



Female Suicide Bombers in Boko Haram Insurgency: Victims or Perpetrators?

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Abstract

The increasing involvement of women in the advancement of insurgency in Nigeria has become a thing of great worry. The question often asked is as to whether their involvement is induced or free-willed. The concept of consent is on different layers and one would imagine the extent of consent given before they become members of the sect or culprits. The different ways women have been used to perpetrate the activities of Boko Haram ranges from threats to abuse, Indoctrination to hypnotism and many others. Due to the subtle and unsuspecting nature of women, they form a good strategy for members of the sect. However, their involvement is not evidence against them as they face situations that almost deny them the opportunity to choose whether or not to subscribe to the forceful approach used by Boko Haram insurgents!.

Keywords: Boko haram; Women; Suicide bombing; Terrorism; Nigeria.

1. Introduction

Boko Haram is an Islamic terrorist group with its stronghold in Borno, Yobe and Adamawa states in northeast Nigeria. It is also active in Chad, Niger and northern Cameroon. Since the beginning of the insurgency in July, 2009 Nigeria has incurred colossal losses. It is not clear how many people have died, but it runs into tens of thousands. Since 2010, the group has gained strength, sophistication and international notoriety in its operations. The state of emergency declared in 2012 did not deter them but only escalated the violence. Boko Haram has devised a number of strategies to sustain its operations, including kidnapping for ransom. Funds raised are used to acquire weapons and further their objectives. The sect abhors western education and often attacks and abducts girls from their schools.

The group has posed a monumental security problem in Nigerian in the past ten years. And the end is not in sight. Government's promises to annihilate the group have proved to be a delusion. Instead of its defeat, the group has become stronger with infiltration from violent Islamic groups hitherto operating in the Maghreb region. It is not clear what members of the sect really desire or profess. Thus many regard them as criminals who hide under the guise of religion to perpetrate their banditry.

Sects like Al Qaeda, Taliban, Hezbollah, Hamas and others constantly threaten the peace of the rest of the World. This relative peace has become a forgotten story as the theatre of war, insurgency and terrorism has relocated to Nigeria, with greater intensity in the northeast region covering Borno, Adamawa, Nasarawa, Taraba, Yobe and Gombe states respectively. The aspects of bombings, abductions and other acts of terror perpetrated by Boko Haram have greatly undermined the peaceful foundation and mutual coexistence that the nation has been enjoying. This is further compounded by acts of terror and mayhem unleashed by armed herdsmen, Niger Delta militants, rampaging bandits, armed robbers and kidnappers. This is very unhealthy for a state, especially one that is heterogeneous like Nigeria.

The insurgents in Nigeria added some degree of sophistication to the suicide campaign by introducing female suicide bombers most of whom are young women. This has since then evolved into a preferred strategy of war [Bloom and Hilary \(2016\)](#). Suicide attack made its debut in Nigeria in 2011. The group has followed up this initial attack with multiple suicide attacks. Until the first attack in 2011, suicide bombings were considered a Middle East affair, with countries like Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Turkey and others often in headlines as victims or perpetrators of global terrorism.

The involvement of women and girls has raised many concerns as to the extent of consent and religious approval inherent in their actions. Without any more emphasis, women have been integral and a major determinant in the success recorded by Boko Haram. Women have detonated many bombs and are still a great and subtle way to wreck havoc. On the other hand, women have also faced the heat of Boko Haram insurgency in diverse ways. They have lost their loved ones breadwinners, husbands, brothers and fathers to this insurgency. They have also had to endure economic hardship, socio-economic ostracism, sexual violence and internal displacement from their homes.

The extent of women involvement in suicide bombing, voluntarily or by coercion, is what has triggered this investigation.

Women and girls in the conflict zones of northeast Nigeria have assumed critical roles in the operational and ideological structure and dynamics of the Boko Haram insurgency (Bloom and Hilary, 2016). Globally insurgent groups are swelling in ranks with female recruits and deploying them to combat duties, especially in suicide attacks. Most of these women are volunteers. The alarming situation in the case of Boko Haram is that many of its female suicide attackers are coerced. Their participation is not voluntary. Some are too young to be able to appreciate the gravity and the ethical, legal or other implications of their actions.

