

## **GENDER DIMENSIONS OF BOKO HARAM TERRORISM IN NIGERIA: ISSUES, PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS**

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### **Abstract**

*Most societal impression of what it means to be a woman underscores peacefulness, mothering, caring and interdependence rather than violence; thus, terrorism has been seen as a machismo crime. But is that the whole truth? This study interrogates the extent of women's involvement in Boko Haram terrorism; and the challenges that such involvement poses to counter-terrorism in Nigeria against the erroneous belief that terrorism is a male crime. A qualitative descriptive research by design, the liberal feminist theory guided the analysis of the data collected from secondary sources, mostly scholarly and empirical research findings, and online newspaper reports and articles. It argues that women maintained active involvement in Boko Haram terrorist activities and that the involvement constitutes a bane to the success of counter-terrorism measures which are lopsided against men. It recommends a gender-mainstreaming approach to solving the problem of Boko Haram terrorism in Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** Gender, Gender Based Violence, Gender-mainstreaming, Boko Haram Terrorism and Women

### **Introduction**

The intractability of the Boko Haram sect in Nigeria despite efforts at “degrading” or destroying them has been a source of worries nationally and internationally. Boko Haram, whose Arabic name, *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad* (People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad) was founded in 2002 by Mohammed Yusuf in order to oppose Western education (Genocide Watch, 2015, para. 3). The ideology earned them the sobriquet, *Boko Haram* which loosely translates, “Western Education is Sinful.” It was not until 2009, when Boko Haram turned horribly violent that the United States of America declared it a terrorist group in 2013 (BBC 2014, May 4). Since then, researchers have recorded giant strides on approaches to solving Boko Haram Terrorism; suggesting either a military or a roundtable option. They however in either forms of suggestion granted the gender dimensions of counter terrorism against Boko Haram a very little attention. This act of indifference was engineered by the misguided notion about women as a tender, caring, soft-hearted, life nurturing species of human beings; and thus, painted terrorism, a male crime. This paper therefore answer these questions: Is Boko Haram terrorism entirely a male crime? How has

indifference to gender mainstreaming constituted a problem to counter-terrorism measures against Boko Haram? This paper argues that the Boko Haram terrorism is not entirely a male crime; and also links the intractability of the Boko Haram sect to the singular act of indifference to gender mainstreaming dimensions of the counter-terrorism measures. It also promotes gender mainstreaming in the counter-terrorism as the viable option for defeating Boko Haram sect for good.

## **Conceptual Clarifications**

### **Gender**

Despite its high profile and long usage, Okunade (2001) observes that the concept of gender is still not always well understood, although two types of usage are common; first as synonym for women and second as synonym for biological sex. This observation is accurate because many a time, whenever gender is discussed, women is discussed; and also wherever you are requested to fill against “gender” in a form, biological sex is requested. Okunade (2001) however considers the two usages above, erroneous. He would prefer that it can merely be described as a social construct of roles and responsibilities assigned to women and men, influenced by environmental, economic, political, cultural and religious factors. This acceptable meaning of gender confirms that it is a social construct, and by implication, the gender in North might not be the gender in the South especially as no two environments are ever the same. Along this line of thought, Lorber (1994) argues that gender is culture specific. Thus, gender denotes the socially defined capacities and attributes assigned to persons based on their alleged sexual characteristics (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1988).

The sex-based denotation of gender as discussed above, where roles are socially assigned to either sexes, overtime began to gather dust due to disuse in favour of a more sociologically based meaning. For instance, Eagle and Steffan’s (1984) view of gender is tied to power, and so they view it as a social construct based on the assumed power and position that a person possess. By power, they imply the ability which individuals have to make decisions and to behave as they please. Later, scholars such as Lorber (1994) and Rilley (1999) pushed the concept far beyond the level of individual attributes and rather argue that it defines specific forms of social organisation. It is in this respect that Lorber (1994:13) opines that “gender is a set of social and cultural practices that influence the lives of women and men in society.” Women’s participation in terrorism therefore is more compatible with the emergent sociological denotation of gender. Crimes such as terrorism are hardly assigned; they are rather assumed, especially for a number of culture-specific purposes such as religion, politics, and values of a society.

