

## ***Boko Haram Insurgency and the Spectre of Female Suicide Bombers in Nigeria***

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### **Abstract**

The encounters between Boko Haram and the Nigerian state have been largely nightmarish and calamitous, making it one of the most talked about phenomenon in the recent times. The violent activities of Boko Haram constitute major disruption to the Nigerian state, especially in its task of achieving peace and development. Apart from persistent threats to the peace, stability and developmental aspirations of the country, Boko Haram has also wrecked an unimaginably high level of damage on the country's social fabrics. One of such instance is the sending of young female suicide bombers to unsuspecting members of the public, with tales of death, destruction, displacement, sorrows and tears as consequences. Apparently using indoctrination, intimidation and exploiting the innocence of underage girls, Boko Haram terrorists have inadvertently introduced a dangerous dimension to their violent operations. Indeed, resort to exploiting the innocence of young girls for nefarious activities constitutes an affront on shared social, cultural and religious values of the Nigerian people. And this raises some pertinent questions: what led to the use of young girls for suicide bombings? How do they source for the girls? What are the implications of this trend on the Nigerian society? This paper seeks to interrogate the foregoing questions and by so doing contributes to the discourse on the various dimensions to the Boko Haram insurgency and the implications on shared societal values, peace, orderliness and development in Nigeria and her immediate neighbours.

Keywords: Boko Haram, Female bombers, Abduction, Indoctrination, Violence and Nigeria

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## **Introduction**

Boko Haram insurgency occupies a prime position in the number of security challenges currently facing the Nigerian state (Olaniyan and Asuelimeh, 2014, Agbiboa, 2016). Since the end of the civil war in 1970, no other violence has openly violated Nigerian territorial integrity and recorded more numbers of human and material casualties than the Boko Haram insurgency (Olaniyan, 2015). Indeed, the appearance of the militant group on the Nigerian political landscape has set in motion chains of uneventful events of gruesome proportions, which continue to affect the citizens in their daily existence. One major area of these unpalatable events is the introduction of suicide bombings into the Nigerian society. Prior to the appearance of Boko Haram in the Nigerian state, suicide bombing was something unthinkable. Nigerians are generally regarded as fun-loving people, famous for heavy partying and always scared of death. Suicide is a taboo among the various cultures in the country. But Boko Haram elements changed that perspectives.

Suicide bombing was introduced into Nigeria in 2009 by Boko Haram when it launched suicide attacks on the convoy of the Inspector General of Police as well as the UNDP office in Abuja, killing people and destroying the property. Since then, Boko Haram as a militant group of people has caused devastations through waves of bombings, massacres, suicides and major destructions of infrastructure (Chothia, 2012; cited in Mathew and Fada, 2014). To worsen the situation, they added the specter of female suicide bombings, to the extent that most of the recent suicide acts are perpetrated by young females. This paper interrogates the phenomenon of female suicide bombings by Boko Haram militants. It examines the theoretical aspect of suicide missions, the rationale behind the Boko Haram usage of small girls for the deadly mission, the instanced and the implications on the society.

## **Why Suicide Bombing**

Suicide bombing has become a weapon of choice which usage has experienced rapid rise as evident in its adoption by 17 terror groups in 14 countries of the world (Zedalis, 2004). Between 1974 and 2016, the world recorded 4669 terrorist attacks, resulting in 41,731 deaths and 105,388 wounded (Chicago Project on Security and Terrorism, 2016). The growing rampancy of the deadly tactics shows the grim situation the world is confronted with. Suicide terrorism is a form of terrorism that dwells largely on using human bodies as weapons of destruction. It is a weapon of the weaker parties when facing forces that are considered stronger (Scot, 2003). Suicide attacks are cruelly efficient means of killing mass number of people at little cost to the killer or the sponsors. In the contemporary times, we have cases of Japanese Kamikaze on Pearl Harbor in the United States that resulted in the death of about 5000 Americans (Scot, 2003:1535), the Irgun of Israel against British colonial government, Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka that introduced suicide belt to terrorism, ISIS of Iraq and Syria that became one of the most brutal usage of suicide attacks in history, Alqaeda Networks in the Middle East and north of Africa, Boko Haram group that has emerged as about the deadliest terror group at the moment; as well as Palestinians attackers in their wars against the Israeli forces of occupation in the West Bank. We have seen the devastating usage of the deadly method by the such other groups as the Taliban in Afghanistan, Hezbollah in Lebanon, FIS in Algeria, Ansaredin in Mali, and several groups fighting against the Assad government in Syria.