2. Women of War: Historical Involvement of Women in Armed Conflicts

The role of women in war goes back to antiquity. A confirmed account of women participation in war is that of an Egyptian monarch, Queen Ahhotep, who fought off an invasion by the Hyksos (Herrmann and Palmieri, 2010). Other women of war included Fu Hao of China, Queen Boudica of Britain, Queen Zenbia of Palmyra and Joan of Arc. There are also accounts of involvement of women warriors in contemporary armed conflicts all over the globe.

In Africa, women contributed extensively in reshaping the history and redrawing the boundaries of ancient kingdoms. The history of northern part of precolonial Nigeria is not complete without the contribution of female warriors. Queen Bakwa Turuku was the founder of the modern city of Zaria, after defeating Kufena. An important player in the political history of ancient Zaria, she was the mother of Princes Amina who later succeeded her. Princess, later queen, Amina hailed from the Hausa city state of Zazzau, and eventually became its ruler. A greatly feared and widely respected warrior, she trained in cavalry and created her military force (Iruemiobe, 2018). Princess Amina went on a campaign of conquest and captured the whole area between Zazzau and the Niger. The people of Bauchi, Kano, Katsina, and many others paid tributes to her. She built a high wall around Zaria to secure the city and its inhabitants from invasion and thereby consolidated her power base.

Generally women are always viewed as defenseless prey in times of war. They are always seen as passive victims of wars started by the men (Herrmann and Palmieri, 2010). However in contemporary armed conflicts, there has been an upsurge in the involvement of women as active participants, even though such conflicts are dominated by men. The perception of a less significant or non-existent role for women notwithstanding, women from the ages past have been known to participate in armed conflicts, “and have sometimes even been the main protagonists” (Herrmann and Palmieri, 2010). As noted by Herrmann and Palmieri (2010) “women are rarely the focus of the debate on belligerence except as victims. Whether as prey or plunder, women are supposedly merely the passive objects of men’s warrior instincts.”

Apart from their role in the armed forces of States, women have also constituted major participants in the activities of insurgent groups, nationalist movements, liberation armies, armed left-wing groups, militant communist groups and terrorist organizations (Plaza *et al.*, 2017). Ulrike Meinhof, a female terrorist, co-founded the Red Army Faction in Germany (Dugdale-Pointon, 2007). A Palestinian militant, Leila Khaled, became the first woman and to hijack an aircraft in 1969 (Strickland, 2015). Fusako Shigenobu was the leader and founder of the Red Army, a defunct Japanese communist group. Women were active in Italian and Puerto Rican terrorist groups. They have participated in revolutionary groups in Colombia and Peru (Lee, 2016). In Uganda Alice Lakwena led a bloody rebellion against the government (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019). In the course of the hostile activities of the insurgent groups, several women have been enlisted as suicide bombers.

2.1. Women in the Boko Haram Insurgency

The existence of the female wing of boko haram has been acknowledged by the Nigerian military (BBC, 2014). The female members participate actively in spying, undercover operations enlistment of other women and provision of sundry services. Women are involved primarily in humanitarian assistance and sundry services to Boko Members. The tactics of war used by Boko Haram is the guerrilla warfare where they hide amongst people especially in densely populated areas and from there carry out their bombings and other attacks, further explains that they attack villages at night and run in the morning. The implication here is that their wives, female relatives and other female sympathisers provide the humanitarian assistance and sundry services to fighters in the field. This ranges from food preparation to medical assistance and sundry needs of the members of the sect.

Those in possession of vital information on the activities of the group conceal it in order to frustrate military operations against them. The extent of information that should pass to security personnel to assist in the arrest of these sect members is concealed because of the relationship that exists between them. This refusal to give information can be considered a form of assistance to the advancement of the Boko Haram insurgency. GTCadmin (2018), expresses the right of a spouse to refuse to testify against the other in a criminal investigation. This position of Gtcadmin shields spouses and female acquaintances of Boko Haram from testifying against them even when good information could be obtained in the national interest.

