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Women, Peace building and the Boko Haram Conflict in Nigeria

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Insurgency and counter-insurgency has changed the lives of women and girls, leading them voluntarily or forcefully into new evolving roles outside the domestic sphere. Some women fight against Boko Haram within local vigilante units. Others play critical roles in relief and reconciliation, while those displaced find themselves with new responsibilities as heads of households. Women have organized and participated in numerous marches, rallies, campaigns and protests to draw attention to abuses, demand participation and action for peace. One of the most widespread actions undertaken is the Bring Back Our Girls (BBOG) campaign. The focus of this essay is to highlight the role of women and women organizations in peacebuilding in the northeast of Nigeria in the context of the Boko Haram conflict ravaging the region utilizing the liberal feminist framework and an aggregation of secondary data.

The important role of women in peacebuilding and peace processes has been recognized by the United Nations through the adoption of Resolution 1325 in 2000 (UN Women, 2000). The adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 in October 2000 signaled the growing imperative of making women’s issues central to the peace and security agenda of the UN. The landmark resolution acknowledged the importance of women’s participation in peace negotiations, humanitarian planning, peacekeeping operations, post-conflict peacebuilding and governance. The resolution was the first document to be passed in the Security Council to underscore the role and protection of women in times of conflict. This instrument is a product of the cumulative impact of collaboration between civil society, governments, grassroots women and policy makers. The United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 is one of the earliest formal documents identifying and institutionalizing the formal designation of women peacebuilders. The resolution recognizes the role women play in peacebuilding at different levels, from the community level, where everyday women strive to ensure that the home and community are safe, to the national and international spaces, where women play important roles in peace negotiations and shaping the resolutions and policies that impact the rights of women (Ilesanmi, 2019). Whilst the roles of women in conflict may vary, their experiences of conflict and violence often signify that women have different views on what peace means and how peacebuilding should proceed.

UNSCR 1325 focuses specifically on prioritizing women's participation in the international peace and security agenda, calling for states to increase the number of women involved in decision-making around issues of peacebuilding and conflict transformation; protect women and girls in conflict and post-conflict situations, especially from gender-based violence; and adopt a gender perspective on peacemaking, peace keeping and peacebuilding. The Boko Haram conflict on going in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin provides a basis to examine the role of women in peacebuilding in Nigeria. This essay explores the various ways women and women-led organizations have engaged in peace building efforts in the northeast region of the country where the conflict is most prevalent. It builds on the gap in studies of women and the Boko Haram conflict, which have mostly focused on women as victims of the insurgency and women
involvement with the sect (Imam, et.al, 2020, Oriola, 2016, Pearson & Zenn, 2018). Not much attention has been paid to the role of women organizations in the peacebuilding architecture of the region. Government interventions in the northeast have been largely led by men and the roles of women seem to be insignificant. This study fills this gap by providing specific activities of women geared towards peacebuilding in the region. The study addresses the following questions; why women are relevant in peacebuilding; what peacebuilding activities have women undertaken in the northeast of Nigeria; how can the peacebuilding efforts of women be strengthened and consolidated upon. The research draws upon secondary data from women’s organizations involved in peace building in the region and an in-depth review of literature on the subject.

Jama’atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati wal-Jihad (JAS), also known as Boko Haram, which operates in northeast Nigeria and the neighboring countries of the Lake Chad basin, was formed in 2002. JAS is an Islamist militant group based in Borno State, northeast Nigeria (Monguno & Umara 2014). Its founder and leader, Mohammed Yusuf, attracted a local following through his fiery sermons, which denounced Nigeria’s governance system and promoted his vision of a society free of corruption. His message resonated with a local populace disillusioned with earlier attempts to introduce Sharia. Yusuf also garnered support from prominent members of the political and social elite who were keen to tap his growing following for electoral ends. However, his relationship with both the political class and the security forces deteriorated. In 2009, 800 of Yusuf’s followers died following violent confrontations with Nigerian security forces (Zenn, 2013; Mellgard, 2015). Yusuf himself was arrested in July 2009 and killed whilst in police custody (Walker, 2016). Following his death, JAS supporters went into hiding until the movement’s reemergence in 2010 when Abubakar Shekau, Yusuf’s deputy, became the group’s leader. Under Shekau’s leadership, the movement re-grouped in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State, and launched revenge attacks on police and security forces (Zenn & Pearson, 2014). The sect believes in the union of state and religion. It continues to advocate making Nigeria an Islamic state administered by Sharia. The sect also considers the Muslim community as one under Islamic principles with no chance of secularism, which the sect terms atheistic or syncretistic practices. For them, the imposition of secularity amounts to a cultural affront and an attempt to relegate Muslims to the position of second-class citizens. The group also labels both the state and federal government as a tyranny that must be attacked even at the risk of death in order to achieve what it considers as the Islamic path to justice (Peter, 2012).

