

Cross-National Trends in Female Terrorism in West Africa

Mfon U. Ekpootu

Department of History and Diplomatic Studies, University of Port Harcourt
Rivers State, Nigeria
mekpootu@yahoo.co.uk

ABSTRACT: The sensationalism of women blowing themselves up helped to galvanize interest in female members of terrorist organizations and spurred a myriad of studies on female terrorism. In spite of the abundance of literature, there is however a lack of cumulative development, a follow-up of the previous trend. This multiplicity of approaches and disciplines ‘results in the juxtaposition of competing hypotheses with no comparison across and between findings. Several gaps are discernible here that prompt further epistemological forays into female terrorism. This research attempts to fill this gap, by examining female terrorism across West Africa, investigating motives, roles played, and intersections of class, religion and ethnicity. Scholarly attention towards these questions will help create a comprehensive strategy for policy implementation in the fight against terrorism

KEYWORD: Women, terrorism, West Africa, Boko Haram, ISWAP

NIGERIA

Originating in Nigeria in 2009 - the Boko Haram jihadist insurgency has destabilised the country’s North East. Despite proactive measures taken to quell the insurgency, results have been rather slow. According to Babatunde (2018:382) The name Boko Haram which means “Western education is forbidden” in the Hausa language is a home-grown terrorist group in Nigeria, contrary to some media speculations. He adds that, ‘what makes this radical Islamic organization in Nigeria to stand out is not just its mode of recruitment, but also its ability to involve all categories of the society. Male and female, rich and poor, young and old, as well as the employed and unemployed, have been recruited through teaching, preaching, propaganda, inducement, abduction, coercion and foreign support’.

The peculiarities in the ways and methods in which Boko Haram have enlisted this wide range of people, cutting across class, ethnicity and even religion through conversion has made it the most ferocious terrorist group ever to have unleashed coordinated and widespread terrorist attacks and bombings in Nigeria and her neighbouring West African states. Most scholars have attributed high corruption and neglect by the Nigerian government, with adverse effects resulting in the increase of crime, violence, illiteracy, poverty, etc., as the conditions that have given room for the Boko Haram group to flourish in the country (Babatunde 2018; Bigio & Vogelstein 2019).

Abatan (2018) in an article; “The role of women in West Africa’s violent extremist groups” traced the involvement of women in Boko Haram, dating it back to the early 2000s. From the author’s view, Mohammed Yusuf (the founder of Boko Haram) urged women to join the group in order to serve two main purposes, which is: to broaden the group’s membership and enable women to become wives for male combatants and mothers for the next generation of fighters. This strategy was also designed to encourage men to join the group. However, with Yusuf’s death, AbubakarShekau, took over leadership in 2009, and Boko Haram began abducting women and girls. While some women voluntarily joined the group, others were forcibly enlisted. More than 2000 women and girls were allegedly abducted between 2014 and 2015.

Aside from these abductions, the roles of women in Boko Haram and in the conflict are multiple and increasingly impact men and women differently. As women are central for Boko Haram as well as for international interventions, it seems fair to say “that women’s rights, their bodies and freedoms in north-east Nigeria have become “the battleground on which the war is being fought” (Cold-Ravnkilde & Plambech 2015:44)

Lord-Mallam (2019) argues that the shift by Boko Haram to include women in its operations was in response to increased pressure on its male operatives. In the same vein, the International Crisis Group (2016) reported that; Since its emergence in 2002, Boko Haram has paid particular attention to women, partly because of the intense debate surrounding their role in society in the North East. Among other revivalist Islamic movements, the sect called for tighter restrictions on them in some areas of life but also promotes their access to Islamic education and offers financial empowerment. The report noted further, that with patriarchy, poverty, corruption, early marriage and illiteracy long thwarting the life chances of women, some of them saw an opportunity in Boko Haram to advance their freedoms or reduce their hardship. Many valued the religious and moral anchor.