### **Terrorism**

Central to the litany of definitions of the concept of terrorism is purposeful violence which is often targeted at the unconcerned. For example, for Enders and Sandler — terrorism is the premeditated use or threat of use of extranormal violence or brutality by subnational groups to obtain a political, religious, or ideological

objective through intimidation of a huge audience, usually not directly involved with the policy making that the terrorists seek to influence (2002, pp. 145-146). Thus, terrorism has been branded “propaganda of the deed” (Laqueur, 1999, p. 43 and Hardman, 1987, p. 227) or “propaganda by deed” (Weinberg and Eubank, 2006, p. 3). In a clearer terms, the U.S. Department of State quoted in Ruby (2002, p. 10) defines terrorism as “politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.” By this definition, terrorism presupposes the employment of “terror” against a non-enemy in order to force an enemy to conform to their desire. This explains why terrorists make extensive use of the media to publicize their attacks, so that it may strike the right chord of panic in the perceived enemy.

### **Boko Haram**

Boko Haram is an Islamic sect based in Nigeria. It is otherwise known in Arabic language as *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awatiwal-Jihad* (People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad). It was founded in 2002 by Mohammed Yusuf in order to oppose Western education (Genocide Watch, 2015, para. 3). This earned them the sobriquet, *Boko Haram* which loosely translates, “Western Education is Sinful.” It was not until 2009, when Boko Haram turned horribly violent that the United States of America declared it a terrorist group in 2013 (BBC 2014, May 4). Since then, Boko Haram attacks have gone beyond Nigeria to countries such as Cameroun and Niger.

### **Gender Based Violence**

The inequity in the semantic status of the concept of gender based violence is highly contestable given that most of the definitions of the concept are sympathetic to women; hence, the term violence against women has been used interchangeably with gender based violence. This research however, holds gender-based violence against women to mean violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately. They include: sexual violence as a weapon of war, e.g. rape, pre-natal sex selection, female genital mutilation/cutting, date rape, bride burning or other forms of dowry-related violence, child marriage, trafficking of girls and women, domestic violence, crimes committed in the name of passion of honour, abductions of adolescent girls during combat, bride kidnapping, sexual harassment at work, physical or emotional, violence by an intimate partner, exploitation of domestic workers, femicide, forced sterilisation or other coerced reproductive practices.

### **Theoretical Orientation**

This study is liberal feminist in theoretical orientation. Liberal Feminism began in the 18th and 19th centuries and has continued through to the present day. Throughout its history the liberal feminist movement has been and continues to be focused on eliminating female subordination (Ruffcorn, n.d). The advocates of liberal feminism include Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, and Harriet Taylor. Mary

Wollstonecraft (1759-1799) represents the beginning of the liberal feminist movement. She wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in which she makes the case that women need to be educated just as well as men so that they can grow up to be moral and autonomous human beings (12-13). Then in the 19th century, John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor (Mill) wrote about women needing to be more involved in society. Emphasizing equal individual rights and liberties for women and men and downplaying sexual differences, liberal feminism is the most widely accepted social and political philosophy among feminists. Liberal feminists defend the equal rationality of the sexes and emphasize the importance of structuring social, familial, and sexual roles in ways that promote women's autonomous self-fulfillment (Feminism, Liberal, n.d). Liberal feminism according to Lorber (n.d) claims that gender differences are not based in biology, and therefore that women and men are not all that different -- their common humanity supersedes their procreative differentiation.

Although, liberal feminism could not overcome the prevailing belief that women and men are intrinsically different, it was somewhat more successful in proving that even if women are different from men, they are not inferior (Lorber, n.d). Liberal Feminists have moderate aims, their views do not radically challenge the existing values and as such they aim for gradual change in the political, economic and social system (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008). They seek a gradual change in gender disparities in the society which are attributed to a number of factors. Such factors include culture and the way men and women are socialised within that culture (Samkange 2015). In essence, liberal feminism is for gradual reforms through advocacy for equal rights for all, and laws and policies that promote equality.

The liberal feminist theory is relevant to this research as it helps us to understand women's participation in terrorism. Liberal feminism claims that the difference between men and women is only biological. This claim is buttressed by the active participation of women in terrorism. The theory therefore lays bare the error in the notion about women as weak and harmless. The theory shows that it is a fact that whatever a man can do, a woman can do better; and this includes terrorism. In other words, femininity is not inferiority. This theory equally helps in understanding the possible reason for the intractability of Boko Haram despite efforts at degrading them. Anti-terrorist strategies against Boko Haram has been lopsided against men, as women just like in other aspects of the policies of the society were disregarded, this time, both as a veritable anti-terrorist instrument but also as a threat. Gender mainstreaming which liberal feminists are clamouring for, if adopted in anti-terrorist strategies against Boko Haram can be very effective.