The first reported abductions of women and girls took place in 2013, when the families of officials and security agents were targeted in retaliation for detaining the wives and children of JAS leaders. Subsequently, JAS began attacking civilians, both Christian and Muslim, and targeting public spaces, such as markets and schools. The Nigerian state and its neighbors have responded to Boko Haram primarily with security campaigns. Marred by abuses against civilians and detainees, these crackdowns have fueled Boko Haram’s politics of victimhood.

The kidnapping of the 276 Chibok schoolgirls in Nigeria in April 2014 first began to focus international attention on the Boko Haram insurgency. The Chibok students represented only a small percentage of the thousands of people, including women and girls, whom Boko Haram has kidnapped. Despite losing most of the territory that it once held, Boko Haram has continued to conduct abductions. The crisis has affected women and girls with particular intensity: women and girls have been used as suicide bombers; they have been subjected to forced marriage; and after
being freed or escaping from Boko Haram, returnees often face stigmatization (HRW, 2014; Mia & Matfess, 2016).

Sexual exploitation has been commonplace among the displaced persons, including by the security forces and authorities, often involving transactional sex to access food and non-food items. An August 2017 study by the Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point and Yale University found that of the 434 suicide bombings by Boko Haram from 2011 to 2017, a majority (56 percent) were carried out by women and girls, including two-thirds of suicide attacks in 2017. Insurgency is a condition of revolt against a government that is less than an organized revolution and that is not recognized as belligerency (Peter, 1964). It is the rising up against what is believed to be a constituted or legitimate authority. The term "insurgency" is used in describing a movement's unlawfulness and capacity to pose a threat to a state or seen as such by another authority, especially when viewed from the backdrop of its not being authorized, and therefore executing a cause that is illegitimate (Shafer, 1988).

Insurgency is an act of rebellion against a legitimate authority. However, such an authority would have acquired the recognition by an international body such as the United Nations, while those taking part in the rebellion are not recognized as belligerents. The United States Department of Defense (DOD, 2007) defines insurgency as an organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict. Peacebuilding is defined as actions for detecting and supporting structures that will reinforce peace in order to avoid a relapse into violence (Boutros-Ghali, 1993). It was also considered an external intervention planned to avert the outbreak or reoccurrence of armed conflict. This definition was expanded to include the task of providing for reintegration and rehabilitation programs, and creating conditions for resumed development (Annan, 1998). Lederack (1997) defined peacebuilding as a comprehensive concept that encompasses, generates, and sustains the full array of processes, approaches, and stages needed to transform conflict toward more sustainable, peaceful relationships. Peacebuilding is not just an activity, but a process that requires continuous engagement and covers all efforts that are aimed at dismantling structures of violence and erecting structures of peace. It encompasses proactive, preventive, management, and relationship-building measures that go beyond peace talks.

Women and Peacebuilding
The adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 in October 2000 signaled the growing imperative of making women’s issues central to the peace and security agenda of the UN. Although Nigeria has developed a National Action Plan to fulfill UN Security Council Resolution 1325, this is not reflected in the ongoing armed conflict between the Nigerian state and Boko Haram. Nigeria has adopted two National Action Plans; the first in 2013, which ended in 2017, while the second was adopted in 2017 and ended in 2020. Plans for a new action plan are underway in the country. The action plans were based on the UN guidelines; however there are still gaps in implementation, especially in the context of the Boko Haram conflict in the northeast of Nigeria. For instance, while women and children are most affected by the insurgency, there are few women involved in counter-insurgency operations, with government forces estimated to have a higher percentage of men.
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Boko Haram Insurgency in Nigeria
Jaam’atu Alhis Sunnah Lida’awati wal Jihad (JAS) commonly known as Boko haram first emerged as an Islamic reform movement in the northeastern town of Maiduguri, Nigeria in the early 2000s. Its members followed the charismatic preacher Muhammad Yusuf, who condemned Western-style education and corrupt, secular governance while also cultivating strategic ties to the city’s elites. Boko Haram draws, among other things, upon historical references to the Islamic empire of Dan Fodio’s Sokoto Caliphate in the 19th century that introduced and institutionalized Islam in northern Nigeria. The Sokoto Caliphate consisted of Sharia-based emirates led by local emirs (commanders), which continued to exist after the British colonial power made it an integrated part of the Nigerian state when they occupied the territory.

