

**‘WEAKER SEX’ AS AGGRESSOR: SUICIDE BOMBINGS AND STRATEGIC LOGIC OF GENDER MAINSTREAMING IN NIGERIA’S *BOKO HARAM* TERRORISM**

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**ABSTRACT:** *This essay is about the current wave of suicide bombings in Nigeria; a phenomenon hitherto alien to the country. The increasing rate of female suicide terrorists raises more curiosity among gender/security scholars and the womenfolk in general. Though a noble concept in its original context and application, gender mainstreaming has become a useful policy option for the terrorist organisation to pursue their objectives in Northern Nigeria. Thus, the popular idea of propagating women as a weaker sex seems to have evaporated with the reality of integrating a gender perspective into all stages of terrorist organisation’s deadly activities, particularly in an African country. Why has it become more advantageous for terrorist organizations to use women to support or execute terrorist activities? This essay examines the concept of gender mainstreaming within the context of terrorist operations, focusing on mode of recruitment and indoctrination and the Boko Haram’s strategic logic behind the use of female bombers. The implication of this trend on the Nigerian state and gender stereotyping is also analysed.*

**KEYWORDS:** Insurgency, Gender Mainstreaming, Weaker Sex, Suicide Bombing, Aggressor

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Over the past three decades, researchers have learned much about the motivations of suicide bombers, the rationales of the organizations that support them, their modus operandi, the precipitants of suicide attacks, and the effects of counterterrorism on insurgent behavior. Much of what they have learned is at odds with conventional wisdom and the thinking of policymakers who guide counter terrorist strategy (Brym, 2007:40). It is noted that suicide bombings represent the ultimate terrorist tactic. Beside their tactical advantages, they also have the capability of satisfying many terrorist objectives in a single attack: demonstration of dedication and capability, attracting attention and media coverage, producing a high number of casualties, and instigating general feelings of vulnerability (Dolnik, 2009:113).

Since the attack on the World Trade Center in September 11, 2001, terrorism has become a matter of every-day public issue, discussed as one of the top topics in daily news. However, these discussions rarely focus on the implication of gender on the issue, and Islamic terrorism is intuitively perceived as “masculine” rather than “feminine” (Figler, 2013). Suicide attacks are not new in history, but the general public views them as an unprecedented threat to its security because of their relatively recent revival. Of particular interest, however, is the role of women in carrying out suicide attacks. Madukovich (2015) observes that before it became norm in Nigeria’s North East, Female Suicide Bombers were already in the news in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia (maybe a few in Syria) and other places where so called Jihadist groups were locked in what seems like eternal battles against the government of the day which are sometimes supported by western powers.

As noted by Cronin (2003:15), the use of women in suicide attacks may point to a broadening to include members of society not usually recruited by contemporary terrorist organizations for this type of mission. Although female participation in terrorism is not historically unusual (notably among left-wing groups), participation in suicide attacks is less common. Similarly, though it is accepted in terrorism studies that terrorists are rational actors, female suicide bombers are often framed by the media as individuals driven to act on the basis of emotion, not rationality (Becker, 2014).

While men continue to dominate the spectrum of suicide terrorism, the inclusion of women employed as suicide bombers by terrorist organizations remains a challenging, yet fascinating field of study (Halu, 2011:1). Women are perceived as the protectors and givers of life, rather than the destroyers. They are often perceived as victims of violence or of society, as widows or mothers, or as passive supporters – part of a support network. She symbolises the guardian of tradition, a symbol of motherhood and life. How can she then, seemingly contradictory to this, give her life to violence and death?

Ironically, while this remains a puzzle, Debra Zedalis (2007:59), a leading expert on counterterrorism, makes six predictions for the future use of females in suicide bombings: First, terrorists will continue to use Islamic converts who have the advantage of blending in with Westerners. Second, future bombings will include multiple targets and will include sequential and simultaneous bombings. Third, female suicide bombers will continue to focus on high value targets. Fourth, the internet will continue to be a prime resource for recruitment of women. Fifth, women will increasingly fill strategic-level positions in terrorist organizations. Finally, terrorist organizations will begin to use young women and women who are pregnant to commit terrorist acts. Alvanou (2006:95) argues that “the unequal position of women in society due to social oppression and economic dependency on men and the state, especially in the environments where female suicide terrorism occurs, has to be examined”. It becomes expedient, therefore, to begin to take an introspective examination of some of the Zedalis’ prognostications between 2007 when she wrote the essay and now that female terrorism has crept into the most world’s populous black nation, Nigeria.

### **Conceptualising Gender and Gender mainstreaming**

Gender refers to the social construction of women and men, of femininity and masculinity, which varies in time and place, and between cultures. The notion of gender appeared in the seventies and was put forward by feminist theorists who challenged the secondary position of women in society. It departs from the notion of sex to signal that biology or anatomy is not a destiny. It is important to distinguish clearly between gender and sex. These terms are often used interchangeably while they are conceptually distinctive (Fröhlich, 2014:3). Mainstreaming a gender perspective means assessing the implications of any planned action for both women and men. This approach seeks to ensure that women and men benefit equally by integrating their experiences and concerns into the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres.