### **Women as Victims of Boko Haram Terrorism (The Gender Based Violence Mantra)**

This is the most obvious gender dimension of Boko Haram terrorism which drowns the reality of women's active participation in the sect. It however suffices to say that most women are indeed victims in the Boko Haram crisis. For instance, there was the notorious April 14, 2013 abduction of over 200 school girls from the

Government Girls' College, Chibok, Bornu State which stirred international concern and sparked off a widely circulated social media campaign with the hashtag *#BringBackOurGirls*. Some of the escapee girls from their captors now turned women told tales of horror and sexual abuse which the sect meted on them in the dreaded Sambisa forest. The attention that the group garnered following the abduction which facilitated the spread of its propaganda domestically and internationally, may have emboldened the group to rely more heavily on female operatives (Matfess, 2016).

The violence against women in Boko Haram crises however did not emanate from Boko Haram sect alone. Federal Government was also culpable. As a matter of fact, most of the kidnappings of women by the sect are in response to some of the Federal Government's counter-terrorism tactics that targeted wives of the terrorists. Women are thus used as pawns in the hands of the antagonistic parties (Agara, 2015; Bloom and Matfess, 2016). Matfess (2016) recorded that in 2012, he (Shekau, the Boko Haram leader) released a video in response to the detention of 10 women related to Boko Haram members by the Federal Government, 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 sharia law." The sect concretized the threat in several raids that targeted women. They stormed a police barrack in Bama, Brono State on May 2013 and carried out a mass assault in which they captured 12 Christian women and children (Agence France-Presse, 2013). Most of these women and girls abducted by Boko Haram in the northern areas of Nigeria experienced sexual violence including rape, torture and also murder (Osita-Njoku and Chikere, 2015). After another raid on the Borno State village of Bama in 2015, Boko Haram released a video in which abducted women were paraded in front of the camera. In the footage, Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau threatened that if the Nigerian security forces did not release their wives and children, that they would not release theirs. 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. All these indeed constitute gender based violence against women. Osita-Njoku and Chikere (2015, p. 104) aptly captures it thus:

The use of violence and intimidation as well as kidnap, forced marriage and compulsory conversion to Islam is one...way Boko Haram plays on the psychology of women. The rape of Christian women for example is a means of ethnic cleansing, serving not only to terrorize individual victims but also to inflict collective terror on the ethnic (Christian) group.

Women suffer Boko Haram crisis, that is granted, and this has courted the attention of relevant local and international organizations. But, while women need to be rescued from the insurgents, strategically, Boko Haram monster needs to be

crushed. The former need is thoughtful while the latter is needful. Rescuing women from the insurgents is only one part of the solution; therefore, there is need to examine the role of women in the perpetration of the crime of terrorism in *paripassu* with their victimization in order to mount an effective counter terrorist campaign against the sect.

### **Women as Boko Haram Terrorists (The Overemphasized)**

This aspect of gender dimension of Boko Haram Terrorism is treated with levity. Women are not believed to be partakers of terrorism, and when caught in the act, they are dismissed as acting under coercion. Anyadike (2016, para. 11) floats this thought too when he wrote that “we seem to automatically regard female bombers as coerced – that they cannot act out of their own volition.” There is certainly enough evidence to support the women as victims as we have attempted in the preceding section where women as victims of terrorism was vividly discussed. There are also empirical theories about the possibility that the abducted Chibok girls have been radicalized and turned suicide bombers; having the young girls, too young for it to be an informed decision, dragooned into martyrdom. But there are also cases where women have been active members of the movement and not just cannon fodder, manipulated and fooled. According to researchers Elizabeth Pearson and Jacob Zenn, more than 200 women suicide bombers have blown themselves up since June 2014, killing more than 1,000 people in Nigeria, and increasingly in neighbouring Cameroon (Anyadike 2016). Are all these women terrorists coerced? Searcey (2016, para. 21) finds determination to die in some of them; saying that “some of the bombers in recent attacks in Nigeria have been found to wear their hair pulled back from the face — a hairstyle reserved for burial rites, a sign they were ready to die.” She also broached a report about a woman dressed as a man who set off her explosives during morning prayers in a village in northeastern Nigeria. This is an express scorn at her womanhood.

Women participation in terrorism is not surprising because femininity shares in humanity just like masculinity. If there are indeed factors that could make men to join terrorist gang, women certainly would be susceptible to such factors too; more so as women are less suspected for such crimes. The gender-conditioned belief associated with manliness (bravery, and self-sacrifice) and womanliness (innocence and fragility) are as old as society itself. Thus, women’s association with violence is seen to “fall outside of these ideal-type understanding of what it means to be a woman” (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007:2). However, this stereotype is the result of transference of Western culture because traditional African societies’ history, for instance, is replete of women involvement in wars. In Nigeria, the examples of Moremi (Yoruba), Queen Amina (Hausa/Fulani), Emotan (Benin Kingdom) and Inkpi (Igala Kingdom) are still salient (Agara, 2016). The blood of those African Amazons is still running in the veins of the female Nigerians that joined Boko Haram.

