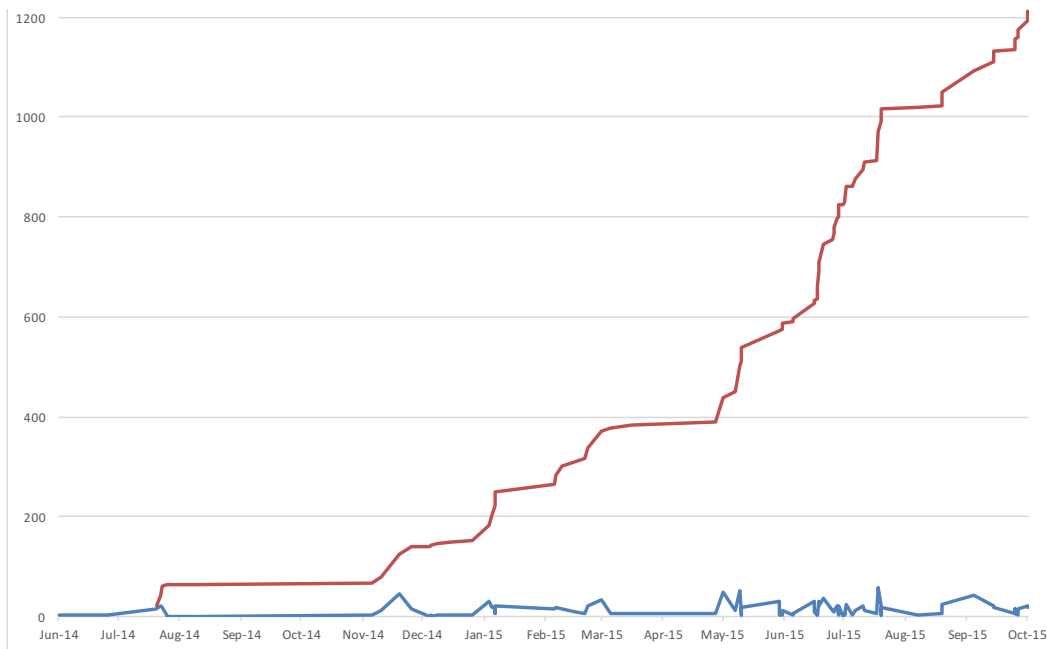
Even more directly than through their (re) production of future militants and the group cohesion that "marriage" may foster, women have contributed to Boko Haram's campaign by carrying out attacks. Between the Chibok abductions and October 2015, there have been nearly 90 attacks with female perpetrators.

These attacks have typically been against "soft targets," such as markets, mosques, and bus depots and have taken place in urban settings. Boko Haram, like other terrorist groups, has used women because they draw less attention and are less likely to be subjected to searches than men. Since Nigerian

counterterrorism efforts increased in urban centers as a part of the State of Emergency and Multi National Joint Task Force, women have become tactically important for the group to maintain an urban presence.

While the majority of these attacks have been suicide bombings, this is perhaps a misnomer as "suicide bomber" implies that the perpetrator's decision to martyr oneself is made of his or her own volition. Yet, many of the Boko Haram attacks were conducted by girls too young to have agency; others, such as rape victims and those subjected to psychological trauma, have been robbed of their autonomy to make that choice. In some instances, the bomber may have not even understood what was happening. A military source speaking to Nigerian news went so far as to suggest that, "some of those girls might not really know they were strapped."³⁰ In

Figure 1: Deaths from Boko Haram Female Suicide Bombers over Time



Graph illustrates cumulative (red) and incident (blue) death tolls over time in the Lake Chad region.

some cases, the Nigerian military preempted female suicide bombers who offered little resistance, suggesting that they were not fully committed to, or even necessarily aware of their “mission.” Some reports suggest that family members coerced the girls to join the organization; in July 2014, a 10-year-old girl accompanied by her older sister and an older man was arrested while wearing a suicide bombing vest.³¹ One 13-year-old girl detained by the state reported that her father, a supporter of the insurgency, had encouraged her to join.³²

One source cited by Awford suggested that, of the women that have participated willingly, some might have been homeless or beggars who had been banned from Kano, where many of the bombings occurred. The source asserted that such women and girls “are easy to recruit and [may] have fallen prey to Boko Haram members who have lured them with a few naira notes. They may also be ignorant of what they are being asked to do.”³³

Others might have been married to “slain or arrested members of the Islamic sect who have been indoctrinated and brainwashed to take revenge on behalf of their husbands.”³⁴ Revenge-motivated female participation in terrorist activities is a well-documented phenomenon globally. Regardless of motivation, there is evidence that women have indeed actively participated in Boko Haram’s activities. For example, several Nigerian soldiers were shot by women in the Sambisa Forest while rescuing the women, suggesting that some of the women have developed allegiance to the terrorists. Additionally, a soldier posted in Adamawa State, in North East Nigeria, confirmed reports of female fighters, “wearing burqas and guns.”³⁵

