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**The Complexity of Women's Roles in Boko Haram
Terrorist Activities in North-East, Nigeria**

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Abstract

This concept paper examined the multifaceted roles of women in the Boko Haram insurgency in North-East Nigeria. Drawing on social movement theory and gender and power dynamics theory, the paper explored how women are both victims and perpetrators of Boko Haram's violence. It highlighted the ways in which women are influenced by the group's ideology and the challenges they face in resisting its control. The paper also discussed the importance of addressing the needs of women who have been affected by Boko Haram and

promoting gender equality in the region. Addressing the challenges faced by women in Boko Haram requires a multifaceted approach that recognises the diverse experiences and needs of women within the insurgency. This includes providing support to women who have been abducted or forced into marriage, promoting gender equality within Boko Haram and addressing the root causes of the insurgency. By implementing these recommendations, it is possible to address the complex challenges posed by Boko Haram and to build a more just and equitable society in North-East Nigeria.

Keywords: *Boko Haram, Counterterrorism, Gender, Insurgency, Nigeria, Power dynamics, Social movement theory, Women.*

Introduction

In recent years, the public and academic community have become more interested in the role that women play in the Boko Haram insurgency in northeastern Nigeria. Research has shown a more nuanced picture, revealing the various ways in which women interact with Boko Haram, despite the fact that they are typically perceived as the group's primary victims of violence. Using current literature as a guide, this paper examines the various roles that women have played in the insurgency and the intricacies of their involvement.

The varied experiences of women in Boko Haram have been insightfully documented by Akilu and Shonibare (2018), Aliyu (2021), Ibrahim (2023), and Salihu (2024), which has led to a more complicated understanding of their roles and the intricacies of the insurgency. Examining elements including forced recruitment, radicalisation, and active involvement in assaults, this paper looks at how women are both perpetrators and victims of Boko Haram's brutality. It also explores the experiences of women who have been sexually assaulted, kidnapped, and forced into slavery by the sect. This study intends to add to the current conversations around the nature of the insurgency and the difficulties in resolving its effects on women and communities in North-East Nigeria by comprehending the many viewpoints of women within Boko Haram. Recent studies have questioned the conventional depiction of Boko Haram women as helpless victims. According to academics like Akilu and Shonibare (2018), this story is too straightforward and ignores the complexity of women's experiences during the insurgency. We run the risk of hiding the manner in which women have actively participated in Boko Haram's operations if we just highlight them as victims.

The role of women in Boko Haram has been extensively studied by Aliyu (2021), with a particular emphasis on the state of Borno. She found that women have been involved in the insurgency in a number of ways, such as suicide bombers, informants, and combatants. By highlighting their agency within the group, these findings cast doubt on the idea that women are only passive victims of Boko Haram's violence. Ibrahim (2023) has investigated the perspectives of women kidnapped and imprisoned by Boko Haram. Women's experiences inside the insurgency are shaped by the intersections of gender and religion, as her research demonstrates. Many women who have been kidnapped by Boko Haram have been coerced into marrying Boko Haram members and converting to Islam.

These incidents highlight the intricate connection, within the framework of the insurgency, between gender, religion, and violence. As detailed by Salihu (2024), addressing the needs of women impacted by Boko Haram presents problems. Her study sheds light on the challenges overcome by women who have been kidnapped, sexually assaulted, and coerced into marriage. Numerous women encounter persistent stigma and discrimination when attempting to reintegrate into their communities. Women's roles within Boko Haram are a complicated and multidimensional issue. Some women have been compelled to join the group and have been abused, but other women have taken an active part in its activities. Understanding the many ways that women interact with Boko Haram will help us create more effective plans for dealing with the insurgency and aiding those who have been harmed by it.

Research Objectives

This paper seeks to answer and discuss in context the following objectives:

1. Analysing the extent to which women's involvement in Boko Haram reinforces or challenges existing ideological tenets within the group and the specific roles they play in their operations.
2. Examining the social, economic, and cultural implications of women's involvement in Boko Haram.