Understanding women’s roles in terrorist groups can thus be quite complex. From the foregoing, women who were initially abducted could sometimes shift their roles to improve their situation, because of personal relationships, or because of indoctrination of radical ideas. For instance, Bryson & Bukarti (2018:13) noted that when Boko Haram abducted the Chibok girls, they were converted to Islam and recruited into the group. Other women reportedly volunteered to join the terrorist group because of social or political pressures, or for economic opportunities offered by Boko Haram that were not available in their conservative communities. Hence, there are women who migrate to the Boko Haram caliphate with their husbands or families and others who join alone, many of them travelling hundreds of kilometres. Several reasons cited for joining the group include religious motivations, such as the opportunity to study the Quran, the offer of marriage or the alleviation of financial pressures (International Crisis Group 2016).

As noted earlier, under Shekau, Boko Haram began to abduct women and girls for both political and pragmatic ends, including to protest the arrest of female members and relatives of their members. The seizure of more than 200 schoolgirls near Chibok in 2014 was the peak of the abduction saga. The group

took Christian and later Muslim females to hurt communities that opposed it, as a politically symbolic imposition of its will and as assets. By awarding “wives” to fighters, it attracted male recruits and provided incentive to combatants. Because women were not considered a threat, female followers and forced conscripts could initially circulate in government-controlled areas more easily, as spies, messengers, recruiters and smugglers. For the same reason, from mid-2014, Boko Haram turned to female suicide bombers. Increasingly pressed for manpower, it also trained women to fight (International Crisis Report 2016: I).

The ICG report was therefore right in concluding that; Boko Haram leaders made use of the opening created by patriarchy, constraints on women and girls (particularly by patriarchal family members) and grinding socioeconomic hardship in the North East to attract followers. Religious authority was invoked to back up the group’s claims and made women and girls significant for its rhetoric and actions. Its operations, therefore, allow for the use of women in its state-building affairs, recruitment roles as well as militant positions.

Boko Haram continues to enlist women, through the use of force into its ranks and its suicide bombing operations. The media reported the story of two girls who verified that Boko Haram paid young girls who volunteered for suicide missions, as little as ₦200 to buy themselves food before an attack (Vanguard newspaper 2014; BBC Africa 2014; New York Times 2020). As a result of its random kidnappings and female recruitment between 2011 and 2017, the group carried out at least 434 suicide attacks – of which 244 were undertaken by women (Abatan 2018). Another report shows that within the same period up till 2018, more than 450 women and girls were deployed in suicide attacks; at least a third of them were teenagers or young children. According to Akanonu (2020), “young girls and pregnant women are selected as the ‘best candidates’ for these violent attacks”. These female suicide attackers are cheap and unsuspected combatants because of their non-violent looks and they have been so effective—killing more than 1,200 people over just four years—that today women comprise close to two-thirds of the group’s suicide attackers (Bigio & Vogelstein 2019:12).

Aside from Boko Haram, the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) is another terrorist organization operating in Nigeria. Although their footprint is not as strong as Boko Haram, the group is a break-away faction of Boko Haram. The former has often been seen as an outlier among Salafi-jihadi organisations when it comes to the role of women and this is where the ISWAP stands out with its belief in the non-violation of Muslim women or women in general (Bryson & Bukarti 2018:4). The new faction operating as an ISIS cell, was under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Barnawi (the son of the late Yusuf who started Boko Haram). However, In March 2019, the shura (consultative council) of (ISWAP) released an audio recording announcing Abdullah Ibn Umar al-Barnawi (a.k.a. “Ba Idrisa”) as ISWAP’s new leader (Zenn 2019; Bryson & Bukarti 2018).

