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# Pawns, Puppets or Weapons of Choice: Examining Boko Haram's Use of Female Suicide Bombers in Nigeria



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## Abstract

The use of girls as suicide bombers by Boko Haram in Nigeria has brought to the fore critical questions about the exploitation of girls in crises situations. The use of females as a war tactic is not new but the juvenile nature of the girls used by Boko Haram has changed the nature of guerrilla warfare and led to intense fear and panic in society. This paper interrogates the utilisation of girls and women in suicide bomb attacks in north-eastern Nigeria. Current conventional wisdom suggests that most of these girls are either being used as "pawns" or "puppets" by the group. The paper argues for a more robust response by the state and its agencies as well as a critical rethinking of societal systems that continues to foster the recourse to violence, suicide bombings and terrorism.

*Keywords:* pawns, puppets, suicide bombers, female, terrorism, Boko Haram,

## Introduction

On 8 June 2014, a woman got down from a motor cycle and attempted to force her way through the main entrance of the Gombe military barracks in Nigeria. In the ensuing stand-off with the quarter guard, she set off an improvised device believed to be on her person killing one soldier and injuring several more.[1] Since then as at August 2017 about 106 females,[2] some as young as 7 years old, have been deployed by Boko Haram to unleash death and terror on the country's citizens. The age bracket is believed to range from seven to 17 years for the young girls and up to middle age for the women. Additionally, many of the attacks have occurred in public places such as markets, crowded bus stations, public schools and even internally displaced camps. Some studies also state that Boko Haram has utilised and deployed more female bombers than any other terrorist group in history.[3] In 2014, 85% of suicide attacks perpetrated by females around the world happened in Nigeria.[4] Furthermore UNICEF[5] reports that out of the 84 bombings by minors in 2017, majority were done by girls usually under 15, this is in consonance with suicide attacks recorded in 2014 where three quarters were done by women and children.[6]

In most parts of the world, the phenomenon of women and girl assailants run contrary to many social constructions of women and girls. In African societies in particular, women are perceived to be more pacific and are less likely to perpetuate violent acts such as suicide bombings. However, the changing nature of armed conflicts and the unconventional tactics used in asymmetric warfare suggests the need to re-examine some of these perceptions. These assumptions also present a challenge when juxtaposed against the plethora of national, regional and international frameworks protecting women and children, especially in armed conflicts which regard them as vulnerable groups. These instruments place the primary responsibility of protection on the state. However,

the Nigerian state has had a somewhat chequered response in its containment and reversal strategies against Boko Haram's activities. What is more, Boko Haram expanded its attacks on civilians beyond the borders of Nigeria; making it a regional challenge. So far the strategies used to counter Boko Haram seem to focus on their elimination as a terrorist group thereby dealing with the effects and not so much the causes of the menace. Not much is being done by the government in terms of special protection measures to reduce the utilisation of females as suicide bombers in Nigeria.

This paper joins the various discourses on the participation of women and girls in terrorism, using Boko Haram's female suicide bombers as an example. It interrogates the diverse assumptions for Boko Haram's preference for women and girls in suicide attacks. Data for the paper relied on interviews with security experts and a review of extant literature on the subject. The paper is organised in the following sections: The first part provides a background to Boko Haram as a terrorist[7] organisation and the use of suicide bombers in their operations. The second part examines the role of women as weapons for warfare, the third part analyses Boko Haram's preference for the use of women and girls in suicide bombings. The fourth part examines the nature of the Nigerian state and presents the different national and international texts/frameworks binding states and other regional bodies to the protection of women and children in armed conflict. This is followed by an analysis of whether these suicide bombers qualify within the protection parameter's elaborated in the previous section and the responses of different levels of government in trying to address the use of women and girls in such attacks. The paper ends by providing recommendations on protecting female suicide bombers be they pawns or puppets.

**Boko Haram**

Boko Haram in Nigeria also known as Jama'atu Ahlissunnah Lidda'awati wal Jihad'[8] has been classified as a terrorist organisation by the United States, the UN and Nigeria. Loosely translated, Boko Haram means 'Western education is forbidden', and its ideology is based on strict and extreme Islamic teaching which rejects most western ideas and institutions as un-Islamic (particularly the education of females) and seeks to impose Sharia law in Nigeria. Though its actual origins are debateable, the group is largely credited to have been formed by Islamist cleric Mohammed Yusuf who was killed extra-judicially in police custody in 2009. The manner and circumstance of his death, somehow, changed the dynamics and the modus operandi of the group. Under its new leader – Abubakar Shekau, the group became a nettlesome problem originally against the Nigerian state and then to ordinary citizens as it scaled up its terrorist activities with an accelerated pace of killings, kidnappings and suicide attacks, with women and girls being the most vulnerable. Since 2009 to 2017 Boko Haram has killed over 20 000 people with as many as 3 million displaced by the insurgency.[9] Further, the 2015 Global Terrorism index lists Boko Haram as the deadliest terrorist group in the world ahead of the Islamic State, al-Qa'ida, al Shabab and the FARC in terms of total number of people killed within the calendar year.[10] This dark record shows its rising lethality when compared to the period 2009-2013 where it accounted for 2.34 per cent of more than 34 000 terrorist attacks and 5.9 per cent of fatalities.[11] Additionally, the Organisation for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported that in 2014 alone, over one million people were displaced and 6 400 killed by the conflict in North Eastern Nigeria.[12]