Literature Review

Recent years have seen a rise in both popular and intellectual interest in the role of women in the Boko Haram insurgency in northeastern Nigeria. Despite being predominantly perceived as victims of the group's violence, research has shown that women interact with Boko Haram in a variety of ways, painting a more nuanced image. Examining the literature on women's roles in the insurgency, this review focuses on the sociological, operational, and ideological ramifications of their participation.

The ideological ramifications of women's participation in Boko Haram have been the subject of numerous investigations. Women's involvement in the group, according to Akilu and Shonibare (2018), has strengthened its hardline ideology, especially with regard to gender norms and religious interpretations. They contend that the urge to break free from social norms and discover a feeling of belonging frequently drives women's allegiance to Boko Haram's ideology. However, Aliyu (2021) contends that women's participation in Boko Haram can subvert the organisation's conventional gender norms and beliefs. According to her, some women might join Boko Haram in order to express their agency and defy patriarchal expectations.

Women's operational involvement within Boko Haram have also been studied. The role of women in the group's recruitment efforts is emphasised by Akilu and Shonibare (2018). Particularly in rural regions, they imply that women are frequently more successful at enlisting other women and girls. The experiences of Boko Haram-abducted and prisoner women have been studied by Ibrahim (2023). Her research emphasises how women can be utilised as hostages or as negotiating chips to accomplish the goals of the group. Salihu (2024) contends that the military prowess of Boko Haram has been enhanced by the participation of women. She says women are a vital resource for the group since they may be utilised as warriors, informants, and suicide bombers.

Women's participation in Boko Haram has important sociological ramifications. Women's involvement in the group, according to Akilu and Shonibare (2018), has put traditional gender roles and conventions in North-East Nigeria to the test. They contend that communities and family institutions have broken down as a result of women's engagement. The socio-economic repercussions of women's participation in Boko Haram are emphasised by Aliyu (2021). She contends that after joining

the group, women frequently experience financial struggle and social rejection in their home areas. Ibrahim (2023) investigates the psychological damage endured by women kidnapped and held captive by Boko Haram. She contends that PTSD, sadness, and anxiety are common among these women.

Women's roles within Boko Haram are a complicated and multidimensional issue. Ideological, practical, and sociological ramifications result from women's participation in the group. While some women might be coerced into joining Boko Haram, others might actively join due to despair or religious conviction. Developing successful measures to combat the insurgency and aid the victims of its atrocities requires an understanding of the various ways that women interact with Boko Haram.

Women as Symbols of Ideology

The conflict of Boko Haram in north-eastern Nigeria is more than just physical violence. It is a fight on ideas and social conventions as much as it is on human bodies. Women become powerful symbols in this perverted worldview, and their oppression and domination serve as a horrifying embodiment of the group's extreme goals. Current studies explore this terrifying occurrence, emphasising how Boko Haram uses women as weapons to bolster their authority and frighten the populations they attack. The use of women by Boko Haram is not only pragmatic but also firmly ideological. According to Adesanmi (2023), the group's dominance over women's bodies is a powerful representation of their misconstrued understanding of Islam. Their goal is to control every element of life in the area, and the oppression of women becomes a horrifying illustration of their twisted worldview.

Boko Haram uses women as propaganda tools to promote a perverted definition of femininity that serves to further their extreme goals; thus, their control goes beyond simple physical limitations. According to Adesanmi (2023), Boko Haram intentionally seeks to dominate women, rather than having it be an accidental tactic. They use a twisted interpretation of Islam to justify their control over women, viewing it as a potent symbol of their domination and placing women under men's authority. Boko Haram attempts to undermine established social institutions and uphold its patriarchal interpretation of Islam by enforcing stringent clothing regulations, restricting movement, and even using female slaves as rewards for combatants (Mede et al., 2022).

The Perception of Power: Mastering the Story

Boko Haram is aware of how symbolism may influence public opinion. Hutcheon (2023) highlights the group's use of propaganda to demonstrate its dominance over women. Pictures of women being executed in public or kept in veiled segregation serve two purposes. They portray themselves as having unbreakable control over all facets of existence and generate dread in the public (Jasinski, 2021). Through story manipulation, Boko Haram can further strengthen its radical ideology by presenting itself as the upholder of a strict hierarchy.