The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality. The most frequently cited definition of gender mainstreaming in the European literature is that devised by Mieke Verloo as Chair of the Council of Europe Group of Experts on Gender Mainstreaming: Gender mainstreaming is the (re)organisation, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes, so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels at all stages, by the actors normally involved in policy making (Council of Europe, 1998: 15). In other words, it is an

organisational strategy to bring a gender perspective to all aspects of an institution's policy and activities, through building gender capacity and accountability.

With a mainstreaming strategy, gender concerns are seen as important to all aspects of development; for all sectors and areas of activity, and a fundamental part of the planning process. Responsibility for the implementation of gender policy is diffused across the organisational structure, rather than concentrated in a small central unit. Such a process of mainstreaming has been seen to take one of two forms. The agenda-setting approach to mainstreaming seeks to transform the development agenda itself whilst prioritising gender concerns. The more politically acceptable integrationist approach brings women's and gender concerns into all of the existing policies and programmes, focusing on adapting institutional procedures to achieve this. In both cases, political as well as technical skills are essential to a mainstreaming strategy (Reeves and Baden, 2000:11).

It could be deduced from the above explanation that effective gender mainstreaming seeks to address men's and women's differential barriers to full participation in political, economic, social and community development. If the process of integrating the concerns of women and men in design, implementation and evaluation of all planned activities ensures that both men and women benefit, which is a noble initiative, could insurgents have also found it strategic for their deadly activities? Perhaps, as opined by Pearson (2014), Boko Haram has already recognized the strategic advantages women can present in terms of operating under the radar. Women have been carrying out tasks such as smuggling weapons since the state of emergency was declared in 2012. Women are now clearly involved in other Boko Haram activities, as the arrest of the female cell shows. The bigger picture is one of women and girls involved in a variety of capacities as Boko Haram enters a pivotal stage of its organizational development.

### **Internal Insurgency in Nigeria: An Overview**

Since the late 80s, West Africa has been a hotbed of violent conflict and wars, from Sierra Leone, Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea Bissau, Casamance in Senegal and Togo, to the Niger Delta in Nigeria. Most of these armed conflicts have been waged between rebel/militia groups and state governments and have taken unconventional forms, defying traditional 'fighting' zones by taking wars right into homes and having a high human cost. The nature of these conflicts and the fact that they originate from the bush, close to rural/grassroots communities, exposes and draws local populations into the violence conundrum, completely disregarding the provisions of both international humanitarian and human rights laws (Alaga, 2010:3).

Nigeria's internal security has been significantly undermined by violent activities of armed non-state actors, largely made up of radicalised youth groups as foot soldiers. Prominent among these groups are the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), the O'Odia People's Congress (OPC), the Arewa People's Congress (APC), Bakassi Boys, Egbesu Boys, the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), and more recently, Boko Haram, Ansaru, 'Kala-Kato', and Ombatse, among others (CLEEN Foundation, 2014:2). These ethnic militias have contributed to the cycle of violence over the years. They have a political element to them and are often seen as self-defense by particular ethno-religious communities. The fact is these many ethnic militias and separatist groups in Nigeria are proof that there are many grievances and injustices in the system (Firsing, 2012).

Nigeria's government has struggled for several decades with security challenges in the southeast of the country, particularly the Niger Delta (Forest, 2012:45). In this region,

particularly since the advent of democracy in 1999, the crises began to manifest in various ways- militancy, hostage taking and kidnapping of oil workers and frequent disruption of oil production activities through the destruction of oil and gas installations and facilities.

Collectively, these forms of violence had a negative impact on oil production in the region. Foreign oil companies closed down several facilities and sent personnel back home (Forest, 2012:48). Obi (2009:116) avers that various Niger Delta ethnic minorities led the agitation for resource control. Some environmental/human rights groups protesting against the exploitation, neglect and pollution of the region by successive governments and oil companies also supported them. They expressed the view that the control of their oil resources by outsiders was akin to 'internal colonialism' and demanded for the right to control their own resource, oil. Such demands were largely ignored by the various military regimes that also repressed such protests.

Until Boko Haram's transition to extreme violence, perhaps the most virulent of the radical Islamic movements was the Maitatsine uprising in the 1980s or the Yan Shi'a movement in the 1990s. But all of these movements could be described as international in some respect: their members or ideologies all crossed beyond Nigeria's northern borders, or they referred to global models of Islamism in Iran or Saudi Arabia (Montclos, 2014:6). The Maitatsine movement was led by a Cameroonian preacher known as Marwa, who arrived in the northern Nigerian city of Kano around 1970 and took up many of Dan Fodio's teachings. Marwa preached against Nigeria's secular government, political corruption, and the moderate religious establishment. He quickly gained many followers, especially among the poor. During the 1970s, the Maitatsine gradually turned more violent, and relations between the group and the government deteriorated. Marwa was killed in 1980 during a confrontation with police. The movement dispersed, but reemerged as isolated pockets of extremism in the northern part of the country. Maitatsine teachings are said to be a source of ideological inspiration for Boko Haram (Ofstedal, 2013:9).

