Governing Gender:
Violent Extremism in Northern Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper draws on a qualitative study piloted in Maiduguri, Northern Nigeria, to unpack the gender logics that shape why women join Boko Haram, their roles, how they are perceived by their communities on their return and how these dynamics inform the 'deradicalisation' programmes of the Nigerian government and civil society organisations. The study reveals that the absence of a gender power analysis reproduces the dominant tropes evident in radicalisation theories and programmes about who is radicalised and why, thus limiting a holistic response to the factors that drive association with Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria. The paper points to the opportunities that a more nuanced reading of women's experiences of associating with armed groups and their return to their communities offers to re-conceptualising integration programmes.

Résumé

Cet article s'appuie sur une étude qualitative menée à Maiduguri, dans le nord du Nigeria, pour analyser les logiques de genre qui déterminent les raisons pour lesquelles les femmes rejoignent Boko Haram, leurs rôles, la manière dont elles sont perçues par leurs communautés à leur retour et la manière dont ces dynamiques influencent les programmes de « déradicalisation » du gouvernement nigérian et des organisations de la société civile. L'étude révèle que l'absence d'une analyse de genre et des relations de pouvoir reproduit les tropes dominants évidents dans les théories et programmes de radicalisation pour savoir qui est radicalisé et pourquoi, limitant ainsi une réponse holistique aux facteurs qui poussent à l'association avec Boko Haram dans le nord du Nigeria. L'article souligne les opportunités qu'une lecture plus nuancée des expériences des femmes associées à des groupes armés et de leur retour dans leurs communautés offre pour reconceptualiser les programmes d'intégration.

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Introduction

The implicit construction of men as the most likely targets of radicalisation pervades the literature on terrorism and violent extremism (Borum 2011; Ogharanduku 2017; Schmid 2014). Women and girls are often portrayed as inactive, passive and apolitical, largely experiencing violent extremism through abduction, rape and murder. There is a growing body of literature that has sought to complicate this bias by framing women as agentic, choosing to join insurgent groups for political and personal reasons (Henty and Eggleston 2018). However, most gender and violent extremism programme strategies by state and non-state actors largely engage women as wives and mothers who are mobilised to prevent their children (sons) and husbands from being radicalised. What does a gender analysis of violent extremism that goes beyond framing women as both victims and villains offer? I unpack the gender logics that underpin why women join Boko Haram, their roles, how they are perceived by their communities on their return and how these dynamics inform the Nigerian government and civil society organisation deradicalisation programmes, or not. The absence of a gender power analysis reproduces the tropes evident in radicalisation theories about who is radicalised and why, thereby limiting a holistic response to the factors that drive radicalisation in Northern Nigeria. This paper points to the opportunities offered by a more nuanced reading of women's experiences of armed groups to developing comprehensive programmes for countering violent extremism.

This article draws on a July 2019, qualitative pilot study conducted in partnership with Neem Foundation and the African Leadership Centre.[1] Neem Foundation staff are members of the team that established Nigeria's pioneer Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Programme who also run an extensive counselling-on-wheels programme in Maiduguri, to both mitigate and respond to the impact of Boko Haram on the community. Methodologically, this study takes seriously how power relations impact knowledge production on Africa generally, the visibility and impact of African scholarship and how this dynamic also translates to the visibility and impact of feminist scholarship on security studies specifically (Adegoke and Oni 2017; Medie and Kang 2018). Consequently, this paper draws on knowledge from below to contribute to a deeper conceptual and practical understanding of how gender analysis generally, and women's experiences specifically, can expand our understanding of the drivers of and responses to violent extremism in Nigeria. The pilot fieldwork was framed by feminist research ethics, which meant paying attention to what it means to do

research on this subject and with research participants implicated in Boko Haram, given the larger political and binary framing of the actors linked to insurgent groups and the impact of asymmetrical warfare (Borum 2011; Berntzen and Sandberg 2014).

