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Boko Haram insurgency and gendered victimhood: women as corporal victims and objects of war

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ABSTRACT

Boko Haram insurgency in North East Nigeria has exposed women (girls, ladies, and mothers) to a complex jeopardy. While some women have suffered untimely widowhood or child-lack as a result of the Boko Haram onslaught, others have suffered death, forced abduction, and allied assaults on the main and side lines of the insurgency. Oftentimes, women have faced direct violence that essentially degrade their humanity. This is evident in the deployment of women as war-front sex slaves, human shields, and suicide bombers by the insurgents. The virtual expendability of women in the context of Boko Haram insurgency has been vividly demonstrated by the gale of female suicide bombings in Nigeria over the recent years. By means of a textual and contextual analysis of library sources and/or documentary data, as well as an adroit application of the theory of objectification, this study posits that, in addition to suffering collateral vulnerabilities, women have equally been instrumentalized as objects of terror in the context of Boko Haram insurgency. The paper further argues that the ‘weaponization’ of women’s bodies as bomb vessels and human shields by the insurgents highlights the height of women’s corporal victimization and objectification in contemporary asymmetric warfare.

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KEYWORDS Boko Haram; gender; insurgency; objectification; women; victimhood

Introduction

Terrorism often takes the form of gendered violence. It is a phenomenon that involves and affects people differently based on their respective gender and allied intersectionalities. Traditional literature on terrorism proffers somewhat mixed perspectives on how gender determines the involvement of people in terrorism. Some scholars contend that terrorism is overly a masculine phenomenon, with men usually plotting and leading the operations.¹ Yet, some other scholars argue that women count among the ‘vulnerable demographics’, which suffer the most of the terrorism

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consequences.² Importantly, conflict scholars who are inclined to gender analysis believe that 'gender affects the way war and conflicts are experienced'.³ Put straight-forwardly, 'Armed conflicts affect women and men differently'.⁴ But while the effects of terrorism are no respecter of gender, history has clearly demonstrated that women are often at the receiving end of the violence. In effect, 'Although women are not inherently vulnerable, they frequently fall heightened danger in (such) situations of violence ...'.⁵

Over the years, Boko Haram insurgency has presented a veritable theatre for Gender Based Violence (GBV) in Nigeria. In effect,

Boko Haram has routinely engaged in GBV, abusing and harassing both Muslim and Christian women in North-East Nigeria. They have also instrumentally used women and girls ..., for example, to recruit or to smuggle arms. There is a growing evidence of coercion of females into roles as suicide bombers.⁶

Research has shown that 'Boko Haram has deployed not only more total female bombers than any other terrorist group in history, but more female bombers as a percentage of its overall suicide bombing cadre than any other group'.⁷ In other words, Female Suicide Bombing (FSB) constitutes a critical facet of Boko Haram's operational tactics. What then is the nature of FSB? What is its strategic logic or tactical utility? What are its gender implications? These are the salient questions that this study intends to answer.

While exploring the above analytical posers, the study posits that the instrumentation/weaponization of women as suicide bombers in the context of Boko Haram insurgency amounts to corporal victimization and objectification. This has reproduced and perpetrated the patriarchal gender relations based on hegemonic masculinity, male domination, and female subjugation. While women have been involved in terrorism and extremist movements in various parts of the world (e.g. the SSNP's female attackers of Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka; the *shahids* (martyrs) of Lebanon) as actors and agents of violence, the case of Boko Haram presents a peculiar scenario whereby the role of women in such context often merely passes for objects and victims of violence.

The remainder of the paper is organized around six thematic areas. Following the foregoing introduction is a conceptual segment where the basic variables are conceptualized and contextualized. This is followed by a brief literature review and then theoretical framework, where the theory of objectification is presented and applied as the analytical anchor of the study. Next is a discourse on the strategic logic and tactical utility of Female Suicide Bombing (FSB) vis-à-vis the Boko Haram's experiment with FSB. Following this is a consideration of some gender implications of Boko

Haram's use of FSB alongside the question of agency, and then the conclusion.

Conceptualizing and contextualizing basic terms

Four key terms constitute the conception thrust of this paper, namely: gendered victimhood, Boko Haram insurgency, corporal victimization and objectification, and female suicide bombing (FSB). [Table 1](#) considers these terms in order to operationally situate them.