In addition to sexual and physical abuse, Boko Haram perpetrated psychological abuse of the captives in order to maximize the utility of women and girls to the group’s mission.³⁶ According to a social worker in Maiduguri, “[t]he militants feel it is easier to intimidate and brainwash young girls than adult women. Besides, these girls come cheap, and most of them are extremely loyal....”³⁷ Perhaps because of this pliability, girls and young women have been employed frequently by the insurgency in suicide bombings, despite the fact that the first such attack was conducted by a middle-aged woman. The treatment of young women as malleable and expendable echoes how terrorist leaders in other conflicts have viewed female participation in conflict, not as members of the organization with autonomy, but as another form of artillery.³⁸

Women who have escaped or have been rescued by Nigerian soldiers report exposure to, and/or forced participation in, extreme violence. The militants have used girls they claimed were from the Chibok abductions as “enforcers,” parading them in front of kidnapped women and telling them that, “these are your teachers from Chibok.” During raids “people were tied and laid down and the girls took it from there...the Chibok girls slit their throats.”³⁹ Within the camps, the Chibok girls were used “to teach groups of women and girls to recite the Qur’an.... Young girls who couldn’t recite were...flogged by the Chibok girls.”⁴⁰ Such reports suggest that “exposing women to extreme violence [is] a strategy to strip them of their identity and humanity, so they can be forced to accept the militants’ ideology” and contribute to maintaining order within camps.⁴¹

Several of the women and girls have suffered from the double trauma of abduction

and sexual exploitation, as well as efforts to convert them to Boko Haram's ideology through brainwashing and consistent exposure to propaganda.

The question remains whether the women who are victimized have been genuinely radicalized, whether women related to the insurgents might share the same ideology, goals, and purpose as the men, or whether the women are suffering from severe trauma, causing a form of "Stockholm Syndrome."⁴² It is difficult to discern women's motives for participation in Boko Haram's activities, as the women's bodies are often too "mutilated to... identify them," let alone recognize and put a name to the women, a source within the Nigerian government told the authors.⁴³

The group has also used women as bargaining chips with the Nigerian government. After a raid on the Borno State village of Bama in 2015, Boko Haram released a video in which abducted civilians were paraded in front of the camera. In the footage, Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau threatened that if the Nigerian security forces "do not release our wives and children, we will not release theirs."⁴⁴ Just two weeks later, President Goodluck Jonathan ordered the release of women and children imprisoned for their connection to Boko Haram. In return, Boko Haram released its captives. Boko Haram has also offered to exchange captive women for insurgents captured by the state.⁴⁵ Shekau routinely makes threats, for example to kidnap President Goodluck Jonathan's daughter. He also framed the abduction of the Chibok girls as retribution for abuses perpetrated against Muslim communities and has issued threats against the wives and daughters of other state officials. In 2012, he released a video in response to the detention of 10 women related

to Boko Haram members, in which he stated, "since you are now holding our women, just wait and see what will happen to your own women...to your own wives according to shariah law."⁴⁶ Shekau's statements rely upon examples of the "proper" treatment of women; in this way, women within Boko Haram are a symbol for the Islamic rule envisioned by the group, in addition to being valuable targets to gain the government's attention. These interactions allow the group to portray itself as a "protector" of Muslim women and source of justice against un-Islamic actors.⁴⁷

The use of women as bargaining chips straddles the line between the operational and rhetorical advantage women have given Boko Haram; within the group, women and girls serve as symbols and swords. The image of persecuted Muslim women, the model of the righteous Muslim wife, and the symbol of Muslim women as vessels for the next generation of jihadi fighters are valuable propaganda tools. Additionally, the tactical advantages gained by using women in coordinated attacks have allowed the group to maintain a presence in urban areas despite significant Nigerian and regional efforts to push the insurgency out.

Rhetoric and Ideology – Women as Symbols

The Chibok abductions and ensuing controversy provided the first nationally and internationally recognized symbol of the group's violence against women. Shekau successfully used the Chibok girls' symbolism and visibility as a megaphone to telegraph the group's strength and ideology.⁴⁸ Violence against women and girls "is often intended to humiliate their families and communities, wherein women and girls are 'bearers of honor,' and men are shamed for failing to protect 'their' women."⁴⁹

In this way, sexual violence is a mechanism of destroying family and community, making it a valuable tool for terrorist groups.⁵⁰ Scholar Ruth Seifert observed that, “rape is not an aggressive expression of sexuality, but a sexual expression of aggression...a manifestation of anger, violence and domination,”⁵¹ making violence against women a way for terrorist groups to project power and demonstrate their capacity to intimidate civilian populations.⁵² Boko Haram’s attitude towards women terrorizes Nigerians at the national level, and also serves to differentiate the group from other mainstream, nonviolent Salafi movements locally, such as Yan Izala, which advocate modern education for girls and boys.⁵³