The emergence of Boko Haram can be seen in the broader context of the radical Islamic reform movement inspired by Wahhabism and Salafism that flourished in northern Nigeria in the 1980s. These groups included, among others, the radical, anti-modern and violent Maitatsine movement who were not, however, organizationally linked to Boko Haram. The aims and claims of Boko haram revolve around a rejection of democracy and politics entailing that the Nigerian state should be replaced with an Islamic state based on Sharia law. This aim may be shared by other Salafist groups, but the difference lies in the way Boko Haram perceives that this aim should be achieved through violent means (Signe, Marie & Cold-Raynkilde, 2015).

Although the practice of Islam has historically been a means of resistance to the imposition of indirect colonial rule through education and state formation in general, the extremely violent expression of this resistance is new (Mohammed, 2014). Boko Haram is motivated by stark feelings of injustice by the Nigerian state, which they consider to have terrorized them. As such, revenge constitutes a subject of Boko Haram’s actions in response to the atrocities carried out by the state security forces (Signe, Marie & Cold-Raynkilde, 2015).

The Boko Haram insurgency in northeast Nigeria has exposed women to wide range of issues: some women have suffered untimely widowhood and loss of children as a result of the Boko Haram onslaught; others have suffered death, forced abduction, and allied assaults on the main and side lines of the insurgency. Oftentimes, women have faced direct violence that essentially degrades their humanity. This is evident in the deployment of women as war-front sex slaves, human shields, and suicide bombers by the insurgents (Onuoha et al, 2020).

Gender-based violence usually consists of the use of violence or threat of violence on women and girls. Boko Haram has played on the common perception of women as nonviolent to effortlessly mainstream women into their operations, using them to gather intelligence, as recruiters, and promoters of radical ideologies to indoctrinate abductees and other converts in Boko Haram enclaves. One aspect of the Boko Haram insurgency is that women are not only targeted for sexual violence but kidnapped to be used as shields, suicide bombers and spies who can be caught in a crossfire between soldiers and the insurgents. Their presence in high-risk areas has been described as one of the factors sustaining the insurgency. Women have also been subjected to forced marriages to members of the sect and myriad forms of sexual and gender based violence.

Patriarchal influence restricts and undermines women’s peacebuilding ability. Male dominance is enshrined in the cultural and religious practices guiding daily interactions within the region that
perpetuate the subjugation of women. This limits their effectiveness as social agents of change. Educational discrimination, religious dictates, and sexual abuses are some of the tools used to subdue women and ensure their conformance to established patriarchal norms. Denial of access to resources directly affects their access to leadership leading to the exclusion of policies of great concern to women. Perception of women as weak and lacking strength for peacebuilding further adds to their difficulty in getting engaged.

**Feminist Framework for Women and Peacebuilding**

Liberal feminism is a form of feminist theory that has been instrumental in fueling women's rights movements in diverse contexts and remains a familiar and widespread form of feminist thought. Liberal feminist theory emphasizes women's individual rights to autonomy and proposes remedies for gender inequities through, variously, removing legal and social constraints or advancing conditions that support women's equality. The problem in the northeast is that women face many cultural and structural barriers that limit their political participation, including in peace processes, which the liberal feminist framework espouses.

The disproportionate victimization of women and their near-total exclusion from official circles of security policy processes can be effectively understood within the framework of liberal feminism (Nwangwu & Ezeibe, 2019). The theory challenged the “essentialist notions of femininity and the dichotomy that posited rationality as masculine/male and emotionality as feminine/female,” calling for equal rights for both women and men (Scraton & Flintoff, 2013). The theory contends that the subordination of women is rooted in a set of customary and legal constraints that prevent their access to and success in public life (Tickner, 2006). Thus, the primary goal of liberal feminism is to achieve equality in the public sphere through purposeful mainstreaming of gender issues. It calls for equal access to education, healthcare, equal pay for equal work, ending sexual segregation, better working conditions, among other goals, primarily through political and legal reforms. Friedman (2002) observes that political and legal barriers are not the only problem for women’s participation, but also sex roles and stereotypes, the impact of gendered organizations and the constraints of family obligations. At the core of this theory is the need for gender equality and authorization of women, not only in peace processes but also in the society at large. Liberal feminism is an historical convention that sprung out of liberalism as evidenced from the works of feminist such as John Stuart Mill, Judith Sargent Murray and Mary Wollstonecraft. It is an aspect of feminism which generally discusses the effort targeted at inaugurating or preserving equal political, economic and social rights and prospects for women. The rationale of this theory is that women as distinct personalities possess reason and as such, they are entitled to full human rights (Taylor, 2019). It is an individualistic form of feminist theory, which focuses on women’s ability to maintain their equality through their own actions and choices. Liberal feminists argue for women’s rightful inclusion in the liberal category of the autonomous individual as the basic social unit, and that women likewise are accorded the individual rights connected to the category.

