

**GENDER AS A DRIVER OF CONTEMPORARY VIOLENT EXTREMISM: FOCUS
ON BOKO HARAM AND RELATED ISLAMIC JIHADI GROUPS IN NIGERIA**

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Abstract

Nigeria's Boko Haram has, according to a United Nations department, helped to shape the definition of what constitutes violent extremism today. The dynamics of identity and ideology fuel Northern Nigeria's Islamic extremism, and gender is instrumental in recruitment, radicalization and participation in these movements and their activities. Certainly, there are a multiplicity of both push and pull factors which drive extremism in the structural context of Northern Nigeria's society, including socio-economic poverty, poor governance, illiteracy, political ideologies, as well as a history of prolonged and unresolved conflicts. In examining the drivers of violent extremism in this context, it is necessary, and indeed critical, to consider not only the structural socio-economic conditions, but also the dynamics of religious identity and ideology played in the field of politics, and within that interplay, to consider the religious rhetoric which defines and shapes gender relations at national and local levels. Similarly, gender is a necessary factor in policy making and implementation approaches which attempt to prevent and to counter terrorism in this region. There is need for greater recognition of the fact that both men and women are perpetrators and victims of extremist violence, and that men and women experience this violence differently. Equally, there is need for both perspectives to be heard, including their experience and their suggested pathways, for countering the spread of such violence.

Keywords: Gender, Women, Violent Extremism, Boko Haram, Nigeria

Introduction

Boko Haram and its splinter jihadi movements, prevalent in Northern Nigeria today, have greatly destabilized an already tottering nation which is identified as “a new global hotspot for jihadist activity” (EPRS 2021:1). Nigeria, where religion and politics are firmly intertwined, was until recently ranked “the poverty capital of the world” (Oluwole 2022) and is high on the list of the world's most violent countries (World Population Review 2023). Nigeria also ranks 123 out of 146 countries in the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index (WEF 2022), with patriarchal norms and gender roles deeply embedded and perpetuated by both culture and religion (Okenyodo, 2016:100).

This paper examines how the dynamics of identity and ideology fuel Northern Nigeria's Islamic extremism, and how gender is instrumental in recruitment, radicalization and participation in these movements and their activities. It also examines how gender is a factor in policy making and implementation approaches which attempt to counter terrorism in this region and looks at how women's

leadership might help to resist and prevent extremist ideologies and the violence they sanction.

Violent Extremism and its ‘drivers’ in Northern Nigeria

“There is no universally agreed definition” (UNODC 2018b) of the complex phenomenon which is termed violent extremism. However, in its P/CVE Policy Framework, the Nigerian Government has defined it “as the beliefs and actions of persons who support, promote or use ideologically motivated violence to achieve social-economic, political, ethnic and religious objectives” (Federal Government of Nigeria 2017: 14). Nigeria’s Boko Haram has, according to a United Nations department, helped to shape the definition of what constitutes violent extremism, through its spread of “messages of hate and violence as well as religious, cultural and social intolerance” (UNODC 2018b).

Boko Haram emerged in 2002 in North-Eastern Nigeria, primarily as a proselytist (dawah) movement. Its proper name, *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad* means 'People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad'. In 2009, it became more radical, violent and prominent, adopting “the tactics of global Salafi jihadist groups” (Mohammed 2014:9), “driven by a desire for vengeance against the state and western related institutions” (Barkindo et al 2013:14). Boko Haram pledged allegiance to ISIL in March 2015 and thus became the *Islamic State West Africa Province* (ISWAP). ISWAP separated from Boko Haram in 2016 and thus the two groups continue active today (EPRS 2021: 5; GTI 2020: 103). Another splinter faction emerged in 2012, Ansaru, first called ‘Al-Qaeda in the Lands Beyond the Sahel’, and whose Arabic name now is *Jamā'atu Anṣārīl Muslimīna fī Bilādīs Sūdān* - 'Vanguards for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa' (Mohammed 2014: 30). “Ansaru is especially active in Nigeria’s North-West and North-Central zones... At the start of 2022, Ansaru reconfirmed its allegiance to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)” (ISS: 2022). Each of these ultra-salafī radical jihadi movements continue to attack each other as well as other targets, causing countless deaths, destruction and general insecurity and fear. Certainly, as elsewhere, there are a multiplicity of both *push* and *pull* factors which drive this extremism.