While it is comparable to the Maitatsine group, Boko Haram also draws ideas and inspiration from newer radical Muslim entities. Importantly, it has concrete links with not only al-Qaeda, but a number of radical African Muslim jihadi groups as well. The skills they have imparted have made Boko Haram a much more significant threat than Maitatsine. Boko Haram's principal goal is to create a strict Islamic state in the north that it believes would address the ills of society, including corruption and bad governance (ICG, 2014:9). The group, Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS) (People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad), known commonly as Boko Haram, has been waging a campaign of violence in northern Nigeria in its effort to create an Islamic state governed by strict Shariah Law (Watchlist, 2014:13).

Today, Nigeria records the world's highest casualties from terrorist attacks per day with an average of 24 deaths, higher than Iraq and Somalia, according to a survey by Maplecroft, a UK-based Risk analytics Company. "The country has been host to 146 reported attacks in the period 01 July 2013 to 30 June 2014, resulting in 3,477 killed - an average of 24 people killed per attack, compared to 2 deaths per attack in Iraq. The increased capacity of Boko Haram - as illustrated by attacks on the key centers of Abuja and Lagos in June 2014 - is likely to lead to a further loss of investor confidence in Nigeria's ability to respond to security risks in the country," (See the report: <http://maplecroft.com/portfolio/new-analysis/2014/07/23/global-terrorism-fatalities-30-risk-attacks-increase-most-china-egypt-kenya-and-libya-maplecroft/>).

Irrespective of the state of mind of the government, a war between Nigeria and Boko Haram has been raging. Not only have people been massacred and villages sacked, territories are also being occupied and flags hoisted to establish the occupation of 'conquered' lands. No fewer than two dozen towns and villages in three states – Adamawa, Borno and Yobe – have been captured and a caliphate allegedly declared over them. This is the simplest understanding of war. So, the government should not be deluded that it is grappling with mere religious rascals; rather it is contending with an outlaw demanding sovereignty. More than before, the fight has now escalated from one of dissuasion of fanatics and bigots to one of recapturing occupied territories (The Guardian, 2014).

### **Boko Haram and the New Strategy in Female Suicide Bombers**

Although women taking part in terrorist and extremist acts is not new and dates back more than a century, their presence in terrorist organizations as both leaders and executors is increasing around the globe (Sutten, 2009:1). The usual interpretation, including the interpretation that persists in Western literature and defence studies, is that women are not allowed to fight in jihad, and their emergence as terrorists is something new, alarming and unprecedented. However, several noted scholars have questioned this assumption. Today, women's role in religious terrorism is growing; female terrorists have staged attacks in Israel, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Chechnya (Davis, 2006:1) and since June 2014 in Nigeria, there has been a disturbing spike in female suicide bombers.

Women's role in terrorist organisations have also transformed since 1970s. Women across the ideological spectrum played different roles at different times. The use of women for "soft tasks" like logistics and recruitment gradually started to change in the mid-1980s when they started playing a much more visible frontline role (Raghavan and Balasubramaniyan, 2014:197). Female suicide bombers are said to be even more effective than men for a variety of reasons. At least until recently, their use as operatives has been completely unexpected. Soldiers and security personnel have been guided by profiles and stereotypes of terrorists as men.

Terrorist organizations have deliberately used these preconceptions to their advantage by employing operatives who do not fit the conventional profile. They widened the field in which they look for volunteers, and found them among women and even children. The women bombers also tend to be more successful than men. They have higher kill rates and can penetrate the target more deeply than many of the men who might get stopped at the entrance of a bus or restaurant. The ability to get deep inside a location increases the effectiveness both of the explosive materials and the shrapnel packed into the IED (See <http://elearning.la.psu.edu/hls/805-old/lesson-2/women-who-kill>).

Very hard to detect because of the tender human sentiments harboured towards womanhood, female suicide bombers, some of them teenagers, have suddenly become the newest weapons of mass destruction in the hands of Boko Haram terrorists. In the latest tactical offensive, hijab-wearing women, laced with improvised explosive belts, are increasingly wasting lives in northern Nigeria (The Punch, 2014). The use of girl suicide bombers indicates a desperate attempt by the insurgents to prove their reach and capability after the decisive defeat they suffered at the hands of the self-defence groups in Borno, popularly known as Civilian JTF. The absence of accompanying gunmen in such suicide bombings carried out by small girls may well indicate the extremely limited capability of the insurgents (Atiku, 2014).



