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## Understanding the Roles of Women in Boko Haram's Terrorism

By Temitope Peter Ola<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Boko Haram's insurgency has jumpstarted a new concern for regional security in sub-Saharan Africa. While the collaborative response from the countries of the Lake Chad Basin (LCB) is acceptable for the 'global war against terrorism' the activities of the terrorist group and the responses they generate have exposed the gender strains within the societies around the LCB. Taking its point of departure in world system theory, the study examines how the role that women play in Boko Haram's terrorist activities in the LCB can be understood. The study found that women's participation in Boko Haram's terrorism may be understood within four models of 'coerced women', 'revolutionary women', 'delinquent women', and 'women clientelism'. The study concludes that the answer to terrorism in LCB lies in a holistic engagement of women, in the local communities, to address the basic issues which precipitate terrorism.

**Keywords:** Terrorism; Boko Haram; Lake Chad Basin (LCB), terrorism, women and terrorism

### Introduction

"...To build a nation, it takes centuries; to destroy it, it takes only a day or two..."

Nik Abdul Rashid bin Nik Abdul Majid

Executive Director of Melaka Museums Corporation

Though the German playwright, Bertolt Brecht's epic *Mother Courage and Her Children* depicted the efforts of a tragic heroine – a widow who fought bravely but unsuccessfully to save her children from Europe's Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) the more popular extant literature relating to terrorism present women as 'onlookers,' and as a set of 'irrelevants'. Beyond the literature, public discourse tends to suppress, ignore or devalue the contributions of women to socio-political development in different parts of the world and particularly in the Lake Chad Basin (LCB) where Boko Haram operates.

As the public idiom continues to diminish the enterprise of women at critical periods of society/nation-building processes the role of women in security and Boko Haram-related matters are clouded, with disastrous consequences. Quite often, the eventual beneficiaries of women contributions end up distancing themselves from or working against women aspirations and needs.

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This was the situation soon after women played a crucial role in the decolonisation struggle in Africa, after which the post-independence socio-political project was hijacked by the male dominated ruling elites in for personal and group aggrandisement. It still is the situation after women supported the socio-political 'revolution' that led to the collapse of military regime and the process of re-democratisation and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. What this suggests is that women are considered relevant by LCB society only to the extent that they serve the narrow interests of their male-dominated political and social elite. This exploitative attitude to women feeds into the discourses of gender and hegemony which shape Boko Haram's terrorism.

In other words, scholars have examined the role of women as agents and beneficiaries of global peace and stability. The place of women as perpetrators and victims of instability and war have also been explored. What is, however, missing in the literature is an understanding of the role of women, in post 9/11 period, as agents for and against terrorist activities within many nation states. Thus, the roles of women in terrorists' activities in the Chad Basin are yet to receive adequate attention. To solve the research problematique, the paper addresses two basic questions which are: i. why and how did women play the role they did in Boko Haram terrorist activities in the Lake Chad Basin? ii. Are the factors responsible for the actions and inactions of women in Boko Haram terrorism in the Lake Chad Basin being addressed or it is just the effects that are being treated? This is done with a view to proffering newer insights into the discourse on the place of women in Boko Haram's terrorism in the LCB.

## **Methodology**

The paper is conceptual and qualitative in nature. It draws insights from secondary sources such as scholarly exegesis and empirical historical evidence. The outcome of this forms the substance of the descriptive analysis to fit a conceptual scheme of the paper using world theory as postulated by Immanuel Wallerstein (1976). The basic assumption of world system theory according to Wallerstein is that world social system had to be analysed within the context of the world system. A system has two (2) main characteristics, the first – all the elements (Political, Economic and Social) within the system are interlinked, and they exist in the dynamic relationship with each other. Secondly, life within the system is more or less self-contained i.e. development within the system can be explained by internal factors alone. For convenience of systematic organisation of thought, the thrust of analysis in the paper is schematically presented under a number of select themes and sub-themes carefully formulated to prosecute the paper's derived assumption to wit: women play important role in global terrorism as exemplified in the Boko Haram's terrorism.