Perspectives on female suicide terrorism (FST): a literature review

Suicide bombers are today's weapon of choice. Terrorists are using suicide bombers because they are a low cost, low technology, and low risk weapon. Suicide bombers are readily available, require little training, leave no trace behind, and strike fear into the general population. The success of suicide bombers depends upon an element of surprise, as well as accessibility to targeted areas or populations. Both of these required elements have been enjoyed by women suicide bombers.¹⁹

Suicide terrorism is a frontline, combat operation that involves the deployment of a human body as a defensive or an offensive weapon. According to Olaniyan,²⁰ 'Suicide terrorism is a form of terrorism that dwells largely on using human bodies as weapons of destruction'. The strategic logic of suicide terrorism has been underscored by Horowitz,²¹ who notes that 'Suicide bombings are often an attempt to circumvent an asymmetrical weakness by using members of the group themselves as part of the delivery mechanism'. Horowitz adds that suicide terrorism 'substitutes people ... for artillery, missiles, and other expensive weapons'.²²

Suicide terrorism thrives on the logic of tactical 'opportunism' and expediency.²³ Motivated by 'a willingness to kill and a willingness to die',²⁴ suicide terrorism is geared towards the end of terrorism, namely: creating fear, sending a symbolic message to diverse audiences, killing civilians, and asserting power over governments and communities.²⁵ As a recent literature puts it:

[...] the terrorists rely on the asymmetric violence which is geared towards sending a particular political message. To maximize the attention of their audience (the adversary governments, ordinary citizens, and their own political base) the terrorist organizations tend to utilize the most visible, memorable, and thus high-impact forms of violence – suicide bombings, plane hijackings, hostage taking, or political assassinations. These violent and illegitimate acts are designed to amplify fear and trauma and thus make governments look weak and incompetent.²⁶

Table 1. Overview of basic terms.

Term	Definition(s)
Gendered victimhood	The notion of gendered victimhood is an attempt to situate the gender question in the way in which violence is experienced. It presupposes that violent conflicts impact and affect males and females differently. ⁸ Although violent conflicts affect man and women alike, women are much more vulnerable and less resilient in such situations. Occasions of conflict victimize women by exacerbating their feminine vulnerability to social and sexual abuse. This perspective amply resonates in the GBV narrative which characterizes women, more or less, as victims of violence. ⁹ The common experience of women in North-Eastern Nigeria under the reign of Boko Haram has been one of aggravated victimhood. In addition to being exposed to the worst collateral social consequences of insurgency, women's bodies have been objectified as the expendables of war. The dehumanization of women in the theatre of insurgency in this context smacks of gendered victimhood amidst entrenched patriarchal and masculinist stereotypes.
Boko Haram insurgency	'Boko Haram' literally translates to "western education is forbidden". It refers to the notorious terrorist group based in Northern Nigeria, whose original standard name is <i>Jama'atuAhlisunnahLidda'awatiwal Jihad</i> (meaning: people committed to the propagation of the Prophet's teachings and Jihad). The Jihad group was founded in 2002 in Maiduguri, Borno State, by a radical Islamist cleric, Mohammed Yusuf. The group's ideology is based on radical (extremist) jihadism as well as strict observance of Islamic law (Sharia) in Nigeria. ¹⁰ Since 2009, Boko Haram has carried out systematic campaign of terror against the Nigeria state and people, attacking both hard and soft targets rather indiscriminately. ¹¹ The group has employed diverse tactics, such as mass assassination, mass abduction, guerilla warfare, suicide bombings, among others, in perpetrating its declared jihadist cause. ¹² By 2015, activities of Boko Haram had gone very widespread in Northern Nigeria as well as the wider Lake Chad Basin. By then, the group had launched successful attacks in Nigeria's Federal Capital Territory (Abuja) as well as in thirty (30) of the thirty-six (36) states of the Federation.
Corporal victimization and objectification	To victimize is to afflict somebody with unwarranted suffering. Corporal victimization, therefore, occurs when a person's body is subjected to undeserved physical abuse by another person. Objectification, on the other hand, "occurs when human beings are seen and treated as objects"; that is, "when people are treated as things instead of people". ¹³ Corporal objectification thus refers to a situation "When a person's body parts or functions are separated from the person (and) reduced to the status of instruments". ¹⁴ The notion of corporal victimization and objectification is used in this paper to denote the abusive experience of women as sufferers to Boko Haram insurgency, which has reduced them to mere corporal victims and objects of war. This is instantiated in their instrumentalization and exploitation as sex slaves, arms vessels or couriers, human shields, and suicide bombers. These forced 'war-time' undertakings do not only violate women's bodily integrity, but also dehumanize their essence and existence. This is more so considering the fact that such undertakings of women are hardly accorded any symbolic value or glorification by the male insurgents, who conscript the women into such roles. ¹⁵

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Term	Definition(s)
Female suicide bombing (FSB)	<p>Female Suicide Bombing (FSB) refers to the use of women or girls in carrying out bombing operations. As a form of suicide terrorism, it dwells on "using human bodies as weapons of destruction".¹⁶ FSB instrumentalizes women as weapons. A weapon is a means of gaining strategic, tactical, or coercive advantage in a conflict or contest, which "can take the form of an item, action, or offensive capability used or intended to kill, injure, or coerce".¹⁷ In the case of FSB, the woman that bears the bomb is not only an arms-bearer; she is also a weapon herself.</p> <p>FSB is a highly nuanced idea, which is associated with some conceptual polemics. While some female suicide bomber would pride themselves as 'martyrdom operators' or 'missionaries', a lot of them have been described as mere victims of Gender Based Violence (GBV). It has been contended women who do not possess the agency to willfully consent to being a 'suicide bomber' can only pass for a PBIED (person-borne improvised explosive device).¹⁸</p>

Source: Various authorities cited.