The pace and intensity of Boko Haram's attacks, especially against civilian targets, dramatically increased after the federal government imposed a state of emergency in Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe states in mid-2013. Since then, and even more intensely since January 2014, the group has perpetrated almost-daily attacks on villages and towns, and laid siege to highways (HRW, 2014:15). In July 2014, almost four months after the Nigerian Islamist group Boko Haram abducted around 270 schoolgirls from Chibok in Borno state, a series of suicide attacks caused fresh panic across the country. In as many days, four suicide bombings targeted Kano, a major city in northern Nigeria. It was not just the quick succession of the bombs that caused this panic, but that all the attacks were carried out by teenage women (Pearson, 2014).

The group's brutal notoriety did not traditionally focus on its penchant for kidnapping girls, but for butchering entire schools of male children. On 6 July 2013, the group launched an attack on a local secondary school in Mamudo killing forty-two students and staff. On 29 September 2013 in Gujba they launched an attack on the College of Agriculture killing fifty students. On 26 February 2014 in Buni Yadi the group attacked a remote boarding school killing at least twenty-nine students. And there have been numerous other similar incidents (Pantucci and Cadoux-Hudson, 2014).

Indeed, some observers have associated this spike in female suicide bombers with Boko Haram's notorious kidnapping of the schoolgirls in April 2014, and are beginning to speculate that the group is deploying these girls as suicide bombers throughout northeast Nigeria. A report in the Nigerian newspaper- the *Daily Independent* (Cited in Magdaleno, 2014), pointed out that the women undertaking the suicide bomb attacks have been between 15 to 18 years old, which is the general age range of those that were kidnapped. One of the coordinators of the *#BringBackOurGirls* group, Oby Ezekwesili, raised the alarm that the continued incarceration of the abducted girls in Boko Haram's custody could spell doom. The former education minister stated that the Federal Government must not "move on," as the Chibok girls may well be indoctrinated or coerced into being used as suicide bombers:

It feels like eternity since April 14 when our girls lost their freedom. How can we move on like that? This new trend and serial pattern of female suicide bombers surely should particularly worry us. Female suicide bombers are again and again becoming the trend and our Chibok girls are still in the enemy's den (*The Punch*, July 30, 2014).

A joint security alert from the Department of Homeland Security and the FBI warns that terrorists are increasingly turning to women and teenagers to carry out suicide bombings. CBS News terrorism consultant Paul Kurtz says that women are also less likely to alert other citizens, not just law enforcement. "Terrorists may calculate women or young adult will have a better chance of escaping detection. Citizens are less inclined to believe a woman or young adult would carry out an attack and therefore may refrain from tipping off authorities when faced with suspect behavior" (See Orr and Hendin, CBS News, June 25, 2014).

There are increasing reports that the militant group is using 'mentally-handicapped' women to bomb civilian areas. The group has kidnapped hundreds of women and girls, with reports stating they are being forced to carry out suicide attacks. Girls are increasingly being used to carry out attacks in crowded areas as they can pass through security more easily than boys. In all cases involving child suicide bombers in Nigeria, girls were reported to be carrying the explosives (Hunter, 2015).

On 8 June 2014, however, Boko Haram dispatched the first female suicide attacker to the 301 Battalion barracks of Nigerian Army in Gombe, Gombe State. The girl detonated the explosive concealed in her hijab, killing herself and a soldier. UNICEF (See BBC News, May 26, 2015), in a statement confirmed that there were 27 attacks between January and May 2015, compared with 26 for the whole of 2014. Three-quarters of the attacks were carried out by female bombers, some as young as seven. This has become a recurring decimal as shown below:

8 June, 2014	A middle-aged woman arrives on a motorcycle at a military barracks in Gombe, detonating an explosive killing herself and a soldier
27 July, 2014	A teenager with an explosive device concealed under her veil blows herself up at a university campus in Kano, injuring five police officers
28 July, 2014	A young woman joins a kerosene queue at a filling station in Kano before her bomb detonates, killing three people and wounding 16 others
30 July, 2014	A teenager within a crowd of students at a college campus in Kano blows herself up, killing six people
12 November, 2014	A woman blew herself up at a teacher training college in Nigeria's central Niger state, killing at least one other person
25 November, 2014	Suicide bombing in the Maiduguri market by two women killed at least 45 people
1 December, 2014	In Damaturu, during a Boko Haram attack, two female suicide bombers detonated bombs at the central Maiduguri market, killing dozens
January 1 2015	A suicide bomber detonates his explosive belt at a church during a New Year's mass in Gombe killing only the bomber but hurting eight people ( <a href="http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2015_in_Nigeria">http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2015_in_Nigeria</a> )
January 10, 2015	A female suicide bomber, believed to be aged around 10 years old, kills herself and 19 others, possibly against her will, at a market in the northeastern city of Maiduguri ( <a href="http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2015_in_Nigeria">http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2015_in_Nigeria</a> )
January 11, 2015	Two female suicide bombers, each believed to be around 10 years old, killed themselves and three others at a market in the northeastern city of Potiskum ( <a href="http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2015_in_Nigeria">http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2015_in_Nigeria</a> )
February 2, 2015	A female suicide bomber attacked minutes after the President left an election rally in the city of Gombe resulting in at least one death and 18 people injured ( <a href="http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2015_in_Nigeria">http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2015_in_Nigeria</a> )
February 15, 2015	Damaturu, Nigeria (Reuters) - A female suicide bomber blew herself up at a crowded bus station in the northeast Nigerian city of Damaturu
February 28, 2015	A woman suicide bomber killed two passers-by and her accomplice in an attack in Borno state, northeast Nigeria ( <a href="http://thenewsnigeria.com.ng/2015/02/28/nigeria-female-suicide-bomber-kills-3-others/">http://thenewsnigeria.com.ng/2015/02/28/nigeria-female-suicide-bomber-kills-3-others/</a> ).
March 1, 2015	Two women apparently on a suicide bombing mission got killed by their own devices after failing to get a vehicle to take them to Damaturu, Yobe state capital. The incident, which happened at Ngamdu village, however, led to the death of two travelers, who were standing in close proximity to the suspected bombers as they waited for a bus to convey them to Damaturu, some 35km away.