Initial attacks of the group begun with the targeting of state security installations usually with locally produced bombs driven in cars and or left behind in vehicles which were later detonated. This graduated to targeting of churches and schools and finally to the use of both male and female suicide bombers. This new tactic though it originated with the use of men changed to include women and girls in June 2014. The activities of the group have not only been concentrated in Nigeria but have spread to neighbouring countries. Cameroon was the first country to be invaded thus making the violence internationalised. Chad and Niger have also had to fend off Boko Haram incursions with Chad especially hitting back very hard at all incursions into their territory. This has resulted in a coalition force backed by the African Union (AU) to combine forces and fight the threat in a holistic way. Since then till August 2017, there have been a total of about 106 'successful' female suicide bombings and 13 failed attempts mostly in northern Nigeria with a conservative estimate of about 800 people killed in the attacks and 524 injured per illustrations below.[13]
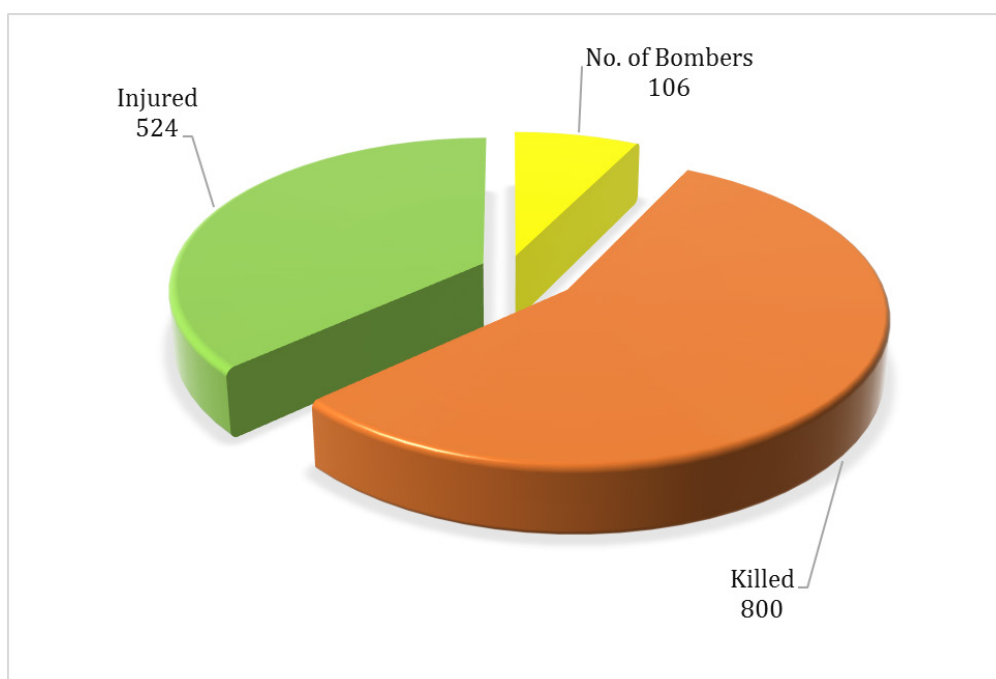