The major contention between the factions was the permissibility of attacking civilians and the legality of using women and girls to commit attacks (Bryson & Bukarti 2018). As well as not “enslaving”

Muslim women (Zenn 2019). Clearly, the breakaway faction disagreed with Shekau's principles on exploiting and violating women (especially Muslims). ICG report concluded that its rhetoric, which is different to that of Shekau, could attract local people. This is because, many of them are tired of Boko Haram excesses but remain open to its religious message, especially when it criticises corruption and calls for the introduction of the Sharia to clean up society.

Indeed, a survey of the group's activities since its breakaway proved that it stood by its core beliefs and principles. Using data from the Tony Blair Institute's Global Extremism Monitor (GEM), which tracks violent Islamist extremism, Bryson & Bukarti (2018) in the analyses of the two factions' activities throughout 2017, concluded through a conservative estimate and trends in the data which reflected the fact that the two factions largely abide by their ideological parameters. Of the more than 50 recorded fatalities involving Barnawi's faction, none was a civilian nor were female operatives involved. Most of those killed were Boko Haram militants or security personnel.

Nurwho became a high member of the ISWAP shura council spoke up against the enslavement of the girls and suggested that they should be wives who have more rights and protection than slaves. In his letter, titled "Expose", Nur said women and children should be kept at home, fed and catered for (International Crisis Group 2016). Through such line of operation, the ISWAP is gradually gaining local support and marrying into the local population. Girls recruited by the group have been married to men and only maintain secluded (purdah) roles within the organization. Nevertheless, with the change in leadership, there has been a report of a shift towards the Shekau's line of thought, especially in Niger where the faction seems to have much foothold.

Recent studies on terrorist recruitment have also shown the effect of advancements in ICT, where the internet and its tools, especially social media, has become a recruitment hub for terrorist organizations to recruit fighters (Maza, Koldas & Aksit 2020:7). Since 2009, Boko Haram has been using the traditional media (propaganda films) to recruit across boundaries. From 2014, it crossed into the social media space, creating multiple accounts across different platforms including Facebook, Twitter and Telegram (Sutzker 2018). It is further observed that, through personal networks and friendships developed in this virtual space, women are sometimes exposed to this negative indoctrination and manipulation of ideas by these extremist groups. Many analysts conclude that the general platforms that control privacy like Facebook and Twitter are used for posting general propaganda, while private conversations are carried out on Telegram.

A community leader in AngwanRimi in Jos shared a sad experience that involved his niece who left home in November 2015 and travelled to Maiduguri (Borno State) to meet a Saurayi (Boyfriend) whom she supposedly met on Facebook. Unfortunately, this was the last time that she was seen as she disappeared and several searches produced no successful results. The last news the family received regarding her was that she had been married to a unit commander of Boko Haram (Maza, Koldas & Aksit 2020:7).

This story is one of many in which young people are deceived by strangers they meet online who have the ulterior motive of recruiting them into violent extremism. These terrorists post inviting videos of

their daily lives with children and family as a way to attract more individuals, as well as legitimise their actions and elevate Islam through quotations from the Quran (Slutzker 2018). Therefore, it is important to note that terrorist groups such as Boko Haram and the ISWAP increasingly use such platforms to share their videos, promote their ideology and propaganda, and transnationally appeal to individuals sympathetic to their cause to motivate them to join the group in their aim of eradicating the supposed moral decay in Northern-Nigeria because of the influence of Western civilization (Maza, Koldas & Aksit 2020:7; Slutzker 2018).

On the part of the Nigerian government, there's the problem of rehabilitation and reintegration of the Boko Haram women who choose to return or defer from the terrorist groups. Many women remain ostracised in their communities and are constantly exposed to abuse. This is largely a result of quick reintegration into a non-sensitized society without following adequate rehabilitation processes and the lack of provision by the government to appropriately cater for their needs, exposing them to abuse in order to earn bread.

Indeed, poor efforts at rehabilitation by the Nigerian government have only made the situation quite worse in the North East which has been devastated by government and militia violence. Women who return from Boko Haram receive little socioeconomic support and often face stigma, sexual violence, and poverty. (ICAN-UNDP 2019). It is generally observed that; the families and communities of the returnees sometimes view them with suspicion, and their children born of militants are more likely to be abused or remain uneducated. Thus, a consequence of the flawed reintegration system operated by the Nigerian government.