For sure, suicide terrorisms are not entirely new forms of warfare in the history of humanity (Victoroff, 2005, Merari and Friedland, 1985). Scot Atran reported how the *Sicari* (Jewish sect of Zealots) employed suicide attacks against the Romans during the latter's occupation of Judea as well as the suicide warfare employed by the *Hashashin* (Islamic Order of Assassins) against early Christian crusaders (Scot, 2003:1534). In the recent time, however, the suicide attacks on Iraqi Embassy in Beirut, killing 28 people in December 1981, seemed to have opened the floodgate for series of suicide missions that were to follow. Such violent ways of attack have featured prominently in instruments in the hands of violent groups around the world, featuring prominently in United States of America, Sri Lanka, Lebanon, Israel, Turkey, Pakistan, Algeria, United Kingdom, Afghanistan, Chechnya, Philippines, etc. (Ibanez, 2014). In the very recent time, there has been several suicide attacks in France, Belgium, Germany and London. The specter of female suicide attacks started in the 1980s and Sana'ah Mehaidi of Lebanon was believed to be the first female suicide bomber when he detonated a truck bomb on the Israeli convoy on April 9, 1985 in Beirut (Zedalis, 2004). Ever since, the idea of using females for suicide bombing mission has become quite a common practice in the hands of some terrorists. Quite expectedly, these spates of attacks have resulted in the dispatch of several thousands of people to their early graves.

A number of theory has emerged in the quest to grasp the essence of the phenomenon of suicide terrorism. Psychopathological, the oldest theory of terrorism, which is also very popular in media representation of suicide attacks, bother on insanity or irrationality. The theory sees terrorists as insane people who are devoid of any scintilla of rationality (Hacker, 1976, Cooper, 1977). The problem could be a function of psychotic, whereby the person suffers from mental derangement to the point of inability to decipher right from wrong; or sociopathic in which case the persons is aware of what is good and what is bad but chose to do the wrong one (Victoroff, 2005:12). A person afflicted by either of the two cases is not normal. The ruthlessness and remorsefulness of apprehended terrorists give credence to the presence of either psychotic or sociopathic problems. It does not appear normal for someone to kill unsuspecting fellow human beings without having any feelings of humanity. New York Post featured a report of a captive ISIS militant in the war in Mosul who did not show remorse for raping over 200 women and killing over 500 people. He was quoted as saying: "We shot whoever we needed to shoot and beheaded whoever we needed to beheaded...Seven, eight, 10 at a time. Thirty or 40 people. We would take them in desert and kill them...I would sit them down, put a blindfold on them and fire a bullet into their heads. It was normal" (*New York Times*, 2017). This does not seem to come from a normal person; and it lends credence to the psychoanalytical perspectives that terrorists suffer mental problem.

However, some scholars of economic and political science persuasions have identified the rationality in suicide terrorism, hence bringing forth the rational theoretical perspective (Caplan, 2006). According to the theory, suicide terrorism is a deliberate choice, involving organized and extensive planning and the attacker knew what he was about to do. Also, the attacker works towards a goal, which could be drawing attention of government, forcing government to withdraw foreign troops, or seek independence, to create a politico-religious suzerainty or aim to get higher cosmic rewards. That is why it is in the words of Jeff Victoroff, "a practical low-cost strategy through which subordinate groups leverage their power to successfully achieve their