2.2. Deployment of Female Suicide Bombers by Boko Haram

The deployment of suicide bombers in combat is traceable to the 11th century when Muslim militants embraced it as a mechanism to propagate their objectives (Zedalis, 2004). Indeed, as noted by Zedalis (2004) “These perpetrators perceived their deaths as acts of martyrdom for the glory of God.” Hinged on that belief, suicide bombing had since then acquired notoriety and prominence as a strategy of war. Numerous advantages have been associated with suicide bombers as the latest weapon of choice. According to Zedalis (2004), “Terrorists are using

suicide bombers because they are a low cost, low technology, and low risk weapon. Suicide bombers are readily available, require little training, leave no trace behind, and strike fear into the general population.” As a preferred weapon for international terrorists, suicide bombers have been in action in major cities and countries around the world. These include Israel, Palestine, Indonesia, Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. Other countries affected by suicide bombing are Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Lebanon, Chechnya and Nigeria. Several terror groups now employ suicide bombers.

International terrorists added some degree of sophistication to their suicide campaign by introducing female suicide bombers. They have been successfully deployed in several suicide missions. As noted by Zedalis (2004) “The success of suicide bombers depends upon an element of surprise, as well as accessibility to targeted areas or populations. Both of these required elements have been enjoyed by women suicide bombers.” The involvement of women as suicide bombers is somewhat new Zedalis (2004). The first of such incidents occurred in 1985 when a teenager, Sana’a Mehaidi engaged by the Syrian Nationalist Army, attacked a convoy of Israeli Defence Force with a truck killing herself and two soldiers (Pearson, 2018). From then on, female suicide bombing gained prominence as a strategy of war. Daivs (2013), states that between 1985 and 2006 15 percent of entire suicide onslaught was carried out by women and girls. International terror organizations that deploy female human bombs include Kurdistan Workers’ party (PKK) active in and around Turkey; Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka; the Black Widows in Chechnya; the Hamas in Gaza Strip and al Qaeda (Pearson, 2018). The al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade deployed the first female suicide bomber in Israel in January 2002 (United States Department of State, 2018). In Nigeria, Boko Haram first deployed a male suicide bomber in 2011 and the first female in 2014 (Markovic, 2019).

In June 2014, about two months after the abduction of the school girls at Chibok, Boko Haram introduced a new dimension in its campaign of violence, and manner of conducting the hostilities (Pearson, 2018). History was made in Nigerian insurgency when a woman of middle age became the first female suicide bomber (Campbell, 2015). This occurred in Gombe city when the woman on a motorcycle closed in on the military barracks. She decided to set off the bomb fastened to her body while undergoing routine search at the military check point, killing herself and a soldier in the attack (Bloom and Hilary, 2016).

This incident triggered a dangerous and consistent precedent and set in motion endless cycles of female suicide bombing (Bloom and Hilary, 2016). Suicide bombing has become a new phenomenon in the tactics used by Boko Haram. The insurgents appeared to have emulated the emerging trend in the conflicts in Iraq, Syria and other Middle East countries where female suicide bombings are rampant. As noted by Bloom and Hilary (2016), “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 profile.”

Most of the suicide bombing activities of Boko Haram is carried out by young women and girls who launch attacks and in the process die alongside their victims. Hundreds of them have been enlisted into the suicide bombing wing of the group. The large-scale participation of young girls is worrisome as many have been deployed to soft targets to carry out deadly operations. The concern which has been expressed, however, is that some of the female suicide bombers are not voluntary participants, but are imperatively conscripted to carry out the deadly operations.