Some reports noted that such women who lived their lives in proximity to the jihadists are seen by fellow citizens as corrupted by association. Some are even hated as women for daring to venture into a male-dominated activity. Thus, they remain ostracised and their position precarious: unattractive on the marriage market, rejected by relatives, shunned at social gatherings and – without male partners – vulnerable to assault (ICG 2019). The situation is so dire, that two female returnees in an interview with a reporter at one of the IDP camps in Maidugri, stated their desire to return to the jihadist group as their life in the bush was much better (Moaveni 2019).

Over the years, from the largely criticized and failed safe house system to a rehabilitation centre, the government has evolved in its response to reintegrating female returnees from Boko Haram. Most of these women were subject to sexual exploitation by the army and members of the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) in return for favours or as payment for release. According to ICG Report (2019), as a result of lobbies from human rights groups, the government have taken steps to reduce abuses, while the profusion of humanitarian actors in Borno state has meant greater monitoring of the security forces. Nonetheless, sexual exploitation persists: rape still occurs, and many women find themselves forced into “survival sex”, the exchange of sex for protection or resources. These factors fuel an intergenerational cycle of extremism, leading some women to re-join Boko Haram or the ISWAP and leaving their children vulnerable to

radicalization (Bigio& Vogelstein 2019:13). For the female narrative to change, the Nigerian government needs to scratch beyond the surface to deradicalize the women in these volatile areas.

NIGER

Niger, is a landlocked country in West Africa prone to political instability, chronic food insecurity and natural disaster. The government's capacity is equally stretched and requires urgent support. Despite these conditions, Niger Republic is one of the neighbouring countries committed to tackling Boko Haram, having joined the fight in October 2014. Next to Nigeria, the country has also been ravaged by the operations of the Boko haram terrorist organization within its territory. Like Nigeria's North East, the South East province of the Niger Republic Diffa, situated between 1350-1400 kilometres from the capital of Niamey on the borders of Borno state in Nigeria, is Niger's poorest region and has been described as its frontline in the Boko Haram insurgency. The region has for a long time served Boko Haram as a hideout for soldiers, a reservoir for recruitment and a stage for attacks (Cold-Ravnkilde & Plambech 2015:54, ICG report 2017: I)

Cold-Ravnkilde & Plambech (2015:54) observed that the immediate borders in the country were closed because of the insurgency, thus many markets in northern Nigeria shut down, with devastating consequences for the cross-border trade that is indispensable for the exchange of goods between farmers and pastoralists and the local economy. They concluded that this can be particularly critical for unemployed youth, making them more prone to jihadist recruitment.

Some local sources claim that Boko Haram can offer "new recruits 300,000 Francs-CFA (approximately 500 USD), plus a motorbike and the promise of a bride", which is a great deal in the absence of alternative livelihood strategies (Thurston 2015). Mohammed Yusuf's preaching had an impact on the Diffa region. Many of the thousands of Nigerien men and women who went to study or work in Maiduguri heard Yusuf's message and some attended his mosque. In Niger, they disseminated his thoughts in electronic format but also more directly especially in markets: Yusuf's assistant and successor as Boko Haram's leader, Abubakar Shekau, reportedly had family contacts in the area and preached in Diffa before taking over as leader (International Crisis Report 2016: 5).