Female Suicide Terrorism (FST) is a pattern of suicide terrorist operation whereby women or girls are used as suicide bombers or attackers. The women involved in suicide operations could be self-motivated and ideologically persuaded persons who are seeking martyrdom. Yet, in most cases, they are women who have been coerced, cajoled, or intimidated into the act.²⁷ But whether they are 'victims' or 'vanguards',²⁸ the fact remains that they are deployed by terrorist operatives to gain a strategic advantage by 'subverting social norms and identifying unorthodox targets in order to exploit security gaps and continue its campaign against the state'.²⁹

Women involvement in suicide terrorism is not a historical novelty. Cases in point include the SSNP's female attackers (Hezbollah) in Lebanon; the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka; the *shahids* (martyrs) of Lebanon, etc.³⁰ Perhaps, what is novel is the increasing exploitation and objectification of women as the 'expendables' of terrorism. As Maiangwa and Amoa³¹ put it, the 'major concern ... is with their (sic) involuntary involvement, particularly of young females, through kidnapping and forceful recruitment ...'. The involuntary involvement of women in suicide terrorism mission amounts to the height of Gender-Based Violence (GBV). Incidentally, it has been the dominant pattern of women involvement in suicide bombing in respect of Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria.

Female suicide bombers share some general characteristics. One such characteristic is their youthfulness. Most of the bombers have been teenage girls and young women that are not married. According to Zedalis,³² 'some are widows and others have never been married; some are unemployed and others are professionals; some are poor and others are middle class'. Most of the female suicide bombers have either

experienced the loss of close/loved ones, or have suffered gender-based violence in the context of a conflict. Generally, the selection of women for suicide operations and the strategy employed to persuade them are similar to those employed for their male counterpart. In most cases, the recruiters exploit the candidates' innocence, enthusiasm, personal distress, and quest for revenge. Children orphaned and destituted by armed violence often count among the most vulnerable groups to female terrorist recruiters. Some accounts hold that the female suicide bombers could be 'sold' to terrorist organizations, drugged to perform such acts, and/or blackmailed into it through threats of physical or sexual violence.³³

There are many reasons for the involvement of women in suicide bombings. These variously border on religious, nationalistic, economic, social, and personal concerns of the suicide bombers.³⁴ In effect, whatever the reason may be for each suicide bomber, the underlying motivation have often been the same: 'they do believe they are committed, they are patriotic, and this is combined with a religious duty'.³⁵ Religion for, instance, offers the moral justification for committing seemingly immoral acts, such as suicide bombings. Most suicide bombers rationalize their violent actions as an imperative of a higher order. They believe such 'sacrifice' will earn them bounties of rewards in the afterlife.³⁶ Nationalistic extremists court suicide bombers by using fanatical rhetoric to whip up extreme sentiments based on hate and a profound sense of victimization. In addition to religious and patriotic motivations, suicide bombers could be motivated by material or egoistic rewards, such as large sums of money, personal or family prestige and honour and symbolic heroism.³⁷

Studies have shown that female suicide terrorism has been driven more by personal than ideological motivations.³⁸ Ideological motivations, often through religious and nationalistic indoctrination, have sometimes intermixed with personal motivations, such as depression, revenge, social estrangement, and dehumanizing experiences, to engender indulgence in suicide terrorism.³⁹ Factors such as these are often complicated by difficult material conditions, which threaten the individual's livelihood and survival, can push people becoming a suicide bomber. In respect of women, critical experiences, such as sexual violence or exploitation, can contribute to the lethal decision.⁴⁰ When these conditions are rife, terrorist organizations and their scouts could capitalize on the circumstances to recruit people as suicide bombers.⁴¹

Some suicide bombers have been driven by the pursuit of martyrdom. Martyrdom presupposes the willingness to seek death and to die for a holy cause. Every martyr believes that he/she is dying in the name of God.⁴² Beyond this spiritual understanding, the martyr wants to achieve some

symbolic and strategic ends. He/She views him/herself as a person who, through a publicly witnessed death, passes a message of faith, commitment, determination and a non-submission to a known enemy. By his sacrificial, altruistic death, he also serves as a role model who is worthy of emulation.⁴³

Female suicide bombers pass for martyrs when they act based on agency and with ideological conviction.⁴⁴ This implies that they must be acting in full cognizance of dying a heroic death. Otherwise, they would end up as either villains or victims of the violent circumstances that produced their supreme action. The experience of female suicide bombers in the case of Boko Haram insurgency to a large extent smacks of feminine victimhood at best. This is in view of their treatment as mere expendables and objects of war by the reprobate insurgents.