## **Understanding Terrorism**

The twentieth century stood out as a period of rapid and dramatic change. Revolutionary changes were sustained from the turn of the century through a series of technological innovations, resulting from continuous research and experimentation in all fields of human endeavour; with the climax of the process occurring in the last decade of the century by a whirlwind of change sweeping the world. Along with these changes was the gradual loss of the capacity for tolerance within many states. Thus, violence became an established part of societal lifestyle around the world. Since the twentieth century was dominated by war and the threat of external aggression,

the twenty-first century may be defined by terrorism, crime, large-scale population movement, economic and environmental threats, and social instability (Fukuyama, 2004).

According to Schmid and Jongman (1998), terrorism is: ‘an anxiety inspiring method of repeated violent action, employed by semi clandestine individuals, groups or state actors for idiosyncratic, criminal or political reasons...’ (cited in Barga, 2012:1). Apart from its idiosyncratic or criminal motivation, terrorism is essentially political. In this regard, Hoffman (1998) argues that terrorism in its most contemporary understanding is inherently political. Indeed, it is the political essence and characterisation of terrorism that distinguishes it from other forms of violence (cited in Barga, 2012). To say that terrorism is political, among other things, implies that it is related to power and influence. In this regard, Barga (2012:2) opines that terrorism: Is also ineluctably about power, the acquisition of power and the use of power to achieve political change at all cost. Terrorism is thus the actual or threatened use of violence in an attempt to advance a politically motivated end.

The A-B-C of terrorism is to use force (coercion) to instill popular fear (anxiety) in a bid to cause a desired behavioural stance among the target. In this respect, the United States Department of Defence defines terrorism as ‘unlawful use of force or violence against individuals or property to coerce and intimidate government to accept political, religious or ideological objectives’ (Eze, 2013:90). In contemporary social discourse, the concept of terrorism has been used to denote forms of unconventional, illegitimate violence targeted by a group at the state or society, or any section of the population thereof. In this direction, it could be observed that: Terrorism is the aggression unjustly carried out by individuals, groups or states against human beings. It includes forms of unjustly terrifying, harming, threatening, and killing of people and banditry. It also includes any violent act or threat carried out as part of individual or collective criminal plan aimed at terrifying or harming people or endangering their lives, freedom or security (corroborating Saudi Arabia stance on terrorism, 2004). Terrorism is essentially sectarian in nature (Nchi, 2013). It is usually associated with the activities of a fringe and ideologically misguided sub-group of a larger religious or political movement. In this regard, Shabayany (2012:33) observes that it ‘is a fanatical war waged by a puritan few against the massive army of innocent people of different religions, class and gender’.

The contemporary global octopus-like nature of twenty-first century terrorism can be said to have started with the 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001, *Al Qaeda* attacks on the World Trade Organisation twin towers and Pentagon (otherwise known as 9/11) (Awake, June 2006:4). But *Jammatul Ahlis Sunnah lid Daawa wal Jihad*, otherwise known as *Boko Haram*, an affiliate of *Al Qaeda* began its activities in LCB in 2002. With the United Nations classification of the *Boko Haram*, as a terrorist group the ‘global war on terrorism’ which was started by United States to outwit *Al Qaeda* and contain the ogre of the activities of its affiliates effectively extended to LCB. The ubiquity of terrorist acts coupled with heightened feelings of self-doubt and insecurity from New York to Bali, Mogadishu, Moscow, London, Kandahar and Abuja, confirmed that no state or human being is immune to the deleterious effects of what has, to all intents and purposes, become an international crime, if not indeed a crime against humanity. However, terrorism is not the problem of the world; it is just one consequence of contemporary problems.

### **Development in the Lake Chad Basin (LCB)**

There are few regions in the world more diverse than the LCB – a diversity that encompasses not only the people’s civilisational legacy, historical experience and memory,

ethnicity, religion, language and culture; but also political systems, social and economic structures; the environmental problems they confront, their levels of development, the quality of their governance and the values of their people. The Chad Basin's continuous search for the ability to transcend such differences, manage them and progress towards the necessary degree of convergence would be one of its strengths.

