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Women, Internal Displacement and the Boko Haram Conflict: Broadening the Debate

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ABSTRACT

Women and children make up 79 per cent of the population displaced by the conflict between the Nigerian government and the armed movement informally known as Boko Haram. Their lived experiences expose the considerable protection and humanitarian risks of being female in violent contexts and the complexities of addressing them. In addition to open conflict and inconsistent policy and humanitarian responses, women's displacement is being protracted by disjunctures between women's roles and their construction as victims in policy and humanitarian frameworks. Construed as lacking agency, displaced women are resisting the hardship of displacement by returning to Boko Haram. This article argues for a rethinking of the importance of context, autonomy and agency as a prerequisite to reconciling false narratives about women's experiences of conflict and displacement and their lived realities. It speaks to broader debates about women and conflict and the utility of current approaches and frameworks for addressing the roles and needs of women in these contexts.

KEYWORDS

Nigeria; gender and security; IDPs; UNSCR 1325; women; peace and security in Africa

Introduction

Women's experiences of protracted displacement within the Boko Haram crisis have received scant scholarly attention. This article aims to contribute to a critical rethinking of the assumptions underlying much of the scholarship on women and displacement. It makes three arguments: First, Nigerian women's experiences of conflict and displacement derive from their unequal status within the Nigerian polity. As discussed, this is evidenced by the historic normalization of violence against women by state and non-state actors in and out of conflict. Though the article focuses on internally displaced women and girls, it intermittently discusses challenges facing (1) displaced women and girls; (2) humanitarian workers (enslavement and killings) and (3) police women, showing how despite their varying positionalities as social actors, their female sex and gender predispose them to specific forms of intersubjective violence. Second, in spite of their subjugated sociocultural status, displaced women are using their agency in multiple ways to

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compensate for shortfalls in policy and humanitarian responses to their situation. Some women's decision to return to Boko Haram illustrates the disjuncture between their lived realities of displacement and their construction as helpless victims in policy and humanitarian interventions. Third, a critical rethinking of the importance of context and the concepts and practices of autonomy and agency is necessary to transforming women's displacement experiences.

The article adopts a feminist perspective for several reasons, chiefly in an attempt to distance itself from the mechanistic global discourses surrounding gender and security in Africa that have obstructed radical changes in women's conflict experiences to date.¹ By unmasking the multiple, intersectional roles and experiences of women and girls in conflict, recent scholarship deconstructs their stereotyping as victims and peacemakers, and highlights the need for policy and humanitarian interventions to take better cognizance of this. Second, despite growing recognition that displacement, like other social phenomena, is deeply gendered and affects women, men and other sex and gender groups differently, gender is not yet sufficiently embedded in emerging analyses of Boko Haram and the displacement crisis. Third, this contributes to the fact that although women and girls make up at least 79 per cent of persons displaced by the Boko Haram conflict,² displacement policies and programmes overlook their specific needs, experiences, vulnerabilities and priorities in these processes. Fourth, the governance deficits faced by many Africans are often felt more acutely by women who in many contexts do not enjoy the full benefits of citizenship, making it imperative to surface women's experiences with the aim of helping to address these deficits in the context of forced displacement.

Nigeria is not strictly a Sahelian country although three northeastern states – Sokoto, Kebbi and Katsina – are considered part of the Sahel region. The country is implicated in the Lake Chad Basin Crisis as the source of the transnational Boko Haram conflict that involves several Sahel and Lake Chad countries and affects over 17 million people across northeast Nigeria, Cameroon's Far North, western Chad and southeastern Niger.³ Nigeria is also actively involved as an origin, transit and destination country for IDPs and refugees fleeing the Boko Haram conflict. From a research perspective, Nigeria also offers the opportunity to problematize hegemonic regional and transnational discourses on forced migration by examining internal displacement from the standpoints of those most affected. That said, the Boko Haram displacement crisis intersects Nigeria's better-known migration trend through a growing trafficking threat⁴ that targets orphaned girls living in IDP camps.⁵

Data was gathered over six months. This included a feminist review of knowledge on gender and forced displacement in Nigeria and relevant policy frameworks. The article draws on individual and focus group interviews with 71 persons in Abuja and Maiduguri in September and October 2018, including female IDPs (15 participants in three group discussions), human rights and humanitarian personnel (eight interviewees), female civilian joint task force members (ten

participants in one group discussion), police (two interviewees and seven participants in one group discussion), activists (seven interviewees and eight participants in one group discussion), politicians (two participants in one group discussion), security experts (nine interviewees) and journalists (two interviewees). For security reasons, none of the participants is identified. In keeping with feminist ethics, I interviewed diverse women and tell their stories through their voices in the ensuing narrative. I tried to create safe spaces during interviews, shared from my own life as the women told me their stories and continually reflected on the power dynamics evoked by my methods and positionality in my meetings.