We drew on qualitative research methods, specifically focus group discussions to identify the intersections between social norms, socio-economic status, gender roles, ethnicity and religion. Given that this study was informed by feminist research traditions, which seek to destabilise hegemonic and homogeneous categorisations of the social, focus group discussions facilitated a complex understanding of the social context and relationships (Okech 2013). Consequently, the analysis of the data is attentive to contradictions in beliefs, opinions, emotions and discursive relationships between individuals. The focus group discussions were conducted in Bakassi internally displaced people's (IDP) camp in Maiduguri, Northern Nigeria, with women associated with Boko Haram. I draw on reflections from six focus group discussions conducted with women formerly associated with Boko Haram, and community members in Maiduguri. In keeping with research ethics, the participants were anonymised, represented here through numbers and letters linked to different focus group clusters. We met a total of thirty-five people over four days. Of these, twenty-five were women associated with Boko Haram and ten were men community members.

I supported a team of Neem Foundation research assistants in designing the focus group discussion guide, provided training support and shadowed three focus group discussions, given language limitations. Shadowing, as a research methodology, can be described as 'observation on the move' (Czarniawska 2014:43). Shadowing is not limited to understanding the data collection and analyses only, but also offers insights into the research process, which informs how knowledge is produced through research (Cohen and Manion 1989). As a shadow researcher, I had a back-seat view of the process, in terms of observing the research assistants and the interactions between the research participants and their encounters with the research assistants. As an outsider, a Kenyan woman with a language barrier, I was aware that my presence could be a hindrance, therefor we devised a range of strategies to ensure that my presence was not a distraction. The methodological lessons from this process will be explored in a separate paper.

In going to the field grounded in reflexive research praxis, the research team was attentive to how research questions were framed, the environment of the focus group discussions and the importance of creating space for women to engage freely. These decisions were critical given the cultural

context that mediates interactions between women and men. However, the combination of cultural dynamics and insecurity impacted our ability to have a mixed gender team of research assistants who could speak the local language fluently. Consequently, the research assistants were all men, which affected the extent to which some conversations could be pursued. As a pilot study, lessons on the conditions of the research environment are critical to the design of future projects. We were also attentive to the psychosocial issues that might emerge when dealing with survivors of deeply traumatic experiences. In this regard, the partnership with Neem Foundation, a non-governmental organisation whose staff have twenty years of cumulative experience in psychological/ psychosocial support, as well as extensive training and experience in countering violent extremism and motivating community engagement as a direct response to insecurity in Nigeria, was key.

This qualitative pilot study contributes to understanding the experiences of women associated with Boko Haram. I use 'associate' rather than 'join' to highlight the complexity that informs why women align themselves with Boko Haram and the roles they play within the group. The analysis of the conversations with the interlocutors in the focus group discussions is informed by Mbembe's (2003) Necropolitics, which argues for an expansion of how we think about sovereignty, not in the political nation/ state sense, but as the exercise of control over mortality (death) and life (living) as a manifestation of power. Mbembe (2003) argues that sovereignty becomes about 'the generalised instrumentalisation of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations'. Part of this instrumentalisation is what I call the democratisation of violence through urban militias, private armies, insurgent groups such as Boko Haram, and state armies, who all claim the right to exercise violence or to kill. Consequently, according to Mbembe (2003), in a society where the possession and non-possession of weapons define one's social value, all social bonds are destroyed, thus normalising the 'idea that power can be acquired and exercised only at the price of another's life'.

In exercising sovereignty over life and death, one can argue that those who associate with the group are seeking to leverage the sovereignty offered by necropolitics in a context where powerlessness has characterised their lives. This power, as will be shown in the sections that follow, does not necessarily alter gender norms but relies on them to claim certain levers of access and authority that were hitherto unavailable in their 'normal' lives. In the sections that follow, I explore how gender is governed by unpacking women's motivation to join Boko Haram, their roles and how they are received on return into their communities. Governing gender is used as

a framework to examine the terms by which gender is constituted in the context of insurgency. I examine the regulatory forces that define gender relations within Boko Haram camps and therefore become central to systems of governing within the group. I also use governing gender to interpret how women, in particular, shape gender norms outside the modes of regulation by Boko Haram and the Nigerian state. Analytically, I use thematic analysis to make sense of the focus group discussions (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria

Maiduguri, the site of this qualitative study, can be described as the epicentre of Boko Haram attacks. As the capital city of Borno State, it joins Yobe, Kano, Bauchi and Kaduna in Northern Nigeria as one of the targets of the Boko Haram insurgency and therefore one of the most vulnerable. Since 2003, Boko Haram tactics across these states have included attacks on military barracks, police stations, raids on communities and abductions, largely of locals and some foreign nationals (Pillay 2018). The 2014 abduction of approximately 276 teenage girls from a boarding school in Chibok in Borno gained global attention. Cumulatively, these actions have led to loss of life, displacement of communities, states of emergency, closure of schools and overall insecurity in the region. Maiduguri has been hardest hit by Boko Haram's activities, and, as a result, the Bakassi camp hosts approximately 34,000 internally displaced people (UNOCHA 2020).

Pereira (nd) notes that discriminatory features of Nigeria's state processes and practices restrict the character of citizenship, thereby discriminating against women. The specificity of discrimination in Northern Nigeria was made palpable by the 2002 case against Amina Lawal. Amina Lawal was sentenced to death by stoning, by a Regional Court in Katsina State, Nigeria, for having a child outside marriage. Her sentence was announced on 23 March 2002, but subsequently withdrawn on 23 September 2003, in large part due to national and international advocacy by women's rights organisations. Pereira (2005) underscores the significance of history and politics in the interpretation of cultural practices, including practices integral to heterosexual culture. Lawal's case above is characteristic of a region where religious and cultural norms intersect to define women's status through social reproduction. Consequently, women's access to education and the formal labour market is restricted, and they do not own land or homes, which increases an overreliance on masculine patronage and, therefore, their vulnerability. These cultural, religious and legal inequalities, combined with poverty, have resulted in low school attendance and high rates of child marriage for women and girls (Imam, Biu and Yahi 2020).

A rapid gender assessment conducted by UN Women, Oxfam and Care in 2020 noted that over 80 per cent of internally displaced people (IDPs) in Northern Nigeria are in Borno State (the epicentre of the crisis) and 79 per cent of them are women and children (Unaegbu, Kimiri and Agada 2020). Vulnerability assessments show that women-headed households are at higher risk of sexual and physical violence, and are more likely to experience rape, sexual abuse and sexual exploitation, such as engaging in transactional sex with humanitarian aid workers, security forces and community members who have access to food, shelter or non-food items (Unaegbu et al. 2020). Northeast Nigeria is still shaped by patriarchal values in which religious and cultural beliefs appoint men as the head of the household, a relationship of power that extends to every facet of women's and girls' lives. The choices and experiences of the women engaged in this qualitative pilot study need to be understood within the context set out above. The section that follows sets out a broad framework for understanding Boko Haram in Nigeria, drawing on scholarship that expands a reading of why and how insurgent groups come to flourish.

In the last two decades, there has been a shift in how conflict and wars manifest. This is evident in a marked decrease in interstate conflicts, the increase of organised violence and the critical role of non-state actors in the emergence and sustainment of conflict and proxy wars, fought over the control of natural resources in sovereign territories. All these developments are profoundly gendered and are linked to the maintenance and or challenging of existing gender regimes that tend to privilege certain forms of femininities and masculinities. Globally, there is a confluence of factors at play. The first factor is the larger geopolitical question, which places state formation and the creation of stable states elsewhere in direct conversation with the sustainment of a global power axis that constructs a few powerful states as arbiters of global political order. The second factor is the privatisation of the state as a cumulative result of externally driven programmes, such as Structural Adjustment and its successor policies, which have foregrounded the advancement of neoliberal globalisation at the expense of a resolution of the vast structural inequalities in the countries where these programmes were implemented. Third, the management, governance structures and opponents in any given conflict involve multilayered local, national, regional and global institutions.