In a propaganda video released in May 2014, shortly after the Chibok abductions, Abubakar Shekau claimed responsibility for the raid. The abducted girls were not just used

for gendered labor within the camps (though reports suggest that such work was integral to their condition), but were also a valuable tool to illustrate the implementation of Boko Haram’s vision of shariah. Shekau asserted that he would, according to holy directives, sell the non-Muslim women. In later videos, Shekau proclaimed that the Chibok girls had converted and were married to Boko Haram militants.

According to Shekau, Boko Haram “would marry them out [sic] at the age of 9 or 12.”⁵⁴ He justified his actions within the context of his interpretation of Islamic history and “marrying off” a girl as young as nine “like it was done on [his] mother Aisha and the wife of the Prophet” (there are varying accounts of how old Aisha was when she was married).⁵⁵ Shekau contended that the girls should have never been in school in the first place as they



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At St. Therese Church in Yola, a displaced girl rests.

were old enough to be married.⁵⁶ By going to school, the girls had supposedly violated shariah in a variety of ways; not only were they participating in an educational system that contradicted Islamic teachings, but their attendance in school was considered a violation of their role as women.⁵⁷

In these videos, which sometimes featured images of the abducted girls fully dressed in burqas, Shekau positions himself as the abducted girls' savior from the infidel lifestyle and institutions, while offering salvation to those willing to support his violent process of "reclamation" of society, notably through the overrunning of territory, the destruction of secular, modern institutions, and the abduction of women and girls. He taunted, "don't you know the over 200 Chibok schoolgirls have converted to Islam? They have now memorized two chapters of the Qur'an. They have seen themselves in the Books of Luke and John that Christians have corrupted the Bible. Girls from Chibok [are] confessing [that] Islam is the true religion."⁵⁸

Shekau is not a fixture in all of Boko Haram's propaganda, suggesting that the group saw the girls as a valuable publicity opportunity. The group used this global platform to threaten communities and increase the audience for its ideological proselytization. In one video, Shekau insisted that Nigerians could avoid being targeted by espousing their Salafi-jihadist interpretations of Islam. "If you turn to Islam...you will be saved. For me anyone that embraces Islam is my brother."⁵⁹ He also threatened Nigerians that "nothing will stop this until you convert."⁶⁰

Boko Haram's use of women has served to distinguish the group from other Salafi groups in the region. In a 1987 interview, Abubaker Gumi, the leader of the largely non-violent

Salafi Islamist Yan Izala movement, said that, "politics are more important than prayer" and that Muslim men should allow their women to vote and "to mix in public, especially in times of impending elections" to further the political Islamist agenda.⁶¹ Gumi's statements carried significant weight because of the prominence of Yan Izala in Northern Nigeria as a source of religious authority. Yan Izala has established a number of educational institutions for women; these schools impart both traditional Quranic education and, in some instances, "Boko" learning. The headmasters of Izala schools for women "uniformly stated that they were founded 'to help society to know their God and to know how to worship their God,'" according to academic Elisha Renne's review of such institutions in the North Eastern city of Zaria.⁶² Yan Izala is far from progressive with regard to gender relations; the practice of female subordination and seclusion is regularly practiced among the Izala and "for wives and daughters of the Yan Izala, membership...means wearing the *hijab*—a veil that ideally covers much of their bodies—and living in total or partial seclusion," according to Adeline Masquelier.⁶³ However, while Yan Izala promotes some conservative practices such as female veiling, the progressive notion of female education was seen as equally critical for its religious and political legitimacy; Renne notes that "women's pursuit of Islamic education has strengthened the position of the Izala movement in Zaria."⁶⁴

By asserting its position on women's "proper" role and attire, Boko Haram is reaffirming its role as an Islamist reformist movement and differentiating the group from rival Islamists. It is worth noting that Boko Haram's founder Mohammed Yusuf worked alongside

Ja'far Adam, a Salafi scholar in the Yan Izala movement, before founding his own offshoot with a different ideology than Adam's teachings. When Adam and other Muslims (including mainstream Salafis) spoke out against Boko Haram, they were targeted in violent attacks.⁶⁵ This illustrates the stakes of intra-Islamic debate following the implementation of shariah across northern Nigeria following the adoption of the 1999 constitution. As the Boko Haram insurgency has escalated, mainstream Salafis, according to Alex Thurston, have been placed in "a complicated position vis-à-vis both Salafi-leaning audiences in the state."⁶⁶ While Yan Izala has "worked to undermine Boko Haram's messages and Salafi credentials," it has simultaneously "criticized the state's response to Boko Haram."⁶⁷ Thus, the debate over women's proper role in society

is a contentious battleground in the debate between Salafi groups in Northern Nigeria.