This article is divided into five parts. Part One begins with an overview of the Boko Haram conflict, its gender dynamics and the ongoing forced migration and displacement crisis. Part Two presents a synopsis of the implications for women of this crisis, looking at protection and humanitarian needs. Part Three comprises a review of policy and practice responses and frameworks, followed by a discursive exploration of the broader questions surrounding women's conflict experiences in Part Four. The article closes in Part Five with a conclusion.

During fieldwork, some participants observed that the moniker, Boko Haram, is a Western imposition that misrepresents the group's ideology. While preferring to use its more germane name, *Jama'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihad*, the author acknowledges that the organization split into two major factions in 2016. Marked differences in ideology and military strategy thus necessitate a different approach.¹ For convenience, the article identifies as Boko Haram the collective of armed groups operating in Nigeria's northeast, the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin.

The Boko Haram conflict and internal displacement in Nigeria

In the deadly violence that broke out in 2009 following the state killing of then Boko Haram leader, Mohammed Yusuf, tens of thousands have been killed, thousands of women, girls and men abducted, and millions displaced in the conflict between Boko Haram and the Nigerian government.⁶ Attacks against civilians lessened when the group split in 2016 into two factions: the *Jama'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihad* (People Committed to the Prophet's Teaching and Jihad) and the Islamic State West Africa Province, recognized as the West Africa affiliate of the Islamic State, which has since directed its attacks at the Nigerian military.⁷

Nigerians have been displaced in other internal conflicts but not on the numeric and geographic scale of the Boko Haram conflict. The government has fought hard to suppress and discredit the group and appeared to gain military victory in 2018. This triumph was short-lived, however, as sporadic

¹For more on the ideological differences and divisions within Boko Haram, see Edward Stoddard (2019): *Revolutionary Warfare? Assessing the Character of Competing Factions within the Boko Haram Insurgency*, *African Security*, 12, 3/4: 300-329.

attacks throughout 2018 intensified in November 2018, causing a cycle of fresh displacements and re-displacements. Violence against women and girls (VAWG) in different forms has been a prominent tactic of war throughout the conflict.⁸ Some analysts estimate that Boko Haram has abducted up to 2000⁹ but the figure is likely to be much higher given the numbers of women returning from captivity and continuing abductions by Boko Haram. With recent allegations by military insiders of high-level collusions within Nigeria's security frameworks and the reported involvement of heavily armed military outsiders,¹⁰ there seems to be no end in sight for the conflict or the displacement crisis it has engendered.¹¹

Between 2009 and 2016, at least 2.5 million people across northeast Nigeria (reportedly women and children make up 79 per cent of this figure) have been forced from their homes and displaced in camps across six states in the region – Adamawa, Bauchi, Gombe, Taraba and Yobe.¹² Thousands more have been forced across borders from Nigeria into neighboring countries (Cameroon, Chad, Niger) and vice versa; although Cameroon has repeatedly expelled them – most notably in 2015, 2017 and March and September 2019 – ostensibly to keep Boko Haram members from hiding amid refugee flows.¹³ These figures are conservative estimates, meaning that the situation may be much worse but accurate data is inaccessible owing to challenges with efficient data gathering given the sudden nature of displacement, poor data cultures,¹⁴ methodological disparities in data collection,¹⁵ and difficulties tracking and accessing the 90 per cent of displaced persons who live in host communities, not IDP camps.¹⁶ With Hausa and English being the linguistic currencies of most data collection and humanitarian work in the region, a language barrier obstructs data collection among some IDPs and is particularly skewed against women and girls who have generally lower literacy levels and are more likely to speak local languages like Marghi or Kanuri.¹⁷

Women and the Boko Haram displacement crisis

The Boko Haram conflict has numerous protection and humanitarian implications for women. In this section, the article analyzes safety and security, health, food and nutrition, economic hardship and access to justice.

Safety and security

The displacement crisis has multifaceted security implications. The concentration of masses of IDPs in camps makes them easy targets and Boko Haram has attacked them, partly to source for food supplies¹⁸ and partly, it would seem, to brandish its military superiority over Nigerian security forces – an assertion that finds credence in reports that soldiers are underequipped and have been known to run away during attacks.¹⁹ The group has repeatedly attacked Dalori, one of the largest camps in Borno that houses some 15,000 IDPs. At least 12 civilians were killed when some 100 Boko Haram fighters burned Dalori in an

October 2018 attack that involved Bulaburin and Kofa villages.²⁰ During these attacks, male and female IDPs face an equal threat of violence, abduction or death. However, women and girls face an additional threat of sexual violence, whether captured or not.