Overall, the prevailing scholarship on suicide terrorism has identified a number of reasons for the involvement of women in terrorism suicide operations. Prominent among the reasons are:⁴⁵

- (i) Ideo-theological persuasion that suicide terrorism amounts to martyrdom.
- (ii) Sense of frustration–aggression arising from dire emotional or material suffering.
- (iii) Mental gullibility arising from ignorance (illiteracy) and spiritual naivety.
- (iv) Psychological manipulation by way of cajolement, brainwashing, and the like.
- (v) Coercive intimidation by terrorists.
- (vi) Parental or familial pressure, especially on young females.
- (vii) Despondency and fatalism to violent.

The aforementioned factors resonate with the extant theoretical perspectives on the motivations of suicide terrorism as highlighted in [Table 2](#).

The strategic utility of FST has made it a fashionable tactic of terrorism globally. For instance, female suicide bomber can easily escape the scrutiny of security forces, owing to the assumption that women are largely pacifist and less inclined to violence.⁴⁶ Similarly, cultural sensitivities regarding the 'sacredness' of women's bodies may hamper thorough security scrutiny, especially where the search is conducted by a male security personnel.⁴⁷ Furthermore the use of flowing over-clothing (such as *hijabs*) as well as maternity gowns by women can provide cover for the concealment of bombs and explosives in their bodies. This is also true of pregnancy-related physiological changes in a woman, which can provide her with the pretext to evade security searches with an incriminating object. In addition to the above, terrorist organizations use female suicide bomber pertinently because of its 'shock value'.⁴⁸ In addition to

Table 2. Theoretical perspectives on the motivations of suicide terrorism.

Perspective	Proposition
Psychopathological perspective	Suicide terrorism is a consequence of irrationality or insanity. It is a case of psychological abnormality.
Politico-strategic perspective	Suicide terrorism is driven by strategic logic and rational choice. The Suicide terrorism is a conscious goal-oriented performer/actor
Force theory perspective	Suicide terrorists are forced into the act. They have no agency to act of their own accord.
Material vulnerability/ gullibility perspective	Poverty, ignorance, illiteracy and spiritual (ideological) naivety can render people vulnerable or gullible for terrorist inducement, brainwashing or cajolement
Psycho-telepathic Perspective	Drugs, alcoholism and indulgence in substances can predispose to terrorist suicide mission
Diabolical/Fetish perspective	The use of magical or mystical powers by terrorists to hoodwink people into suicide mission is possible.
Vindictive perspective	Suicide terrorist may be driven by vengeance
Ecology of war perspective	People raised in a context of war are inclined to develop queer violence disposition

Source: Compiled by the authors from various readings.

bringing about widespread shock nationally and globally, FSB holds the capacity to ensure maximum publicity 'and therefore (has) propaganda effect'.⁴⁹ The emotional response engendered by such an occurrence vitalizes the campaign of fear which constitutes the crux of any terrorist enterprise.

Globally, the growing involvement of women in terrorist suicide operations has, among others, challenged the orthodox bourgeois understanding of violence as fundamentally masculine. However, it has more importantly raised a salient concern about the question of self-autonomy and agency of the women involved.⁵⁰ Until women suicide terrorist begin to assert agency over their actions, their involvement in that context remains an exercise in feminine victimhood and objectification.

Theoretical framework: objectification theory

This paper appropriates objectification theory as its analytical framework. The theory was pioneered by Fredrickson and Roberts⁵¹ in their seminal work titled 'Objectification Theory'. The theory is an attempt 'to understand and explain the experiences of girls and women' in relation to conditions that instrumentalize, de-autonomize and objectify their essence.⁵² Epistemologically, the theory is rooted in the contemporary scholarship on social psychology, with studies on self-objectification and sexual objectification as its progenitors.⁵³

The notion of objectification requires a proper contextual understanding before its theoretical application. According to Calogero, 'To objectify is to make as an object, which can be used, manipulated, controlled, and known

Table 3. Nussbaum's conception of objectification.

S/n	Dimension	Remark(s)
1.	Instrumentality	Treatment of another as a tool for one's own purposes
2.	Denial of autonomy	Treatment of another as lacking self-determination
3.	Inertness	Treatment of another as lacking agency and activity
4.	Fungibility	Treatment of another as interchangeable with others
5.	Violability	Treatment of another as permissible to break/break into
6.	Ownership	Treatment of another as something that is owned
7.	Denial of subjectivity	Treatment of another as something whose feelings and experience do not need to be considered

Source.⁵⁶

through its physical properties'.⁵⁴ In relation to humans specifically, the core of objectification is to instrumentalize the human essence in a person by way of denial of autonomy, agency and subjectivity.⁵⁵ The essence of objectification could be better understood with the aid of Nussbaum's conception highlighted in Table 3.