**Figure 1:** *Numbers of female suicide bombers, injured and killed from June 2014 to August 2017.*

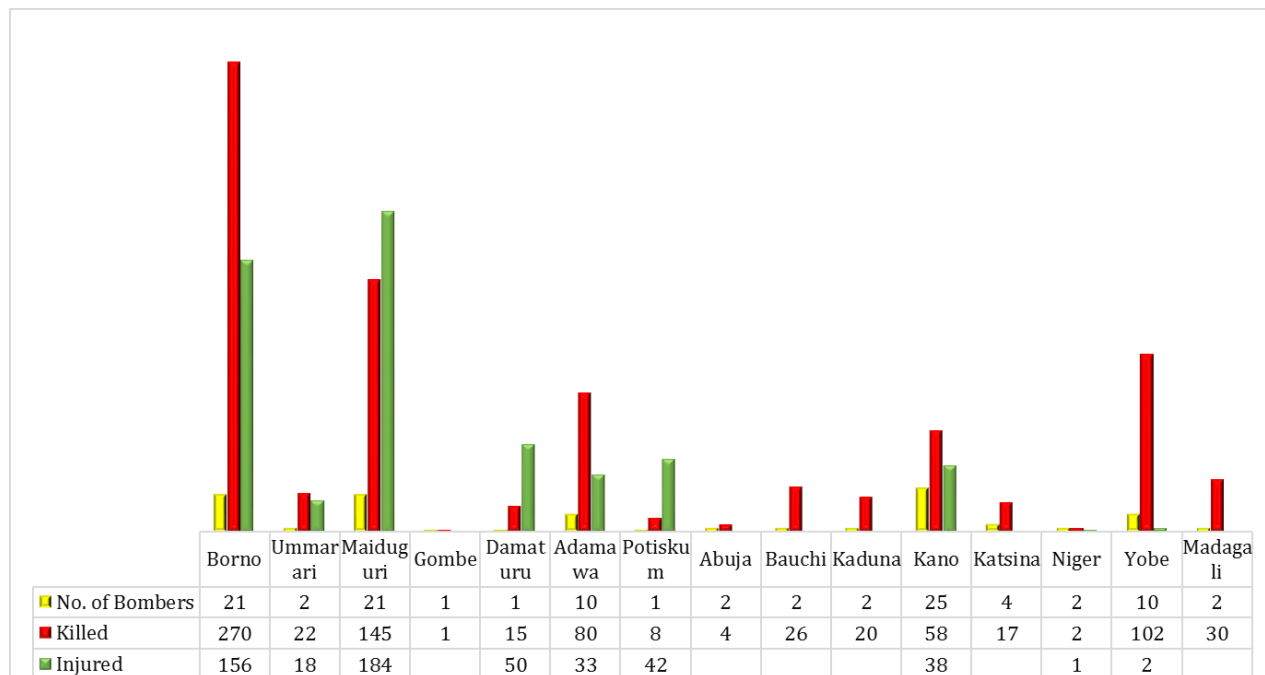*Source: Authors Compilation from reported incidences by the news media[1]*



| | Borno | Ummar ari | Maidug uri | Gombe | Damat uru | Adama wa | Potisku m | Abuja | Bauchi | Kaduna | Kano | Katsina | Niger | Yobe | Madaga li |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| No. of Bombers | 21 | 2 | 21 | 1 | 1 | 10 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 25 | 4 | 2 | 10 | 2 |
| Killed | 270 | 22 | 145 | 1 | 15 | 80 | 8 | 4 | 26 | 20 | 58 | 17 | 2 | 102 | 30 |
| Injured | 156 | 18 | 184 | | 50 | 33 | 42 | | | | 38 | | 1 | 2 | |

***Figure 2.*** *Conservative estimates of female suicide bombings in Nigeria from June 2014 to August 2017.*

The continuing spate of brazen attacks and the seeming inability of the Nigerian government to completely repel, destroy or incapacitate Boko Haram until a change in government in March 2015 meant that civilians especially women and children were exploited in the deadly agenda of the group. Abductions, forced recruitment and coercive means have been used to recruit most of the girls into the Boko Haram group. The threat of Boko Haram became even dire when the group swore allegiance to the Islamic State[2] (IS) in 2015, establishing its presence on the continent as an international problem. Already, there are reports of IS

influences in some of the media content of the Boko Haram group. Prior to this there were also allegations of some members of the group receiving training in Mali among the al-Qaeda group in the north of the country. Several parallels can be seen in the modus operandi of both the IS and Boko Haram. Both groups employ the use of children in direct combat. Under the guise of education the IS recruits children who are then deployed in active combat military operations including suicide bombings, thought the IS has not been recorded to use young girls.[14]

**Women in Warfare in West Africa**

Throughout history, women have played significant roles during conflict situations. They have participated directly or indirectly in community conflicts, liberation struggles and civil wars for various reasons.[3] However, the social constructions of women have often blurred out all these roles and they have usually been represented as victims. As war is so often associated with generalised images of masculinity and femininity, women have become associated with life-giving and men life-taking.[15]  In West African societies where patriarchy is entrenched

and the conduct of warfare is considered a masculine enterprise, women's participation in warfare and violence is often regarded as anomalous or unnatural.[16] Due to women's traditional roles as home-makers and care-givers, their roles in warfare are further diminished. More often than not, they become victims, spectators or even, the prize of war.[17]

Further, an analysis of numerous armed conflicts in

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1 These include reports from national newspapers in Nigeria such as the Leadership and premium times among others and also international media such as the BBC, CNN and Al Jazeera.
2 There have been indications of some splits between these groups in the media.
3 Women participate in conflicts as combatants, financiers, spies, trainers, recruiters, care-givers or may provide labour for fighting forces.