Socio-economic poverty and poor governance are prevalent in Nigeria, with Northern Nigeria suffering the highest levels of poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, lack of opportunities, and poor governance. Northern Nigeria has also endured prolonged and unresolved conflicts between the majority Hausa/Fulani (Muslim) ethnic groups and the many other minority ethnic groups (Christian) who originate from and/or inhabit the Northern states. Socio-economic development is hampered due to corrupt governance and incessant conflicts, and to the use of religious arguments to justify certain traditions such as the *almajirai* system which allows thousands of young boys to wander the streets as beggars (cf. Edinyang et al 2020), or girl marriage and polygamous households which ensure high levels of female poverty and illiteracy. These can be considered some of the *push* factors within the structural context of the society from which today’s jihadi extremism emerges.

According to the UNODC, *pull* factors can include “collective grievances and victimization stemming from domination ... distortion and misuse of beliefs, political ideologies and ethnic and cultural differences” (UNODC 2018a). Since Independence

in 1960, there has been in Northern Nigeria an ongoing Islamic radicalization nurturing a sense of being marginalised as Muslims within the secular state. Radical Islamic movements have continuously emerged, seeking to further a political Islamist agenda. For example, the Izala Movement, born in the 1980s, otherwise known as *Jama'atu Izalatul Bid'a wa Ikamatu Sunna* (The Society for the Removal of Innovation and the Establishment of the Sunna), was a form of Salafi Islam which condemned what it considered the innovations and apostasies of most Muslims in Northern Nigeria. It began as an insurgent movement, was repressed, but has since been revived with a change in tactic and is today hugely influential among the Muslim elite and political leaders of Northern Nigeria as well as among women and youth groups. The Izala movement encourages female subordination and seclusion, but it also advocates for women's education, both Quranic and Western. It is from Izala, now considered by many Nigerian Muslim scholars as 'mainstream Salafism', or as 'Peaceful Salafism', that today's violent jihadi movements have emerged (Tarhbalouti 2019; Amara 2013).

Some scholars would claim that violent extremism is a "highly gendered" activity (Ndung'u & Shadung: 2017; Dharmapuri: 2016) and indeed gender can be considered under the umbrella of both push and pull factors for violent extremism in Northern Nigeria. Gender relations formed an important part of the reform which Uthman d'an Fodiyo called for during his jihad which led to the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate that ruled for one hundred years over the area now encompassing Northern Nigeria (McGarvey 2009: 90-96). Once the British conquered the Caliphate in the early 1900s and formed the country which is now Nigeria in 1914, an agreed policy of Indirect Rule allowed the Emirate system to continue; during colonial years dan Fodiyo's interpretation of gender relations, including the system of female seclusion, increased (McGarvey 2009:101-104). In 1976 the Muslim Sisters Organization was established and from this, in 1985, came the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN). Both of these organizations serve to give Muslim women, particularly their leaders, a strong foothold with Muslim politicians and through them they seek to give voice to women's concerns, and promote the education, empowerment and rights of women. They do so within an Islamic framework, finding in Islam an ally for their 'feminist' consciousness (cf. McGarvey 2009: 163-199).