There is widespread albeit underreported sexual violence against women and girls across the northeast²¹ and a severe paucity of data on VAWG.²² However, the absence of male relatives and the confinement of women and girls within IDP camps make them especially vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, including by those mandated to protect them as well as Boko Haram members who have allegedly infiltrated some camps. Some rapes occur as women and girls perform routine tasks like collecting firewood and fetching water outside camps.²³ Women are raped while relieving themselves in bushes, owing to an acute lack of toilets that has been noted by humanitarian workers.²⁴ Amnesty International, female IDPs and women activists have reported rapes allegedly committed by Nigerian soldiers²⁵ that the Nigerian government has repeatedly denied,²⁶ although Nigerian media reported that one air force officer was dismissed in April 2019 for raping a 14-year-old in September 2018.²⁷ Human Rights Watch has also reported rapes and other forms of assault by Cameroonian soldiers against Nigerian women refugees and asylum seekers that are said to have occurred during their return from captivity (or forced expulsion in the case of Cameroon) and during detention in military, refugee and IDP camps.²⁸ This amounts to re-victimization following extensive abuses of some women and girls by Boko Haram²⁹ that has already caused extreme trauma and depression.³⁰ Some women whose husbands are present are experiencing domestic violence borne out of men's frustrations at being unable to provide for their families and self-perceptions of eroding masculinity. For some men, the fact that humanitarian aid tends to be given to women in order to prevent misuse by men³¹ serves as further evidence of their emasculation and resentment and makes violence a means to reassert their authority over their wives.³² Social workers³³ and platforms like *Bits of Borno*³⁴ have identified a growing problem with illegal substance use among both sexes that is further fueling VAWG and men's need to prove their masculinity through violence and sexual abuse. Some women endure the harsh living conditions in the camps through survival sex which puts them at risk of sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies; the latter has occasionally led to infanticide.³⁵

Health, food insecurity and malnutrition

In addition to the risks of sexually transmitted infections, sexual violence exposes women to conditions like fistula in contexts with limited access to reproductive health and medical care. Women face mental health challenges that include post-traumatic stress disorder and are more vulnerable to depression.³⁶

Food and nutrition insecurity represent a further challenge for many women and are a direct consequence of their economic deprivation and dependence on humanitarian aid. Two groups of women IDPs interviewed at separate camps told me that at the time of interview, they had not received food rations for over a month and were surviving on handouts. According to the first group – women representatives of female IDPs in that camp (translated from Hausa):

IDPs: Of course we have a lot of problems! We have problems of food, money, clothes, body lotion and soap. All of us. These are our biggest problems but the major one is food. We used to get some before but not anymore.

Researcher: Do the UN and other organisations not give you food?

IDPs: They give but it's not enough for us. It's NEMA that gives us food but it's not enough. We have women here with 10 children. Some even have 15. The food is never enough for them. And it doesn't taste nice. They give us rice, beans, bulgur wheat and corn. No salt or anything.³⁷

One woman in the second group said (translated from Kanuri):

The last time we received food was 53 days ago. We work by picking beans and groundnuts on farms near the camp to be able to get enough food for a single meal. Last week while we were working, Boko Haram attacked us and we had to run and leave the food behind.³⁸

As can be deduced from both responses, the food given to IDPs is nutritionally sparse and lacking in taste. Food shortages occur because of corruption or diversion by the private companies in charge of distribution.³⁹ Food supply can also halt during transitions from one provider to another, which happens when some contractors do not meet international standards.⁴⁰

Inconsistent humanitarian support

Reports indicate that IDPs have access to humanitarian assistance but that it does not match their extensive needs.⁴¹ There are also problems with disparate quality of interventions and capacities and a lack of monitoring of who is doing what, where and how and to what effect and standards.⁴² As stated, only 22 per cent of IDPs live in designated camps⁴³ while the rest reside in host communities. Poor road connections and insecurity in remote locations like Damboa have made it difficult to access some IDPs. In some cases, the government allegedly denies humanitarian personnel access to IDPs.⁴⁴ While organizations like the ICRC and UNICEF have extended assistance to remote places, Boko Haram's abductions and killings of humanitarian staff are seen as demotivating factors.

Access to justice

Access to justice for IDP survivors of VAWG is limited. From a response perspective, under current arrangements, policewomen are assigned to IDP camps as contact points for women who experience abuse. Policewomen remarked in a focus group discussion that compared to a few years ago, they are now receiving fewer reports of abuse from IDPs in camps. However, this could be as much a factor of reduced violence (unlikely) as of a prevailing culture of silence surrounding sexual violence that prevents survivors from speaking up.⁴⁵ It could also be the result of alleged threats by soldiers and other authorities committing such abuse⁴⁶ and the involuntary choice of affected women and girls to be silent in order to survive on the camps.

