The role of women in Countering Violence Extremism: the Nigerian experience with Boko Haram

20 March 2017: While many resources have been dedicated to Countering Violent Extremism efforts, little attention has been paid to the role women play in the Boko Haram insurgency and responses to it in Nigeria, says Idayat Hassan.

Displaced Nigerians living within and outside Yola travel collect food and relief materials distributed by St Theresa Catholic Church. Photo: Immanuel Afolabi.

The Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), popularly referred to as Boko Haram, has been waging a war against the Nigerian state for the past seven years. The insurgency has claimed over twenty thousand lives, displaced over two million people, and destroyed billions of dollars’ worth of personal and public property.

This insurgency and counter-insurgency (COIN) is being waged by three distinct actors: the government of Nigeria, Boko Haram, and the Civilian Joint
Task Force (CJTF). While many resources have been dedicated to Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) efforts, little attention has been paid to the role women play in promoting or participating in the insurgency and counterinsurgency.

Of the aforementioned organisations, only Boko Haram and the CJTF have integrated gender into their terrorism and counter-terrorism efforts. Boko Haram has played on the common perception of women as nonviolent to effortlessly mainstream women into their operations, using them to gather intelligence, as recruiters, and promoters of radical ideologies to indoctrinate abductees and other converts in Boko Haram enclaves. In fact, the sects have allegedly preyed on women’s grievances relating to marginalisation, inequality, and alienation to recruit more women into its folds. In other cases, women are unwilling perpetrators and are forced into becoming suicide bombers, sex slaves, and forced labourers.

There is a growing awareness on the significance of mainstreaming women into Prevention and Countering of violent extremism (P/CVE). The UN Security Council in several of its resolutions has affirmed the importance of including women in P/CVE processes and their implementation. For instance, Security Council resolution 2129 reaffirms the Council’s objective to “increase its attention to women, peace and security issues in all relevant thematic areas of work on its agenda, including in threats to international peace and security caused by terrorist acts.”

The importance of women in the P/CVE process cannot be overemphasised as women occupy several twinning roles within the community, and their perception and reaction differs. However, the counter insurgency strategy in Nigeria so far has not seized the opportunity of women’s unique roles and, importantly, their perspectives in the prevention and countering of violent extremism [1].

**The Civilian Joint Task Force**

The CJTF was formed in June 2013 out of necessity. The motivations behind its creation were the frustrations of the people of Bornu, particularly young people. As the government’s campaign against Boko Haram intensified, hundreds of youth were caught in the crossfire of the military and Boko Haram, resulting in the arbitrary detention of several youths by security agencies. Later, the government issued a declaration of a state of emergency in the states of Bornu, Yobe and Adamawa, which resulted in extreme economic hardship for civilians, compounded by rampant killings of the locals by Boko Haram.
At present, the CJTF boasts between 25,000 - 36,000 members including both men and women [2] and presently operates as a pro-government paramilitary force, similar to the Sons of Iraq or Afghan Local Police (ALP). The CJTF, with its knowledge of local terrain, language, and intelligence gathering capabilities, has contributed largely to the successes [3] recorded so far in Nigeria’s counter-insurgency efforts.

The CJTF was the first to incorporate women into their counter-insurgency operations and currently have between 50-100 female members. Female members’ responsibilities include conducting pat-downs of women in churches, mosques and other public places, gathering intelligence, and arresting suspected female insurgents. The North East has experienced many attacks by Boko Haram, and through the efforts of the female CJTF members, several attacks have been prevented successful intelligence gatherings.

In an expose with female CJTF, members recounted their experiences in intelligence gathering, detecting Boko Haram members, and acting as bait. According to the women, they search women before they enter public places such as mosques, weddings or other festivals, most importantly because of the Islamic religious and cultural system which forbids non related men from entering women’ homes, the female CJTF members easily help in arresting female Boko Haram members in their abode[4].

In an interview with Daily Trust, Murjanatu Umar explained how they have been instrumental to the arrests of potential female suicide bombers and enlightenment campaign they run for women and girls on safety. According to one of the Sectors Commanders of the CJTF in Bornu State, Buba Shehu Abubakar, women have effectively contributed to prosecuting the war against insurgency.

**Human rights violations**

Despite reported successes, there have still been over 100[5] suicide bombing so far executed by girls and women in the North East since Boko Haram commenced the use of female suicide bombers around June 2014. The CJTF has also committed grave and serious human rights violations, in particular extra judicial killings, arson, and sexual and gender based violence against women.