ends” (Victoroff, 2005:15). To Simon Ross, suicide terrorism is more of politics. According to him, “terrorism does sometimes increase the likelihood that perpetrators will reach their sociopolitical goals. The bombings perpetrated by Irgun, a paramilitary group, facilitated the independence of Eretz Israel from the British. Terrorist attacks, committed by the IRA, expedited the formation of the Irish Free State. Furthermore, suicide bombings during the mid-1980s, perpetrated by Hezbollah, enabled Shia to control parts of Lebanon and incited the withdrawal of America, French and Israeli forces. Finally, terrorist acts that were committed by the ANC hastened the dismissal of apartheid in South Africa” (Ross, 2016).

When viewed from the prism of accounts by arrested terrorists that show little or no remorse, we tend to see their action as not a matter of insanity; but one of choice. However, lofty as the perspective is, the theory of rationality fails to account for the presence of young suicide bombers who are as young as seven years old. Jamie Fergusson showed a video of a teenage boy weeping profusely before driving his bomb-laden vehicle that was given to him by militants, who were seeing goading him to the suicide mission (Fergusson, 2015). Obviously, the poor boy was not acting on any basis of rationality. In most cases, teenage suicide attackers are oblivion of the bombs they were carrying; and are even remotely detonated, showing that these teenagers are also victims (Ochele, 2015). Cases of teenage suicide bombers portray irrational scenario, thereby puncturing the rational choice theory.

Another perspective locates the reason in poverty and lack of education. Supporters of this perspective have located the roots of terrorism and suicide attacks on ignorance and poverty. The argument here is that people that engage in these acts do so out of want and ignorance. Lending his voice to the role of poverty, President George Bush once argues that “we fight poverty because hope is the answer to terror, we will challenge the poverty and hopelessness and lack of education and failed governments that too often allow conditions that terrorists can seize” (cited in Ross, 2003:1536). In the same vein, Archbishop Desmond Tutu argues that “at the bottom of terrorism is poverty” (cited in Ross, 2003:1536). In the contention of Elie Wiesel and Dalai Lama, “education is the way to eliminate terrorism” (cited in Ross, 2003:1536). However, Alan Krueger and Jitka Maleckova, (2002) argues that education and poverty may not really be at the bottom of suicide mission. Their research in Palestine proved that those who engaged in suicide bombings did not come from poor homes, and neither are they illiterates. Majority of them had not less than twelve years of education. This position could be said to be validated by the case of the first suicide bomber in Nigeria. According to report carried by the Blueprint newspaper, the bomber, Abubakar Manga, was a fairly successful business man who left behind a will of four million Naira (\$12,600) for his five children of two boys and three girls (Sajdika, 2012).

A dimension of drug and intoxication was introduced by Femi Ajayi, the then Director of the Nigeria’s National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA). According to him,

Death in itself is dreaded even though it is a necessary end; but when people subscribe to it happily by bombing, killing innocent lives and creating havoc and ruin, you know it is not normal. The impact of drug abuse is far more damaging than some people assume