The debate around the place of Shari'a law within the Nigerian constitution has continuously raised its head (Kukah 1993: 115-144; McGarvey 2009: 89-142). In 1999, following a return to democratic rule after years of military dictatorship, twelve Northern State governors announced its extended implementation as the legal and administrative system in their jurisdiction. Loud in this debate were issues surrounding gender relations, with restrictions on women's movements and the sentencing to lashing and stoning of pregnant unmarried girls and women. Through various women's rights NGO's, justice was sought in shari'a courts, within an Islamic framework, referring solely to Islamic law. FOWMAN, at first critical of these NGOs, has since used this same strategy in their Shari'a project (launched in 2004) to promote Muslim women's rights (McGarvey 2009:199-214). This debate and the notion of promoting human, including women's, rights within the shari'a, in line with international human rights norms, in a secular pluri-religious democratic society as Nigeria pertains to be, continues to be hugely problematic (Kendhammer 2013). Due to the continued abuse of women's rights in many households and communities, it is

not surprising that issues around gender are also of great significance in the emergence and splintering of Nigeria's Islamic jihadi movements.

Thus, as we examine the drivers of violent extremism in this context, it is necessary, and indeed critical, to consider not only the structural socio-economic conditions, but also the dynamics of religious identity and ideology played in the field of politics, and within that interplay, to consider the religious rhetoric which defines and shapes gender relations at national and local levels.

Gender as instrumental in recruitment, radicalization and participation in Nigeria's jihadi movements and their activities

From its emergence in 2002, much attention was given to women in Boko Haram's rhetoric and actions, calling for restrictions on women in some areas of life while also promoting their access to Islamic education and financial empowerment (ICG 2016: i). While Izala, FOMWAN, and other groups advocate for women's economic empowerment and education, the fact is that such opportunities are denied the majority of girls and women in Northern Nigeria. Thus, Boko Haram in its initial stages appealed to women because it gave them the opportunity to study the Quran and Arabic; it encouraged marriage within the movement and offered financial assistance; it emphasised respect for the female body as correct adherence to Islam and encouraged full niqab; it initially allowed women to attend the mosque (ICG 2016: 5-6). According to Reports, the year 2013, following Boko Haram's becoming a more violent insurgency, "marked a significant evolution in its tactics, in which one of the main features is the instrumental use of women" (Zenn & Pearson 2014:47), the extensive targeting of Christian women (cf. Barkindo et al 2013), and the inclusion of women in its operations (cf. ICG 2016; Zenn & Pearson 2014). It began to recruit women "with a mixture of coercion and incentives" (ICG 2016:6).

The world has heard of the kidnapping of the Chibok girls from a boarding school. There are many other reports of women and girls kidnapped, forced to marry with compulsory conversion to Islam, rape, physical abuse of female Christian students for not covering their heads or wearing provocative clothing, and so on. A study on the targeting of Christian women and girls by Boko Haram refers to the ideological and doctrinal justification for this particular tactic, primarily that Christian women are "the weakest members of an infidel cast" (Barkindo et al 2013:14; see also Zenn & Pearson 2014: 49-50). Women are also used as "symbols of revenge" (Botha 2021: 269) and as "bargaining chips with the Nigerian government" (Bloom & Matfess 2016: 109), such as where Christian women and girls are abducted in retaliation for the governments imprisonment of the wives and daughters of Boko Haram members (Bloom & Matfess 2016: 112; Barkindo et al 2013:16).

Females are required in Boko Haram to satisfy male fighters, ensure the production of future generations of jihadists, maintain order and carry out domestic duties in the camps. In Boko Haram, women also play "an increasingly important role in the tactical operations" (Bloom & Matfess 2016:108): they carry weapons to and for the insurgents, help carry out attacks, abductions and slaughters, and basically are involved in all operations except in leadership. A huge increase in the number of Boko Haram female suicide bombers has been noted in all research conducted in recent years (Ejiofor 2022; Botha 2021). Some females do this willingly, while many,

in diverse ways, “have been robbed of their autonomy to make that choice” (Bloom & Matfess 2016: 111). There have also been cases of men disguised as women, presumably because women tend to be less easily searched or suspected, and “mirrors a pattern seen in adaptive responses of other terrorist organisations in times of unique pressure on men” (Zenn & Pearson 2014: 48).