Minors are their favourite as they provide tactical advantages. The upsurge in the use of children is irksome as they are regarded as “cheap labour” which can readily and without difficulty be replaced through raids and abductions (Meservey, 2018). The suicide attacks are carried out by females aged between seven and seventeen often coerced into carrying out the operations. Young girls have been deployed effectively because in the eye of the public, they are seen as placid “making it easier to avoid detection while reaching the target” (Meservey, 2018). They usually direct their attacks at civilians and targets that are quite vulnerable, such as markets, bus terminals, motor parks, places of worship and IDP camps, among others (Bloom and Hilary, 2016). According to the UN Children Charity, the suicide attack on a video hall in Konduga, Borno State, was allegedly carried out by two boys and a girl (BBC, 2019). The attack which took place as people assembled to watch television, resulted in the death of about 30 people while 40 others sustained injuries (BBC, 2019).

2.3. Alarming Statistics

Statistics on the exploitation of women and girls by the sect abound, and the figures on their involvement in suicide mission are startling. Boko Haram is said to have deployed more female suicide bombers than any other terrorist organization. In other words, it is the first gang to utilize a majority of female suicide bombers (The Economist, 2017). The record was previously held by Tamil Tigers. It has been observed that “Of the 434 bombers the group deployed between April 2011 and June 2017, 244 have been definitely identified as female” (The Economist, 2017).

Female suicide bombings are responsible for several deaths and injuries. “The 89 attacks documented between June 2014 and January 2016, mostly civilian soft targets, are responsible for more than 1,200 deaths and even greater number of injuries” (Bloom and Hilary, 2016). As observed by the UN Children Charity, 48 children among them 38 girls were deployed in suicide attacks in 2018 (BBC, 2019). Meservey (2018), notes that between June 2014 when the first female bomber struck to the end of February 2018, Boko Haram engaged 469 females on suicide missions, resulting in the death of over 1200 people and about 3000 injured. Most appalling is the fact that a good number of the suicide bombers are children and two-thirds of them are girls (The Economist, 2017). Some blow themselves up before reaching their targets when they are accosted by security personnel.

After the first female suicide attack at a military checkpoint in 2014, several others followed (BBC, 2014). In July 2014, there was an aborted suicide attack in Funtua, Katsina State, involving a ten-year old girl (Olaniyan,

2017). Two women launched suicide attack on marketplace in Potiskum, Yobe State, on January 12, 2015 (Lee, 2016). A girl of eight years of age set in motion another suicide attack in Potiskum, in February, 2015. Another occurred on 29 October 2016 when two female suicide bombers attacked an IDP camp and NNPC fuel station killing eight and injuring twenty-four. In December 2016, two women detonated their suicide bombs at a market in Madagali resulting in high fatalities (Olaniyan, 2017). There were attacks on 7 and 17 November, 2016, respectively perpetrated by young girls. On 11 November, 2016 three girls on suicide mission died in the course of carrying out the attacks were dispatched. A cattle market in Maiduguri suffered serious destruction and fatalities market when it was attacked by two young female suicide bombers on 25 December, 2016 (Olaniyan, 2017). The female suicide attacks continued in 2017, 2018 and 2019 with greater intensity, ferocity and fatalities.

The use of female suicide bombers began in June, 2014 following the abduction of girls from a secondary school at Chibok, Borno State in April, 2014. The number of women and girls used as human bombs has since then increased significantly. Could this be a coincidence? *The Economist* thinks there is a correlation between the two. According to it, "It is no coincidence that its use of female bombers rose sharply after the kidnapping of the 276 'Chibok Girls' from their school in April 2014" (The Economist, 2017). Though some of the Chibok school girls were released as part of prisoner exchange deal, a significant number has not been accounted for till today.

2.4. Female Suicide Bombers: Perpetrators or Victims?

The issue as to whether women and girls engaged in suicide bombing are willing participants or unfortunate victims continues to take a centre stage. The ground for distinguishing between a perpetrator and a victim is the factor of consent. One is said to be a perpetrator if he/she voluntarily obliges. The possibility of any iota of influence such as intimidation, indoctrination or hypnotism negates consent. Unarguably, a significant number of women and girls deployed by the Jihadists on suicide missions have not done so voluntarily and willingly. They are clearly victims of the insurgency (Bloom and Hilary, 2016). The issue as to whether they participate in the insurgency voluntarily or are coerced is difficult to ascertain. In the Sri Lankan civil war that spanned several years, Tamil women occupied key positions of responsibility. Commenting on their role in the conflict, Alexander (2014) observed thus: "The question remains, however, whether the female LTTE combatants have been manipulated into becoming victims of war by the male-dominated insurgency or whether they have become agents of their own empowerment through their participation in the conflict."

