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Women's informal peacebuilding in North East Nigeria

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Since 2009, the Boko Haram insurgency and the government's military response has killed thousands and displaced more than three million people. Boko haram has kidnapped thousands of adults and children. Both Christians and Muslims have been victims of Boko Haram's brutality. The most well known kidnapping case in international media in recent years is from 2014, where 276 mostly Christian female students were kidnapped from the Secondary School in the town of Chibok in Borno State. Borno State is the epicentre of the Boko Haram insurgency, which has affected northern Nigeria, Nigeria, Chad and Cameroon.

Boko Haram and the Insurgency

Jama'atu Ahlis Sunnah Lida'awati wal Jihad (JAS), commonly known as Boko Haram has waged an armed campaign against the Nigerian state since 2009. Boko Haram means "Western education is a sin" in Hausa, the dominant language of the

north-eastern region of Nigeria. Its ultimate goal is to create an Islamic state. Boko Haram's leader, Abubakar Shekau has pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (IS) since 2015.

The insurgency has dramatically affected the lives of women and girls living in this region. Over 2,000 women and girls are estimated to have been abducted since the start of the insurgency. Women and girls are forced to take on domestic service, including cooking and cleaning, sexual abuse through forced marriage or as sex slaves, according to Human Right Watch. They are also trained to take on conflict service tasks, such as information gathering. Although men are more at risk of being killed, women and girls may also be killed as they are suspected to be security force collaborators or as insurgency combatants, including so-called 'suicide' bombers, many of whom are girls too young to consent, and women under coercion.

Women and Marginalization in the North East

The North East of Nigeria is a heavily patriarchal society, both in the predominantly Muslim community and in the Christian community. The region's religious and cultural norms have defined women's status through reproduction and largely confined them to a domestic role (despite their actual participation in agricultural tasks). Women's access to education and formal labor market is restricted in a context where men are seen as breadwinners and women as caregivers. Women in the North East do not usually own land or homes which makes them vulnerable in case of divorce or widowhood. Northern women are furthermore politically marginalised. The representation of women in legislative state assemblies in the North East is extremely low. Cultural, religious and legal inequalities combined with poverty, has contributed to further marginalization with high female illiteracy, low school attendance and high rates of child marriage.

This context places restrictions on women's mobility and plays on conservative gender ideologies, which are further acted on by the insurgency. This complicates peacebuilding and specifically the inclusion of women as full actors in prevention, protection, mediation and peace building including reconstruction.

Methodology

We engaged mostly from people directly affected by the conflict. We ran four volunteer-based discussion groups with women in Internally Displaced Peoples' (IDP) camps in Maiduguri, where the largest number of IDPs are now. Similarly, three volunteer discussion groups were held with IDP women living in host neighbourhoods of Maiduguri. The seven discussion groups comprised around seventy women, coming from eighteen local government areas of North East Nigeria. In the IDP Camps, we also observed anti-stigmatisation awareness sessions and community tolerance and mediation trainings, and psycho-social counselling group sessions. In addition, we spoke with around 20 women there who had returned to Konduga Local Government area, as the army had declared it safe. In addition to the focused discussion groups, we also had informal conversations with IDP women.

In addition to talking with IDP women themselves we conducted 25 interviews with representatives of women's rights, peace, religious and community groups and networks, state agencies, traditional leaders, International Nongovernmental Organizations (INGO) representatives in security, humanitarian aid and reconstruction, policy-makers, researchers and individual activists in both Maiduguri at the local state level and Abuja, the federal capital territory.

Following the preliminary analysis of the data from the discussion groups and the interviews, a series of five workshops were held, with the women IDPs in Maiduguri and select groups of the interviewees in both Maiduguri and Abuja. These workshops fed back the researchers' analyses for critique and revision, and which worked on developing recommendations based on the revised analyses and jointly agreeing them. These recommendations are presented in the latter part of this chapter.

Women's informal peacebuilding

Insurgency and counter-insurgency have dramatically changed the lives of thousands of women and girls, casting them voluntarily, by force or for lack of other options into new, evolving roles outside the domestic sphere. Some women fight against Boko Haram within local vigilante units, like the *kungiyar marhaba* (hunters' association) and notably the Borno state-based Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF). Others play critical roles in relief and reconciliation, while many displaced by fighting find themselves with new responsibilities as heads of households.

Despite the changing role of women, they are still largely marginalized from political decision-making processes. Two IDPs interviewed by the authors in 2018 stated that;

"We the women are side lined in all the process of either peacebuilding or planning of anything that will bring development in the town. We the women need to voice out until someone hear our cry, and come to our rescue in Konduga and beyond."