It is in this environment that groups such as Boko Haram emerge. Boko Haram is now understood to be a consequence of overlapping religious, historical and political histories and actors specific to Northern Nigeria. Hansen notes that rather than viewing Boko Haram as new, it is important to root the group in an ongoing history of Islamic phenomena in the region

(Hansen 2017). Declarations of jihad for the purposes of Islamic societal revolution have long been common in the region. Different forms of Islamic practice against the state, advocated by the dispossessed, began to develop based on the central demand for the establishment of a societal order founded on sharia law (Hansen 2017). Pertinent to Boko Haram's history is the normalisation of the denouncement of others as non-Muslims, which emerged in the 1970s. According to Paden, this practice of declaring others to be non-Muslim (takfir) began to be extended by some to anyone outside of their group (Paden 2005). It is also important to consider the intersection of colonial history and religiosity. Hansen (2017) and Musa (2010) note that the core driving force behind the denouncement of Western education in Boko Haram's messaging is inseparable from histories of imperialism in which Muslim knowledge production, literary histories and means of communication were disrupted.

The politicisation of religion is argued to be grounded in structural inequalities. Religion itself has been proven to have less impact on association with extremist groups than other structural issues that dominate lived experiences (Alao 2013; Bamidele 2016). Botha and Abdile (2019) extend this analysis by charting how the division between the Christian south and Muslim north of Nigeria is exacerbated by an environment in which Muslims are politically and economically marginalised. Hansen (2017) continues, noting that the rhetoric of 'evil' or terrorism fails to adequately capture Boko Haram as a logical consequence of the failures of the Nigerian state. The failure of the post-independence state to provide significant infrastructure for healthcare and education, especially in Northern Nigeria, demonstrates how semi-industrial capitalism and the legacies of colonialism have created ripe conditions for corruption, exploitation and extraction. Botha and Abdile (2019), Agbiboa (2014) and Hansen (2013) argue that far more than religious indoctrination, poverty, corruption, unemployment and the unequal distribution of wealth and opportunities were important contributing factors to people's decision to join the group. Boko Haram infuses religion into a history of grievances (Agbiboa 2014). By reframing 'terrorism' in terms of state neglect, a more nuanced picture of the sociopolitical landscape is made visible.

The evolution in the understanding of violent extremist groups such as Boko Haram, in scholarship, is not matched by the literature that engages gender and violent extremism (Giscard d'Estaing 2017). Women and girls are often depicted as solely affected by violence through abduction, rape and death (Gonzalez-Perez 2008). But the idea of violence generated by insurgent groups against women and girls has steadily been challenged by emerging studies. In a study on the gender-based violence perpetrated by

Boko Haram, Oriola (2017) notes that gender-based violence reflects how women are generally treated. The violence perpetuated by Boko Haram on women reflects ongoing and persistent patriarchal encounters within the region. Boko Haram's treatment of women, particularly in their abduction, exposes a deeper, more pervasive way in which women experience the world. Feminist security studies scholarship, complicates our understanding of the role that women play within insurgent groups, and the impact of their association with these groups by moving beyond their historical framing as unagentic, absent and apolitical (ICG 2016).

Associating With Boko Haram

Studies on gender and violent extremism point to how structural inequalities collide with recruitment into violent extremist groups (ICG 2016). Poverty, patriarchy, corruption and state responses (or the lack thereof) to socioeconomic dispossession are key contributory factors for women's association with insurgent groups like Boko Haram (Kessels, Durner and Schwartz 2016). As illustrated below, the discussions with women associated with Boko Haram point to poverty and broader economic inequalities as key drivers for their association with Boko Haram. I distinguish here between association based on coercion and force and association informed by an assessment of where positive outcomes lie. As I will illustrate in the sections that follow, these positive outcomes are shaped by a promise of economic freedom that is accessible to both women and men, which is at odds with a society that provides this option for men only. This is the first mode of governing gender relations deployed by Boko Haram, as the excerpts below illustrate.

> Participant A:[2] Because of the high rate of poverty and hunger during the time Boko Haram were active in our community, majority of goods and property of people had been destroyed by the armed group. That in turn made most of the women and girls become very vulnerable whilst Boko Haram were having abundant food, clothes, shelter, freedom etc. That also made women and girls think about joining Boko Haram and they eventually joined.

> Participant B: I feel that a lot of people, not just women, were very interested in the economic benefits that the group provided at the time; because many people felt that they were going to gain in terms of monetary benefits. Let us not forget that at a time the group were offering financial loans to people. I feel this must have influenced many to join.

