

# BOKO HARAM'S CAMPAIGN AGAINST WOMEN & GIRLS



Nigerian women demonstrate outside the parliamentary building in Abuja, the country's capital, in April 2014, demanding the government to search harder for more than 200 schoolgirls abducted by Islamist militants Boko Haram. (Photo by Afolabi Sotunde, Reuters)

**I am still afraid to go anywhere because he could be any one of the people around me. Every time I see a huge dark man, I jump in fright that it might be him coming to get me back. I stay awake some nights because I dream of those terrible weeks I spent in their camp.<sup>1</sup>**

—This woman's testimony about her abduction in 2013 by Boko Haram reflects the experiences of thousands in the region who live in fear of the insurgency.

Although Boko Haram is notorious for the abduction of the Chibok girls, the group's impact extends far beyond that event, affecting women and girls throughout northeastern region of Nigeria. The insurgency's violence has particularly affected children, many of whom have been exposed to unfathomable violence and abducted. Nigerian women and girls have not only suffered from direct violence by the sect, they also suffer from abuse by the Nigerian security sector and rampant discrimination. Women thus face insecurity from many sides: the insurgency, their government, and from the burden of caring for many crisis-affected children.

The international community has largely failed to realize that rebuilding the region will fall to women—despite their marginalization and victimization. Similarly, the international community has often overlooked the violence Boko Haram has perpetrated against young men. Although the Chibok abductions garnered international headlines, abductions of boys from their dormitories have not galvanized similar action. Empowering women and dealing with the trauma that all children have experienced throughout the crisis will thus be critical to postconflict redevelopment.

## WHAT IS BOKO HARAM?

Boko Haram has waged a campaign of violence and instability unseen in Nigeria since the country's bloody Biafran War in the 1960s. The insurgency has thrust the region into a humanitarian and security crisis. Despite its fearsome reputation now, the group was founded at the turn of the century as a largely peaceful dissident religious group. The founder, Mohammed Yusuf, had been a popular preacher with Indimi Mosque, a mainstream Salafist mosque in Maiduguri, Borno State. Yusuf fell out with the community as a result of his radical positions condemning Western education and collaborating with the Nigerian government. Following a harsh crackdown by the Nigerian government in 2009 in which an estimated 700 to 1,000 people were killed—including Yusuf—the movement eventually regrouped under Abubaker Shekau with more sophisticated military tactics and propelled by a set of grievances that extended beyond the local political and religious figures that Yusuf had condemned. Under Shekau, Boko Haram became a brutal anti-government insurgency.

In recent years, the crisis has spilled across the country's borders into neighboring Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. In all four countries, the insurgents have overrun villages, attacked militaries, and bombed crowded civilian areas. The death toll from the fight against the insurgency is at 30,000 and rising daily. More than two million people have been displaced as a result of the violence, and the disruption in agriculture and regional trade patterns has kicked off a food crisis that is thought to affect fourteen million people in the region.

## BOKO HARAM'S CAMPAIGN AGAINST WOMEN

As the United States seeks to contain violent extremism and stabilize a critical US partner in West Africa and the Sahel, it is critical for it to recognize how this conflict affects women and girls. Of all of the destruction wrought by Boko Haram, the sect is perhaps best known for its abduction of more than 200 schoolgirls from their dormitories in Chibok in 2014, a town in Nigeria's hard-pressed Borno State. The kidnapping led to a global campaign, #BringBackOurGirls, which attracted the support of Malala Yousafzai and Michelle Obama, who amplified the voices of local activists. The campaign moved President Muhammadu Buhari to state by the end of 2015 that he was willing to "negotiate with Boko Haram for the release of the Chibok girls without any preconditions."<sup>2</sup> In October 2016, negotiations resulted in the release of 21 Chibok girls, who were returned to their overjoyed families.

Their release, and the escape of an additional girl with the help of her insurgent husband in May 2016, is certainly worth celebrating, but the fact remains that most of the Chibok girls remain under Boko Haram's control.<sup>3</sup> And the Chibok abductions are the tip of the iceberg. Amnesty International estimated in April 2015 that the group had abducted more than 2,000 women and girls in the region. The number is sure to have risen since then.

[Boko Haram] went from house to house. When they arrived at our house, they wanted to marry me, and I refused. I told them I wouldn't marry anyone without my father's consent. They came back again at night and kidnapped me." Aisha (17) was forced to "marry" a fighter, and she became pregnant. "I hated the baby," she said, but a woman she didn't know showed her kindness and taught her to love her son. "She preached to me about his innocence."