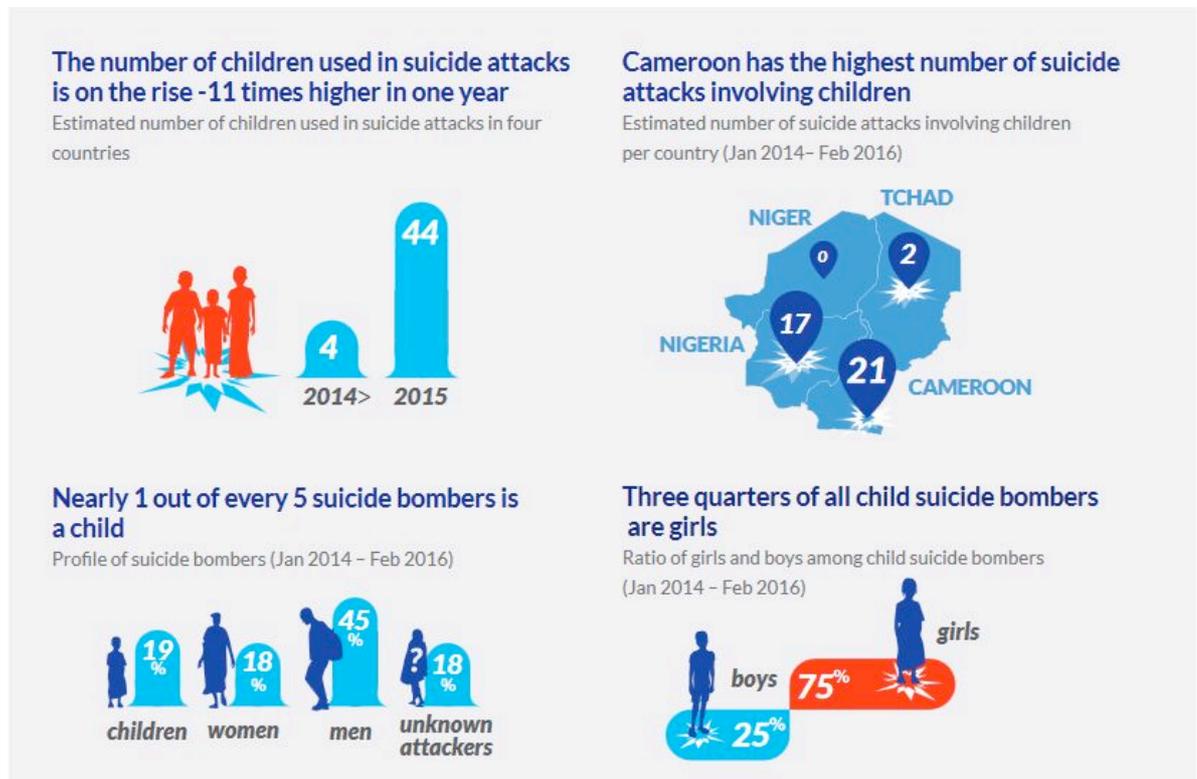
because it is related to violent crimes. A man under the influence of drugs is as deadly and unpredictable as a mad man playing with a time bomb (NDLEA, 2012, Abubakar, 2012).

In a feature article in *Christian Examiner*, Gregory Tomlin (2016) reported how drugs form the centerpiece of the activities of Taliban, ISIS and numerous terrorist groups in Syria. The report shows how terrorists not only cultivate and traffic cocaine to raise funds, but equally consume it to enhance their deadly activities, including suicide bombing. The report further indicated how Al Nusra Front, one of the terrorist groups in Syria, operated factory for production of amphetamine drugs for themselves and ISIS. Tomlin further quoted Allan Duncan, a former British sniper as saying: "IS [soldiers] have syringes attached to their clothing so that if they are shot they can give themselves a boost. ... They are high on cocaine and amphetamines. It helps them fight" (Tomlin, 2016). In 2015, the Nigerian army reported the seizure of drugs in raided Boko Haram camps. Sani Usman, the Nigerian Army spokesperson, was quoted as saying: "when the Nigerian military captured their bases and training camps, they never found (the) Qur'an or other Islamic books. They mostly found ammunition, local charms, condoms and all sort of drugs including sex-enhancing ones in their enclaves" (Lacinno, 2015). Again in 2016, the Nigerian army intercepted large quantities of drugs meant for the Boko Haram terrorists (Ibekwe, 2016). The persistent discovery of drugs on the body as well as in the camps of terrorists lend credence to the veracity of the narcotic perspectives. I argue that the case of suicide bomber has elements of all of the above. There are obvious traces of insanity, deliberate choice, poverty, ignorance and drug. Therefore, we need to combine all the perspectives so as to get a grasp of the essence of the phenomenon.