> Participant C: Most women that join Boko Haram from the Gwoza community joined for economic benefits. They were lured, brainwashed and radicalised. They voluntarily followed Boko Haram members to Sambisa

> Forest. Those women saw that Boko Haram members had money and were very generous at the time. They lured women with food and money so much so that many women in the community wanted to get married to Boko Haram men.

However, all the participants above also highlight how Boko Haram's tactics create the conditions for economic distress, through the destruction of property, frequency of attacks that lead to curfews and the eventuality of a depressed economy. Participants B and C specifically note the connection between causing economic distress and promising economic benefits as a tactic pursued by Boko Haram, which therefore becomes a mobilisation tactic. The research participants' views above connect structural inequalities to the vulnerability of communities to Boko Haram, an observation that is picked up in a range of studies, including those analysing the entry of Al Shabaab in Kenya (Badurdeen 2018a; Okech 2018). Like Al Shabaab, Boko Haram's choice of Maiduguri is linked to the geography and historical under-investment in the region by successive governments, as was pointed out earlier in this paper. Consequently, limited economic opportunities make both men and women more vulnerable to choices based on survival.

The conservative nature of the region, shaped by the nexus of gender, class, religion and culture, means that women tend to have limited economic opportunities. This is tied to the reliance on gender stereotypes that see their role as limited to social reproduction—motherhood, wifehood and, therefore, household. This specific vulnerability attached to women creates a desire for economic independence that is utilised by Boko Haram as a recruitment strategy. While this can be read as a gendered vulnerability, it can also be understood as an illustration of how the gender norms governing the society are outwardly challenged by a group whose key interest is in mobilising labour towards its cause. The promise of greater economic freedom therefore becomes an opportunity that women seize.

Additionally, Boko Haram's tactical use of violence in a society where the state is viewed as being on the backfoot of a ragtag group, creates political value for Boko Haram. The group's ability to exercise power over those who live—those who associate with the group—and those who 'die'—who are displaced and consequently die socially—normalises the 'idea that power can be acquired and exercised only at the price of another's life' (Mbembe 2003:11–12). Beyond the economic conditions, the power over life—necropolitics—is a key factor that shapes association with Boko Haram. The choice to associate with a group that is constructed as and appears to be more powerful than the state, due to its ability to take life, is an association with a source of power, as the excerpts below point to.

Participant D: My husband was killed by Boko Haram and I followed my father to live with him under Boko Haram due to fear of soldiers. They wanted to kill my father because one of the Boko Haram members married his daughter.

Participant E: Boko Haram used money and flashy items to influence women and children to join them. They even had more guns than the military. They had a fleet of cars that they used to raid communities and villages, which led them to think Boko Haram was more powerful than the army.

Participant F: In the beginning of the insurgency, the group came into our community and portrayed themselves as Islamic religious scholars; they preached and empowered community members. The group was not violent at this point, which was why it was easy to brainwash the community members to join their cause. When the group later became violent, the community members started to flee from Gwoza.

Participant G: Boko Haram is a religious group that forces their beliefs on people. They forcibly recruit members. Anyone that fails to join gets killed; however, they do not harm women because they are mothers.

It is equally evident from the above that the monopoly of violence exercised by Boko Haram is a tactical tool used to govern gender. The decision to abduct rather than exercise other forms of physical abuse implies the use of violence as a mediating force for gender relations. Women and girls are mobilised for their social reproduction capacities and, as illustrated in the sections below, the gender stereotypes about women's roles serve a larger political purpose for those who are politically aligned to the group.

In the sections that follow, I observe that Boko Haram does not radically alter gender dynamics in the way in which it treats women within the camps. There is a patriarchal continuity in the expectation that women will play domestic roles. However, a range of power hierarchies emerge that are linked to how different women and girls arrive in the camps and their links with key men members of Boko Haram. It is these power hierarchies that illustrate how gender is governed within Boko Haram 'territory' and how positive outcomes for women associated with Boko Haram should be viewed in relation to how gender is governed in society generally.