Beyond mere control, the weaponisation of women's roles results in a terrifying inversion of conventional gender norms. Okech (2020) has drawn attention to the fact that Boko Haram coerces girls into becoming child soldiers and brides, taking advantage of their vulnerability and upending the traditional view of motherhood. It becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between the victims and the offenders when these girls, who are supposed to be raised and shielded, are turned into tools of violence. There are extensive repercussions when women are used as symbols. Long-lasting psychological scars result from the trauma inflicted on women who are coerced into embodying the ideology of Boko Haram (Mede et al., 2022). Additionally, communities are characterised by mistrust and anxiety due to the disintegration of conventional gender roles. Social stigmatisation of women who escape from captivity may arise from their affiliation with the gang (Hutcheon, 2023). Communities become more malleable to Boko Haram's propaganda as a result of this disquiet in society.

Defying the Narrative: Methods of Transformation

Taking a diverse approach is necessary to stop Boko Haram from using female symbols as weapons. The group's ideology can be rendered non-legitimate by educating populations about their misinterpreted view of Islam (Adesanmi, 2023). Further addressing the underlying causes of vulnerability that Boko Haram preys on is possible through endorsing initiatives that stimulate women's economic and social agency. To further mend the rifts in society created by the insurgency, programmes that support community peacebuilding and reconciliation are essential.

Subjugation is just one aspect of Boko Haram's control over women. With their bodies and stories turned into weapons to sow terror and reinforce the radical ideology of the group, women become powerful

symbols. Breaking the propaganda machine of Boko Haram and promoting long-term peace require an understanding of this weaponisation. North-East Nigeria can have a more equitable and peaceful future by opposing Boko Haram's misguided vision and advancing alternative narratives that uplift women and strengthen communities. The ramifications of female participation in Boko Haram are extensive. Hutcheon (2023) highlights the psychological damage done to women who are coerced into violent conduct. This trauma upends not just their personal lives but also entire communities, fostering mistrust and terror. Moreover, the existence of female offenders subverts conventional gender norms and security assumptions, causing enduring damage to the social structure of northeastern Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

It takes a complex theoretical framework that incorporates knowledge from multiple fields to comprehend how Boko Haram uses women as ideological symbols. Two important theoretical perspectives that shed light on the intricate processes at work are examined here:

1. Gender and Power Dynamics:

The theory of gender and power dynamics has no single "founder". It developed in the middle of the 20th century as part of the larger feminist movement. Scholars like Betty Friedan, Judith Butler, and Simone de Beauvoir are important contributors.

The ideology of Boko Haram is firmly based on a strict patriarchal worldview in which men have total control over women. According to feminist researchers such as Sylvia Walby (1990), patriarchy is a system of social institutions that benefits men at the expense of women. Boko Haram perpetuates this power disparity and presents an image of total supremacy by regulating women's bodies, movements, and behaviours (Mede et al., 2022). The idea of symbolic violence, first introduced by Pierre Bourdieu in 1977, highlights how dominant groups force their interpretations and meanings of reality on inferior groups. By controlling how women are portrayed in public and on their bodies, Boko Haram perpetuates symbolic violence that supports their extremist interpretation of Islam and their assertion of total control over all facets of life.

Gender and Power Relations: Using Patriarchy as a Weapon in Boko Haram

Beyond mere subjugation, Boko Haram has complete power over women. They started using it as a calculated tactic to increase their influence and frighten the people they target. Studying the group's distorted gender and power relations in great detail is necessary to comprehend this weaponisation. The strict patriarchal belief that men have ultimate control over women is at the core of Boko Haram's ideology. Patriarchy is a system of social institutions that benefits men and disadvantages women, according to feminist theorists like Sylvia Walby (1990). Boko Haram perpetuates this disparity in power and presents an appearance of total control over women by restricting their bodies, movements, and conduct (Mede et al., 2022).