Africa indicates that young women are participants and carry guns alongside their male comrades-in-arms, challenging the stereotypes of women as war victims only.[18]   Historically, several accounts exists of women warriors such as the female warriors of ancient Dahomey[19] and Yaa Asantewaa of the Ashanti kingdom in ancient Ghana who is recorded to have commanded an army to battle against the British in the Anglo-Asante war of 1900.[20] Queen Amina of Zazzau (Zaria, Nigeria) also fought conquest wars to expand the Zazzau kingdom.[21] As combatants, intelligence officers, commanders and even generals of armed groups, some women are known to have committed more brutal and cruel acts than male fighters. Cases in point are Martina Johnson and Black Diamond who were commanders within the ranks of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) and Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) respectively.[22]

The factors which drive women to participate in armed conflicts are complicated. While some women may voluntarily fight to support the cause or ideology of fighting forces, many more are driven by circumstances. Some are captured and forced to join fighting forces, others also join in order to protect themselves or provide for their families, while others may join fighting forces purely out of revenge for atrocities metered out to them or members of their families, and yet others are also given out as sacrifices on behalf of their families.[23] Conflict situations in themselves bring a mix of experiences to women and more especially for those, who directly engaged in the conflict. Some female combatants may experience some form of "new power" and liberation from subordinating patriarchal social orders. Others may also experience extreme forms of gender-based discriminations.[24] The equation however, tilts more to the latter than the former. While they may perform same combat roles as their male counterparts, women often suffer discriminations, abuse, and sexual violence or may be forced to perform sexual favours to maintain their position in the group due to their gender.[25] As much as these narratives hold some truth, more often than not, women have participated in war out of compulsion, enticement or desperate measures. It must however be noted that others also joined fighting forces because they choose to identify with the group and support the group's ideologies and course. Contrary to the many narratives which portray women as naturally nurturing, peaceful and often the victims of male brutality during armed conflicts, Kwesi Aning,[26] suggests a move from these traditional essentialist perspectives which define women's roles in armed conflict.  Rather it is important to recognize that beyond the socially attributed gender roles ascribed to women, they also assume new roles during conflict situations which is useful in understanding women's engagement/participation in armed violence. In the case of young girls associated with armed conflict or groups most of them are recorded as forced into that kind of difficult situation and hence they comply with their captors as a matter of survival. In West Africa this unfortunate trend was observed in many armed conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Cote d'Ivoire where young girls were sexually abused and misused during the conflicts in those countries. However there are no records of them acting as suicide bombers for their captors. This makes their exploitation in the case of Nigeria's Boko Haram all the more virulent and despicable.

**Suicide terrorism in West Africa: A rising phenomenon?**

Suicide bombing or terrorism as defined by Boaz Ganor is the operational method in which the very act of the attack is dependent upon the death of the perpetrator.[27] This implies that the perpetrator is aware or is used as a tactic of war, and in most reported cases, female suicide bombers have at least been willing and or motivated by religious and personal agendas among others to wilfully explode themselves. Nonetheless, female suicide bombing is a relatively new phenomenon in West Africa though outside the region especially in East Africa there have been some recorded incidents since 2006.[28] For instance there is an alarming concern in Kenya of young women[4] of marriageable age being radicalised. A government report released in 2015 indicates that these women are made to view terrorism as a noble cause.  Experts on terror groups also posit that suicide bombing is preferred as a more effective weapon against their supposedly more powerful enemies.[29] The situation presents a more complex challenge when suicide bombings are carried out by juvenile girls.

An analysis of terror-labelled groups such as Al-Qaeda, Hamas, Hezbollah, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka indicates that these groups have all used women to carry out suicide attacks at some point in time[30], but none has been recorded to have used children or young girls[31] in their attacks, which makes the case of Boko Haram very distinct and even more shocking. As reported by the UN children's agency in Nigeria the use of a young girl as a suicide bomber in Maiduguri 'should be searing the conscience

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4 The girls attracted to these groups are generally in the adolescent-young adult category and tend to have a romantic notion about the lives of extremists.

of the world'[5].

Bloom and Cunningham identify several factors behind why women participate in violent situations. Bloom argues that women are prompted by the five Rs: revenge, redemption, relationship, respect and rape.[32]

Cunningham also adds that domestic, international, conflict and social dislocation are behind the reasons why women get involved in violence.[33] This suggests a relatively new trend in contemporary armed warfare that is both dangerous and calculating.

## Boko Haram's Female Suicide Bombers: Pawns, puppets or Weapons of Choice

It is unclear if the use of female suicide bombers by Boko Haram is an act of desperation, a measure of last resort or they perceive women and girls as more convenient weapons against the Nigerian state.[34] Some analysts also claim that the use of women and girls is rather an indication of the group's weakness. However, with the changing dynamics of the Boko Haram crisis, these analyses are yet to be confirmed or disproved. Yet, on the whole, female suicide bombers tend to create a more intense fear among populations and even among security agencies because their operations re-emphasizes a state of general insecurity, where all aspects of the society are infiltrated and anyone could be a suicide bomber.[35]

In this section we examine some of the factors which make women and girls' convenient targets of exploitation in suicide bombing missions and the nature of the participation of these women and girls who engaged in Boko Haram's suicide bombings.