—Reported by Larisa Epatko, *PBS Newshour*, October 19, 2016

Interviews with those who were abducted reveal that their time with Boko Haram was marked by near-daily Quranic education, training in how to be suitable wives for the insurgents, strict gender segregation, and strictures imposed by a strict interpretation of Sharia law that mandates corporal punishment for violations. As the crisis has worn on, Boko Haram itself has felt the effect of food shortages; abductees often reported that they were given little food. Many reported that they spent most of their time as captives trying to find a way to escape. Many of the abductees experienced sexual violence at the hands of the insurgents, and following marriage to insurgents, they were expected to have sex with their husbands.<sup>4</sup> Many of the women who escaped suffer from trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other mental health challenges. Despite government attempts to train additional counselors, the resources available are tragically inadequate.

Young men and boys in the sect, both voluntarily and by force, are trained in horrifying ways to perpetrate violence against their communities. Communities throughout the country's north tell stories of young men and boys who are forced to kill members of their own family—even parents—as a sort of initiation ritual. As Yan St. Pierre of the security consulting firm MOSECON observed,

**By making them kill their own parents or their own family, it makes them be in a position where they can't go back.... Psychologically, they are absolutely broken. They killed their parents. They literally murdered what brought them to life. In that sense, their loyalty becomes to the only family that they have now, which is the army or the terrorist group that kidnapped them.<sup>5</sup>**

Even those who have been merely exposed to violence report trauma. Not only does this violence undermine social trust, it also traumatizes those (especially the children) exposed to these acts, and it fosters a notion of masculinity and power that is intrinsically linked to violence. Extreme subservience of women and girls and the acquiescence of violence against them deeply affect not only the victim but also those forced to witness and perpetrate such acts. Children who are deeply traumatized by exposure to violence become more vulnerable to perpetuating violence. As long as these attitudes are held, women are not safe: Across a number of countries, rates of domestic violence spiked at the end of conflicts.

The postconflict reconciliation process must recognize that the end of the insurgency will not mean the immediate dissipation of the impact of the violence. However, children's experiences of witnessing violence can be counteracted through early, consistent, effective counseling. Failing to do so will not only be a great disservice to these children but will prime the region for future conflict.<sup>6</sup>





## VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS BY THE STATE

While insurgent violations of women and girls have created an international outcry, condemnation of the abuses by the Nigerian state has been muted at best. In October 2016, Human Rights Watch released a report documenting the sexual abuse, exploitation, and rape of women and girls in a number of displacement camps in Maiduguri. This abuse is not merely “a few rotten apples spoiling the bunch.” A review of all the displacement camps in Maiduguri, which hosts the most internally displaced people (IDPs) of any city, concluded that such practices were taking place at nearly every camp. In a poll of displaced people in the three most-affected states, 66 percent reported that camp officials engaged in sexual abuse.<sup>7</sup> Women I spoke to in the camps reported trading sexual favors for access to food and talked of soldiers charged with guarding the camps “taking girls” for weeks at a time. Clearly, the limited humanitarian aid provisions and restricted movement of the IDPs make it easier for security and camp officials to exploit women and girls. Few women report these violations to government officials for fear of stigma and retaliation.

The proximate sexual violence committed by representatives of the Nigerian State against those in displacement camps is an extension of

the structural violence that women in Nigeria face because of their cultural and legal marginalization in the country. In 2015, the country was ranked 152 of 188 in the United Nations Development Programme’s Gender Equality Index, which gauges gender parity.<sup>8</sup> Although there is gender discrimination throughout the country, it is particularly acute in the north. An estimated four in five women in the north cannot read. Maternal mortality in the north is five times the global average, a result of a number of factors, including inadequate health services, high fertility rates, and young marriage ages. One of every three women in Nigeria reported having experienced “some form of violence, including battering and verbal abuse, emotional and psychological abuse, marital rape, sexual exploitation, or harassment within the home.”<sup>9</sup>

Clearly, Boko Haram’s destruction will not resolve the issues women face in Nigeria. Not only do Nigerian officials need to be held accountable for their abuses against women, the social system in the country must be more female-friendly. Such reforms will make it easier to rebuild the north after the conflict is over and also make a relapse into violence less likely.<sup>10</sup>

## CONCLUSION: POLICY OPTIONS FOR REDEVELOPMENT

Stabilizing Nigeria has been a priority for the United States in the global war on terror; it requires recognition of the risks posed by the persistent marginalization of women and girls.<sup>11</sup> Widespread gender-based violence infects society as a whole and perpetuates a climate of heightened insecurity and propensity for conflict. Achieving peace for women means winning peace in the war on the battlefield but also ending violence that women face off the battlefield—whether in captivity or at home. The following reforms are recommended for the short, medium, and long term:

### Short Term: Design Humanitarian Assistance and Redevelopment Programs around Women

- Prioritizing gender equality while scaling up donor assistance to the Lake Chad Basin crisis would undoubtedly have a huge effect. The United States and other major donors can play an important role. Nigeria's reconstruction plans do not yet sufficiently incorporate women or gender considerations. The Presidential Committee on the North-East Initiative's 800-page report deals with women only at the margins despite the fact that resettlement and redevelopment requires that they be included in the programming.<sup>12</sup> Nascent development programs for the postconflict era are failing to target women as beneficiaries, putting them at a particular disadvantage.
- The United States and other donor governments and institutions, while providing technical and financial assistance, should advocate for amendments to include consultations with women (and their organizations, where they exist) throughout the region to identify what support and initiatives they would prioritize. With leadership backing from the international donor community, women's groups and advocacy networks can ensure the postconflict agenda provides much-needed assistance to women.
- Recognizing the trauma that widespread violence and terror tactics have inflicted on the population, special attention is urgently needed to enhance recovery and improve reintegration for all members of the community.

### Medium Term: End Impunity for the Harassment of IDPs

- Women and children make up the vast majority of the population in IDP camps. To make recovery possible and build the groundwork for reintegration, the rights of IDPs must be respected and protected. There have been numerous reports of gross human rights violations in the camps by humanitarian workers, members of the military, and members of the civilian joint task force. Yet reporting abuse in IDP camps often means filing a complaint with the perpetrators. Alternative reporting mechanisms, coupled with swift and public discipline of offenders, is necessary for ensuring women's and children's safety within the camps.
- Assistance programs must prioritize building safeguards against abuse, integrate gender-informed processes, and strengthen accountability mechanisms in the initiatives that it sponsors, and help establish this approach as a norm for organizations operating in Nigeria.<sup>13</sup>

## Long Term: Implement Gender-Sensitive Security Sector Reform

- Military-to-military training exercises are a prime opportunity to help mainstream gender into security sector reform initiatives. The United States and other critical security partners must prioritize gender analysis in training and equipping missions to Nigeria. Nigeria is a partner country for the Security Governance Initiative (SGI) and the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), so there are ample opportunities for bilateral and multilateral engagement on these issues.
- Insist on accountability for those responsible for abuses and establish programs to prevent abuses. The United States and other security partners should design training programs for the Nigerian military that emphasize best practices for interacting with women and civilians generally. Of particular use would be training on how to interact with the (often female) family members and associates of suspected insurgents without violating human rights and on best practices for counterinsurgency.

**Hilary Matfess** is a specialist on the intersection of security and governance in sub-Saharan Africa. She is a freelance journalist whose stories have been published by Newsweek (cover story), Foreign Affairs, The National Defense University Press, and others. She is a senior program officer at the Center for Democracy and Development in Abuja, Nigeria, a visiting fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies at the National Defense University, and a contributor to the Nigeria Social Violence Project at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies. She is also an adjunct fellow with the American Security Project's Women in Security Leadership Initiative. She has conducted field work in Tanzania, Rwanda, Nigeria, and Ethiopia. Her current research focuses on social violence and the gender dynamics in the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria.

---

## ENDNOTES

1. Human Rights Watch, "Those Terrible Weeks in Their Camp: Boko Haram Violence against Women and Girls in Northeast Nigeria," (Washington, DC: Human Rights Watch, 2014).
2. "Nigeria Ready to Negotiate Release of Chibok Girls with Boko Haram, Buhari says," *Reuters* (December 30, 2015).
3. "Nigeria's Boko Haram Abducted 2,000 Women and Girls: Report," *Reuters* (April 14, 2015).
4. Not all unmarried women experienced such violence. Human Rights Watch observes that *mustadafin* are often shielded from sexual violence by insurgents.
5. Heather Murdock, "Nigeria's Boko Haram Forces Victims to Fight, Kill," *Voice of America* (August 19, 2014).
6. Doris Buss et al., *Sexual Violence in Conflict and Post-Conflict Societies* (London: Routledge, 2014).
7. Human Rights Watch, *Nigeria: Officials Abusing Displaced Women, Girls* (Washington, DC: Human Rights Watch, 2016).
8. UN Development Programme, *Gender Equality Index 2015* (New York: UNDP, 2015).
9. UKAID, *Gender in Nigeria Report 2012: Improving the Lives of Girls and Women in Nigeria* (London: UKAID, 2012).
10. Valerie Hudson, et al., *Sex and World Peace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).
11. Ibid.
12. Presidential Committee on the North East Initiative, "The Buhari Plan" (Abuja: PCNI, 2016).
13. David Killcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).