March 10, 2015	A suspected female suicide bomber killed at least 25 people in Maiduguri, Borno state. ( <a href="http://www.thenigerianvoice.com/news/172639/1/female-suicide-bomber-kills-25-in-maiduguri.html">http://www.thenigerianvoice.com/news/172639/1/female-suicide-bomber-kills-25-in-maiduguri.html</a> )
June 4, 2015	A female suicide bomber killed two people and injured three others at a checkpoint in the northeastern Nigerian city of Maiduguri. The female bomber, who wore a veil and concealed explosives on her body, detonated the bomb beside a checkpoint on the outskirts of the city. <a href="http://www.news24.com.ng/National/News/Female-suicide-bomber-in-Maiduguri-kills-two-near-checkpoint-20150604">http://www.news24.com.ng/National/News/Female-suicide-bomber-in-Maiduguri-kills-two-near-checkpoint-20150604</a>
June 11, 2015	Three women wearing explosive vests blew up near Maiduguri in an apparent failed suicide bombing attack on Nigeria's beleaguered northeastern city. Police commissioner John Opadokun confirmed that the three women bombers died near Auno village, 15 kilometers (nine miles) from Maiduguri. He said they intended to attack the city
June 22, 2015	At least 30 people died in Maiduguri, capital of Nigeria's restive Borno state, after two female suicide bombers detonated the explosives they were wearing. One of the bombers, a teenage girl, waited until vendors started the late afternoon Muslim prayers before carrying out the attack. <a href="http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/boko-haram-30-killed-twin-female-suicide-bomb-attacks-busy-fish-market-maiduguri-1507583">http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/boko-haram-30-killed-twin-female-suicide-bomb-attacks-busy-fish-market-maiduguri-1507583</a>
July 6, 2015	A girl aged about 13 was killed when explosives strapped to her body went off near a major mosque in northern Nigeria's largest city Kano <a href="http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/06/girl-13-blows-herself-up-near-mosque-in-suspected-boko-haram-attack">http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/06/girl-13-blows-herself-up-near-mosque-in-suspected-boko-haram-attack</a>
July 17, 2015	A bombing attack targeting Muslim prayer grounds in Nigeria's northeastern Yobe state killed nine people and injured 18. An elderly woman and a 10-year-old girl carried the explosives used in the attack. They detonated their devices at screening areas set up by security forces outside two sites where worshippers were gathering for prayers in the town of Damaturu <a href="http://edition.cnn.com/2015/07/17/africa/nigeria-violence/">http://edition.cnn.com/2015/07/17/africa/nigeria-violence/</a>
July 26, 2015	Fifteen people were killed and 47 others injured in a suicide bomb attack on a crowded market in Damaturu. The bomber, a 10-year-old girl, detonated the explosive device at the gate of the market, killing herself and 14 others <a href="http://www.bellanaija.com/2015/07/26/15-killed-47-injured-in-yobe-as-10-year-old-female-suicide-bomber-attacks-crowded-market/">http://www.bellanaija.com/2015/07/26/15-killed-47-injured-in-yobe-as-10-year-old-female-suicide-bomber-attacks-crowded-market/</a>
July 31, 2015	A woman suicide bomber killed many people at a crowded market early Friday in a blast that thundered across the northeastern Nigerian city of Maiduguri. <a href="http://globalnews.ca/news/2141464/female-suicide-bomber-attacks-crowded-market-in-northern-nigeria/">http://globalnews.ca/news/2141464/female-suicide-bomber-attacks-crowded-market-in-northern-nigeria/</a>
August 25, 2015	A girl, who appeared to be between 12 and 14 years old, blew herself up at the crowded entrance to the main bus station in Damaturu, killing six other people and wounding 41 others. <a href="http://www.dw.com/en/girl-suicide-bomber-kills-six-in-nigeria/a-18671860">http://www.dw.com/en/girl-suicide-bomber-kills-six-in-nigeria/a-18671860</a>