When survivors do have the courage to report, they face a number of obstacles that can eventually obstruct their access to justice. In theory, they have recourse to the police, medical facilities and the courts. In February 2018, the Managing Conflict in Nigeria programme added to this matrix the N3lewa Center (a Kanuri word meaning wellbeing) – the only sexual assault referral center in Borno to provide medical support and legal assistance to survivors. Since its creation, the center has processed 79 cases of VAWG as at October 2018, including some involving IDPs, and facilitated collaborations with the police, the media, activists, the Borno State ministry of justice and other development and humanitarian actors. However, these justice structures are thin and poorly resourced. The N3lewa Center is the only one of its kind in Borno State and is located in central Maiduguri, meaning that survivors in remote parts of Borno and other states either do not have access to it or have to travel long distances to get help. Many of these women find it difficult to get there and some have to rely on the staff to pay their bills and finance their return to the camps.⁴⁷ In addition, the police are not well paid, their salaries and allowances are often in arrears and their living and working conditions are difficult.⁴⁸ The policewomen who are chiefly responsible for administering VAWG cases are themselves often the target of harassment by senior male officers within the police force and confront a crisis of legitimacy in the eyes of some locals who are not accustomed to seeing women in uniform or do not think that women belong in the police. “We’re IDPs too; please tell them we’re crying”, one policewoman half-jokingly said in a focus group discussion,⁴⁹ alluding to the difficulties of being female in a male-dominated institutional and cultural context. Judicial clerks sometimes make technical errors that cause cases to be withdrawn or dismissed, raising questions about competence.

The Nigerian penal system is set up so that the police and court system can only prosecute suspects if survivors press criminal charges. Some reported cases lapse at different stages because survivors withdraw charges. This happens either because perpetrators offer compensation in the form of cash or marriage, or their families want to avoid the stigma that public exposure can bring in

a culture where silence and shame surround such events because of the premium placed on the sexual chastity of women.⁵⁰

Economic hardship

With so many husbands and male relatives absent, and in a culture where men are the main earners and masculinity is interwoven with the ability to provide, many displaced women are struggling to cope with their sudden thrust into this economic role. In a context of displacement where there is no well-paying work, these women survive by selling crafts and working menial jobs either for a scanty daily wage of a few hundred Naira (roughly US\$0.50 to US\$1) or tiny food portions after several hours' strenuous work in Maiduguri's scorching heat.⁵¹ Women IDPs also beg or send their daughters into the city center to beg and hawk, reportedly with a "tacit understanding" to exchange their bodies for money,⁵² thereby putting them at risk of abduction or further abuse. Some women take on petty jobs in farms adjoining the camps where they are sometimes attacked, raped or/and abducted by people believed to be Boko Haram members.⁵³ Media reports corroborate humanitarian accounts of women engaging in "transactional sex" in order to survive, although the deprivation and indignity that compel this "choice" blur the lines of agency between sexual violence and compelled consent given under duress.

Responses to the displacement crisis

Nigeria has an elaborate legal and policy framework and institutional architecture that targets its other, better-known migration crisis of mass emigration from Nigeria to Europe or North America. This consists of the Nigeria Immigration Act 2015, the Nigeria Immigration Regulations 2017 and the National Agency for the Protection of Trafficking in Persons, supported by an assortment of national and international NGOs and multilateral organizations like the International Organization for Migration, the European Union and Pathfinder International. In contrast, the government's legal position toward IDPs is less clear.⁵⁴ This section appraises responses to the IDP crisis at subnational, national, regional and international levels, pointing out highlights, challenges and opportunities. It does not discuss the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement 1998 because they are incorporated as foundational principles into each of the national and regional multilateral frameworks that are regulating responses to the displacement crisis.

At the subnational level, the National Emergency Management Agency and Borno State Emergency Management Agency has conducted needs assessments, distributed relief materials, supported state-level deradicalization programmes and constructed makeshift lodgings for IDPs.⁵⁵ However, it is stretched thin with continuing influxes of IDPs from outside Maiduguri into the city as attacks

have resurged in recent months. The state chapter of the National Human Rights Commission has been instrumental in processing people either escaping or rescued from Boko Haram, the bulk of whom comprise women and girls. One research participant suggested that this was because intensified pressure by the government at the time had made it difficult for Boko Haram to cater for all captives and members and forced it to abandon the people most likely to slow them down during quick escapes. Some women and men have also left, disillusioned by the group's promises of a purer way of life following repeated military victories by the Nigerian government. The Human Rights Commission has also helped to pursue access to justice for survivors of VAWG, including IDPs, and worked with other actors to collect data and conduct site visits to determine IDPs' needs and assess their welfare.