It can then be seen that Boko Haram uses its funds to recruit members, combining its call to jihad with practical material benefits, like credits to open small businesses or buy vehicles, money when combatants enlist, promises of wages and motorcycles and prospects of marriage. The latter is particularly attractive in a cultural context where marriage is an essential symbol of identity. All of these are quite irresistible to men and women alike, but mostly the latter. In the villages of Komadougou, from 2014, young Nigeriens tried to identify, persuade and escort young women from Kanuri villages to areas held by Boko Haram on the other side of the border. Meanwhile, the ostentatious prosperity of combatants on their return from Nigeria, rich from looting and the rewards granted by the movement, has always attracted new female recruits from Niger (International Crisis Group 2017a). The ICG report shows that several hundred

and a few thousand young Nigeriens joined the organisation, some out of conviction but a growing number out of opportunism and greed.

It would not be far-fetched to argue that for the young men and women, most of them Kanuri from Niger, who joined the movement, a major attraction was the financial benefit it offered. The high poverty ratio in the region was accountable for this high rate of recruitment. It is important to observe here that, abduction activity is very low in the Niger region since the predominant religion is Muslim and thus, most women are Muslims. This can also be said to be the reason for the lower number of female suicidal attacks in the region unlike in Nigeria where the presence of Christians and religious rivalry provides the needed fire for violence.

According to the 2002 Demographic and Health survey released by the Niger Government, 98 per cent of the Nigerien population are Muslims, abiding by the patriarchal values of Islam. Therefore, the Nigerien culture can be said to be male-dominated. This could be another wildcard exploited by the terrorist group in the region. Boko Haram is reported to offer women in its camps access to Islamic education and empowerment that is not readily available in their immediate communities and this is seen as an opportunity to these women who seem to jump on it without questions, because this patriarchy promoted women or wives' seclusion (also referred to as *purdah*) in the Niger culture, which limited women's social, economic and intellectual power (Kudoadzi 2013:2). So, though secluded, the women have other opportunities to explore as housewives.

The ISWAP earlier mentioned in this paper as maintaining a foothold in the Niger have also played a role in the feminization of terror in the region. The group largely known to abhor violence against civilians and the use of women for violence, seem to have shifted its stands recently in the Niger Republic. Zenn (2019) noted that from the increase of female abductions carried out by ISWAP members in Niger, abductions of women had become non-controversial. He attributed the shift in tactics to Ba Idrisa taking over the leadership position from Abu Musab al-Barnawi. The series of kidnappings coincided with his replacing al-Barnawi in March. It remains to be seen what roles the ISWAP will give to its female abductees, as the group has not made any claims of female suicide attacks in the West African region.

A report by International Alert and UNICEF, titled; "Bad Blood" discovered that women and girls returning from the grip of terrorism were seen as tainted, dismissed by community leaders as; "Boko Haram wives", "Sambisa women" or "Annoba (plague)". Thus, they face marginalisation, discrimination and rejection by family and community members due to social and cultural norms related to sexual violence (Independent 2016). The report further stated that; all the women interviewed were concerned of their future.

They are on the verge of destitution, with no skills, ostracized by husbands, neighbours and parents and terrified to go home because Boko Haram could come again (Independent 2016).

Despite recommendations of counselling and psychotherapeutic services to these women, who are mostly victims that were kidnapped, raped and in some cases, forced to commit different atrocities, the government of Niger Republic has been criticized for flouting many standards of rehabilitation for terrorist

returnees, especially women. The United Nations DDR standards mandate that women and children be kept in separate facilities and provided special care. Yet in Diffa, women, often with young children, are kept at the same DDR facility as men (Felbab-Brown 2017), thus exposing these women and the female child to dangerous abuse. Felbab-Brown (2017) argues that; many of Boko Haram's captives were never radicalized, but merely enslaved; some may have committed heinous crimes under duress. Therefore, a crucial step of the DDR process is to separate them from others who can be released after DDR or other assistance. Instead, the Nigerien government sees most of these women and children as vicious criminals.

More broadly, conditions at the Diffa DDR camp are reportedly difficult. Many reporters familiar with the region observed that there are meagre facilities and those kept at the camp complain of poor food, as well as insufficient water and shelter. Consequently, many interviewed defectors said that if they knew what was awaiting them, they would not have left the bush (Felbab-Brown 2017; ICG 2017a; Zenn 2019). The unfolding situation then is that even those who try to stay away from the bush, find themselves re-victimized by the very society that should help them overcome their experiences.