Preliminary Conclusions

Women serve the dual purpose of serving as symbols of Boko Haram's ideology as well as swords bolstering the insurgency's operational effectiveness. Boko Haram's abuse and use of women provides a clear example of how women who are victimized may in turn victimize others because of coercion, honor-bound cultures, and (mis)conceptions about how identity and ethnicity are transmitted from one generation to the next—a process that is, unfortunately, being replicated globally.

In 2015, African troops in Nigeria (composed of soldiers from Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, and Niger) liberated almost 1,000 women, indicating that the total number of women abducted far exceeds the 276 Chibok



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A woman displaced by Boko Haram prepares a meal at an IDP camp in Yola, Adamawa.

students.⁶⁸ In the aftermath of the women's rescue, human rights groups alleged that the vast majority of the women were pregnant.⁶⁹ Nigerian religious leaders and the members of the *ulema* have intervened to prevent the women from being shunned by their own families and communities. The reintegration of these abused women will be difficult, given the conservative values and "honor culture" that discourages premarital sex and extols virtue. The women's experiences have justifiably instilled a fear and loathing of Boko Haram among a diverse population.

Women who have escaped report psychological trauma and rejection by their communities despite the best efforts of religious leaders. Particularly for those who have been forcibly impregnated, reintegration is practically impossible. In honor-bound societies, women who have been raped are often blamed for sexual violence and fear retribution from the community, especially if children resulted from the sexual abuse. In light of the humiliation faced by these women, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein, has spoken out forcefully urging "the most compassionate possible interpretation of the current regulations in Nigeria to include the risk of suicide and risks to mental health for women and young girls who have suffered such appalling cruelty" and may wish to terminate their pregnancies.⁷⁰ Currently, Nigerian laws permit abortion only in instances where the mother's life is at risk. However, even if Nigerian restrictions were eased for victims of Boko Haram, it is likely that traditional women would not seek such services because of the accompanying stigma. John Campbell, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and a former U.S. ambassador to Nigeria noted, "there is law, and then

there is social custom and social custom is much stronger than law in many parts of Nigeria."⁷¹

Victims' legitimate concerns about being shunned by their communities are compounded by their fear that the militants will return and track them down. One woman interviewed by *Al Jazeera* feared that her Boko Haram militant husband would "kill her for running away;" at the same time, in her community she is considered "an outcast...they remind me that I have Boko Haram inside me," since she was impregnated.⁷²

Rescuing the women from the insurgents is only one part of the solution. Providing psychological support, health services, and community reintegration is critical to the success of Nigeria's counterterrorism and counterinsurgency strategy. In June 2015, Dr. Fatima Akilu, head of the Countering Violent Extremism Department of the Office of the National Security Advisor, announced that 20 women and girls who had been recruited by Boko Haram had been "saved" and were "undergoing rehabilitation and de-radicalization," though the details of the program were not released.⁷³ One woman whom the authors spoke to had gone through the rehabilitation program after being abducted and held by Boko Haram, and spoke enthusiastically about the program; however, the woman was uncertain about her future and lacked freedom of movement and access to livelihood generation programs.⁷⁴ The approach to treatment has to be multi-layered and sensitive to the experiences of these women who have been victims many times over. Further, "as long as the basic social and economic context does not decisively change—specifically, Nigeria's on-going inability to achieve sustained economic growth as well as some degree of social

justice—militant movements such as Boko Haram will rise again,” meaning that a wholesale reformation of the socioeconomic landscape of Northern Nigeria must be undertaken in the quest to recover from the Boko Haram insurgency and prevent such conflict in the future.⁷⁵

As academics Bradley Thayer and Valerie Hudson note, improving women’s status results in decreases in overall levels of violence; they assert, “when society’s male members develop ways of relating to women other than through physical dominance and violence, and when women begin to take coordinated action to dampen the most oppressive features of their society, positive change will spread to broader social realms, and even affect interstate relations.”⁷⁶ In conflict-afflicted and post-conflict contexts, the state must take an active role in asserting the equality and value of women through legislative equality and socioeconomic programs aimed at female empowerment. Doing so will help counter ideological conceptions, like Boko Haram’s, of female subordination. Just as women and girls have become an integral part of Boko Haram’s strategy, the Nigerian state must cultivate a robust strategy of female empowerment and reintegration to counter the insurgency’s long-term consequences.

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Notes

¹ This work was supported in part by a MINERVA N000141310835 grant on State Stability under the auspices of the Office of Naval Research. The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the authors and should not be

interpreted as representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the Department of Defense, the Office of Naval Research, or the U.S. government.

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Photos

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