Reclaiming Agency

A binary approach to understanding power relations is well explored in feminist scholarship, showing that powerlessness is not a useful way to understand women's experiences (Amadiume 1997; Lazreg 1994). Women are not homogenous, which means that various factors such as class, age and reproductive capacity intervene to shape the power that different

women will hold in any context (Pereira nd). Hierarchies of power and powerlessness therefore become the lens through which I view the roles that the women associated with Boko Haram play. In examining these roles, it is critical to retain a focus on the minor structural shifts in the conditions of women who in their societies are considered second-class citizens.

> Participant 1: In my opinion, some of the people including young women join the group to get power. This makes them feel they have a purpose. Because many people who were nothing suddenly had domestic workers for chores and many men obeying them as wives of top figures in the group.

> Participant 2: Let's not forget that some women had important roles in the camp, others served as recruiters and even were trained to preach these ideologies to other women to make it as appealing as possible. These women who are part of this group go further to convince their relatives especially their husbands to join Boko Haram. It depends what kind of role you can play, sometimes some were informants within and outside the camp.

> Participant 3: Women are also used in the combat field more often than before as they commit suicide while attacking/targeting security personnel, community members particularly in very crowded areas. Most are young individuals who are selected for this cause from the beginning of indoctrination, and they include women because they are less suspicious in crowds.

> Participant 4: The women and girls who willingly join the group were kept in a separate place called Parisu, they were enjoying their life very comfortably and they were very happy to be part of Boko Haram. Most of them had the role of service especially cooking roles as the most common work the women did there. When their men return from combat against the armed forces, they will hail their husbands as heroes and support them.

The four participants above draw attention to the hierarchies of power that shape women's roles within Boko Haram and how they establish access to power that most of these women did not have prior to being associated with the group. The first hierarchy is raised by participants two and three, who highlight the recruitment role that women who join Boko Haram willingly play. This is an important subversion of how women are understood as political actors because it points to women as conveyors of political beliefs and ideologies to secure more members. The task of recruitment should not be constructed as a simple task of translating an organisation's view. It indicates an internalisation of the political beliefs to undertake their task effectively.

In addition, a second layer of power lies in the recruitment of family members who are not part of the group. This also illustrates the agency that these women have exercised in leaving husbands and extended families behind to pursue what they construe as better living conditions for themselves.

The third layer of power explored by participant two is the role of women as informants. The fact that women have historically been viewed as good spies in conflicts and world wars is well established (see Amrane-Minne and Abu-Haidar 1999; Higonnet, Jenson, Michel and Weitz 1987). Women's ability to do this work well is based on gender stereotypes of women as apolitical, not threatening and generally invisible, thus making it easier for them to gather information. The reliance on gender stereotypes of women as temptresses, lovers or harmless people is a route that Boko Haram uses to subvert societal governing principles of gender to their advantage. When women's invisibility is enhanced by cultural and religious norms, mobilising these stereotypes as an asset illustrates how Boko Haram uses gender to govern its relationship with women recruits and expand its networks.

Participants one and four draw attention to gender hierarchies that are connected to how patriarchal structures distribute power amongst women. The class differences play out here in relation to who has access to workers and who performs which domestic tasks. These roles are often linked to specific women's proximity to masculine power, such as leaders and or fighters within Boko Haram. This proximity to masculine power offers them privileges, such as domestic support and authority to oversee other women. The importance of this power lies in the fact that these are privileges these women did not enjoy in their communities. Women who join Boko Haram, whether willingly or not, come from lower socioeconomic strata. For them, access to domestic help in the household is a privilege often available only to families with greater economic mobility and social capital, which allows them to either pay for labour or mobilise the free labour of younger relatives.

The power hierarchies above, when framed as part of the broader logics of violence that inform Boko Haram, are therefore not only gendered but also draw a direct link to necropolitics, which has created a divide between those who are protected because they are armed and those who are not. The power that women derive from being associated with those who can exercise sovereignty over life points to a broader layer of power associated with greater societal outcomes, particularly where violence has been democratised due to asymmetrical violence. This broader sociopolitical power that women acquire is connected to necropolitics and is a critical point to bear in mind later in this paper, when reintegration for returnees and community responses are examined.