2.4.1. Women as Willing Participants

Women have embarked on suicide attacks as perpetrators and members of the sect. In other words, the enlistment of some women was consensual and of their own volition. Despite the fact that most of its female suicide bombers are abducted and conscripted into the insurgency and forced to carry out attacks, there are women who join the insurgency voluntarily and devoid of any form of coercion. It is interesting to posit that Boko Haram has a female wing of the insurgency which bustles with activities (BBC, 2014). These women allegedly embarked on the radicalization and conversion of other women in their families. Some women gave out their female children for suicide missions. Others enlisted in the training programme of the sect following a vigorous recruitment programme of women by the female wing of the group. An attempt by this group to recruit female members in Abuja was aborted and three women who were members of an intelligence cell arrested by the Nigerian military (BBC, 2014). According to reports "One of them was said to be the widow of a Boko Haram militant" (BBC, 2014).

Several factors are adduced for this voluntary enlistment. Plaza *et al.* (2017) identifies certain factors such as "personal motivations, like joining a terrorist group out of love, the need to avenge the death of a family member, to advocate for equality, to become subordinated to men or to recover the lost honour, but go beyond, and can include social pressure, desperation, ideological causes or the desire to improve their situation – obtain financial resources with their actions, or contribute to changes in the political or social order." Some perpetrators are motivated by the feeling of nationalism to join terrorist groups and carry out deadly attacks. Many are seeking for identity and a sense of belonging (Lee, 2016). Experts believe that the number of women engaging in violent and extremist organizations is rising and blames the social media for the trend (Lee, 2016).

2.4.2. Conscription by Coercion

Boko Haram conscripts most of these women into their ranks often by coercion (Bloom and Hilary, 2016). This is the principal factor according to experts (Lee, 2016). Many of them have been "moved more by manipulation than personal conviction" (Plaza *et al.*, 2017). This assertion is corroborated by the huge occurrence of abductions of women and girls. From the inception of the insurgency in 2009, more than 2,000 women and girls have been abducted (Campbell, 2015). Women and girls who have been abducted and held captive in the Sambisa forest and succeeded in escaping gave graphic accounts of the atrocities perpetrated against them (Campbell, 2015). The group brainwashed women and girls, indoctrinated and radicalized them. Boko Haram enlisted girls of various ages, the youngest being seven. This is indicative of the fact that the girls were coerced and indoctrinated as a seven-year-old cannot understand or appreciate the nature of the assignment she is asked to undertake (Campbell, 2015).

2.4.3. Hypnotized Girls as Human Bombs

The military has been known to use hypnosis in the course of warfare (Colosimo, 1992). One of the techniques Boko Haram has deployed to induce the desire to commit suicide is best described as hypnotism. It is only hypnotism that would create the extent of concentration required for people to commit suicide and also take the lives

of innocent people. Erstwhile chief intelligence officer (CIO) of Boko Haram, Abdulkadir Abubakar, after his capture by the Nigerian security forces, acknowledged the deployment of hypnotised girls on suicide missions ([The Eagle Online](#)). Abubakar who until his arrest in Gujba Local Government Area of Yobe State, was one of the foremost commanders “regretted that a lot of innocent young girls were captured, tortured, hypnotised and used by Shekau for suicide bombing” ([The Eagle Online](#)). [Gruzelier \(2000\)](#), concludes that hypnosis should be discontinued as the practitioners do not have the capacity to curtail its adverse effects and there are no safeguards for the victims. The effect of hypnosis may be very drastic and enduring.