### **Boko haram and female suicide bombings**

As argued heretofore, Boko Haram introduced suicide bombing into Nigeria in 2009. In June, 2014, the sect added female suicide bombing to the nightmare, thereby worsening the situation. The major reason for adding female to the violent campaign has to do with the ease of girls to penetrate crowds of people with little suspicion. Security operatives are mostly on the lookout for young boys, and attentions are seldom paid to young girls (Onuoha, 2015). It is this situation that Boko Haram has exploited for its deadly actions. A report by UNICEF shows an escalation of incidence of child bomber from four in 2014 to 44 in 2015 (UNICEF, 2015, CNN, 2015).

**Fig 1**



Source: UNICEF. 2014. Beyond Chibok: over 1.3 million children uprooted by Boko Haram violence, retrieved from [https://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/files/Beyond\\_Chibok.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/files/Beyond_Chibok.pdf)

The diagram above shows increase in the use of child bombers by Boko Haram. From 2014, it rose sharply from 4 to 44 in 2015. Nearly one out of every suicide bombers is a child. Three quarters of the child bombers are females. Ever since 2015, there has been a rise in the reported cases of attacks carried out by female suicide bombers in Nigeria.

Nigeria recorded its first female suicide bomber in June 8, 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 (Chotia, 2014, Onuoha, 2015). 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 were involved in a failed July 2014 attack in Funtua, in north-western Katsina state (Punch, Dec 11, 2016). In October 2016, another set of female suicide bombers killed 17 people at a station near a camp for internally displaced persons (Punch, 2016). In November 11, 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 (Punch, 2016). On 25 December 2016, two female suicide bombers invaded cattle market in Maiduguri, killing two people in the process (Haruna, 2016). 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 (Sahara Reporters, 2016). 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 (Fulani, 2016). 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 (Daily Nation, 2017). On 15 March, 2017, four young female suicide bombers killed two people in Usmanti area in the outskirts of Maiduguri, Borno state (Daily Nation, 2017). These cases show the rate at which Boko Haram is deploying young girls as suicide bombers, with devastating effects on the society.

### **Sources of the girls**

Abduction has been the major source of girls Boko Haram is using for suicide bombings in its deadly war against the people and the Nigerian state. It is quite difficult to know the number of girls abducted so far by Boko Haram. This has to do with the fact that several cases were either not reported or underreported. Also, several real cases were denied by the government to save itself from embarrassment. In 2014, Boko Haram terrorists abducted over 200 girls in their school dormitories in Chibok town, Borno state. This is often regarded as the highpoint of the abduction saga, and it is the case that caught the international attention, which soon became the face of the atrocities of the group against women. But, according to Nnamdi Obasi, this is just a tiny figure in the number of girls that have been abducted since the appearance of the group in Northeastern Nigeria (cited in Huffington Post, 2016). As reported in the Huffington Post, these include: Abduction of 19 girls in the villages of Wala and Warabe, four months after the Chibok saga. The abduction of 60 women from Kummabza village June, 2014, after holding the villagers ransom for three days. In December 2014, about 200 women and children were abducted from Gumsuri village, just 15 minutes south of Chibok. In March, 2015, about 300 schoolgirls and children were abducted from Damasak, the highest haul by the group. In Madagali village, 14 women and two girls were also abducted (Alfred, 2016). The abduction continues on regular basis.

Once in their nets, the abducted girls are then cajoled, indoctrinated or threatened to embark on suicide mission. A documentary done by Aljazeera channel revealed cajolement and indoctrination tactics often employed by Boko Haram:

They tell women and girls that they will go to paradise if they commit suicide for Allah. So, they ask girls, 'Who wants to go to paradise?' They tell the girls that they will also wear bombs. So, the man straps a bomb to his body and to the girl. They tell the girl, let's do this and we will meet again in paradise. So, the girl goes forward and detonates herself, expecting the man to do the same. But the man does not. He watches her blow herself up into pieces and then goes to the next girl to lure her to do the same thing (Aljazeera, 2016).