These were the guiding principles during the first wave of feminism period when women demanded the right to education, employment, property and the vote. This theory addresses the issue of women’s marginalization or exclusion from peacebuilding. It posits that gender differences neither undermine nor totally hinder their abilities to perform efficiently on specified tasks. The aspirations and desires of women differ in our traditional societies based on factors
such as religion, ethnic and religious values. This theory ignores biological differences between men and women in order to correct the anomalies. It also exposes that a sex blind theory dictated by men does not produce a good result (West & Bowman, 2019). Nevertheless, this theory concludes that gender parity is essential to assert women’s role in society without any form of discrimination, which makes the theory apt to explain women’s peacebuilding roles.

**Strategies for Women’s Peacebuilding amidst the Boko-Haram Insurgency**

The roles women are taking in the context of violent terrorism create counter-narratives where women demonstrate agency through informal peacebuilding activities. The Federation of Muslim Women’s Associations in Nigeria and other local and international organizations have provided women with leadership training; vocational skills; an orphan support scheme; free health aid; youth communal farming and agro-allied facilities; micro-credit schemes, as well as workshops/seminars, advocacy campaigns and research (Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Program 2013). Imam et.al (2020) list other organizations involved in peacebuilding in the northeast to include the Women in New Nigeria (WINN); the Borno Women’s Development Initiative; the University of Maiduguri Muslim Women’s Group; the Borno State Christian Association women’s wing; Hope in Legislative for the vulnerable and marginalized; Al Ansar Hope for All Foundation. Some projects are also carried out by international NGOs active in the area, such as the Norwegian Refugee Council and Search for Common Ground.

Even before the mass abduction of the Chibok girls, women under the aegis of “Concerned Mothers of Borno” marched for peace in 2009 (Nagarajan, 2015). Women have been at the forefront of Boko Haram’s activities, not only as victims of abduction or suicide bombers but also as galvanizers of political action and protest against the conflict. In April 2014, the “Million Woman March”, arranged primarily by Nigerian women protesting the mass abduction of the girls from Chibok, organized in the capital, Abuja rapidly spread throughout the country and across the world. Women are active in fighting Boko Haram in several arenas. Women have also been vocal in pressuring the government and traditional and religious leaders to take action towards the welfare of victims of the insurgency to alleviate the suffering they face.

Protests and rallies were held by women groups to create awareness and seek the release of the abducted school girls. Besides protest marches and press conferences, women-led civil society organizations made attempts to improve the socio-economic status of women and youths through advocacy visits, training, education, health and humanitarian services as well as micro-enterprises. For example, The United Nations, in partnership with some of the women’s organizations, carried out vocational training for 496 victims of Boko Haram in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe States in 2016 as a livelihood support scheme (Adebowale 2016). Similarly, the Women’s Peace and Humanitarian Fund channels required financing to grassroots women organizations in peace and security context in the region.

In most northern states, the Women’s Interfaith Council also provided platforms for dialogue between women leaders and members of the Muslim and Christian faiths. It has carried out many peace initiatives, including visits to media agencies and victims of bomb blasts in hospitals as well as internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. During advocacy visits and peace talks, the organizations provided de-radicalized extremists, survivors of terrorist actions, community leaders, law enforcement officials, academics, politicians and celebrities the space for counter-narrations against violent extremism and terrorism. These spaces provided them with the
opportunity to tell their stories, build confidence and make alliances in order to reduce risks, to undertake counter radicalization and to promote peace.