Source: Compiled by the author



Boko Haram turns to young, impressionable women and children, as well as homeless people for foot soldiers mainly because many northern cities are teeming with the downtrodden – beggars, abandoned street urchins (known in local parlance as “almajiri”) and poverty stricken women who have been denied of basic care and education. The insurgents reach out to them and find it so easy to manipulate them for anti-social ends (Vanguard, 2014). According to Onuoha (2014:6), it is likely that the girls being used are children or widows of Boko Haram fighters who have been brainwashed or radicalised into undertaking a mission not only for martyrdom but also as revenge against the ‘infidels’ whom they have been made to believe are responsible for the death of their loved ones. Also, it is possible that the female bombers are women or girls recruited by Boko Haram operatives, especially through their female scouts. In June 2014, for instance, troops arrested three suspected female Boko Haram members - Hafsat Usman Bako, Zainab Idris and Aisha Abubakar – who have been secretly recruiting girls for the terrorist group

In fact, the militant Islamist sect was reported to have deployed more than 50 female suicide bombers throughout Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State in northeast Nigeria, intending to kill 100,000 people before the end of 2014. The plot was revealed after a suspected suicide bomber was apprehended at the entrance of the University of Maiduguri by members of the Civilian Joint Task Force, a non-military vigilante group, and confessed. Another female suicide bomber was arrested on the same day near the Maiduguri post office, a few miles northwest of the university. The information follows a spate of devastating attacks by Boko Haram on civilians and police forces in the area since the end of November 2014. More than 70 people were killed when two female suicide bombers attacked a market on November 25 (Magdaleno, 2014).

### **Mode of Recruitment and Indoctrination: A General Perspective**

Recruitment is a general term covering any means, whether compulsory, forced or voluntary, by which a person becomes part of an armed force or group. According to Dolnik (2009:113), finding recruits for suicide missions is never difficult once a precedent has been established. All suicide bombings to date have been a group phenomenon, and there are no known incidents in which the operation has been initiated, organised and executed by an individual. A suicide bombing campaign can become the instrument of choice in virtually any conflict, given that an organisation in that context makes such a decision at the strategic level, along with providing a system of rewards or threats to motivate individual volunteers.

If suicide terrorism is limited to a small group of men, it can be seen as an extraordinary phenomenon. Recognizing women’s (active) participation would force the recognition that suicide terrorism is not incidental or marginal, but a normal part of social and political life (Gentry and Sjoberg, 2008). As earlier noted, the involvement of women in suicide terrorist attacks carried out by various organizations around the world is an established fact. At the same time, even though women are an integral part of the phenomenon, their numbers are still small, compared with the number of male suicide terrorists, and their role in the suicide terrorist apparatus is limited (See Schweitzer, 2006: 39). Female terrorists have had many roles; they could be collaborators, informers, human shields, recruiters, sexual baits in person or over the internet, and as perpetrators of acts of destruction and death (Berko, Erez, 2007). Thereby, they could easily smuggle arms, transport arms.

The deployment of women bombers by groups is frequently regarded as a last act of desperation. By this stage, terrorist organizations often face vastly depleted male resources and

women represent a last resort in terms of recruitment. By contrast, Boko Haram is a comparatively new insurgency that only carried out its first major attacks in 2009. Yet, despite its operational successes, it is experiencing current difficulties in recruitment. In past months, it has been abducting men of fighting age *en masse* (Pearson, 2014). Since male bombers are becoming easy to identify, the terrorists have devised a new scheme to infiltrate the towns through innocent-looking female suicide bombers. With the use of suicide bombers, the effect is strategically greater than the cost. While suicide terrorism knocks out one supporter, it:

enables the organization to recruit many more people. The perpetrator is dead and so can never recant their decision. Besides, any potential negative costs associated with an attack (like the death of civilians) are mitigated by the logic which argues that the brutal state is so horrendous, its victims (the perpetrators of violence) have no other means of expressing their anger and no other avenues to channel their grievances than this ultimate sacrifice (Bloom 2005)

Globally, Islamist terrorists, known to be lethally flexible and inventive, are always developing new tactics to overcome security measures. For female and child suicide bombing, the logic is so simple: There is more reluctance to search women and children, considered to be “vulnerable,” which gives such attackers an advantage over men. They are also assumed to be potentially less dangerous and may be able to approach the target with greater ease. Female suicide bombings have more shock value and greater media coverage because women are considered less likely to commit acts of mass violence. The power of religious indoctrination has always been devastating (*The Punch*, 2014). In a study, Beyler (2003) argues that women are more likely to become suicide terrorists for nationalistic rather than religious motives. Some religious groups, such as Hamas and PIJ, use women too, but they also have nationalist goals. Cultural influences apparently play a major role in this phenomenon. Thus, it is not solely a woman’s willingness to commit a suicide attack, but the recruitment policy of the particular group she seeks to join.