Objectification theory offers ample insights into the logic and essence of gender-based violence orchestrated by Boko Haram. Instances include the use of abducted girls and women as a means of coercive bargain; appropriation of girls/women as sex slaves, human shields, arms couriers, and defensive weapons; as well as the instrumentalization of girls/women as arms vessels as well as suicide bombers. In all of these instances, women are not only victimized and dehumanized; they are essentially subjectified and objectified. As victims and objects of war, women at the mercy of Boko Haram operatives have been stripped of their autonomy, agency and subjectivity.⁵⁷ The forcible conscription of young girls and women into Boko Haram's suicide mission, and the 'sacri-suicidal' roles of these girls/women as person borne improvised explosive devices, attests to the fact that humans are being reduced to the status of instruments of war. Again, the fact that Boko Haram leadership hardly accords the female suicide bombers any symbolic value or martyric heroism affirms the bomber's utter expendability in context of the insurgency.

Boko Haram and female suicide bombings (FSB)

The appropriation of women and girls as instruments of terror has been central to Boko Haram insurgency. In addition to sundry heinous GBV perpetrated by Boko Haram, the group has further dehumanized women by using them as suicide bombers. To be sure,

Nigeria recorded its first case of female bombing on 8 June 2014. This involved a middle aged women, who detonated an explosive device (IED) strapped to her body at a military barracks in Gombe State, killing herself and on military

personnel. Since that period, the frequency of suicide missions carried out mainly by women and young teenage girls on soft targets has heightened.⁵⁸

Over the years, attacks by female terrorist on suicide mission have been widespread and rampant in northern Nigeria, with main targets being crowded places such as motor parks, mosques, churches, schools, markets, shopping complexes, and IDPs campus.⁵⁹ This phenomenon 'has been an important tactic in achieving fear and communicating Boko Haram's unrelenting endurance, even when under duress'.⁶⁰ The trend and trajectory of FSB in Nigeria over the recent years has been patently eschatological. As chronicled by Onuoha and George:⁶¹

Nigeria recorded its first female suicide bomber in 8 June 2014 when a motorcycle-riding middle-aged female struck at a military checkpoint in north-eastern Nigeria, killing herself and a soldier in the process. Ever since, it has become a phenomenon. Few examples: On Friday, at least 45 people died and 33 others were wounded in another double suicide attack carried out by female bombers at a marketplace in the town of Madagali. In February 2015, Boko Haram used an eight-year-old to carry out a suicide attack in Potiskum, in Yobe state, and a 10- and 18-year-old pair was involved in a failed July 2014 attack in Funtua, in north-western Katsina state. In October 2016, another set of female suicide bombers killed 17 people at a station near a camp for internally displaced persons. In 11 November 2016, three young girls with bombs strapped to their bodies were killed on their way to unleash mayhem in Umarari village along Maiduguri-Damboia road. On 25 December 2016, two female suicide bombers invaded cattle market in Maiduguri, killing two people in the process. On 17 November 2016, the police were able to avert attacks on Federal High Court in Jidari Polo area of Maiduguri by two females and one male suicide bombers. On 7 November 2016, two female suicide bombers also killed 30 people in an attack on a local market in Madagali local government area of Borno state. In January, 2017, a young girl carrying a baby in her back detonated explosives strapped to her body, killing herself, her baby and several people in Adamawa state. On 15 March 2017, four young female suicide bombers killed two people in Usmanti area in the outskirts of Maiduguri, Borno state.

Since its debut in June, 2014 the incidence of FSM in Nigeria has become globally unprecedented, far outstripping the records of any other terrorist group. 'As of 28 February 2018, a recorded 469 'female "suicide bombers" have been deployed or arrested in 240 incidents, and they have killed more than 1,200 people across four countries: Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon. Almost 3,000 more people have been injured'.⁶²

The female suicide bombers have been sourced through a variety of avenues including kidnapping and mass abduction of girls and women, forced conscription, family donations of girls, and volunteering.⁶³ There was a bizarre case of family donation in 2014, when an arrested prospective girl-suicide bomber confessed that she was donated to the insurgency for the purpose of suicide mission by her own father.⁶⁴ The women socio-

Table 4. Phases in Boko Haram's use of suicide bombings, 2011–2018.