There are several reported cases of alleged rape of girls and women as well as reports of coerced sex for food and protection in the internally displaced person’s (IDP) camps. The female members of the CJTF have been singled out for perpetrating violence against other women in the course of carrying out their vigilante duties. In fact, all the actors in the prosecution of the war against
insurgency have been indicted for perpetrating egregious human rights violations. It is important for the government to define what accountability for these crimes will look like post-insurgency, as blanket amnesty will not bode well for sustainable peace in Nigeria.

Women and counter-insurgency

The Nigerian government has made no discernible efforts to integrate women in counter insurgency operations forgetting the fact that women were reputed enablers of the insurgents’ activities and therefore should constitute strong target in the deradicalisation, disarmament and reintegration processes considering their huge but different power base spanning the socio, economic, cultural and economic bases.

Although the country has developed a National Action Plan to fulfill UN Security Council Resolution 1325, this is not reflected in the ongoing armed conflict between the Nigerian state and Boko Haram. For example, while women and children are most affected by the insurgency, there are few women involved in COIN operations, with government forces estimated to be 98 percent male. This is largely responsible for the gender based violence ongoing in the IDP camps. For instance, there are rife allegations of women and girls being coerced into sex in return for food or other favours, as well as rape and assault, among other vices.

Following a recent report by Human Rights Watch on the molestation of women in the IDP camps, the Nigerian government has deployed 100 female police to Bornu State to protect women in the camps. According to the police commissioner Damian Chukwu, the deployment of the female police officers will ensure the protection of women.

Post-conflict palliatives

Most of the post-conflict plans for the North East do not include the role of women in the rebuilding or specify their needs. For instance, the Recovery and Peace Building Assessment (RPBA) blueprint developed by the government of Nigeria, World Bank, and other development partners, conceptualises gender as a cross-cutting theme and while emphasising the importance of addressing gender-based violence never dedicated a specific portion of the plan to gender despite the impact of the insurgency on women and children.

Similarly, the 714 page Buhari Plan - the working document of the Presidential Committee on the North East (PCNI) - only emphasises gender based violence with palliatives such as economic empowerment and psychological support.
lack of substantial gender inclusion similarly applies to the National Counter Terrorism Strategy (NACTEST). None of these blueprints have put women at the negotiation table nor do they work effectively at redressing the alarming gap in women’s participation in the governance processes that predates the insurgency. They have also not adequately explored the intersectionality between gender, peace, and security, and the centrality of gender in CVE and preventing violent extremism (PVE).

Furthermore, there is little or no local ownership of the P/CVE process and women have faced many challenges when trying to participate. Challenges include an overall lack of accountability within the process, trust deficit, lack of funding and access to funders, and trouble deciphering what P/CVE means exactly for effective programming within communities. A significant research gap continues to exist on women in CVE processes. It is time for the Nigerian government to take women’s issues and opinions more seriously.

The inclusion of women in P/CVE processes as well as peace and security matters writ large – as policy makers, negotiators, and as crafters of transitional justice mechanisms are valuable first steps towards building sustainable peace in Nigeria.

**Recommendations:**

Immediately prioritise the recruitment of women in the security forces particularly Nigerian Police Forces for post conflict reconstruction in the North East.

1. Define the accountability mechanism for ensuring peace, justice, and reconciliation in the North East.
2. Mainstream women effectively into all government and donor led reconstruction programs, donors should ensure funding is specifically appropriated to women’s participation.
3. Strengthen the participation of women in political processes at local, state and national levels.
4. The Nigerian government, the World Bank, and their other partners should commit to consulting with women around the post-insurgency governance process.
5. International donors, multilateral agencies and the Nigerian government should provide resources to explore the intersectionality between gender, peace, and security, and the centrality of gender in P/CVE in North East Nigeria.
6. The Nigerian Government should designate resources to psychological support for women and children.
7. The government must make provide for at least 30 percent women representation in all post conflict reconstruction plans and committees.

[1] The lack of women representation in the P/CVE process itself prevents the messages from reaching the intended beneficiaries.

[2] Interview with CJTF state coordinator Abba Aji Kalil May 3rd, 2016, Centre for Democracy and Development, Abuja

[3] The Nigerian government have declared a technical defeat on the insurgents, the areas captured by the insurgents equalling the size of Switzerland have so far been recaptured, ground zero, Sambisa forest, the enclave of the insurgents have also been captured by the government forces.

[4] Interview with CJTF, Centre for Democracy and Development, October 25, Maiduguri, Bornu State