From another perspective, Schweitzer and Farhana (cited in Yesevi, 2014:589) maintain that female terrorists are motivated by revenge, redemption, respect and relationship. It is stated that the loss of loved ones, an inability to conceive children or being considered not marriageable are considered as reasons being a female terrorists. A woman taking up suicide bombing role is a far divergent and more dangerous one from their traditional activity of playing logisticians, recruiters or even a frontline role. It is that observed that women enlist in rebellions for multiple reasons like ideology, tribal or family solidarity, friendship, a desire for change, or are compelled to serve against their will (Herrera and Porch, 2008). According to (Raghavan and Balasubramanian, 2014:205), revenge is perhaps the strongest motivator for a woman to take up the role of a suicide bomber. The desire to avenge either personal suffering or loss of family can be a prime cause. In many cases, such deviant women are victims of rape, physical abuse and torture.

According to Nathaniel Sumner (cited in Vanguard, December 24, 2014), such women probably are on the lowest end of the socio-economic scale with little or no education or job. They also tend to be unmarried, overtly confident, determined, rebellious and outspoken, characteristics that are often deemed as unusual or unacceptable in their society. Female suicide bombers could be motivated by anger, hatred and revenge. The girls could be indoctrinated to hate the society and become martyrs. The Islamist militant group Boko Haram has gained worldwide notoriety this year for intensifying carnage in Nigeria that has claimed more than 10,000 lives in just 12 months. This is a fatality rate that is comparable to the Islamic State, or

ISIS, insurgency in Iraq (ibid). Since they started using women, as earlier highlighted, there have been 15 attacks or attempts by Boko Haram female suicide bombers, who have had an increasingly salient role in the violent insurgent movement.

One of the most deplorable developments in recent years has been the increasing use of young children as soldiers. In one sense, this is not really new. The reality of teenage suicide bombers was brought before the world's attention in March 2004 when a sixteen-year-old Palestinian boy, Mahmoud Tabouq, was captured at a checkpoint near Nablus, hiding five pipe bombs under his coat. This incident gained notoriety because it was recorded by a Palestinian film crew crossing the border at the time (Emilsen, 2008). For centuries, children have been involved in military campaigns—as child ratings on warships, or as drummer boys on the battlefields of Europe. Indeed the word 'infantry', for foot-soldiers, can also mean a group of young people. What is frightening nowadays is the escalation in the use of children as fighters (<http://www.unicef.org/sowc96/2csoldrs.htm>).

Some children join voluntarily as a matter of survival and an alternative to unemployment or because they believe in the cause they are fighting for: a holy war, religious freedom, ethnic or political liberty or social justice. The children's commitment to the armed group may have been part of their upbringing and reinforced by the idealization of a culture of violence (Peters, 2005:2). Once recruited, children undergo varying degrees of indoctrination, often verging on the brutal. Children, who are forced to join guerrilla bands, undergo long periods of forced political indoctrination. And others suffer particularly brutal forms of induction. In other instances, rebel groups turn children into fierce warriors by subjecting them to a brief period of terror and physical abuse—'socializing' them into violence. The Nigerian experience has been documented by *ThisDay* (2014):

In most cases, children and teenagers are forced to be in the frontline in the battle against Nigerian troops through ambushes and suicide bombing...On several occasions, the Nigerian military has captured small children who were forced to take up arms against the state with some of them behaving abnormally due to indoctrination and inducement through the use of hard drugs...Most of the children, especially teenagers were recruited through abduction, kidnapping and enticement with money after which they undergo brainwashing and combat training. Those that are unwilling to cooperate are punished or summarily executed

Religion, in the words of Pape (2005) “is often used as a tool by terrorist organizations in recruiting and in other efforts in service of the broader strategic objective”. Religious terrorism is a particularly potent form of violence; religion offers the moral justification for committing seemingly immoral acts. Nationalistic fanatics court suicide bombers and use rhetoric to stir up feelings of patriotism, hatred of the enemy, and a profound sense of victimization (Zedalis, 2004:9).

For Juergensmeyer (2008:253), religion offers something that nothing else can: an all-embracing ideology- a powerful legitimizing discourse with a vision of a cosmic struggle between good and evil, redemption and heavenly reward- that can justify even the most appalling brutalities. Some suicide attackers are motivated by religious ideology and believe that their god sent them on a mission; i.e., these individuals are motivated primarily by the promise of a happy afterlife and heavenly reward. Many of these individuals are reportedly indoctrinated at an early age about the spiritual importance of purifying the world and

sacrificing their lives to a holy war. Some radical religious groups purportedly use concepts of benevolence, self-sacrifice, and martyrdom to spread the idea that suicide bombing is a noble and godly act (See <http://fmso.leavenworth.army.mil/documents/Suicide-Bombers.pdf>).

Community support is also a crucial factor in suicide bombing, which is illustrated by the fact that Muslim culture does not use the Western term “suicide bombing” but rather *Istishad*-Martyrdom, or self-sacrifice in the name of God (Paz, 2001). The acceptance of suicide bombers as Martyrs is further encouraged by broadcasting videos of past and future volunteers, distributing their photos in leaflets, posters, and calendars, and reenacting famous acts in pageants and school plays. The suicide terrorist, thus, becomes a source of envy and pride for his (or her) family (Hassan, 2001 cited in Grimland, 2006:111).