There appears to be a consensus in the literature that the countries around the LCB face a widespread and deepening crisis of development. Colonialism and its continued salience (Amin 2001), LCB countries' marginal place in the international system (Amin 2001; Bigsten and Dureval 2008), and their severe governance deficits (World Bank 1981, 2000; Fukuyama 2004) are frequently cited explanations. However, even though the economic numbers still remain comparatively low, there is growing optimism that the countries of the LCB are at last showing signs of emerging from its underdevelopment. In fact, triumphalist literature has appeared, heralding the 'institutionalisation of political power in countries of the LCB' (Posner and Young 2007), the strengthening of civil society and democracy (Halperin, Siegle, and Weintain 2010), and the growth of the economies (Soludo, 2005). What these suggest is that while there appears to be an enduring climate of socio-economic crisis, some opportunities for advancement are evident. The women terrorist question evolves within this context and is therefore shaped by the intersection of crisis and opportunity. The concerns and roles of states are important but the individual and people are the ultimate victims and beneficiaries of what happens to society. Thus, the focus on the roles of women is apt.

### **Women and Boko Haram's Terrorists' activities in the Lake Chad Basin**

Being a woman is fraught with danger in many societies. However, the peculiar LCB context of social deprivation within which many women in Nigeria have to operate makes women experience there particularly problematic. Therefore, taking a look at the structural conditions that shape women experience and provide incentives for participation in Boko Haram activities in the way they seek 'survival' is critical to having a holistic conversation about 'women terrorism.' In other words, beyond women entering popular discussions as terrorists the circumstances pushing them towards the margins of society must also be privileged in social discourse.

Women have always been involved in violent conflict. It is possible to establish a causal link between women role in violence and broader questions about social decomposition, economic crisis, and the critical intersection of the local and the global. Deconstructing women participation in violence in the LCB would be incomplete without an engagement with this important phenomenon: not only does it demonstrate the deep-seated crisis of (dis)empowerment facing many societies, it also provides crucial insights into the way women navigate this complex terrain and the weapons or tools they use to do so.

Amani El Jack (2003:6) notes that gender 'refers to perceptions of appropriate behaviour, appearance and attitude for women and men arising from social and cultural expectations. As a consequence, gendered perceptions of youth in violence must take cognizance of the local context and understandings of gender. Generally perceived notions of violence are, however, almost exclusively male. This is not unconnected to the gendered delineation of roles in conflict societies, which regards female identity in violent conflict in the context of victimhood. This blanket assumption of victimhood however often ignored the crucial role that women play in the outbreak, management, and resolution of violent conflict. Iwilade (2011) notes that the 'ethnography of social tactics in conflict situations easily counters the reductionist portrayals of women as merely

passive victims of conflicts. There are good examples of young women in Liberia and Sierra Leone who acted as combatants in civil wars and some, like Colonel Black Diamond of the Women's Auxiliary Corps in Liberia, even commanded elite units (Utas, 2005:404).

Notwithstanding the disproportionate emphasis on men in the discourse on violence, there is still some analytical value to examining women violence in socially separate but mutually reinforcing gender crucibles. Even though disempowerment is a shared misfortune of many Africans irrespective of gender, one may still discern differentiated experiences across gender divisions. For one, young women have unique pre-conflict experiences of disempowerment that provide important insights into how they respond to the dynamics of violence. As Brett and Sprecht (2004:87) note that, women often participate in organised armed violence primarily to escape domestic violence, abuse, and poverty rather than in defense of religious or ethnic interests as can often be the case for men. This indicates that female disempowerment and marginalisation by a patriarchal system is a major reason why young women participate in violent public conduct. This does not however provide adequate explanation for the methods by which they navigate the geography of violence.

In deconstructing women's participation in violence, it is helpful to answer the questions of 'why' and 'how'. 'Why' helps us to understand the specific factors that draw women into violent conduct while 'how' explains the tactics and tools with which they navigate the dangerous geography of violent conflict. Both questions collectively provide important insights into the dynamic engagement of women with Boko Haram activities in North East and the implications for social change.