As intimated earlier, social constructions of women generally present women as pacifists, the givers of life and usually not the takers. Such social biases have been tactfully exploited by militant and terror groups to use women and girls in their operations, simply because these social biases make it easier for women to penetrate or even evade security checks and procedures. According to Heather A. Andrews, female suicide bombers have an immense psychological effect on the larger struggle in which their organisation is involved in[36]. Thus they are used to strike a blow to public morale and contribute to a highly insecure and distrustful society. They usually blend in very well into public places such as markets and bus stations where many of these attacks have taken place. This is especially true of children, especially young girls who are often perceived as innocent and harmless. For instance, in many West African states, a young girl of about seven years walking in a crowded market place would hardly attract any attention or suspicions for security alerts. This therefore makes it easy for the terrorist group to use these agents to penetrate and thwart security checks, systems and infrastructure.

Furthermore, the low numbers of female security personnel also favours the use of women and girls in suicide bombing missions. For a country with a population of 200 million, Nigeria counts only 36 096 female police officers as against 254 998 policemen[37], these numbers are generally inadequate when compared with the UN's standard of 1 police officer to 400 persons. Moreover, it is socially unacceptable for male security personnel to search women or girls and more especially in the Muslim-dominated north-eastern states where women are required to wear a hijab and sharia law is also applied. It therefore makes it easier for women to conceal weapons or explosives and to penetrate security checks or avoid scrutiny as male security officers may be reluctant to thoroughly scrutinize women. There have been reported cases elsewhere, of women feigning pregnancy while carrying explosives.[38] This therefore presents a major challenge to effective enforcement of security standards and renders both security agents and civilian populations vulnerable to terrorist attacks. Closely related to the low numbers of female police women is how security is conceptualized in military terms which leaves women out of counter terrorism strategies.

Additionally, there are assumptions that terrorist groups such as Boko Haram's societal prejudices might make them inclined to think that female members or abductees are more expendable compared to males. Males can be trained to fight and play multiple roles for the group for a longer time than females therefore they are more inclined to use females in suicide bomb attacks.[39] The lack of education of women and females also makes them vulnerable to being used or deceived to carry out suicide attacks.

While all these assumptions may be true, it is also worth examining how these women and girls are recruited and what makes them a preferred or convenient choice for suicide bombing missions. First, it is believed that widows of Boko Haram members participate in the suicide bombing attacks to avenge the death of their husbands and support the cause of the group.[40] They are made to believe that their husbands have martyred into paradise and they can also become martyrs if

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5  BBC, 2015. Nigeria Violence: Female suicide bombers hit market. Available at http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-30772028

they commit these acts. For instance, the first female suicide bomber who attacked a barracks in Gombe State in June 2014 was believed to belong to this kind of sect. However, it is worth noting that, this category of suicide attackers are few compared to the number of naive and unsuspecting young girls who have been used in such missions. Again, this group of people also engage in the secret recruitment of new fighters for the group by luring young girls and other widows of finding them suitors for marriage[41] and later indoctrinate them or force them to fight for the group. Once again, due to social biases about women being peaceful and harmless, they hardly attract any attention or suspicions.

Secondly, it is also believed that there are members of the sect who offer their children either for cash rewards or as sacrifices to promote the cause of the group such as the case of 13 year old Zahara'u Babangida whose father gave her out to the group to carry out a mission which was not successful[42]. In a similar incident, police arrested 10 year old Hadiza Musa in Funtua, Kano State who had been strapped with an explosive vest and was being driven by her older brother and sister when they were stopped by police.[43] There are also suspicions of Boko Haram enticing children, many of whom roam the streets as homeless children who then get indoctrinated and trained to carry out the attacks. Finally, there is the more popular belief that some of these girls could possibly be some of the 276 school girls who were abducted from Chibok in April 2014. Despite the huge international campaigns to "bring back our girls" about 70 girls[44] are believed to have escaped and the rest are still unaccounted for more than two year after their abduction. From the accounts of two would-be suicide bombers, arrested by Nigerian Security forces, many of these girls were unwilling victims who were either lured or forced to perform these acts. There are also reports that some of these female suicide bombers did not actually explode themselves, but mobile detonators were rather involved. The exploitative ways in which Boko Haram engages women and children in its terror campaign makes it imperative to protect the vulnerable, especially young girls. This is not just the responsibility of the Nigerian government but also regional, sub regional and the international community all have a role to play. Various harrowing accounts from human rights and child rights groups should sear the conscience of the world into putting in place some interventions to reduce this carnage.

## Protecting women and girls: Whose Responsibility?

The horrific and devastating trail left in the wake of the Boko Haram group in Nigeria has raised several questions on the robustness of protective measures currently in place. At the international level, the UN, AU and ECOWAS frameworks on women and children are unanimous in the urgent need to protect women and children in armed conflict situations. They especially place high importance on the domestication of international, regional and sub-regional laws into national constitutions as well as measures to prevent children under 18 from being recruited or used in armed conflicts. The 1948 United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration on Human Rights45 state categorically that rights and freedoms are not limited by a person's gender and establishes 'that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights'. The Convention on the Rights of the Child, (CRC), Convention on the Elimination of All kinds of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict stipulates several protection provisions for women and children in times of peace and war. Additionally UNSCR 1325 and 2242 urges states to ensure the participation and leadership of women's organisations in devising strategies to counter terrorism and violent extremism.