Phase	Period	Main target	Main location	Typical bomber profile
Phase 1: Take-off stage	April 2011 to May 2013	Government and Christian Institutions	Borno State and parts of Abuja	Lone men
Phase 2: Innovation stage	May 2013 to April 2014	Government institutions, bus stops and military check point	North-east Nigeria and parts of Kano	Lone young men and young women
Phase 3: Consolidation stage	April 2014 to December, 2015	Civilian areas (markets, shopping areas, bus-stops, churches and mosques)	North-east Nigeria and Lake Chad Basin, North-west Nigeria	Coordinated young women; lone men
Phase 4: Retrenchment stage	January, 2016 to October, 2016	Civilian areas, such as the IDPs camps	North-east Nigeria and Lake Chad Basin	Young women and children in coordinated attacks
Phase 5 Resistance stage	November, 2016 to present	Civilian areas, such as IDPs, shopping areas.	Borno State and Lake Chad Basin	Young women and children in isolated attacks.

Source.⁶⁶

economic and psycho-social vulnerabilities in the context of Boko Haram insurgency (poverty, loss of loved ones, livelihood crisis) have been exploited by the insurgents and their scouts in inducing young women and girls into suicide missions.⁶⁵

To properly situate the historical and contemporary dynamics of FSB in Nigeria, it is germane to understand the evolutionary phases of suicide bombing as a strategy of Boko Haram insurgency over the years. [Table 4](#) is illustrative and instructive in this regard.

Boko Haram's FSB: addressing the gender question and the agency factor

Boko Haram insurgency has obtained in a patriarchal society characterized by entrenched system of female subjugation and victimization. In such a system, 'there is a considerable amount of pressure on the women to perform acts of self-sacrifice', ranging 'from subtle social pressure to do something (selflessly) for their community to more blatant forms of coercion like kidnapping and sexual assault'.⁶⁷ It is in a context like this that the deployment of women as suicide bombers by Boko Haram insurgents could be best conjectured.

Boko Haram's adoption of FSB is a matter of tactical opportunism and expediency. But the strategy has benefitted from the prevailing patriarchal

order, as well as the socio-cultural and socio-economic conditions of women in the context of insurgency, which have aggravated their feminine vulnerability. The existing patriarchal system has fed into the fault-lines of religion-based stereotypes to bring about outcomes that subjugate and subjectify women. In this regard, it has been observed that:

Boko Haram's abuses of women emerge partly from *salafi-jihadi* interpretations of Sharia and partly from entrenched patriarchal legal and social structures in the north-east, which can politically marginalize women and enable abuses of male power, even when women also feel they benefit from other aspects of Islam, and indeed Sharia.⁶⁸

The patriarchal structures are systematically reproduced and reinforced by a high incidence of poverty, illiteracy and structural victimization that have characterized women's existential experience in the wider northern Nigeria. These conditions bring about material hardships, despair, resentment and despondency among women, which are often exploited by the predatory insurgents in recruiting them into suicide operations. The implication of this is that women's involvement in terrorist suicide mission in respect of Boko Haram insurgency smacks of an existential victimhood in a society where women are culturally and structurally marginalized.

Akin to the above is the question of agency. Empirical narratives of defected or arrested female suicide bombers in Nigeria have variously indicated that such women were coerced, induced, intimidated, brainwashed, tricked, or cajoled into the mission.⁶⁹ Most of the suicide bombers have been children and teenagers who lacked capacity for rational and self-conscious decision. Some of the bombers have been as young as less than 10. For example, on Sunday 22 February 2015, a 7-year-old girl was stopped by vigilant security guards in Nigeria's north-eastern town of Potiskum as she tried to enter a busy market in the neighborhood, with the intent to detonating improvised explosives embedded on her by the Boko Haram insurgents. This affirms that the bombers were more or less mere victims in the hands of the insurgents who were inclined to exploit their criminal innocence and feminine vulnerability.

The fact that the female suicide bombers are far younger than the terrorists implies that they are liable to mental manipulation and intimidation. This is more so the case where young and dependent teenage girls are involved. A UNICEF report published in 2015 alarms that Boko Haram has resorted to the used of child-suicide bombers, most of whom were girls. The report states *inter alia*:⁷⁰

- (i) The number of children involved in suicide attacks is on the rise – 11 times higher in one year (from 4 to 44 between 2014 and 2015)
- (ii) Nearly 1 out of every 5 suicide bomber is a child
- (iii) Three quarters of all child suicide bombers are girls.