Policy of Symbolic Violence: Femininity

The idea of symbolic violence, first introduced by Pierre Bourdieu in 1977, highlights how dominant groups force their interpretations and meanings of reality on inferior groups. The way that Boko Haram controls how women are portrayed in public and on their bodies is a kind of symbolic violence. By dictating what "proper" femininity is, they uphold their misguided interpretation of Islam and their assertion that they are in charge of all spheres of existence, including gender roles. The effects of this armed patriarchy are terrible: the disintegration of conventional gender norms fosters mistrust and anxiety in societies. Social stigma may be imposed on women who escape from captivity because of their affiliation with the gang. The women who are coerced into adopting the beliefs of Boko Haram suffer long-lasting psychological damage. Control over women normalises violence against those who disagree with the group's beliefs as well as within it.

Boko Haram's strategy of weaponising patriarchal domination and policing gender aims to achieve symbolic as well as physical dominance. It is essential to comprehend the manipulation of gender power dynamics to undermine their ideology and advance a future in which women are empowered and not used as control symbols.

2. Social Movement Theory:

The wide theoretical framework known as social movement theory first appeared in the middle of the 20th century. It was not created by a single "founder," but rather by a number of political scientists and sociologists, including Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly. According to McCarthy and Zald (1977), social movements need human, material, and symbolic resources to succeed. Using the shock value of female brutality and the subversion of gender norms, Boko Haram uses women as a symbolic resource to attract attention, recruit fighters, and instill dread. Charles Tilly (2004) highlights how social movements present their issues and objectives in a way that appeals to potential supporters. To obtain legitimacy through a perverted understanding of religion, Boko Haram presents its rule over women as upholding a "pure" form of Islam. The use of women as ideological symbols by Boko Haram is consistent with important ideas in social movement theory (SMT).

McCarthy and Zald (1977) suggest that for social movements to succeed, they need resources. Women are a symbolic resource that Boko Haram uses. Utilising female suicide bombers is a way to profit from the perception held by society that women are not violent. The target community is made fearful by this unanticipated violence, which also attracts media attention and tampers with conventional security protocols. Boko Haram's goals are furthered when women are seen carrying guns or following a perverted interpretation of Islam, which disrupts social norms and fosters instability. The framing of social movements' complaints and objectives to appeal to potential followers is emphasised by Charles Tilly (2004). Boko Haram manipulates women to project a particular image. By imposing strict Islamic dress regulations and regulating women's behaviour, the group tries to present itself as upholding a "pure" type of Islam and gains credibility through misinterpretation. Their story of combating societal "corruption" and justifying their violent behaviour is strengthened by the representation of autonomous or bare-chested women as threats.

We can comprehend Boko Haram's motivations better when we apply social movement theory, gender, and power dynamics to their particular activities. Women are not only used by Boko Haram as victims but are also strategically employed as tools for recruitment, attention-grabbing, and brutality justification. They create a story in which women who don't conform to their strict demands are viewed as dangerous, which helps them maintain control and terrify the communities they

target. With this new perspective, we can create more sophisticated counter-narratives and tactics to undermine the ideology of Boko Haram and advance enduring peace.

Combining the Frameworks: A Comprehensive Perspective

These theoretical frameworks provide a wealth of information for comprehending how Boko Haram uses women as ideological symbols. The focus on patriarchal control sheds light on the power relationships at play. According to social movement theory, groups strategically use women to achieve their agendas by serving as symbols and resources. We transcend oversimplified narratives of victimisation or agency by combining these lenses. We are aware of the intricate interactions that exist between security concerns, gender roles, and power dynamics within Boko Haram. This nuanced viewpoint is essential for creating powerful counter-narratives, supporting programmes for peacebuilding, and eventually creating a future in which women in BAY states of North-East Nigeria are empowered actors, rather than symbols, influencing the development of a more equitable future.