Scholars such as Agara (2016) have investigated and came up with many reasons for women participation in terrorism, but they generally imply that those factors are fundamentally different from men’s and therefore their motivations are

gendered. Many have tended to link women's participation to something bad that have happened to them such as abuse, rape, use of drug, and loss of loved ones such as brother or husband or child. Still others have argued that women got involved in violence in pursuit of women's liberation (Talbot, 2001, Cunningham, 2007). All these academic and scholarly perspectives have further obfuscated this problem because very few have linked women terrorist activities to political devotion to the cause, despite the fact that this factor featured prominently in explaining why men choose to commit terrorist acts. This indifference to the reality of women terrorists accounts for the intractability of Boko Haram terrorism in Nigeria.

In women, Boko Haram finds food, sex, motivation, and deadly weapon, being a less suspected folk for such crime. There are reports where, male Boko Haram members have disguised themselves as women in veils in order to evade arrest. In one case, in July 2013, three men dressed as veiled women were killed, and around twenty others arrested, in an attempted attack on a police station (*Daily Trust*, 6 July 2013). However, Zenn and Pearson (2014, para. 16) chronicle the following news reports on "unusual" arrests by the security which buttress women's active role in Boko Haram terrorism in Nigeria thus:

In June 2013, an AK-47, a pistol and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) were found in the garments of two 'shivering' veiled women in Maiduguri (*Vanguard News*, 30 June 2013). Two months later, two women hiding rifles in their clothing were among five suspected Boko Haram militants who were arrested by the security forces (*The Guardian Nigeria*, August 2013). Also in August 2013, a woman was detained alongside a 35-year old male Boko Haram suspect (*Vanguard News*, 17 August 2013).

Those arrests were considered "unusual" because much pressure of the counter terrorism measures of the Federal Government has been on men folk. This unequal approach to combating Boko Haram is haphazard and sexist. Until the counter terrorism measures against Boko Haram are comprehensive and fundamental by focusing on women too, the hydra-headed monster will keep ravaging Nigeria with impunity because the deadly nature of Boko Haram is lodged with its women folk. Quoting *The Long War Journal*, which tracks terrorism, Searcey (2016) reveals that Boko Haram has used at least 105 women and girls in suicide attacks since June 2014, when a woman set off a bomb at an army barracks in Nigeria. Since then, women and girls, often with bombs hidden in baskets or under their clothes, have killed hundreds of people in attacks on fish and vegetable markets, schools, a river dock and even camps for people who fled their homes to escape the violence.

### **The Prospects of Gender Mainstreamed Counter terrorism Measures against Boko Haram**

The indifference to enthrone a gender mainstreamed counter terrorism explains why Boko Haram, despite being under military pressure from a multinational campaign to wipe it out, has been able to strike fear across an expansive battlefield that now includes Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon and Niger. A gender mainstreamed approach to counter terrorism here does not mean shooting every woman at sight; just like men cannot be shot at sight too. A painstakingly gender balanced surveillance will equip the security agents with the requisite strategic intelligence that will guide the actions of the soldiers in determining who is who, and strike any terrorist so determined without regard to sex. This will plug the leaks in the combat by the Nigerian soldiers against the terrorist group. Besides the need for gendering military counter terrorism measure, gender balance in other counter terrorism measures is needful. If propaganda is employed as a counter terrorism measure, it should equally involve women and target women. Propaganda served to a folk is better done by a member of that folk. Similarly, if negotiation is proposed with the sect, women should be substantially featured. Instances abound where women have been able to win bargains with ease. Involving the women folk in the counter terrorism measures holds strong prospects because the feminine component of the human species who apart from serving as vehicle for nurturing human life is also a producer, a consumer and equally endowed agent for fostering a wholesome political, social and economic development in society.

### **Conclusions**

Terrorism is not a machismo crime as the society would want to believe. Female terrorists are real; in fact, being a female provides the female terrorists with the leeway 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. The societal reluctance in throwing up red colour against women regarding terrorism underscores the continued strength of Boko Haram terrorism in Nigeria. Thus, this study recommends that every effort at combating the Boko Haram menace in Nigeria should adopt a gender balanced approach.

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