CHAD

Chad is another West African country also faced with the menace of terrorism by the Boko Haram group. The country is separated from Nigeria by Lake Chad; a so-called wetland area of the semi-arid Sahel (Cold-Ravnskilde&Plambech2015:57). The country like Nigeria has a large percentage of Muslims almost on par with the Christian population- a ratio of 51% to 48.9% (Encyclopaedia Britannica). It is reported that Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa (ISWA) maintain an intent and capability to conduct kidnaps and violent activities in Chad, especially in the Lake Chad region. Historically, the Lake Chad Basin has been of vital importance to the local communities, providing the basis of thousands of livelihoods dependent on its seasonal fluctuations to renew fish stocks, farmland and rangeland (Sarch 2001).

The local communities, for whom the lake provided sustenance, are poverty-stricken as the National government fails to address deep socio-economic imbalances. Historically, the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) has been rather inefficient at managing conflicts and shared water resources, and the question of whether increased international support and facing the common enemy of Boko Haram will increase its capacity to face such challenges and diverging regional interests remains (Cold-Ravnskilde&Plambech2015:57). These loopholes are evidently exploited by the extremist sect to achieve its own aims and objectives, especially in luring the youths (boys and girls) in the local communities.

Foremost among these loopholes, is the accusation by the Fulani and Mohammedan Arab herdsmen of the population groups living along the lakeshores, in particular the Buduma, of being allies of Boko Haram and stealing cattle and abducting their women (ICG Report 2017:16). Eventually, some Buduma leaders admit that some members of their community have joined the movement but refute any massive recruitment of their people. Young Buduma (men and women) reportedly act as guides, boatmen, receivers of stolen goods and even combatants for Boko Haram (ICG Report 2017:16).

Recent research has also brought to light the use of cash loan traps by Boko Haram in Chad to recruit young men and women. In their article, Maza, Koldas & Aksit (2020:6-7) reported based on an interview with a defector; that while loan trap is a strategy for recruitment by the Islamic sect, the control of fishing activities in the Lake Chad area by the terrorist group allows them to recruit individuals who are unable to pay back their debts by employing them in this fish farms (where they act as guides, spies, receivers of stolen goods and arms) as a precondition for paying back their loans. That has not only increased the organization's capacity to raise funds but has also enabled it to increase its membership base.

The attraction of followers through the spread of anti-Western sentiments and teachings in Chad as in Nigeria and Nigerto largely uneducated, unschooled, impressionable, poor, and frustrated young women and men cannot be overlooked. This is a continuous strategy the terrorist organization uses to recruit and expand its base. This approach is to a large extent advantageous, because of the governance system and lack of adequate provision for the welfare of the citizens, especially women who are prone to encounter these terrorists and subsequently succumb to their whims, in order to survive. A founder of a rehabilitation centre in Chad in an interview noted that;

There is however a need to remember that desertification and the lack of so many basic necessities are factors which serve to aid terrorist groups. Extremist groups profit off these conditions of absolute poverty, attracting new fighters through people's ignorance and misery. These are the principal weapons of the jihadists (Bellochio 2018).

The Chadian government however stands out in one aspect from their Nigerian and Nigerien counterparts. The government provides help for its citizens who are willing to leave Boko Haram to return to their country, by creating a demobilisation site and introducing reconciliation and pardoning policies for all those who are not suspected of involvement in blood crimes (ICG 2017a:21). The country is deemed the first in Africa to have opened a centre dedicated to de-radicalization and the prevention of extremism (Bellochio 2018).

Such a program goes a long way to boost demobilisation, especially of those who joined Boko Haram in the hope of easy money. It would aid adequate reintegration into society, control stigmatization and prevent those who have decamped from the terrorist group especially women from having second thoughts to return to these extremists' group where they believe that they would be safer and catered for.