Governing Gender

Access to economic power and its attendant privileges has been illustrated as a core driver for women choosing to be associated with Boko Haram. The allure of these privileges is reinforced by a cultural environment that does not provide these rewards, particularly for women who do not have class privilege. As illustrated above, hierarchies of power across women are made visible by economic mobility, proximity to masculine power within the Boko Haram structures and the nature of political tasks they take on within the organisation. Undergirding their decisions are basic survival concerns such as access to food as well as the power privileges within the camps. If access to and benefiting from new power and privileges frames some women's encounters in the 'bush', how do they navigate their return to communities that remain socioculturally unchanged and their relocation to a transient and economically unstable environment—the IDP camp?

> Participant K (community member): Their families were considered associated with the group, so they were stigmatised.
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> Participant L (community member): The men are not easily accepted back; they are treated with suspicion. Just recently more than fifty men were brought into the Bakassi camp from the 'Operation Safe Corridor'. Unfortunately they were rejected by the communities because they were still considered to be associated with Boko Haram.
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> Participant M (community member): The security is getting worse, and most people here are not ready to accept them back, we are hurt, we are also scared, and we just want to move on.
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> Participant N (community member): At the moment people are not ready to accept those who have returned because they are still considered Boko Haram members. They are likely to accept women and girls more easily.
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> Participant O (community member): I think we have established there are mixed feeling, mostly women and girls can be easily accepted although not entirely the case but they have high possibility of acceptance than that of male counterparts.

The excerpts above from the focus group discussion with men community members point to stigma and exclusion as a central narrative that shapes how women and men associated with Boko Haram experience their return to their communities. Men are considered more dangerous than women and this is clear from participants six, eight and nine. The fear associated with Boko Haram as a group that has terrorised the community extends to those who are seen as having willingly joined the group, as well as to their families.

Two of Mbembe's ideas are worth drawing on here to understand the stigma and loss experienced by returnees and community members who were displaced by Boko Haram. The first idea is the conceptualisation of triple loss—the loss of a 'home', loss of rights over the body and loss of political status that leads to social death (Mbembe 2003:21). The community members above who are now displaced and living in an IDP camp are faced with multiple losses that are directly attributed to Boko Haram.

The loss and social death described by Mbembe (2003) offers a broader framing of the roots of the stigma targeted at returnees, which is not simply about association with the group and the threat that returnees may pose but is linked to their current social conditions of undignified life aptly captured by participant M. However, social death is shared. Returnees do not necessarily experience greater privilege, since the losses experienced by communities are similar to those that the returnees negotiate, as I will explore below.

The rest of the participants' perceptions and views on risk related to men and women returnees are best understood through Mbembe's second idea (2003:12), which is the articulation of the relation between the state of exception created by violent extremism (curfews, displacement) and a relation of enmity that becomes the norm due to the right to kill and sovereignty over life exercised by Boko Haram as a direct result of necropolitics. In essence, whose lives are worth saving and why frames the stigma experienced by women returnees, as illustrated below. Returnees who 'chose' to associate with Boko Haram are constructed as people's whose lives, and therefore wellbeing, hold greater value than those who remained 'socially dead', and this underpins the hostility and stigma they encounter.

> Participant 10: Initially we face a lot of stigmatisation and verbal attacks. People in the camp call us names like bomb makers and all that. Initially, people were sceptical about our presence in the camp, to the extent that they do not sleep at night because of fear. There was no trust, even our friends and relatives who should show love, concern and accommodate us were not forthcoming, and that was how bad it was. But things have changed a little though, not completely because even now, I am suffering from trauma mainly due to attacks from the camp community. Sometimes when such abuses coincide with my children's offences, it affects my blood pressure and makes me sick for some days.

> Participant 11: People who were associated with armed groups go through difficulty from their families and relatives. They are stigmatised and ostracised from their community because their families called them killers and kept a distance from them. Some people will even threaten to take revenge for things that happened to their loved ones, though they were warned not to

but to clean them off from their previous sins and shelve them from hell fire in the life hereafter. People who have grievances with them will refrain from taking retribution and this is what makes the returnees move away from their families to a place they are not known.