At the continental level, the AU's Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, on the Rights of Women in Africa under (Article 11) speaks about adoption of measures to prosecute violence against women with requisite penal codes as well as prohibiting children from being used in armed conflicts. The ECOWAS conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) and the ECOWAS Humanitarian policy also strongly reiterates protectionism provisions. The ECOWAS Counter Terrorism Policy and Strategy has three 3 pillars - Prevent, Pursue and Reconstruct. The first pillar Prevent seeks to deter and prevent terrorism before it emerges as well as eliminate the conditions conducive to terrorism.

## National Implementation and Challenges

At the state level, Nigeria has ratified and domesticated the International Convention on the Rights of the Child. They have also ratified CEDAW, signed but not ratified the Optional Protocol on Children in Armed Conflict (article 14 speaks to the age limit of children in armed conflict), Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution, and child pornography, and the African Charter on the Rights and welfare of the child. It is instructive to note that the Children's Right Act 2003 is an effort to domesticate6 the CRC and addresses the welfare and responsibilities of children as well as those of government and institutions. Nigeria's constitutional arrangement situates issues concerning children within independent state legislatures instead of within the legislative purview of the National Assembly[46]. This means that there is no adequate national framework applicable to the whole country on issues concerning the welfare of children.[47] Even though passed, very few states in Nigeria have enacted the CRA into law. No significant progress has been made in the implementation of these rights. Particularly in the Muslim north, lots of states still have issues with certain provisions such as the tensions of Sharia law against national and international laws. Additionally, many clerics see the act as a western agenda. Even in the various states, children and young person's laws are largely juvenile justice biased and not necessarily child rights specific. This therefore has fostered a climate of human rights abuses against children including physical abuse, child labour and harmful cultural and traditional customs imposed on them[48]. Enforcement of these rights are also provided for with strict penalties for abuse, creation of family courts and streamlining Nigeria's child rights to global standards.[49] On the other hand, some community-level initiatives of some NGO's such as the WELLBEING foundation indicates that if sufficiently sensitised and mobilised, even deeply religious communities affirm to the fact that all children including theirs deserves to be adequately protected[50]. To cross barrier hurdles there is the urgent need for appropriate sensitisation and education as well as appropriate systems to support the implementation of the CRC.

Nigeria has additionally signed all the relevant gender conventions and has a national gender policy (which replaced the women's policy) aligned to the Beijing platform of action, the AU solemn declaration for Gender Equality, Africa protocol on people's right and the rights of women, CEDAW, MDGs. The goal of the gender policy is to build a just society devoid of discrimination, harness the full potential of all social groups regardless of sex or circumstance, promote the enjoyment of fundamental human rights, protect the health, social, economic and political well-being of all citizens for sustainable development[51]. However, patriarchy, unequal constitutional rights, Gender Based Violence, harmful gender practises, inadequate laws on domestic violence which allows insalubrious wife beating and women trafficking militate against the protection of women in Nigeria[7]. Within this setting it is difficult to protect women as they are seen as inferior to men and certain traditional and customary practices accept this form of degradation. A nation that is not engendered is endangered, confronting traditional structures that impede women's maximum participation is critical. Patriarchy in Nigeria is protected within traditional institutional structures held in abeyance and almost in sacredness.[52] Against this backdrop the protection of women becomes extremely fraught. This also constrains the state in responding to gender inequalities and the protection of children through the implementation of the relevant laws.

Following from this, the current state of protection for children especially girls remains a challenge in Nigeria, as seen in the manner in which the Boko Haram uses girls in suicide bomb attacks. The state agencies in responding to the threat posed by Boko Haram militants are unable to effectively protect women and especially children caught in the 'crossfire'. This failure has resulted in abductions and killings, as well as the wanton use of children as female bombers in Nigeria. Despite, the awareness of international, regional and national provisions for the protection of women and girls, their implementation remains a challenge. The bigger question then is how can these laws move from theory into practice?

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6  It was passed amid contestations of the legal age of 18 as the minimum age for marriage –incompatible with religious and cultural practices.
7  For instance wife beating is allowed so long as no major injuries are caused. Further, domestic violence is classified under common assault. Section 55 of the penal code states that wife beating is allowed as long as it does not amount to grievous hurt. Additionally section 353 of the criminal code makes an indecent assault on males punishable by 3 years imprisonment, whiles a similar offence against a woman is treated as a misdemeanour and punishable by 2 years imprisonment (section 360).