At a national level, responsibility for IDP management is shared between the National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons (NCRMFI), a chiefly policy and administrative entity, and an Inter-Ministerial Task Force set up in 2016 to bolster coordination efforts.⁵⁶ The legality of the NCRMFI is uncertain pending the passage of a draft National Policy on Internally Displaced Persons that has been in development since 2003 and was last revised in 2012.^{57,58} The draft policy is a comprehensive document that incorporates the UN guiding principles on internal displacement, the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of IDPs in Africa, and the Communiqué of the First ECOWAS Ministerial Conference on Humanitarian Assistance and Protection of IDPs in West Africa.⁵⁹ It details the rights and obligations of IDPs; responsibilities of government, humanitarian agencies, host communities and armed groups to IDPs; policy implementation framework and strategies, and modalities for funding, monitoring, evaluation and policy review. At the time of writing (May 2019), the policy had not been formally adopted, despite assurances by the Buhari administration in January 2019 that it would be passed into law. In October 2019, President Buhari created the ministry of humanitarian affairs, disaster management and social development and appointed a substantive minister to coordinate his administration's "Special Intervention Programmes".⁶⁰

In the absence of substantive legislation, the status of the IDP policy has been queried as it means that its content is not legally binding. The policy recommends the designation of a central coordinating agency by the president but does not identify one. This responsibility seems to have fallen to the NCFRMI although the legality of its actions are uncertain pending the passage of the policy. It has been suggested that instead of a coordinating body there should be a primary entity with direct responsibility for IDPs that has authority over all other implementing structures and has the power to demand accountability from them.⁶¹ The policy has also been critiqued for its lack of dedicated funding and reliance on external support. It provides for

a joint humanitarian fund to be managed by the coordinating body and fundraised on a need basis during disasters and displacements. As happened with appeals for support during the Boko Haram conflict, delays in commitment and disbursement from contributing countries have impeded effective interventions, thereby compounding the suffering of IDPs.

In March 2017, the governments of Nigeria and Cameroon, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) signed a Tripartite Agreement for the Voluntary Repatriation of Nigerian refugees living in Cameroon. Triggered by repeated forced repatriations of Nigerian refugees by Cameroon, it envisaged the creation of a commission to oversee implementation which was mandated to set up its own technical working group to assist its work. Among its key provisions are the option of voluntary repatriation for Nigerian refugees in Cameroon in safety and dignity, and based on “relevant and reliable knowledge of the prevailing situation”, and non-coercion of return and continued recognition of their refugee status (article 2). The agreement also stipulates free reciprocal access between the UNHCR and refugees during displacement and repatriation (article 3). Some data suggests that thousands of Nigerian refugees (135,000 from January to June 2017, for example) have repatriated voluntarily,⁶² but refugees’ accounts of the deplorable living conditions in Cameroonian refugee camps belie the legitimacy of their supposed agency in this regard.

The agreement itself does nothing to highlight the special needs of women and girl refugees nor to ban and criminalize sexual abuse by security personnel. It also does not provide for gender-aware women or men or IDPs to be included in the composition of either the commission or the technical working group (see articles 23 and 27). Both omissions are significant but unsurprising in a context where government institutions are dominated by men and security is seen as “men’s business” – indications that global gender and security frameworks like UN Security Council Resolution 1325⁶³ have not taken sufficient root in this context. The governments of Nigeria and Cameroon, the latter especially, have both violated and continue to disregard the tripartite agreement with impunity. Cameroon deported at least 9000 Nigerian refugees in January 2019 and was reported to have done the same to some 100,000 others between 2015 and 2017.⁶⁴ Government troops on both sides have reportedly raped women and girls and starved them in order to solicit sex in exchange for food in camps and during displacement and forced repatriations by the government of Cameroon.⁶⁵

The African Union Convention for the Assistance and Protection of IDPs in Africa, commonly known as the Kampala Convention, was passed in 2009. As a signatory, Nigeria has tried to domesticate it through a draft bill⁶⁶ and fulfil its responsibilities there under, thereby creating some conceptual confusion about the status of and relationship among this bill and the National IDP Policy and the National IDP Commission Act. The Convention contains wide-ranging recommendations in five key areas: prevention, coordination, protection,

humanitarian assistance and durable solutions for IDPs. A detailed analysis by the ICRC⁶⁷ shows that although the government is making some efforts, it is largely defaulting in its responsibilities to IDPs within this framework. Abdulazeez and Oriola⁶⁸ classify as criminogenic both the state's complicity in abuses against IDPs as well as its inaction against those involved and failure to protect affected persons, especially women and girls. They also indicate that this could lead to renewed grievances against the government. (It should be noted that anti-government sentiments were among the factors that contributed to the Boko Haram conflict and have helped to sustain it.)