To address the question of 'why', we can apply Murphy's (2003:64–66) four models of participation in violence and find appropriate parallels within the LCB. The first is the 'coerced women model' which views women as being brutally coerced into a (violent) military role and thus as passive victims of social upheaval. This model has been useful in providing some explanation for the 'child soldier' phenomenon in Sierra Leone and Liberia (Richards 1994, 1997). The second is the 'revolutionary women model' which views women as rebelling against political and economic marginalisation. This model has been used to rationalise the engagement of women within social movements involved in violent confrontation with the state/multinational oil coalition in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria (Ifeka, 2006). The two models differ in what they choose to emphasise about women participation in violence. In the first model, women is denied agency as they are framed as unwilling or choice-less victims of a brutal and coercive apparatus of violence. The second fully acknowledges the agency of women, making sure to point out their deliberate and rational rejection of marginalising social systems and their creative responses to the opportunities created by social conflict.

The third is the 'delinquent women model' which views women participants in violent conflicts not as revolutionary idealists but as 'alienated and economically dispossessed opportunists exploiting the economic spoils of social turmoil' (Murphy, 2003:64). In this case, women engage in violence in defense of no higher ideal, but rather for the heady adventure of violence itself (the *West Side Boys* in Liberia for instance; Abdullah, 1998) or for the criminal benefits that can be derived from conflict (some criminal elements of insurgency movements in the Niger Delta for instance). This model is reflective of traditional notions of women as sometimes carefree, rebellious, contemptuous of authority, and mischievous. It follows a path slightly different from the earlier two, straddling the realms of agency and agenthood. Agenthood here refers to the state of being an agent: lacking independent capacity to take decisions without

direction from others. While it acknowledges the choice of women to participate in delinquent violence, it frames that choice as natural and thus demeans it.

The fourth is the 'women clientelism model' which emphasises how women manage their dependency and agency within 'an institutional structure of repressive patrimonialism in which their subordination to adults is based on a cruel mixture of brutality, personal benevolence and reciprocity' (Murphy 2003:65). This model is markedly different from the three described earlier because it focuses on an extraneous factor to explain youth agency in violence: institutions built through client-patron relations. This model is particularly appropriate for analysing relations between women combatants and the commanders who recruit, mentor, and discipline them within the ranks of rebel movements. The civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone are, of course, poster women for this phenomenon.

The other question of 'how' relates primarily to methods and tools for navigating the complex geographies of terrorism in LCB. It is important to understand that the tactics with which women engage in or navigate violent situations cannot be explained with a mono-cultural or fossilised lens. It often involves a series of constantly adjusted tactics, developed in response to the constraints and incentives created, on the one hand by a hostile socio-economic context, and on the other by the immediate consequences of conflict.

In the context of major armed conflicts like civil wars, violence is in itself often a method to navigate the violent terrain created by war. In this regard, many women simply join armed groups as a way of gaining some protection from brutal and unforgiving armies (that are sometimes the very same ones that vulnerable youth join). It is thus often a case of 'if you can't beat them, join them'. This tactic for navigating violence has been thoroughly addressed within the literature. The works of Utas (2005), MacMullin and Loughry (2004), and Murphy (2003) are particularly rich in this with regard to Liberia and Sierra Leone, while Ukeje (2001) and Obi (2006) make similar points about the Niger Delta. As MacMullin and Loughry (2004) note in the case of young women, escaping the heightened vulnerability of women and girls to violent abuse during armed conflict is one of the key motivations that drive many of them to enlist. As McKay and Mazurana (2004) also note, during the 1976–1992 civil war in Mozambique, many young girls joined FRELIMO to get away from the rural areas, to improve their education or career opportunities, and to expand gender roles for women (issues that had become more difficult as a direct consequence of violent conflict). What these cases show is that violence is in itself sometimes a tactic to avoid violence or its consequences.

While the two navigation tactics discussed above are by no means exhaustive, they provide an adequate description of the broad scope and ingenuity of women encounters with violent conflict. The implications of growing organised and unorganised violence on the psyche of women and invariably on the society itself are dire. For one, women violence deepens the debate on gender as well as the conflict therein.