Methodology

To investigate the complexity of women's roles in Boko Haram terrorist activities in North-East, Nigeria, this concept paper conducted a systematic literature review (SLR). An SLR provides a straightforward and rigorous method for compiling and evaluating previous research on a certain subject. The paper's research question was honed to give the literature study a clear direction. A thorough search approach was used to find pertinent scholarly publications. For this, a variety of Internet databases and additional resources were used. Primary databases include those for political science, conflict studies, women and gender issues including gender-based violence, women in leadership, and issues around Boko Haram. Google Scholar, EBSCOhost and JSTOR were mobilised for the search in order to achieve the target using also the keywords being *Boko Haram*, *counterterrorism*, *insurgency*, *gender*, *Nigeria*, *power dynamics*, *social movement theory*, *Women*. A total of 100 papers were read from the various secondary search engines, we looked through the references of related papers to find more relevant researches and condensed the searches to the paper finally used. To augment the academic literature,

official government websites, information from credible think tanks, and academic publications from pertinent organisations were consulted.

Criteria for Inclusion and Exclusion

Clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed to guarantee the calibre and applicability of the material that was retrieved. Among these requirements are the following: the review was limited to works that have been published in the last 20 years to include the most recent developments in insurgency activities of Boko Haram and the history of Boko Haram and women in terrorism and counterterrorism. Peer-reviewed book chapters and journal articles were the main focus of the review. Due to a lack of resources, the review concentrated on literature written in English.

Discussion

To further the discussion on the group, it is pertinent to put the context in perspective so as to foreground the objectives of this paper. Thus:

Analysing the extent to which women's involvement in Boko Haram reinforces or challenges existing ideological tenets within the group and the specific roles they play in their operations

To achieve and analyse the extent to which women's involvement in Boko Haram reinforces or challenges existing ideological tenets within the group, it is important to appreciate the group. Boko Haram, founded in 2002 and officially known as Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād, is an Islamist terrorist jihadist organisation based in northeastern Nigeria, particularly the states of Borno, Adamawa and Yobe otherwise called the BAY states. It is also active in Chad, Niger, northern Cameroon, and Mali. It started more as a religious movement and was dominated by men who held extreme Islamic views on social, political, and cultural issues.

The ideology of Boko Haram is firmly based on a strict patriarchal worldview in which men have total control over women. According to feminist researchers such as Sylvia Walby (1990), patriarchy is a system of social institutions that benefits men at the expense of women. The gender and power dynamics theoretical framework becomes apt in this regard. An ideology that was started by the male gender suddenly found

the strategic use of women in their operations. The recruitment process is the power relations and dynamics in an Islamic society where women are voiceless, and patriarchy is the norm.

Studies in the past used to pay less attention to the roles women play in terrorist attacks due to assumptions that they are victims of terrorist groups and many times suffer rape and abuses, and are held as sex slaves or human shields. However, some studies in the Middle East have signposted that some women are also perpetrators of terrorism or accomplices with terrorist groups. In his work on *female suicide bombers*, Zedalis (2004) argues that suicide bombers are a modern weapon choice because they are a low-cost, low-technology, and low-risk weapon. He also believes that suicide bombers are readily available, require little training, leave no trace behind, and strike fear into the general population. The success of suicide bombers is dependent upon an element of surprise and accessibility to targeted areas or populations. Both of these required elements have been successfully employed in the recent use of women as suicide bombers (Zedalis, 2004). Female suicide bombers were used in the past. However, the recent spate of female suicide bombers in different venues, in different countries, and for different terrorist organisations has forced scholars in the conflict field to research more into it, including this paper.

Bloom (2007) believes that the world became more apprehensive over the trend of growing involvement of women in terrorism since Muriel Degauque, a Belgian convert to radical Islam, blew herself up in Iraq in 2006. She recalls that Degauque's attack occurred on the same day that Sajida Atrous al-Rishawi's improvised explosive device (IED) failed to detonate at a wedding in Amman, Jordan in the Middle East. This apparent growing trend of women bombers has the general public and counterterrorism specialists concerned because of its implication that women will be key players in future terrorist attacks (Nolen, 2016).