"To be frank with you the men, especially the camp leaders never involve the women leaders in the camp when issues of peace building are discussed, they believed their words are final"

Although northern Nigerian women (Christian as well as Muslim) are often stereotyped as marginalized and portrayed as victims, the new roles women are taking in the context of violent terrorism is creating counter-narratives where women demonstrate agency through informal peacebuilding activities. Some women courageously buy time for men and boys to escape when Boko Haram attacks their community. They also hide men and boys, including dressing them as women/girls to facilitate their escapes, and smuggle them to safety. Although women have largely been excluded from peacebuilding discussions, women have negotiated with Boko Haram at the local level to have abductees returned and even offered themselves in exchange for their children. Others try to bring Boko Haram and government officials to the negotiating table such as Aisha Wakil and Hamsatu Al Amin have done.

Women in Borno have organised 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 they took involved the Bring Back Our Girls (BBOG) campaign. Meant to be a one-day march in 2014 to bring back the Chibok school girls, the movement includes a call to bring all girls and women home. In addition to

the work in the North East itself, for the last five years BBOG has held weekly sit in in Abuja, numerous events in Lagos, Ibadan, Kaduna and other cities of Nigeria, as well as mobilising an global virtual campaign. Women's organisations are also mediating and building community support for returned abductees who are pregnant/having children whose fathers are/were in Boko Haram. There is a stigma, especially for women who have children born to Boko Haram fathers, even if the pregnancy was against their will. This is a major obstacle to reintegration into community life, which women actively work to change. Their work seem to bear some fruits as an IDP stated in an interview that;

"I will accept her and the child, because she is my daughter, and was forcefully taken away from home by the insurgents. No matter what condition she enters she is still my daughter. I will accept her and take care of her like I use to do, when life was normal with us in Bama".

The same interviewee stated that he would take back his wife if she is abducted by Boko Haram, but he would not accept the baby;

"the truth is that I will not accept the baby. I know the baby is innocent, but I will not have peace of mind if I see him/her".

Advocacy against stigma and reintegration of abductees is a major topic on the agenda inside and outside of the camps, but also other issues are dealt with. These include: economic support for families whose fathers/husbands were killed, injured or missing, as well as humanitarian relief for those displaced in general; organising capacity-building for making a livelihood for women – sometimes being able to include also (very) small capital grants so that the trainees can actually use the capacity building; caring for 'separated children' including orphans, and working with 'gang youth.' This work is conducted by local women's organizations such as 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 marginalised, Al Ansar, Hope for All Foundation. Some projects are also carried out by international NGOs active in the area, like the Norwegian Refugee Council and Search for Common Ground.

However, Nigerian women's organisations, both national and especially state and local community associations, are badly under-resourced. In the current context in Borno state and local women's organisations were doing the work described above with very small

funds, often through donations through connections and contexts. When the INGOs came in, with their donor aid, they were given privileged access to IDP camps and set up their own projects and programmes – often ignoring the work that had been done previously and hiring (at much higher salaries) women to work on the INGO programmes.

Sexual and domestic violence

The violence and brutality of Boko Haram is a major cause of insecurity, but there is also a growing concern among IDP women in the region regarding sexual exploitation and domestic violence. Household gender relations have changed as women's economic contributions to household maintenance, to a large extent through informal work, became more clearly needed and more visible. This change in status has led to what a reported increase in violence against women within the household, because men feel their masculinity threatened.

But the violence also extends to the insecurity within the IDP camps. Supposedly a safe haven, corruption in the distribution of limited humanitarian supplies and abuse of power by members of security forces and camp staff inside the government controlled IDP camps renders women vulnerable. Stories emerging from our interviews confirm that security force members too often require sexual 'favours' before granting exit passes from camps to women or reduce their misappropriation of food and supplies intended for camp residents. IDP women inside the camps have started to voice their concerns about both coerced sex and 'sex for money.' An IDP from Dalori camp interviewed for this study noted that;

“from my experience in the IDP camp in the last three years, I have realised that the security personnel attached to the camp use their position to molest young girls and even older ones whenever there are materials to be distributed”.

Another IDP from Teacher's Village IDP Camp stated that;

“The problem many of us are facing is the harassment by the security personnel in our camp. If we want to go out of the camp and have to get permission from them, we are asked to go to a room to collect a pass and most times we are sexually assaulted”

Organisations like Baobab for Women's Human Rights Borno state branch have taken this up and demanded accountability.

Poverty and inability to procure food for their families also made girls more vulnerable to child marriage and women increasingly vulnerable to solicitation and sexual

exploitation in exchange for food or other assistance. Organizations such as the Centre for Women and Adolescents and Women's Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative have been active against domestic violence and child marriage. For example, they try to sensitise the parent in the community on the harmful effects of child marriage, such as negative health consequences. Sensitizing sessions target parents as well as the girls at risk.