With shrinking access to subsidised socio-economic opportunities, the resilience of the family as the most basic unit for value creation, moral affection, and individual protection becomes threatened and too functionally weak to perform well. This adulteration is compounded by the harsh consequences of the present neo-liberal economic regime, particularly those associated with globalisation (Meagher, 2003). There is also that factor which Ly (1988) described as the 'eclipse of those traditional forms of solidarity that large kinship groups had generated and sustained' over decades in the continent. In traditional African solidarity means confronting corruption and promoting power-sharing, inclusive governance and the equitable distribution of resources. Then, members of each African society recognise each other as fellow human being and share in the

common welfare and wellbeing of each other. That is there used to be that generous, hospitable, friendly, caring and compassionate character of Africans. They share what they have. It also means my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in theirs. We belong in a bundle of life. We say 'a person is a person through other people. It is not 'I think therefore I am'. It says rather; I am human because I belong'. But all that is disappeared, to say the least. And as more people achieve social puberty, therefore, they are confronted with the 'fact of life' that they may not have the socio-economic wherewithal to live through this difficult phase of life, at least not independently, and are thus encouraged to evolve into a culture of violence and impunity.

There is also the issue of public discontent with the failure of the establishment to win for them due to the emergence of leaders who are not responsible and responsive to the people. The failures of governance and governance in the LCB have created a society in perpetual crisis within which legal opportunities for social mobility are, at best, few. This is the case for the entire LCB societies, but its expression is surely graver for marginalised social categories like women, and youth. In conditions where economic accumulation is extremely difficult, political exclusion and social decay are rife, and the structures of the state are either too weak or too uninterested to resolve conflict, it is not difficult to see the social crucible that forges violent resistance among deprived groups.

### **Factors Responsible for Women's Role in Boko Haram Activities**

In the heydays of the omen which has become Boko Haram and its activities it is common to see members of the set blew up themselves in general LCB and Northern Nigeria in particularly. Given LCB problems with statistics as well as the nature of these tragic events there is at the moment no specific tabulation as per the number of the suicide bombers who are women. But, from the reportage of suicide bombings it is clear that a substantial number of the suicide bombers are young women.

In terms of potential and possibilities, the LCB is the most disappointing region of the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The citizens are so debased and dehumanised that many have no inking of how bad things are. This is a region where poverty, in all its dimensions and ramifications, is the new normal. When one think of all the terrible things that are happening in the LCB on a daily basis one cannot but think of Albert Einstein who believes that 'the world is a dangerous place to live; not because of the people who are evil, but because of the people who don't do anything about it'. One would sure think of academics, lawyers, judges, and clergy, and politicians, members of the Armed Forces, and private citizens who do nothing to rectify but contribute to the pool of travesty that is the LCB. When one remembers that the real doyen of the societies of the LCB are the moneybags, duce bags or political ruffians one would conclude that Frederic Bastiat was right to note that 'when plunder becomes a way of life for a group of men living together in a society, they create for themselves in the course of time a legal system that authorizes it and a moral code that glorifies it'.

One of the root causes of Boko Haram activities is poverty. Most of the poor in the LCB are women. Data from the region shows that the few women who find jobs outside the home and so have income independent of their husbands tend to spend most of their money on the health and education of their families whereas men tend to spend most of their income on themselves. So the none-rising of the status of women in the region made poverty pervasive and restiveness results. How rapidly the status of women in the region declined was critical for the misfortune of that poorest part of world. Since the pace of social development stagnated over time gathering forces



of anarchy overwhelm human development. Thus, economic necessity was a powerful incentive for terrorism. This could not but happen because in an increasingly global economy, societies that do not make use of the abilities of half of their adult population will fall behind.

Women in the LCB experienced damages (structural violence) due to their inability to access social resources. And this is due to the ‘normal’ operation of the social system (Islam). The women operate under a system of distribution characterised by structural violence that is legitimised by prevailing political and social norms and sanctified by religious belief. The structural violence is multidirectional, including health, education and income categories. There is no doubt that the socio-economic and political problems of the LCB appear to have accumulated over time, as policy makers battle with chronic food shortages, high population growth rates, deforestation and desertification; excessive dependence on commodity export – particularly oil; deteriorating terms of trade, huge balance-of-payment deficits, government deficit financing and increasing indebtedness (both domestic and external).