Women’s organizations like the Women’s Interfaith Council facilitate government dialogue with violent groups to foster friendship and amity between Christians and Muslims. Women are integrated into peace and security structures at the community level, supported by partners such as the Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Program (NSRP) and United Nations (UN) Women. Although young men make up the majority of Civilian Joint Task Force members set up by the government in response to the activities of Boko haram, women are also active due to their personal commitment to act and the outcry against men searching women at checkpoints. These and other factors led to the establishment of the women’s corps. When female JAS (Boko-Haram) members began carrying arms to sustain the insurgency, women started checking fellow women, catching many trying to sneak past checkpoints with arms and ammunition. Women have been active in ferrying people out of occupied territories. Women, such as Mai Bintu, the woman chief hunter of Bama, have also led the Civilian JTF on operations against the sect. Women’s rights organizations have been working with vulnerable and marginalized groups such as sex workers, hawkers, domestic workers, widows and survivors of sexual violence, equipping them with life skills and linking them to microfinance bodies. They have been vocal in pressuring the government and traditional and religious leaders to take action. There have been multiple marches from 2009 onwards calling for peace and justice by women through the streets of Maiduguri in the midst of the conflict and violence (Nagarajan, 2015).

Women rights organizations ensure safe passage for humanitarian and medical agencies to provide emergency care needed. These groups also negotiate for the return of women and girls who have been abducted. Caught between security forces who commit human rights violations and JAS fighters who attack, kill and abduct, these women try hard to be seen as independent and neutral. They maintain a balance between different sides of the conflict, negotiating for the return of women and girls, for access for humanitarian workers to give medical care, and for the end of the fighting itself. Women have also played a direct role in hostilities –as security officials, Boko Haram fighters and members of community security groups.

In addition to negotiating for peace women provide services to survivors of rape and sexual violence and speak out against the stigma and shame they experience. The University of Maiduguri Muslim Women’s Association is one of many women-led organizations which have provided food and shelter to those who have fled rural areas. The Centre for Women and Adolescent Empowerment, and Tapestry, has set up a support network to address trauma in girls and women, training lay counselors in communities across the northeastern states affected by the insurgency. Working together across ethnic and religious lines, women have protested against the detention of their family members, for their fundamental rights, and for peace and justice.

Challenges of Women Peacebuilding in Northeast Nigeria

The region is a heavily patriarchal society, both in the predominantly Muslim and Christian communities. Religious and cultural norms have defined women’s status through reproduction and largely confined them to a domestic role. Women’s access to formal education and the labor market is restricted by patriarchal practices, which render men as breadwinners and women as caregivers. Women in the region do not usually own land or homes, which makes them vulnerable
in case of divorce or widowhood. In northeast Nigeria, discrimination against women has long been endemic, in law and in practice. Early marriages, combined with low education and high rates of maternal mortality, are widespread. Young girls in this patriarchal society lack opportunities to engage in activities of their own choice and are subjected to manipulation and control by powerful religious leaders. For example, in the early 2000s Boko Haram leader Muhammad Yusuf and several preachers within revivalist religious movements (like Izala, Nigeria’s non-violent, largest Salafi group) attracted women into their sect. Cultural, religious and legal inequalities combined with poverty, have contributed to further marginalization with high female illiteracy, low school attendance and high rates of child marriage. Culture and religion are two important factors that are often invoked as a justification for the violation of women’s rights generally. In most patriarchal societies, it is often difficult to separate both factors as they complement each other (Udoh et al., 2020).

Some Customary and Sharia laws are discriminatory against women: for example, under Sharia law, punishment given to women in adultery cases is disproportionate to that given to men where a woman can be punished for adultery but her co-adulterer can be let off if he swears an oath of innocence (Ifemeje & Ogugua, 2012). This plays on conservative gender ideologies, which are further acted on by the insurgency and thereby complicates peacebuilding and, specifically, the inclusion of women as full actors in prevention, protection, mediation and peacebuilding including reconstruction.

**Conclusion**
Gender dynamics play a part in fuelling the Boko Haram insurgency and should be a clear signal that women’s integration into decision-making processes at all levels is critical to a durable peace. Countering the sect and rebuilding a peaceful society in northeast Nigeria requires the government and its international partners to tackle gender discrimination, better protect women and girls affected by the violence, and support women’s economic and social reintegration, as well as enhance their role in building sustainable peace.

Generally, there is a need to end the insurgency, ensure food security and livelihoods and development of the region. Such developments would entail positive effects on the population at large – including for women since the intersectional effects of gender discrimination with other forms of marginalization and exclusion leaves women as a group in even more precarious conditions than men. It is recommended that the number of women represented in state assemblies and other decision-making structures in the regions should be increased. Also, women leaders should be appointed in camps and for IDPs in the communities. Women organizations should be channeled needed resources, including capacity building towards sustained interventions and the empowerment of displaced and vulnerable women. Another important step is to strengthen the laws that deal with violence against women. This should come in tandem with campaigns to recognize women’s rights to autonomy, as well as anti-stigmatization campaigns and support for victims of gender-based violence.
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