A constellation of civil society and humanitarian organizations has worked hard to meet vast demands for humanitarian assistance across Nigeria's north-east, often in dangerous circumstances. Boko Haram's abduction and killing of ICRC and UNICEF medical aid workers Saifura Ahmed, Hauwa Leman and Alice Ngaddah from an IDP facility in Rann⁶⁹ expose the dangers and vulnerability that humanitarians face, but also raise questions about the politics of aid assignments in volatile contexts that result in Nigerians being more exposed. Notwithstanding, gaps persist in terms of the adequacy of response to protracted displacement in the context of a broader protection deficit.⁷⁰

Part of the problem is varying depths of coordination and harmonization of mandates and structures in some sectors. With regard to VAWG and community peacebuilding, for example, I observed informal meetings among humanitarian and development actors in which they were just learning about one another's work and negotiating opportunities for mutual support and collaboration. One participant attributed this to a lack of leadership and direction by the Nigerian state at national and subnational levels as well as an overreliance on external financial and material assistance.⁷¹ Other issues include difficulties with ascertaining and controlling the quality of a plethora of interventions in light of the vast needs and inadequate resources as well as loose regulatory frameworks in Nigeria that enable NGOs to operate with minimal scrutiny, except from donors.⁷² Monitoring is also a challenge as there does not seem to be a comprehensive database of all organizations and persons providing relief—including to IDPs—how and where they are working, and to what standards and change theories, making it difficult to assess whether interventions are having desired impact. The cumulative effect of all this is that IDPs have disparate access to assistance in terms of quality and quantity. Fatima Akilu, director of NEEM Foundation, a Nigerian NGO providing psychosocial support in Kaduna and Maiduguri stated that limited donor funding compels her staff to select from target communities only those most visibly in need of support, having been exposed to extreme levels of trauma. During a focus group with displaced women at an IDP camp, a Kanuri interpreter noted a training by the United Nations Population Fund intended to empower women but only accessible to survivors of sexual abuse. This means that some IDPs and IDP communities are

benefitting more than others and people within singular communities do not have the same access to support.

Beyond protection: what are the broader issues?

Thus far, the article has summarized the debates surrounding women and girls' experiences of the Boko Haram conflict. Among its key arguments is that prevailing approaches to addressing women's needs and challenges are problematic because they do not recognize or embrace the broad diversity of women's experiences and how embedded they are in the surrounding cultural context. This section expands the debate by discussing the importance of context, autonomy and agency to women's displacement experiences.

The importance of cultural gender norms and context

The displacement experiences of women and girls in northern Nigeria cannot be read separately from the broadly unequal status of women within the Nigerian polity – more pronounced across the country's north – evidenced by a global gender gap index of 0.62.⁷³ As Oriola⁷⁴ astutely observes, “Boko Haram's deployment of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) against women is an extension of the ‘repertoire of violence’ ingrained in the socio-political and cultural milieu of Boko Haram's primary area of operation”. Embedded in the group's systematic abductions of women and girls since 2009, and its use and abuse of them for reproduction, domestic labor and varying acts of violence, are entrenched cultural norms that objectify and subjugate femaleness across Nigeria, but especially in its northern regions. Violence against women is high⁷⁵ as is impunity for perpetrators, as demonstrated in arbitrary arrests and sexual assaults by police of some 100 women at an Abuja nightclub in April 2019.⁷⁶ Post-event justifications and social media commentary showed clearly the sway of state and popular moral opinion about what constitutes befitting behavior for women. In this context, widespread sexual abuses of displaced women and girls by Boko Haram, and allegedly by security and humanitarian officials, are a continuation of normal gender dynamics.⁷⁷

There have been other instances of unpunished mass abuses of women by the state. In November 1999, Human Rights Watch reported that Nigerian soldiers invaded the town of Odi in Bayelsa State, killing hundreds and raping several women in Choba in retaliation for the killings of several policemen.⁷⁸ The week prior, soldiers had raped “a large number of women” while disrupting a protest in Choba, Rivers State.⁷⁹ The army denied all allegations. More recently, in April 2019, policemen in Abuja conducted raids on several nightclubs and strip clubs, and arrested some 65 to 70 women – one of whom carried her nursing infant – for being “prostitutes”. Some of the women told CNN that the police

asked them for money bribes and raped those who could not pay. Some policemen used discarded water sachets in place of condoms.⁸⁰ They also said that these 'moral cleansing raids'² are said to be very common in Abuja and are targeted at women deemed to be “provocatively dressed” and not accompanied by men.⁸¹