**Who qualifies to be protected?**

As intimated earlier, huge challenges and discrepancies are seen in the theory and practice of frameworks for protecting women and children. It must be reiterated that States have the primary responsibility of protecting their citizens especially women and children in situations of armed conflicts, and it is only when the state is unable or unwilling to fulfil its responsibilities that other actors and organisations can step in as espoused by the Responsibility to Protect concept. It is also important to note that the use of children in this context is outlawed in the protection provisions at all levels, thus the girls no matter their actions cannot be held responsible. The rights to life and humane treatment are non derogable rights under International Human Rights Law particularly, when it comes to the use of children in armed conflict. Their use has thus attracted national and international outrage, for instance, the US State Department condemned the 'unconscionable use of children as suicide bombers' whiles UNICEF also reiterated that children are 'first and foremost victims who are used intentionally by adults in the most horrific way.'[53] In the case of women above 18 however, they are wholly responsible for their actions though with a few exceptions it is unclear their motivations for acting as suicide bombers.

International gender frameworks and international humanitarian law and human rights laws dictate that the vulnerable in society must be protected especially women and children. However children are accorded greater protection because of their perceived innocence. A child is granted immunity even if in armed conflict or insurgencies they become 'perpetrators' of crimes. Thus it does not matter whether the child killed x number of people, they cannot be held accountable for their actions as they acted without the full awareness of the gravity of what they were doing or the consequences of their actions as portrayed by the girls in this study. This is also the case for the girls whose bombs were unable to detonate as they face stigma from the society and challenges to their integration into the communities. It is important to reiterate that these children cannot be held responsible for their actions as there is a great level of exploitation involved in the process.

For those above the age of 18 – the internationally accepted age for a child, the situation surrounding how they got involved becomes important in determining their culpability. In many instances these women may have been abducted by the extremist group and forced to be suicide bombers against their will. However in the case of the Nigerian woman who sparked off the female suicide bombing trend, it has been alleged that she had scores to settle over a family member who was killed by the Nigerian security services. At the end of the day, the important thing to do is not to protect the dead but to safeguard the living and make conditions for their exploitation unattractive.

**Responding to terrorist threats**

In Nigeria, initial responses to the Boko Haram threat were downplayed by then president Goodluck Jonathan whiles also using a heavy hand to try to quell the group's activities. This rather had a negative effect as the group spiralled out of control and become more indiscriminate and deadly in their operations. The Nigerian army especially in the north had low morale and were also not well equipped to effectively engage the Boko Haram group as they lacked the necessary equipment and there were reports of alleged skimming of procurement budgets of the military by top officers.[54] The abduction of the Chibok school girls in April 2014 highlighted the precarious security situation in Nigeria's northern regions and sparked international outrage. Amnesty International for instance claims that the Nigerian military had intelligence of the potential attack on the Chibok School but failed to react.[55] This may be attributed to lack of resources or reluctance to face the well-armed insurgents. Either way it shows clearly the inadequate response mechanisms in place to protect girls in the country. Just before the 2015 presidential elections, Nigerian security forces launched a military campaign to flush out the militant group, killing some of the insurgents and destroying their bases in the northern parts of the country. It must be noted however that there were also allegations by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch in 2012 of excesses not only on the side of Boko Haram, but also on the side of the Nigerian State. They were accused of extra-judicial killings, torture, and other cruel and inhumane and degrading treatment of prisoners, detainees and criminal suspects despite its prohibition in their national laws. Current President Buhari stated in a BBC interview in December 2015 that his troops had 'technically won the war'.[56] This was in the wake of an offensive by the Multinational Joint Task Force against Boko Haram which pushed out the insurgents from Maiduguri and other towns seized. However his admittance that the Boko Haram group was now unable to launch attacks against the military but had resorted to using female suicide bombers against soft targets is telling. This is because it shows little political will to protect the

females who are being used as suicide bombers and rather an over concentration on protecting the military to the detriment of the females.

Considering the increased level of criminality and terrorism in the sub-region, ECOWAS came out with the ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Policy and Strategy in February 2013[57]. The policy seeks to prevent and eradicate terrorism and related criminal acts in West Africa with a view to creating conditions conducive to sound economic development and ensuring the well-being of all ECOWAS citizens. The strategy rests on three pillars: Prevent, Pursue and Reconstruct. The first pillar Prevent seeks to deter and prevent terrorism before it emerges as well as eliminate the conditions conducive to terrorism. This is usually the most challenging aspect in any effort to prevent violence or conflicts, and most states in the ECOWAS sub-region are most often than not aware of the signs but seem somehow unable to put in any effective mechanisms to prevent it from escalating as the case of the crisis in Mali in 2012 depicts. Furthermore some of the root causes of terrorism such as poverty, social and political marginalisation, widespread unemployment, corruption and weak security institutions are endemic in most West African societies and despite some international aid and some national policies to address them, progress remains painfully slow.