BURKINA FASO

Burkina Faso was one of the West African countries long spared of the spill over effect of terrorism from its border countries. But recently, the country faces frequent lethal attacks, especially in its northern and eastern regions. A vast majority of the country's population are Muslims with a few percentages of Christians and traditional religious practitioners (Encyclopaedia Britannica).

A combination of poverty, unstable neighbours, poor provision of social services and weak security forces has opened the door for extremists to flourish in the country. These extremists are mainly the jihadist terror groups also operating in Mali and Niger. They include; Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM),

Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Ansarul Islam (ICG 2017b; Blake 2019).

The areas that feature most of these terrorist attacks include the Sahel region in the north of the country and parts of the East region in the east, with borders close to Mali and Niger. However, this has not exempted other parts of the country - even the capital (Ouagadougou) from terrorist activities.

These groups continue to grow and gain ground because of the high level of poverty, and poor services, particularly health care which is prevalent in the country. Burkina Faso remains one of the poorest countries in the world, with just under half of the population living below the World Bank international poverty line of \$1.90 a day (Blake 2019). Under these conditions, most of the populace has been converted by terrorist groups who claim to offer betterment for their lives. The ICG (2017b) report noted that the ISGS for instance, has a growing footprint across Burkina Faso because it is capitalizing on support from the local population, many of whom live in poverty and lack health care and education. It would not be wrong to assert that women and their children are the most vulnerable in such situations.

Notably, Malam Ibrahim Dicko of the Ansarul Islam group is said to have had a great influence on recruiting through his ideological sermons. ICG (2017b) noted that; his discourse proved particularly attractive to young people and the more disadvantaged social sectors because he styled himself as a “defender of the poor” and a “liberator” who wants to lighten the weight of archaic and restrictive traditions. This showcases how easily these armed groups are able to exploit social divides to their advantage in recruiting across social classes and gender in Burkina Faso.

It appears that apart from Ansarul Islam which originated from Burkina Faso, and still runs its operations outside the country from Mali, the terrorist groups orchestrating attacks in the country do not have an operational military base or camp in the country. Unlike Boko Haram which has operational camps across Nigeria and Niger, thus making recruitment within the country easy. Recruitments from Burkina Faso are mainly wilful recruits who travel across borders to join terrorist organisations. One can scarcely find cases of kidnapped or forced female terrorists. This is because the major terrorist groups like the AQIM and the JNIM operating in the country do not believe in the use of women for violence (Abatan 2018; Akanonu 2020). The ISGS on the other hand seeks to establish a foothold in the east and also to embed itself in the local population as part of its efforts to increase its recruitment (Blake 2019). This would no doubt include the female population.

However, the women who join these groups serve mainly as wives to male combatants and mothers to the future generation of fighters, ultimately encouraging more men to join terrorism.

MALI

Largely a Muslim country, Mali is one of the more unfortunate West African countries to be plagued by terrorism. Bounded in the north by Algeria and on the east by Niger and Burkina Faso, the country has

been stuck in a civil crisis since 2012 which has been prolonged as a result of the involvement of jihadist factions in the crisis. This has resulted in a high rate of child marriage and violence against women. Despite the situation, women are also recruited to foster violence in the country.

There are several armed Islamist groups in Mali who have engaged women to perpetrate their agenda. This include but not limited to; Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar Dine, Mouvement pour le Tawhîd et du Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO) and the Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) (Cold-Ravnskilde & Plambeck 2015:28).

Unlike Boko Haram, which is renowned for its use of women in its terrorist attacks, most of the aforementioned terrorist groups have reportedly not been involved in the use of women in suicide attacks (Abatan 2018; Akanonu 2020). This could be because the group wants to retain the support of local populations by aligning itself with norms and expectations of the role generally attributed to women.