“[T]he debate over women’s proper role in society is “a contentious battleground in the debate between Salafi groups in Northern Nigeria” (Bloom & Matfess 2016: 116) and “the symbolism of female-led attacks has been a means by which Boko Haram has distinguished itself from similar movements and local rivals” (ibid: 108-109; see also Botha 2021: 269). A very significant difference between the Boko Haram and ISWAP movement, noted by the Tony Blair Institute for Social Change (Bryson & Bukarti 2018), is that “The former relies heavily on female operatives, while the latter repudiates the entire principle. Each side gives a contrasting theological justification for its position” (Bryson & Bukarti 2018:3). ISWAP believes women should be “kept at home” (ibid. 10) and looked after while Boko Haram insists there “are situations in which women are allowed to engage in acts of violence” (ibid. 10).

Why women would willingly join Boko Haram is a big question with many answers. Some researchers would suggest there is not “any significant gender difference in the motivating factors for joining violent extremist groups “(Okenyodo 2016:103). Others see the need to consider the social, economic and political avenues which more specifically lead women and girls to join (cf. Botha 2021: 266 – 268). Certainly, in Northern Nigeria, poverty is rampant, and women, largely uneducated, are dependent economically and otherwise on their husbands for their own livelihood and that of their children. It is not altogether surprising that some would choose to join a movement such as Boko Haram. Others are coerced by their family members, some are homeless beggars who have been displaced and are easy to recruit, some are lured by a little money, some impregnated through rape are shunned by their own communities and hence feel compelled to join the group, some have been married to slain or arrested members of the group and want to take revenge on behalf of their husband, and some have been radicalised and freely accept and support the Salafi ideology of the group (cf Bloom & Matfess 2016: 111; ICG 2016; Ejiofor 2022). Oluwaniyi notes the “intersection of the push and pull [motivating] factors for women’s recruitment” (2021: 459) which explain “why women are victims and perpetrators in terrorist activities (ibid: 457). As Temitope Ola elaborates on very well, the four models which can categorize why women join such movements, that is coerced, revolutionary, delinquent, and women clientelism models, are all applicable in this context (Ola 2020).

Gender as a factor in approaches to prevent or counter extremist violence in this region

The primary response of the Nigerian government to the threat posed by the violent extremism has been force, mainly through the military and security agencies, including a Civilian Joint Task Force which was established to assist the military in 2012. Due to the brutality of all these agencies, local communities feel more protected by the jihadi groups, thus leading to their strengthening rather than weakening (Onuoha 2014:175-176; Botha 2021). Other initiatives to counter and prevent extremist violence have been initiated by the government, including its DDR

Programme, Operation Safe Corridor, but most of these have been found greatly lacking.

Women and girls who were rescued or who fled the extremist groups reported to suffering further abuse and inhumane conditions in military barracks and camps for displaced persons (ICG 2019). Women who leave the extremist groups, freely or due to being rescued, often find themselves ostracized by the families and communities, and thus prefer to re-join both for personal as well as social and economic reasons (Moaveni 2019; Botha 2021: 271). Sven Botha, describes this as a “participatory cycle of violence”, where women and girls are first induced to join, then become victims or enablers of violence, then fleeing Boko Haram they find one hell replaced by another, and finally they reintegrate into Boko Haram due to social isolation and economic hardship (Botha 2021: 272).

The sincerity of the government to combat Boko Haram is often questioned and it is queried whether some of the deradicalization programmes are in fact used as centres to continue radicalization, since most participants in these programmes returned to join Boko Haram (Botha 2021: 270; see also ICG 2019 and GTI 2020). For example, Aisha Wakil, known as Mama Boko Haram, supposedly a peace negotiator, was recently convicted of conspiracy and fraud (dnbstories – online).