The second pillar underscores the importance of rapid, timely and effective response when terrorism occurs. This seems to be deficient especially in Nigeria's handling of Boko Haram attacks as in some cases security personnel join civilians to flee from the advance of the group. Lastly the policy encourages reconstruction and a rebuilding of society, allowing the state to heal from social wounds caused by terrorism and counter terrorism. It also calls for the protection of the rights of victims, support and reconciliation of communities as well as the repair of the social contract between the people and the state. The reconstruction period thus allows for a rebuilding of more resilient societies and the opportunity to also address certain imbalances in society that allowed for terrorism. On paper the strategy is robust and proactive and has

provisions for national and regional implementation by member states as well as an evaluation of efforts by member states towards this end. Nonetheless the experience in the sub-region with other nicely crafted policies remains poor since after the rhetoric's most states lack the political will or resources to bring theory to practise.

At the regional level the AU gave support for a regional task force made up of soldiers from Cameroon, Niger and Chad. Military counter-offensive in Cameroon, Chad and Niger has also managed to repel to some extent the activities of the Boko Haram group in these countries. International efforts also resulted in the president of France, Francois Hollande inviting Goodluck Jonathan and his counterparts from Benin, Cameroon, Niger and Chad to explore strategies for responding to Boko Haram attacks in May 2014. Further, the United States sent in intelligence experts to especially help trace the whereabouts of the Chibok school girls but has yielded little results to date, they have since been wary of sharing any intelligence with the Nigerian army amid allegations of infiltration by the Boko Haram insurgents. While these efforts are laudable and represent some marginal success, the fight against Boko Haram and terrorism and the use of women and girls in suicide bombings may not yet be over.

Various issues come to the fore when addressing this threat. Number one is the enabling environment that allowed the militant group to grow and fester with its fatal consequences for the innocent civilian victims. Second is the level of complicity, collusion and corruption exhibited by the State security agencies which has greatly inhibited any efforts at peace and security. Third is the gross human rights abuses perpetrated by both sides to the conflict and their justice and accountability dimensions. Addressing this complex intertwined conundrum is a herculean task fostered by years of systemic imbalances and structural weaknesses. It requires a paradigm shift that will need to rend out the very 'heart strings' of the Nigerian state in order to mitigate the occurrence of such manifest violence in the midst of democratic and governance principles consolidated over the years.

**Policy Options and Way Forward**

The threat of Boko Haram and the use of female suicide bombers is real and goes beyond the borders of Nigeria or neighbouring Cameroon, Niger and Chad. The exploitative use of women and girls in suicide missions, therefore calls for more efforts to especially protect women and girls. The following policy options could be explored as part of efforts to protect women and girls and generally as a response to the threat.

Any effort to address the menace of the Boko Haram group and its perpetuation of terror on vulnerable people must start with the root causes and identify the factors that continue to enable such groups to thrive. In this context it includes a critical analysis of the social systems in Nigeria. Clearly the socialisation of the people especially women and girls in Northern Nigeria is conducive for predators such as the Boko Haram group to exploit. Therefore, Muslim clerics, traditional and community leaders as well as women leaders must all join hands with the state in the formulation of a social policy that will seek to cause a change in the indoctrination, attitudes and beliefs of the people without compromising their freedoms. There is also the need to address the structural issues which undermine women's empowerment. E.g. strengthen women and girls education.

The joint military campaigns between the Nigerian, Cameroonian, Chadian and Nigerien security agencies in March 2015, succeeded in pushing back Boko Haram just before the general elections in Nigeria. While a military offensive by the Nigerian army also rescued nearly 300 women and girls from the Sambisa forest near the Cameroon border. These demonstrate the importance of efforts to addressing the Boko Haram menace. It is therefore important that countries in the sub-region and other international bodies augment the efforts of the affected states. This will enhance intelligence-gathering and information sharing and also make available a pool of resources and expertise from across the region and elsewhere to combat the militant group. The exploitative use of women and girls in suicide bombing missions requires the recruitment and training of more female security personnel and intelligence experts to carry out appropriate screening of women at checkpoints and also conduct proper surveillance on potential suspects.

Funding for re-integrating children who have fled or come back from Boko Haram's captivity should be actively provided. T this end organisations like the UNICEF must be properly resource to continue to offer socio-economic interventions in support of the government. The Nigerian government and other affected countries must also put in place funds for such efforts which are critical for communities in the long term.

Poverty and youth unemployment have been identified as some factors which attract young people to join the Boko haram or even families to offer their young girls to the group to carry out suicide missions. This means that the problem requires a more holistic approach. Accountable governance and the delivery of social services is therefore very critical to tackling the roots of the menace.

International and national regulations protecting women and girls especially should be rigorously enforced, and the perpetrators punished. Thus the Nigerian government should prioritise the protection of young girls particularly in situations of armed violence and counter-terrorism efforts. This also means vigorously implementing the ECOWAS counter terrorism strategy provisions and ensuring swift action to prevent, pursue and reconstruct the communities worse affected by terrorism.

In the long term, a culture of peace, popularly termed peace education should become part of the teaching curriculum for young people especially at the basic and secondary school levels. This would help to reduce somewhat radical ideologies in their later years.

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# Pawns, Puppets or Weapons of Choice Examining Boko Haram's Use of Female Suicide Bombers in Nigeria.

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