2.4.4. Threats to Life

[Hile \(2017\)](#), analysed the report of 18 girls who surrendered to the Nigerian government on assignments to detonate bombs that were strapped to their waist. According to the report, being in the captivity of Boko Haram is not something most suicide bombers would wish for. They are pressured with death threats or harm to loved ones if they refuse to go out for the assignment.

This threat is quite effective because of the people who are threatened. Young girls who have barely had a mind or voice of their own being threatened can only give Boko Haram the result they intend. With the daily deadly sights and unfavourable living conditions at the camp of the insurgents, one can only imagine the hardship these young ladies face. It is unimaginable to see the exposure young girls have at such early age. It definitely alters their personalities.

2.4.5. Indoctrination Brainwashing and Radicalisation

It is well established that Boko Haram deploys women and girls as human bombs as a result indoctrination and brainwashing. According to [Premium Times \(2016\)](#), Ibrahim Abdullahi, the Borno State Commandant of the Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps said his men have retrieved a spiritual book Boko Haram uses to indoctrinate and hypnotise its members and people they kidnap. This is the height of deceit and absence of consent. Umar Abdulmalik, a former Boko Haram member who was arrested in his sister's house after being shot, said he was indoctrinated by an Imam who came to his Okene residence in Kogi State to erect a mosque in 2009 ([Okolie, 2019](#)). The activities of some Imams, who are supposed to be custodians of the peaceful tenets of Islam, leave a sour taste in one's mouth. The jihad practised by Boko Haram which is supposed to be the advancement of the Islamic agenda, should not be to the detriment of other Muslims. A number of female suicide bombers offer themselves due to radicalisation.

2.4.6. Use of Drugs

The use of drugs is rampant among fighters of Boko Haram. They are allegedly drugged with Tramadol ([Meservey, 2018](#)) and sent out on suicide missions. Drug consumption is an integral part of the operational procedures of Boko Haram. Before carrying out attacks, fighters are forced to take many tablets of Tramadol. According to [Freeman \(2019\)](#) “The Tramadol abuse epidemic was started by Boko Haram fighters themselves, who took it to blot out fear during battle and to treat injured comrades. They now consume so much that Nigerian army units hunting Boko Haram in the bush look for discarded Tramadol packets as evidence of the militants' presence.”

2.4.7. Socio-Economic Deprivation and Abuses

Women and girls have suffered severe abuses in the hands of government security personnel and the insurgents. [Bloom and Hilary \(2016\)](#), observe that “In addition to sexual and physical abuse of their captives in order to maximise the utility of women and girls in the group's mission.” Alleged human rights infractions by government security forces of which women have been victims might have caused some of them to embrace and prop up the insurgency. They resorted to suicide attacks in order to avenge the demise of their loved ones and to reunite with them thereafter.

[Moaveni \(2019\)](#), wrote in her article "What would make a woman go back to Boko Haram? Despair" that women in northeast Nigeria face a lot of hardship. This was explained in her interview with Zahra and Amina, two survivors of the Boko Haram insurgency who were wives of Boko Haram fighters. They both absconded after agreeing to detonate bombs when their husbands died in the battle front against soldiers. They narrated how living in internally displaced persons camps was more horrible than living in the camps of Boko Haram. They explained how, as wives of Boko Haram members, they were insulated from rape and had at least enough food to eat. That was not the situation in the IDP camps where they had to starve severally and many were severally raped. They even said one has to be a harlot to survive in the IDP camps. This is the height of abuse of people who have suffered all forms of maltreatment and come back to face worse conditions in a facility of government that is expected to offer them protection. Boko Haram is aware of the kind of abuse these girls and women undergo and come with both threats and a promise of better opportunities to sway them.

Government policies and ineptitude have been identified as chiefly responsible for the Boko Haram insurgency and other forms of insurrection in Nigeria. However, we cannot wade off the poor socio-economic conditions people especially in northeast Nigeria face. This has led to the enticement and attraction of many females to the cause of Boko Haram. [Moaveni \(2019\)](#), explained how some welfare conditions in Boko Haram camp are more inviting. Government should never allow the opposition to have better policies.