A 2018 ISIS report pointed out that these terrorist groups encourage their male fighters to marry into the local population of northern Mali to establish themselves among these communities and gain their support. The report further noted that:

Mokhtar Belmokhtar, an AQIM leader, married four women from different well-known Tuareg and Arab Berabiche families to expand his network of influence. This not only allowed the group to embed itself within certain communities but ensured protection and support from local populations during the occupation of northern Mali in 2012 and beyond.

The report further noted that women played various active supporting roles such as being informants, laundresses and cooks for violent extremist groups in Mali. It mentions that, a woman accused of supplying fertiliser to make explosives for Katiba Macina, an ally group within JNIM, was arrested by Mali's intelligence services.

These acts are only possible because the Jihadists elements have been able to exploit the vacuum left behind by the absent government in the areas where they have established a foothold. They have made provision of health care services and employment available where there was none and have also used the stratification between social classes to gain the support of impoverished communities and offer some sort of social mobility to both poor women and men. Also, in analysing the AQIM terrorist network, Boas (2013) observed that the organization made use of income originating from ransoms paid for the release of kidnapped Westerners and other questionable sources, thus buying itself goodwill, friendship and networks by distributing money and medicine, treating the sick and empowering them.

These relationships were cemented through marriage, not necessarily into powerful families but to poor local women as a way of winning the support of the impoverished ordinary local Tuareg people (Boas 2013).

In their report Lackenbauer, Lindell and Ingerstad (2015), posits that; the Malian crisis is nurtured by the pervasive stratification between almost all groups in the society and that marginality serves as a place of resistance for many groups, including northern women since many of them have grievances that are linked to their limited access to public services and human rights. For these women, marginality is a site of resistance that motivates them to mobilise men to take up arms against an unwilling government.

Hence, though these women are not out rightly involved in physical violence, they somewhat foster and encourage its growth and therefore play the role of perpetrators of violence. These soft but vital roles must be understood as being critical to the survival of the jihadist extremist or terrorist groups and even more dangerous than being in the frontlines of the war.

One report observed that; once they join these groups, the women function in various roles including; supporting operations, gathering intelligence, facilitating financial transactions, and recruiting new members. Some serve as brokers, connecting recruiters to potential recruits. The secretive recruitment targets widows and desperate women during wedding ceremonies and burial occasions as well as at selected salons and marketplaces (UNDP 2019:67).

In a research conducted by two NGOs (the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and the (AMDH) Malian Association for Human Rights), it was reported that, Katiba Macina a terrorist cell under the umbrella of the JNIM operated in groups of 10 men with a chief, himself under the authority of the head of the “markaz.” Their mobile camps resided in the forests and the fighters do most of the domestic chores (laundry, fetching water chore, etc.). Also, a small number of women, married to committed activists live in the camps and they serve as cooks or washerwomen without participating in the fighting (FIDH/AMDH 2018). To attract female recruits, the JNIM provides healthcare, allocates pastoral land and regulates land use close to their encampments (Bukarti 2017).

Conclusion

The above analysis of female terrorism in the West African regions shows certain commonalities in the push factors. These include the financial benefits; and the need to escape the stranglehold of a patriarchal system that marginalises women and the high level of poverty. The use of coercion is also seen across different countries. The modus operandi is underwritten by the religious script. The use of women as suicide bombers seems to be more engaged in by the Boko Haram group than others though as shown above, the ISWAP group in Niger began to incorporate that strategy in the operational tactics in recent times but still at a much lower scale than Boko Haram. The cross-national study also revealed the personality trait and their impact on the activities of the group. The personality trait of the group leader impacts group. The death of Yusuf and the rule of Abubakar Shekau coincided with that group’s use of female suicide bombers. The same is the case in Niger. It is under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Barnawi that the hitherto abominable act of female suicide became non-controversial. Inadequacies in the reintegration of female members of terrorist groups cut across all countries surveyed and demonstrate the need for gender sensitivity.

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