Mbembe's (2003:40) 'death-worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead' best captures what women associated with Boko Haram encounter on their return. There is a contradictory convergence of interests between Boko Haram's production of large-scale death and disruption of life and the state's response through the sequestering of populations in IDP camps contributing to social death. IDP camps therefore become a space of governing unwanted women where the risk they pose to society can be effectively controlled through re-integration processes that simply write them back into existing gender norms.

In a context where ostracisation and powerlessness—economic, social and cultural—characterises their return, what should government strategies to rehabilitate and reintegrate women associated with Boko Haram look like? How can their sovereignty be renegotiated within a state that has failed them? If a return to the 'bush' is considered problematic given the violence wrought by Boko Haram, how can reintegration strategies reduce the attractiveness of the 'bush' due to the autonomy and sovereignty provided therein? Can the modalities of governing gender in society be fundamentally rewritten due to violent extremism?

Concluding Notes

The Nigerian government's integration strategies have largely assumed a return to normalcy by integrating women into a life they had prior to their association with Boko Haram. Government strategies include providing women returnees with economic opportunities for survival. This economic focus is viewed by community members as being disproportionately aimed at people who contributed to the suspended, undignified life they have to live within the IDP camp. In essence, those who suffered do not receive special treatment but are ranked on par with those they see as having caused harm. The notion of favouritism emerged as a common thread in discussions with community members who now live in IDP camps. The stigma therefore is not simply due to a fear of terror as described in the focus group excerpts above, but to a sense of having been let down by the government.

It is evident that these responses are not responsive to the gender disruption in the 'bush', which women returned often viewed as positive (see CDD nd). In addition, civil society interventions, such as psychosocial

and economic support, cannot effectively broker a return from the social death experienced by women associated with Boko Haram (CDD nd). Within the community, men in particular view 'marriageability' as an effective indicator of a return from social death. In essence, the fact that men feel comfortable considering marrying women associated with Boko Haram indicates that they are accepted in the community. However, it follows that women who exercised a fair amount of agency in the 'bush' do not necessarily view a return to subjugation as an equitable negotiated settlement for their integration.

This pilot study echoes findings from an International Crisis Group report on Northern Nigeria and mirrors findings from the Horn of Africa in connection to Al Shabaab (ICG 2016; Badurdeen 2018a and b). However, there are two recommendations that I would like to make that are derived from the theoretical framework adopted for this study, which do not necessarily surface in existing work on Northern Nigeria and women associated with armed groups. The first concerns government and civil society interventions. It is evident that a response to reintegrating women returnees has to address the sociocultural context that they return to. The patriarchal conditions that shape the attractiveness of Boko Haram camps create pull factors that drive women associated with armed groups back into the camps or away from the community. The fact that there is a public perception that women's integration is easier than men's does not address the loss of power that women returnees encounter. Marriageability as integration misses the fundamental power fracture occasioned by being in the 'bush' and navigating multiple 'positive' power hierarchies, as articulated by the focus group participants. In addition, providing economic opportunities that are still reliant on a gendered division of labour does not address the situation of 'social death' as articulated by Mbembe. In essence, there is a question here about the reconfiguration of gender power relations, not necessarily gender dynamics, that is missed in ongoing interventions.

Finally, the focus group participants point to their role in indoctrination and recruitment. Integration and deradicalisation programmes directed at people who have played the above roles in insurgent groups seek to shift the ideological base rather than recognise the outcomes derived from these roles, which are not always connected to belief systems. These outcomes are connected, in the case of these women, to accessing power and benefiting from relationships to power based on the roles they perform. Deradicalisation efforts that do not engage with the outcomes derived from doing this work means that the women who are the focus of this paper see the 'bush' as a better option, given the power

outcomes derived from this association. This recommendation speaks to the patriarchal dividends alluded to in recommendation one and the absence of a rewarding economic base that deals with the economic conditions that led to the women's association with Boko Haram.

Notes

1. My fieldwork was made possible by a seedcorn grant from SOAS.
2. The differences in numbers and letters linked to participants denote focus group clusters.

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