Rethinking women’s autonomy and empowerment

Without the social protections of marriage and family – sometimes in spite of them – Nigerian women face heightened vulnerability to VAWG. But conflict-induced disruptions to family life can also act as a conduit to greater female self-actualization and autonomy if interventions are holistic and take into joint consideration the post-conflict needs of men and women.⁸² Any empowerment that targets women at the expense of men while new roles for women defy traditional norms will only create chaos and suffering for women. What is being termed “empowerment” in the displacement context of the Boko Haram conflict – a complex, multifaceted concept that is difficult to define or quantify (and one that evokes the gender and development discourse and the global agenda to subvert the subordination of women⁸³ – is at best ambivalent,⁸⁴ however, for several reasons. First, because it consists chiefly of giving IDP women money and trainings in entrepreneurship,⁸⁵ it reduces complex multiple iterative processes of self-development to a state that can be evoked by a simple transfer of material wealth.⁸⁶ Second, this purported empowerment has come at the cost of some displaced women’s separation from their husbands in a context where being married is an important social marker and comes with fixed gender expectations. In one focus group, displaced women said through a Kanuri interpreter: “Life is not sweet anymore. Being here without our husbands has no meaning for us. We want to see our husbands.”

Third, without the financial support and companionship of a partner or the social safety nets of extended families, the informal work that displaced women do does not pay well enough to guarantee autonomy and leaves them dependent on humanitarian support⁸⁷ – what El-Bushra calls the “dependency syndrome”. The participants had children aged 2 to 15. With sparse access to schooling in camps and displaced women unable to afford school costs in communities, childcare is an added burden that compromises their ability to earn money. Relatedly, empowerment is easier to rationalize for women of working age with access to resources and opportunities, and more difficult for older women in frail health. Yagana, an elderly woman IDP in her 70s living in a host community takes care of nine grandchildren under ten years old alone after her son was taken by the army years ago. Through tears, she said in Hausa:

²Egbejule, “Abuja police raids”.

Soldiers took my son away. They thought he was part of Boko Haram. They kept asking me to bring money ... up to 60,000 Naira but I still haven't seen him. Then Boko Haram took his wife. I am alone with nine children. I am too old to work. Neighbours help us. Sometimes I can't sleep. I have to keep begging the school not to send them home. I just want a place to live and send the children to school.⁸⁸

In the same focus group, a displaced woman in her 30s said:

Boko Haram buried my brother in the ground up to his neck and covered his head with a bucket with holes. After he begged, they released him and killed him as he tried to run away. Save the Children gives us food but we have no money. I pay rent every six months' here. Sometimes I must choose whether to pay rent or eat. Some people say things about us and keep their distance. I want to go back home and make a living even if the income is small.⁸⁹

As is evident in plural feminist frameworks for measuring women's empowerment, for example, Kabeer's resources-agency-outcome model,⁹⁰ it is multidimensional, meaning that claims to empowerment that focus on displaced women's headship of homes and breadwinner status or use income access as a means to empowerment – both are 'standardized notions of "empowerment" steeped "in ... traditional and neoliberal agendas"⁹¹ – are simplistic and cannot convey the full depth of the displacement-gender power dynamics nexus within the Boko Haram conflict. They also overlook women's lack of "institutional leverage" to fulfill new roles effectively within unchanged social structures⁹² – a major weakness in the global women, peace and security (WPS) framework's "add women and stir" ethos that has prioritized increased women's participation in security over transforming the gender cultures of security infrastructures,⁹³ Per Kabeer, more critical thought needs to be given to how displaced women's new "power" interacts with prevailing gender norms and their reciprocal effects in order to ascertain where the gaps are and devise more holistic, intersectional approaches to this important concept.

An important but overlooked indicator of empowerment is the opportunity that conflict offers to build (on) women's political consciousness or conscientisation, in line with Sara Longwe's⁹⁴ five-part women's empowerment framework. This is a crucial element that could ultimately help facilitate conflict and displacement as catalysts for women's greater political participation.

Re-viewing the agencies of displaced women

The agencies of displaced women are central to both the above debate and the dynamics of displacement and management strategies. But a disjuncture between how they are using their agency, and whether or not they are seen to have agency, is obstructing informed interventions that can tangibly emancipate women from the oppressions of violence and displacement. Both scholarship

and policy have been complicit in perpetuating stereotypes of women in conflict as victims.⁹⁵ In this narrative, women are seen as lacking agency and become associated with violence and fighting groups only by force or other form(s) of coercion. This is at odds with evidence that some women chose to join Boko Haram voluntarily⁹⁶ and are now returning, also willingly, to what the rest of the world construes as captivity.⁹⁷ Their decision seems to be motivated by their self-perceptions that Boko Haram offered them greater autonomy, visibility and voice than their regular social lives as women in northeast Nigeria: they had access to education and power over junior male commanders. These women also face extreme hardship in displacement camps and communities that is compounded by rejection and stigma from their families and communities – a potential factor for the feminization of extremism as has occurred in Sri Lanka, Northern Ireland and Indonesia.⁹⁸ Women in this category, an arguably small group, belonged to the higher end of Boko Haram's hierarchy and inhabited more liberal Boko Haram camps. Their experiences deepen insights into women's intersectional experiences of conflict that do not reflect in current interventions.