Since the last decades of the twentieth century the managers of the economies of the countries of the LCB have moved their nations to the far right of capitalism through different policies. This is at a time when capitalism and socialism have become relics of the past. Capitalism might be working in the U.S. and U.K., but it does not in most other places. The things wise nations do is to use their peculiarities. The countries of the LCB have absolutely no problem but themselves. There are Nigerian leaders who are really Machiavellian in nature, and who feel that when you want to destroy a people you destroy them completely. So, as education is taken away from citizens of the LCB nothing remains. One UN report has it that the LCB has the highest number of out of school children in the world, even higher than China and India. The countries of the LCB failed to equip their young minds and make their huge youth population useful for society. The countries of the LCB are unimaginably wasteful. Thus, the hope for an egalitarian and prosperous society in the LCB is implausible. Boko Haram shows that the LCB missed the box a long time back. Boko Haram activities in the LCB heap disaster upon catastrophe. Women were also victims of Boko Haram by circumstance. The activities of Boko Haram terrorism depict how the system of national underdevelopment has emerged organically, in pragmatic response to unfolding events in the LCB, as well as demonstrating the centrality of individual fulfillment in regional peace.

### **Recommendations and Concluding Remarks**

What the study has done is to take a broad explore the context within which women participation in Boko Haram activities in the Lake Chad Basin may be understood – that is as both a failure of governance and a strategy for survival. Four models of women participation in terrorism are explored. They include ‘coerced women’ (which denies women agency by focusing on factors that force women into violence), ‘revolutionary women’ (which acknowledges women agency and situates terrorism in state decay), ‘delinquent women’ (which views women as economically dispossessed opportunists exploiting social turmoil), and ‘women clientelism’, which focuses on how institutionalised client-patron structures shape women engagement with Boko Haram terrorism. We also show that women participation in terrorism is often a series of constantly adjusted tactics developed in response to constraints and incentives created by a hostile socio-economic context and the immediate consequences of conflict. The ‘women wing of Boko Haram’ thus flows from broader social crises faced by the LCB. The challenge is therefore chiefly

about how to reconstruct LCB (and Northeast Nigeria in particular) in ways that address the women crisis as a developmental problem within a holistic framework.

A major point in this paper is therefore that the ‘problem’ of women is symptomatic of deeper and festering challenges facing African societies and must be addressed from this holistic premise. The countries of the LCB have huge governance deficit along the value chain of peace and security. The region got the social framework for gender interaction wrong *ab initio*. There is thus the need for the countries of the LCB to go back to ground zero, to re-negotiate the imbalance in the region. By virtue of population size and continuing marginalisation in virtually all socio-economic sectors, it is clear that women’s interests and problems will affect any long-run prospects for sustainable peace and need to be taken more seriously. Thus, the answers to terrorism must be found in women. Local women operating under extremely difficult circumstances may provide a powerful bridge leading to sustainable defeat of terrorism in the LCB.

It is important however that the symptom be kept separate from the cause, as it is the pervasive tendency to lump them together that has fueled public concern about the ‘diabolical’ exploits of women and driven denial of their resilience. There is an even bigger concern in the twenty-first century, especially in the context of challenges posed by globalisation (Hedley 2001). In the countries of the LCB today, there is now ample evidence that the globalisation process is going to bypass, marginalise or completely neglect millions of people for several decades to come. For those people, a large percentage of which are women, according to Gus Speth, as cited by Agarwal (1998), ‘poverty is a denial of the most basic of all human rights: the Right to Life’. A new preoccupation in national, continental, and global policy debate and action should therefore focus on improving the quality and dissemination of human security, especially for the most marginalised and vulnerable social categories in the world.

There is a sound conviction that women could reach their maximum potential without engaging in dangerous social activities if they can secure subsidised access to educational, medical, economic, political, social, and cultural resources. Women empowerment means expanding the opportunities available to female, taking cognizance of their ideas, vision, and skills, and channeling them towards development. It is clear that substantial ground still needs to be covered before countries of the LCB can adequately make sense of the concerns, yearnings, and aspirations of its women, and turn these into the energy and drive necessary to claim the twenty-first century. However, leaders in the LCB must reduce their faith in external assistance, concentrate on nation building and develop a more cooperative framework for the region. They must also note that nation building is often cumbersome and vulnerable to all sorts.

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