Scholars and analysts point out the importance “of critically reflecting on the gendered practices that guide the governance of terrorism and violent extremism” (Rothermel & Shepherd 2022: 530). UN Security Council Resolution 2242, adopted in 2015, outlines expectations and provisions towards “a gender perspective, and a concern for women’s rights in” (ibid. 525) government efforts to counter violent extremism. Possibly as a way of showing regard to this resolution, in its 2017 P/CVE Framework and National Action Plan the Nigerian Government acknowledged the strategic role women can “play in the treatment, rehabilitation and reintegration of violent extremist offenders” (Federal Republic of Nigeria 2017: 18). It refers to their ‘emotive role’ as mothers to change the violent behaviour of their children who might be extremist offenders, and to their role in the home and community to pick up early signs of radicalisation and to transmit counter-messages to break this “cycle of radicalisation” (ibid). Thus, funds were given to various NGOs to give income generating and other empowerment programmes to women in various northern states, such as the ‘Mothers School for Prevention of Violent Extremism’ organised by the Women’s Interfaith Council in Kaduna in July 2017 (McGarvey 2022: 107 – 108; see also Botha 2021: 274). These initiatives are no doubt invaluable, but many more are required.

Recommendations are made by analysts and scholars on how to better counter and prevent Northern Nigeria’s extremist violence through a more gendered lens. Primary among these are acknowledging that women are not only victims but are also perpetrators of violence. To counter this violence there is need for greater recognition of the fact that men and women experience this violence differently and thus there is need for both perspectives to be heard, including their experience and their suggested pathways for countering the spread of such violence. Analysts also suggest a greater inclusion of women in “intelligence gathering” (Nwangwu et al 2021) for more effective “prevention of violent extremism” (ibid: 14), in appreciation of the knowledge women have within “their homes, families and communities” (ibid: 13).

Such knowledge includes women's awareness as well as experiences of "grievances, marginalization, corruption and ideologies that may contribute to self-radicalization or recruitment" (ibid: 2) not only of women but also of young people and indeed the wider community. Also noted is the need to "strengthen the place of gender-sensitive religious leaders and scholars" (Botha 2021: 278). It has been reported that FOMWAN has engaged imams involved in the DDR programmes on preaching on the rights of women (Dahir 2020:42). Given the continued radicalization that has taken place within DDR related camps, the appointment of some of these religious teachers is indeed ambiguous.

Conclusion

The strength of FOMWAM and other Muslim women's organizations which were so instrumental in promoting women's rights within an Islamic framework during the shari'a debate, has been weakened due to the emergence of these extremist salafi jihadi groups. This is primarily because it is the Muslim community itself which is divided (Tarhbalouti 2019; Kukah 2022: 43-83; Igboin 2022). In this delicate situation where nobody knows where another might lean and aware that political, security and other social agencies contain many sympathizers and sponsors of these extremist groups, it is more difficult to recruit allies who will endorse readings of Islam which are more favourable to gender quality (cf. Kendhammer 2013).

As they did during the shari'a debate, FOMWAN in collaboration with other NGOs and interfaith groups, can combine the propagation of Islam with gender sensitive Islamic scholars, and other collaborators, to help change the gender dynamic in communities where violent extremism is still rampant. They can be more engaged in designing rehabilitation and reintegration programmes at a local level, in mobilising support for the DDR processes, in promoting reconciliation and dialogue, and in helping to reduce stigma. They can be more engaged in the dissemination of positive religious messaging, in promoting non-violence, and in providing education and mentoring to women and girl returnees, and they can lead the way in welcoming returnees back into the communities (Dahir 2020: 44-46).

FOMWAN as well as other Muslim women's, interfaith, and women's NGOs, are best placed to address the issue of gender as a driver in Northern Nigeria's violent extremism. They must do so within the parameters of the patriarchal culture and the religious sensitivities of this society. They will have to navigate carefully and astutely if they so choose and if they have the courage and conviction to do so.

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