In one sense, some women's return to Boko Haram could be read as an indictment against the state and humanitarian actors for failing to protect them, although this overlooks women's ability and use of agency to choose among competing options in circumstances where other actors see only one. More deeply, it shows how the failure to recognize displaced women's diversity of experience within the Boko Haram conflict leads to misaligned responses that either do not transform women's circumstances or catapult them back into the situations they were rescued from in the first instance. This disjuncture stems from neoliberal conceptualizations of what agency means, leading feminists like Saba Mahmood to suggest that an alternative to hegemonic conceptual frameworks is to “think of agency not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable”.⁹⁹

In the same way that the information blitz around the Chibok girls and other mass abductions invisibilises Boko Haram's violence against other women and their diverse experiences of the conflict,¹⁰⁰ centering female IDPs' stories on victimhood obscures alternate perspectives and constrains their agencies. Displaced women are a diverse intersectional group. They not all uneducated and poor and even when they are, they have evinced remarkable resilience in the ways in which they have coped with and survived very difficult living conditions and repeated violations of their human rights and bodily integrity. During interviews, they articulated clearly their needs, the challenges that they face and the kinds of support that they would like from the government and other actors. They have engaged in peacebuilding¹⁰¹ and mobilized through groups like the Knifar Movement¹⁰² to advocate for better conditions and the return of missing relatives. Within the limits of what is

practically feasible based on available resources, instead of implementing decisions made on their behalf by people who do not share their lived experiences, policy actors ought to involve displaced women in planning, implementation and evaluation of IDP management from a gendered perspective. This would help to ensure that available support is targeted to identified needs and not compounding IDPs' suffering.

Locating women's displacement within the national women, peace and security process

Leveraging the agencies of displaced women would also help to address gender gaps in the management of the displacement crisis which has been disconnected from the national women, peace and security (WPS) process and broader national efforts to increase women's participation in security matters. As a signatory to the landmark United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, Nigeria is required to design and implement a national action plan (NAP) every three years. UNSCR 1325 is part of an expanding framework that now contains nine resolutions with recent additions of resolutions 2349 on women and terror and 2467 on improving the prevention of sexual violence and protecting children born of wartime rape.¹⁰³ A review of Nigeria's first NAP which was launched in 2013 states that it was implemented with mixed results. It helped to establish WPS networks at federal and state levels to support the localization of the WPS agenda and was instrumental in getting the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Bill passed in 2015.¹⁰⁴ This bill has been pivotal in securing successful prosecutions of sexual violence in states where Sharia law conflicts with the Nigerian criminal code.¹⁰⁵ But low levels of support and resourcing by federal, state and local governments obstructed the NAP's implementation. Varying capacities (comprising understanding of WPS issues and programming) among implementing parties in different parts of the country compromised outcomes – capacities in the north were/are among the lowest across the country.¹⁰⁶ Significantly, the NAP did not reflect the country's "evolving contextual landscape" with specific reference to the Boko Haram conflict and its impact on women, a fact that can be attributed to the infancy of the WPS project in Nigeria and its preoccupation with trademark WPS issues like gender mainstreaming in the security sector. While these concerns have been integrated into the NAP 2017–2020, the process will still need to overcome feminist critiques that the global WPS process is "mechanistic" and orientated toward attaining benchmarks as opposed to impact.¹⁰⁷ This would make the difference between, for example, setting targets for recruiting fixed numbers of women into the armed forces as against improving gender culture within armed forces by increasing systemic gender awareness among male and female personnel.

Conclusion

The Boko Haram conflict as well as the displacement crisis that it has engendered are vast and complex. Continuing attacks following a surge in violence in late 2018 are compounding the situation of IDPs and refugees both within affected countries and across the Sahel and Lake Chad subregions which are confronting their own internal crises. Women and girls are experiencing displacement directly as a consequence of their sex and gender, and indirectly through their relationships and interactions with diverse groups of men. The return to Boko Haram of some women and girls is an indictment on the handling of the conflict and displacement crisis and reflects how poorly their needs have been conceived and met by policy and humanitarian actors. The Boko Haram conflict and displacement crisis present important opportunities to interrogate more deeply the lived experiences of displaced women and girls and explore the prospects that they represent to transform gender inequality in a part of Nigeria where it has been historically acute. This would require in-depth, critical reviews of the interplay between conflict, gender structures and attitudes in northeast Nigeria, and the policy frameworks discussed in this article. This warrants further research.

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