Women face horror from the activities of Boko Haram which include losing their husbands, siblings and fathers. [Moaveni \(2019\)](#), explains how the entire northeast Nigeria is a territory ravaged by so many deaths of males that

females face the trauma of the loss and the resulting implications of bread winning for children. Widows who were only at the receiving end are now forced to cater for themselves and others.

3. Why use Women and Girls?

3.1. Strategic Reason

In a bid to answer the question as to what motivates a terrorist group to use female attackers, [Turner \(2016\)](#) construes the position of scholars as tactics and strategies. Females according to Turner are stealthier and surprising when it comes to attack and men are hesitant to search them when they are up for attack. Women and children are not considered as antagonists and as a result attract little suspicion by security personnel. This becomes a great tactic in unleashing mayhem and massive destruction. Boko Haram has successfully explored the strategy in pursuance of their insurgency. Women also add to the number of operatives of these terrorist groups especially with many areas of attack. The strategy perspective of scholars according to [Turner \(2016\)](#) is that the impact of female suicide bombers is more psychological and gets more attention from the society. The attackers also get media attention which by extension bolsters their activities. "Given the strategic desirability of using female attackers by terrorist organisations and the persistence of attacks done by female bombers, the number of female suicide attacks is likely to increase" ([Turner, 2016](#)). [Meservey \(2018\)](#), observes that "the international outpouring of horror over the kidnappings, likely alerted the group to the power of using females, particularly girls, in attacks, and spurred the use of its awful new tactic".

[Campbell \(2015\)](#), also supports the assertion that the introduction of female suicide bombers is largely due to tactical reasons. They offer tactical advantage to the terrorist group ([Plaza et al., 2017](#)). Women can successfully sneak explosives around without attracting attention. She can maneuver freely in the mist of civilians with little suspicion. The resort to female suicide bombers as a strategy of warfare came about largely as a result of pressure on the group by the Nigerian military.

3.2. Propaganda Purpose

Apart from imitating what obtains in other conflict zones where armed groups abduct women for diverse purposes, the practice by Boko Haram "which facilitated the spread of its propaganda domestically and internationally may have emboldened the group to rely more heavily on female operatives" ([Bloom and Hilary, 2016](#)). Attacks carried out by women and girls are used for propaganda purposes ([Banos, 2008](#)). They often hit the headlines and attract global attention. The media attention and sensation engendered by the attacks serve to boost the profile of Boko Haram as a group to be feared and taken seriously ([Campbell, 2015](#)).

3.3. Stigmatization

Sometimes women and girls in the camps of Boko Haram may decide to abandon the group and return home. Those who succeeded in escaping suffered psychological trauma and rejection ([Bloom and Hilary, 2016](#)). Such women are snubbed, stigmatized and not considered worthy of marriage. This may drive them into becoming martyrs by taking to suicide bombing. As noted by [The Economist \(2017\)](#), "Those girls who give themselves up before detonating their bombs often face a lifetime of stigma, as families and communities prove unwilling to take them back."

3.4. Women Attract Less Suspicion

Female suicide attackers are less suspicious and versatile and can move about freely ([Plaza et al., 2017](#)). According to [Meservey \(2018\)](#) "women are generally viewed with less suspicion than men are, and Nigerian cultural norms forbid a man from a woman in the way required to search for explosives" Closely associated with the above is the clothing worn by women which tend to conceal their weapons. [Meservey \(2018\)](#), further observes that "the clothing worn by Nigerian women can also more easily conceal an explosive device. Boko Haram has even begun experimenting with male suicide bombers disguising themselves as females."

3.5. Reserving Male Fighters

Another strategy adopted by Boko Haram is to send women and girls as suicide bombers in order to preserve male members of the group for combat duties ([Meservey, 2018](#)). The shortfall in the number of male fighters accounts strongly for the upsurge in the use of female suicide bombers.