Prevailing anecdotal and corroborated media narratives also affirm that the majority of those involved in Boko Haram's suicide bombing in Nigeria are children. This corroborates the findings of Warner & Matfess to the effect that of the 434 bombers deployed to 247 different targets during 238 suicide-bombing attacks by Boko Haram, 'at least 56% of these bombers were women, and at least 81 bombers were specifically identified as children or teenagers'.⁷¹

The generational dynamics in Boko Haram suicide recruiting becomes more salient when familial or parental pressure is also involved. This is demonstrated in the case of a father who donated his 13-year old daughter to Boko Haram insurgents as a suicide missionary.⁷² This prospective teenage suicide bomber who was arrested in December 2014 in Kano explained how she was conscripted by her biological father and taken alongside other girls to one of Boko Haram's operational camps in Bauchi State for radicalization and onward 'martyrdom'. She narrated that the insurgents tried to cajole and coerce them into suicide mission. According to her confession:

I was not moved by the soul searching preaching of bounties in the heaven and it was at this point, their leader resorted to threat and intimidation to obtain my consent. We were shown a deep hole where the leader of the group threatened to bury us alive at a point if any of us refused to play along, and at another time he picked a big gun and threatened to shoot anyone who fails to obey his command.⁷³

A corollary of under-age bombing is the issue of forced conscription. Confessions of most prospective suicide bombers arrested in the past conform to the narrative that they have, more often than not, forcibly conscripted into the mission.⁷⁴ To be sure, none of these bombers has been recorded to have displayed any form of heroic grand-standing and unrepentance as an ideologically motivated, conscious and committed terrorist, ordinarily, would. Rather, they have generally been found to be overtly remorseful and repentant. More importantly, there have been cases whereby the would-be bombers simply defected or submitted themselves to the government security operatives.⁷⁵ This amply indicates that they must have been acting under duress.

The above revelations and observations point to the fact that such suicide bombers have hardly acted based on self-conscious agency. As such, they could not have acted for martyrdom. Expectedly, none of the female suicide bombers in Nigeria is known to have left any form of statement to indicate proper ideological cognizance of what she was undertaking. Accordingly, the insurgents have scarcely accorded their accomplished missions any significant heroism and glorification. To say the least, Boko Haram's female suicide bombers have been 'mere victims

in the hands of exploitative (and manipulative) men asserting their hegemonic masculinity'.⁷⁶ The male terrorists have merely exploited their ignorance and vulnerability in advancing their extremist cause. To be sure, the suicide bombers have often largely been bereft of ideological conviction. Again, they have generally lacked agency over their decisions and actions. The objectification of women's bodies as bomb vessels and arms courier by Boko Haram insurgents tend to depict the reproduction of the patriarchal ideology of masculine hegemony in the context of an insurgency. This has reduced the suicide bombers not only to victims, but also corporal objects, of war.

Conclusion

Boko Haram insurgency in the north East Nigeria has thrived largely on tactical opportunism. It has been sustained by the use of the most barbaric and unconventional tactics. This is exemplified by the deployment of women, not only as sideline support-agents, but also as frontline actors in the theatre of armed violence. This study approached the gender question in Boko Haram insurgency from the standpoint of women's corporal victimization and objectification. Beyond being traumatized by the collateral humanitarian impacts of the violence, women have also been exposed to dehumanizing assaults, such as mass abduction and hostage, forced marriage and sex slavery, as well as bodily abuse by way of female suicide bombings. The study observed that the insurgents' use of women as war expendables as well as weapons (as in the case of female suicide bombing) has reduced women to corporal victims and objects of war. Interrogating the involvement of women in the frontline of Boko Haram insurgency, the study submitted that, although a handful of such women might have acted based on active self-motivated agency, the generality of them must have acted from the position of sheer vulnerability and victimhood. The implication of this is that, apart from its associated dire humanitarian consequences that threaten human security, Boko Haram violence further dehumanizes women by making them corporal victims and objects of war.

In particular, the study indicates that Boko Haram's operational resilience has been largely based on tactical innovation, dictated by the logic of opportunism and expediency. The mounting counter-insurgency pressure tends to have driven the insurgents into more queer but innovative tactical options, geared towards gaining strategic advantage in a desperate bid to sustain its campaign of terror. The insurgents' resort to instrumentalizing vulnerable women as objects of war typifies this crass, brute tactical opportunism. If anything, the discernible trajectory and outlook of the insurgency point to the fact that this use of women as instruments of war would prevail in view of its relative strategic utility and efficacy. Subsequent counter-insurgency endeavors in

Nigeria must devise a pragmatic means of devitalizing this opportunistic strategy. One vital way forward is the incorporation of gender-sensitive innovations in the counter-insurgency operations, such as the involvement of more women personnel in intelligence-cum-espionage missions as well as stop-and-search operations.