Events in Nigeria have shown that women have participated in terrorist acts by acting as human bombers and serving as human support structures to Boko Haram, the most notorious terrorist group in Nigeria. Onuoha and George (2015) give a historical perspective that Boko Haram was created in 2002 in Maiduguri, Borno State, by Islamist cleric Mohammed Yusuf. Although widely referred to as the Boko Haram (*'Western education is forbidden'*), the authors argue that Boko haram prefers to be called by its original name Jama'atu Ahlissunnah Lidda'awati wal Jihad, meaning a *"People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad"*. Its ideology is based on extreme Islamic teaching which rejects

most Western ideas and institutions as un-Islamic. After their confrontation and the killing of their leader in 2009, the sect went underground and became more deadly with different cells emerging, especially in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe states known as the BAY states. This event started a series of other events that led to the introduction of female bombers in the BAY states in particular being the hotbed of Boko Haram activities (Nnam, Arua, & Otu, 2018; Markovic, 2019).

Examining the social, economic, and cultural implications of women's involvement in Boko Haram

As earlier discussed in the theoretical framework which is mobilised to put this objective in context, social movement theory highlights the importance of the need of human, material, and symbolic resources to succeed. This speaks to the strategy of Boko Haram; although it started as a male-dominated and patriarchy Islamic-dominated extreme views realised the need to recruit and mobilise the female gender to succeed since they see them as an asset.

The activities of Boko Haram have endangered the socio-economic development of women in the BAY states, not only with their disruptive activities in the states, mostly the state capitals of Maiduguri, Yola and Damaturu respectively, but also the women are not able to attend schools and learn new skills. They stand the risk of being kidnapped as in the case of the 276 schoolgirls kidnapped in April 2014 from a Government Secondary School in Chibok, a town in Borno State (Habiba, 2017) and the over 100 schoolgirls aged between 11 and 19 abducted in Dapchi, a town in Yobe State from Government Girls Science and Technical College on February 19, 2018 (Puldu & Stephen, 2022). These assaults against women in the BAY states are most likely going to create another social problem as argued by Oriola (2023), and this social problem will become its own ecosystem for politicians and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to profit from and complicate the already dire situation.

Conclusion

Women's varied involvement in the Boko Haram insurgency in northeastern Nigeria has been examined in this concept paper. Through the application of social movement theory as well as gender and power dynamics theory, we have been able to better understand the obstacles

that women encounter and the variables that lead to their involvement. To analyse the methods in which women have been organised and mobilised inside Boko Haram, social movement theory has offered a framework. Our understanding of the elements that encourage women to join the group and the tactics they employ to thwart its authority has improved as a result. Examining the gendered aspects of women's experiences in Boko Haram has been made easier by the theory of gender and power dynamics.

It has aided us in comprehending how patriarchal systems can restrict women's autonomy and agency and how they disadvantage them. The article has emphasised how women are both the victims and the perpetrators of the brutality committed by Boko Haram. Some women may join the group willingly out of despair or religious belief, while others may be coerced. The intricate web of power dynamics that women encounter inside Boko Haram may restrict their independence and agency. The difficulties that women in Boko Haram face must be addressed with a multipronged strategy that takes into account the various demands and experiences of women in the conflict. This entails addressing the underlying reasons of the insurgency, advancing gender participation but with a disposition that women can help promote social stability in the communities including the Boko Haram community, rather than being recruited for some heinous activities, and offering assistance to women who have been kidnapped or coerced into marriage.

Recommendations

Notwithstanding the notable advancements in the fight against Boko Haram, more work is required to fortify counterterrorism protocols. This entails tackling the underlying reasons of the insurgency, strengthening military capabilities and increasing information gathering. In counterterrorism measures, women impacted by Boko Haram should be given priority. Access to healthcare, education, and employment possibilities are all part of this. Women must be empowered and gender equality must be promoted to address the underlying roots of Boko Haram. Giving women equal chances and questioning patriarchal conventions are two examples of this.

The foundation of counterterrorism initiatives should be a thorough awareness of local populations. Interacting with traditional authorities, civil society organisations, and community leaders is part of this. The difficulties that women in Boko Haram experience are largely addressed

by women's organisations that are receiving assistance from governments and international organisations. However, there is a need for these women organisations to design ways of going beyond the entrenched patriarchy in the communities, and to deliver the message of how women can be useful in the community other than being recruited into terrorist acts. It is feasible to address the intricate problems presented by Boko Haram and create a more fair and just society in northeastern Nigeria by putting these suggestions into practice.

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