4. Implications under Municipal and International Laws

The recruitment of women and girls by Boko Haram in acts of violence constitutes a clear violation of both international and Nigerian laws. The forceful deployment of women as suicide bombers negates the provisions of the Geneva Conventions which stipulates that women shall be treated with consideration due to their sex (GCI, Art. 12; GCII, Art 12). Any abuse of the rights of women in times of hostilities is contrary to the basic norms of human rights and humanitarian law ([Sita, 2008](#)).

The rights of women are itemised in various treaties, conventions, resolutions, declarations and guidelines published by the UN and regional organisations. There are several human rights treaty provisions that deal with the protection of women from all forms of violence, some of which are highlighted hereunder: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966; the Covenant stipulates gender equality in the enjoyment of all the rights it

contains (Art. 3 ICCPR; International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 1966 which recognizes that rights must be afforded to women and men on equal basis (Art. 3); and Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women. Nigeria has ratified most of these international instruments.

The rights of women have not been respected by parties to the conflict. The insurgents engage them to prosecute the war, either as victims or perpetrators. Many are treated as sex slaves, and forcibly married to sect members. Forced marriage is a crime against humanity as was adjudged by the splc. The Nigerian military apprehended and detained thousands of women for their involvement, real while in military custody (Amnesty International, 2018).

Apart from various international laws enumerated above, which are applicable in Nigeria, various domestic laws prohibit acts of violence and terrorism perpetrated by these women. The Nigerian government promulgated the anti terrorism Act in 2011 which was amended in 2013 to curb the activities of terrorists. Some of these women have faced terrorism charges in a mass trial (BBC, 2018). Compulsory enlistment or conscription as suicide bomber is a violation of the rights of the women under international and Nigerian laws. Recruitment of young girls and children generally, as human bombs is a breach of numerous international instruments on protection of the rights and welfare of children. The Child Rights Act, 2003, a federal legislation protects children from violence. The insurgency has taken a great toll on children. The Nigerian military has taken into custody thousands of children for reasons connected with the conflict. Their status however is not clear. While some of them are suspects, others are clearly victims. The children are reportedly being held in horrifying conditions (Paguette, 2014). Whether as victims or perpetrators children's rights are being violated by all sides to the conflict. The long detention of women and children by the military is responsible for mental illness (BBC, 2018). Parties to the conflict must respect the Geneva conventions and additional protocols on the treatment of women and children in war zones.

5. Conclusion

Women have been at the centre of the insurgency in Nigeria primarily as victims, and in exceptional instances as perpetrators. Their involvement however, in most cases, is not consensual due to numerous debilitating factors. They have faced series of threats to life from members of Boko Haram, military officials who are reportedly seizing the opportunity of their displacement to sexually harass them and other civilians who capitalise on the unfortunate situation to render undue hardship on them. This situation of the killings of their sons and husbands either as fighters of Boko Haram or as victims of bomb explosions and other attacks has also plunged them further into hardship, not forgetting the collateral losses they invite from military officials who in an attempt to fight Boko Haram arrest and in some cases kill innocent people. Women have been lambasted for participating in the insurgency and agreeing to carry out deadly attacks. However, women who join the sect voluntarily and willingly undertake suicidal mission are in the minority and cannot be used to demonise the entire women as perpetrators in the Boko Haram insurgency.

The following recommendations would further the protection of women and reduce their propensity to be tools in the hands of terrorists to carry out their heinous and inhumane activities. Government should have proper sensitisation of women and other young people on the dangers of being used to fight the state and thus threaten the lives and property of innocent people.

Government should establish rehabilitation and de-radicalisation centres for women arrested or who wilfully surrender. Some of them are being before special courts under the 2013 anti terrorism law. Such trial hardens and further alienates them. The government should step in to rehabilitate the ones who either surrender or are rescued from Boko Haram. They need a new orientation and ability to relate with people in a more tolerating manner. Government should help rebuild the areas mostly affected by the insurgency to enable affected women return to normal civilian life. Security personnel should be monitored to avoid further abuse of women in their custody. Perpetrators of abuse should be punished accordingly.

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