Added to that, the legal framework is lacking. None of the six states in the North East geo-political zone have enacted the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act, passed at Federal level in 2015, after fourteen years of campaigning nationally by women's rights and gender activists, including women from North East Nigeria. Legal reform is seen as an important step in protecting women from gender based violence.

Women Organizing across Religious Divides

Boko Haram has attacked both Christians and Muslims, convincing women's organizations to combine forces to find ways to create more tolerant communities and build peace. A Network of Civil Society Organizations in Borno State (NECSOB), directed by a woman Fatima Shehu Imam, mobilized along inter-faith lines to provide humanitarian aid and assistance to victims of the insurgency. Women's organizations throughout the northern states affected by Boko Haram attacks have built alliances across religious differences, including to protest abduction of girls and women. Blessing Mshelia from the Women's Wing of the Christian Association of Nigeria interviewed in this study stated that;

“Christians and Muslims have to come together and pray and fight the menace of the insurgence (Boko Haram). Now we are making them accept even their women who were impregnated by the Boko Haram, because it was not their deeds, but the terrorist deeds. Interfaith-dialogue is one of the way for Christians and Muslims to come together and plan how to bring out the truth to each other, and achieve a deal on peace and sustain it, without allowing any lies to disrupt the peace process that is being built”.

Indeed, working across sectarian divides had long been a strategy of the women's movement – both at national level as with their participation in the Legislative Advocacy Coalition Against Violence Against Women, for the passage of the 2015 Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP), and at state level in continuing to push for local state adoption of the federal VAPP Act, and, in peace work, for example, Borno state was the first to develop a State Action Plan for the implementation

of UNSCR 1325 on ensuring women's participation in peace-making. In all of these women in the North East (as elsewhere in Nigeria) have come together across religious and other identity lines to defend and promote women's rights. The insurgency has now strengthened this, as Ms Mshelia explained;

“Boko Haram started with a cover of religion. The Christians developed a phobia because of killing of Christians, and it affected the relationship between Christians and Muslims. But it has been conceptualized that the problems affected many people, which is almost everybody. Now the relationship [of inter-religious cooperation] is coming back to life.”

Conclusion

The patriarchal context of the North East places restrictions on women's mobility and plays on conservative gender ideologies, which are further acted on by the insurgency. This complicates peacebuilding and specifically the inclusion of women as full actors in peacebuilding. Although women are largely seen as victims in need of protection, they are engaging in informal peacebuilding and through that demonstrating their agency and advocacy for a better future. Several of the women who participated in the study have started or joined women's rights and IDP organisations and become activists in their own right.

Recommendations

Generally, there is a need to end the insurgency, ensure food security and livelihoods and development of a marginalized region of Nigeria. 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 marginalisation and exclusion leaves women as a group in even more precarious conditions than men.

Specifically, for the benefit of women, the women (and men) in the study made the following recommendations:

- The representation of women in politics more broadly, including in peacebuilding structures is low so there is a lack of female leaders speaking on behalf of women in decision-making. We recommend that the number of women represented in state assemblies and other decision-making structures in the North East regions should be increased. Also, women leaders should be appointed in camps and for IDPs in the communities.
- Women's rights and IDP organizations should be supported and enabled to build capacity. Although women in the North East region are resilient, their nascent organizations which have been born in a patriarchal, asset-poor and conflictual context is in need of resources, including capacity building, facilitating dialogue between women of different religions within the communities, IDP women, female politicians and women represented in government institutions, as well as for independent livelihoods.
- Women must be protected from gender-based violence, not only from Boko Haram, but also armed forces and state security, as well as within the communities, including domestic violence and child marriage. One important step is to push for and enact violence against women laws. This should come in tandem with campaigns to recognise women's rights to autonomy and to be free of violence, as well as anti-stigmatization campaigns and support for victims of gender-based violence, including abductees of Boko Haram.

The **'Women and Peacebuilding in Africa'** project looks at the cost of women's exclusion and the possibilities for their inclusion in peace talks, peacebuilding, and politics in Somalia, Algeria, northern Nigeria, South Sudan, and Sudan. The project also examines the struggle for women's rights legal reform and political representation as one important arena for stemming the tide of extremism related to violence in Africa.

The three themes that make up the project are:

- 1) Inclusion and exclusion in postconflict governance
- 2) Women activists' informal peacebuilding strategies
- 3) Women's legal rights as a site of contestation.

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Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI) is an independent, non-profit research institution and a major international centre in policy-oriented and applied development research. Focus is on development and human rights issues and on international conditions that affect such issues. The geographical focus is Sub-Saharan Africa, Southern and Central Asia, the Middle East and Latin America.

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