However, the employment of suicide attacks as a terrorist technique is not exclusive to one culture or religion. With the invention of dynamite in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the use of bombs in terrorist attacks became a generally favored method, and this also applied to suicide tactics. For example, the Russian radicals of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, in putting themselves close enough to the target to assure success, usually also consciously sought their own demise. Proximity was important to the successful targeting of the crude explosions. In those instances where the terrorists survived and were captured, they often refused offers of clemency and were executed. Dying for the cause was a highly valued fate, a source of legitimacy for the cause, and a rallying point for future recruits (Cronin, 2003:7).

### **Implications for Gender Stereotyping**

In the face of social change, the reform of traditional gendered practices and the gradual adoption of ‘Western’ values, gender-based violence and binary gender norms can perform as a source of self-worth (Barker & Ricardo 2005: v). Backer (2014) asserts that female suicide bombers’ strategic benefits and greater chances of success in inflicting terror are greatly tied to global gender stereotypes. Globally, women are viewed as the “gentler” of the two sexes, assumed to be nurturing figures within society. Because of this assumed identity, women’s authority has historically been relegated to matters of the home and family, and their role in society is most often embedded within this domestic sphere. This view has influenced not only perceptions of women in day-to-day life, but also has important implications in time of societal conflict. As noted by Hulan (2011:11), women who were once regarded only in support roles either as logisticians, intelligence gatherers and arms smugglers have risen as operational leaders and fighters within various terrorist organizations.

It is posited that “the new danger is not technological growth, deadlier weapons, or more lethal biological warfare: it is the women who sneak in to attack under the ironclad guise of pregnancy and innocence who undermine our senses of security” (Rock, 2006). Thus, symbolically female participation in terrorism sends a powerful message, blurring the distinction between perpetrator and victim. In taking up arms, and using violence, they “destroy” our safe, innocent and traditional view of women (OSCE and ODIHR, 2005:7). Female terrorists are more frequently found in separatist or far-leftist movements, as opposed to Islamic fundamentalist movements, which tend to advocate more traditional roles for women. But Boko Haram is a uniquely Nigerian phenomenon and has adapted its strategies frequently in response to its environment. While still claiming to be aligned with the larger Islamist movements, Boko Haram is only loosely affiliated with al Qaeda (Burchard, 2014). In her thesis on Female Suicide Bombers (FSB), Priscyll Avoine (2013:51-52) expresses worry over this development:

What is particularly shocking with FSB is that it goes against our conception of what a woman is, what a woman should be and what her social role entails, particularly nowadays as the debate regarding women's rights in the Muslim world is currently fervent. It seems that we pay more attention to violent women as they are not fitting into our normal conception of violence; a female body that kills, that explodes and murders innocent people is always portrayed as a maternal body in our minds (Romero, cited in Avoine, 2013).

Yet, in all this, the most affected population are women who become widows, lose their children and livelihoods. They are then forced to head the household and shoulder responsibilities, which they are not prepared for. Children and youths who lose their parents, siblings or colleagues at early age, often become permanently deformed, and the society in general has lost properties and potential achievers (Shamaki 2011 cited in Shuni, 2014:84).

What is however, clear is that the name and location may change, but the common agenda and first order of business for these extremist groups is almost invariably to place limits on women's access to education and health services, restricting their participation in economic and political life, and enforcing the restrictions through terrifying violence. These violations are the extreme end of a global wave of fundamentalist conservatism, but it is an agenda shared by extremists of all religions, whose efforts seem invariably to focus on the suppression of women's autonomy and a return to delineated, outdated gender roles (See <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/10/women-are-the-best-weapon-in-the-war-against-terrorism/>).

## Conclusion

It is affirmed in this essay that suicide bombers possess many advantages over other forms of attack. They are low cost, require little training, low risk, and a near guarantee that the mission will succeed with maximum efficiency as the attacker is able to easily adjust the point of attack. He or she is able to choose the precise place and time for attack – with ultimate surprise – causing the greatest number of casualties and/or property damage. It is an easily available weapon, inexpensive to deploy, yet expensive to prevent (Pounds, 2014). Women are remarkably effective suicide attackers. Given their strategic value, terrorist organizations—first secular ones, then religious groups—have recruited women to perform suicide missions. In order to achieve their strategic goals more effectively, these organizations have developed recruitment tactics aimed at women, employing gender specific and religious rhetoric (O'rouke, 2009:684).

It has been noted that the act of suicide is the result of a highly complex interaction between many forces. This is even truer for suicide bombing. Some of the prevention methods propagated by suicidologists as emphasised by Grimland, et al (2006) include working with the media to downplay the glorification of terror and to change attitudes to suicide bombing. The latter should also be accomplished by de-glorification in educational programs in the schools, starting from nursery school up, and in the community. Policymakers should prevent the humiliation, oppression, or abuse of sectors of the general population – an especially difficult challenge in countries where wars are being conducted.



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