Notes

1. Zedalis, "Female Suicide Bombers," 1–18.
2. Banjeglav, "The Use of Gendered Victim Identities before and during the War in Former Yugoslavia"; Maiangwa and Amao, "Daughters, Brides and Supporters"; and Bloom, "Woman and Terrorism."
3. Luehramann, *Untitled*, 78.
4. ICRC-EUISS, "Women and Armed Conflict," 5.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Zenn, "Boko Haram beyond the Headlines," 43.
7. Warner and Matfess, "Exploring Stereotypes," v.
8. Banjeglav, "The Use of Gendered Victim Identities before and during the War in Former Yugoslavia"; and Jackson, "#Say-her-name".
9. Olwan, "Gendered Violence".
10. Okoli and Iortyer, "Terrorism and Humanitarian Crisis"; Onuoha and George, "Boko Haram's Female Suicide Bombing."
11. Warner & Matfess, "Exploring Stereotypes," 1–44.
12. Onuoha and George, "Boko Haram's Use of Female Suicide Bombing in Nigeria," 1–9.
13. Gervais and Bernard et al., "Objectification and (De)humanization," 2.
14. *Ibid.*, 2.
15. Zenn, "Boko Haram beyond the Headlines," 1–144.
16. Olaniyan, "Boko Haram and Female Suicide," 1.
17. Wernel and Femia, "Epicenters of Climate and Security," 68.
18. Warner and Matfess, "Exploring Stereotypes," 6.
19. Zedalis, *Female Suicide Bombers*, v.
20. See note 16 above.
21. Harowitz, "Non-State Actors and Innovation," 33.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Zenn, *Boko Haram beyond the Headlines*, 37.
24. Hoffman and McCormick, "Terrorism, Signaling and Suicide," 272.
25. Zenn, *Boko Haram beyond the Headlines*, 42.
26. Malesevic, "Cultural and Anthropological Approaches," 188.
27. Bloom, "Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror," 1–251.
28. Onuoha and George, "Boko Haram's Use of Female Suicide Bombing in Nigeria," 6.
29. Warner and Matfess, *Exploding Stereotypes*, 42.
30. Bloom, "Woman and Terrorism."
31. Maiangwa and Amao, "Daughters, Brides, and Supporter of the Jihad," 117.
32. Zedalis, "Female Suicide Bombers," 8.
33. *Ibid.*, 8.
34. Okoli, "Boko Haram and Forestland Governance."
35. Zedalis, "Female Suicide Bombers," 9.

36. See note 31 above.
37. Zedalis, "Female Suicide Bombers," 1–18.
38. Raghavan and Balasubramaniyan, "Evolving Role of Women in Terror."
39. Gentry and Sjoberg, "Beyond Monsters, Mothers and Whores," 1–304.
40. Ibid.
41. See note 12 above.
42. Bloom, "Dying to Kill," 1–251.
43. See note 1 above.
44. O'rouke, "What is Special about Female Suicide."
45. Agara, "Gendering Terrorism," 115–25.
46. Ibid., 121.
47. See note 12 above.
48. Zenn, *Boko Haram beyond the Headlines*, 36.
49. Ibid., 36.
50. Tervooren, "Representing Women and Terrorist Violence."
51. Fredrickson and Roberts, "Objectification Theory."
52. Calogero, "Objectification Theory, Self-objectification, and Body Image," 574.
53. Balraj, "Understanding Objectification Theory."
54. Calogero, "Objectification Theory, Self-objectification, and Body Image."
55. Nussbaun, "Objectification."
56. Ibid.
57. Gervaus et al., "Objectification and (De)humanization"; and Calogero, "Objectification Theory, Self-objectification, and Body Image."
58. WANEP, "News Situation Tracking-Nigeria," 1.
59. Onuoha and George, "Boko Haram's Use of Female Suicide Bombing in Nigeria; and Warner and Matfess, *Exploding Stereotypes*, 1–44.
60. Zenn, *Boko Haram beyond the Headlines*, 42.
61. Onuoha and George, "Boko Haram's Use of Female Suicide Bombing in Nigeria," 6–7.
62. Warner and Matfess, op. cit., 39.
63. Onuoha and George, "Boko Haram's Use of Female Suicide Bombing in Nigeria"; and Okoli, "Nigeria," 34–55.
64. Olaniyan, "Boko Haram and the Specter of Female Suicide bombers in Nigeria," 1–14.
65. Onuoha and George, "Boko Haram's Use of Female Suicide Bombing in Nigeria"; and Olaniyan, op.cit.
66. Warner and Matfess, *Exploding Stereotypes*, 39.
67. Bloom, "Woman and Terrorism," 1.
68. Zenn, *Boko Haram beyond the Headlines*, 44.
69. Onuoha and George, "Boko Haram's Use of Female Suicide Bombing in Nigeria"; Olaniyan, "Boko Haram and the Specter of Female Suicide bombers in Nigeria."
70. UNICEF, "Beyond Chibok," 3.
71. Warner and Matfess, *Exploding Stereotypes*, iv.
72. Olaniyan, "Boko Haram and the Specter of Female Suicide bombers in Nigeria."
73. Omonobi and Muhammad, "Father made me a Suicide Bomber," 1.
74. Onuoha and George, "Boko Haram's Use of Female Suicide Bombing in Nigeria."
75. See note 72 above.
76. Anaedozie, "Emergence of Female Suicide Bombers."

Disclosure statement

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