A narrative of another girl revealed the use of intimidation and threat of force in dragging the girls to their violent deaths. According to the girl:

I was in the bush when the people some who look like Arabs and some huge black men told me that did I know what is suicide mission, that is one killing himself? I

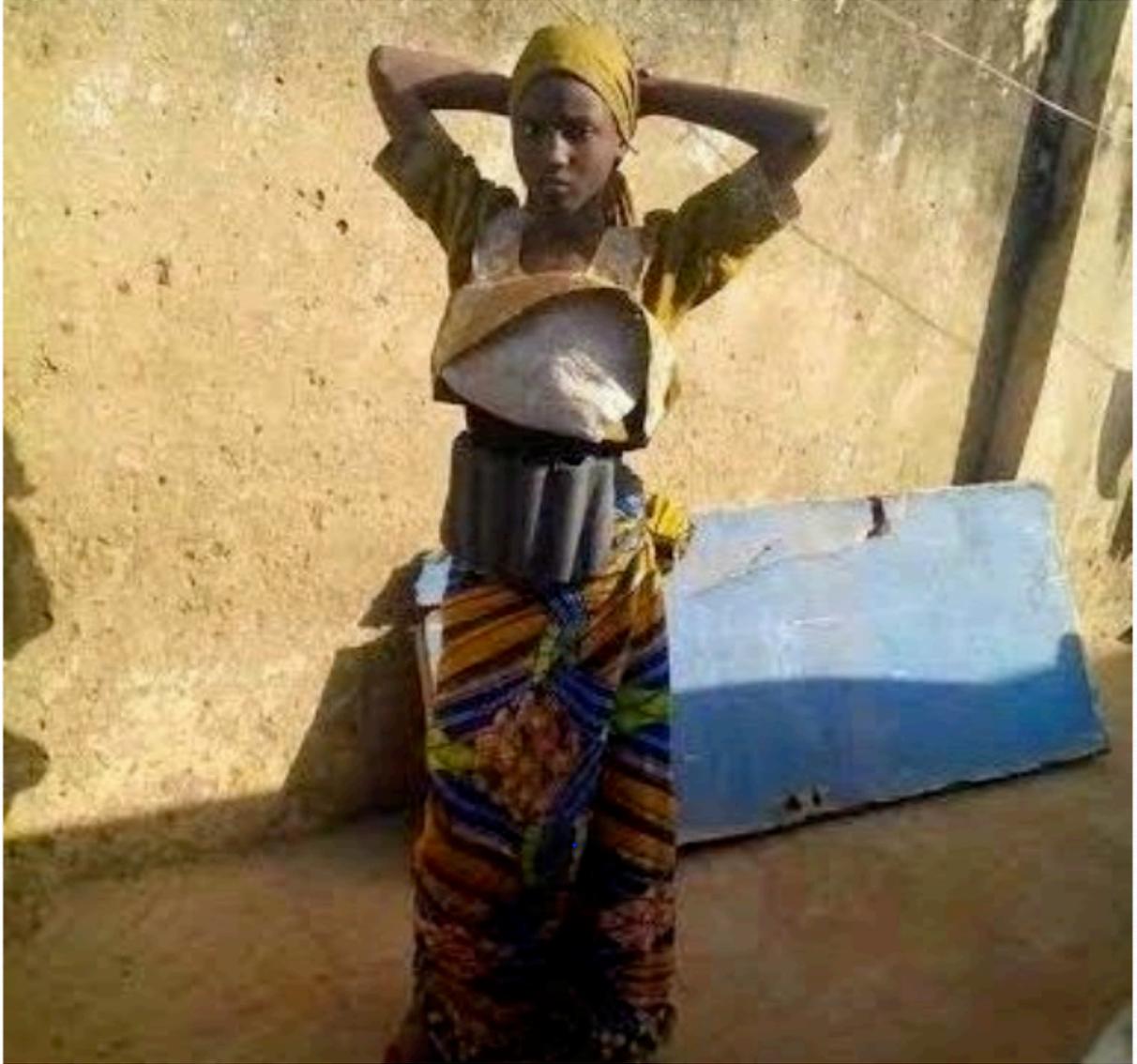
said no I don't know, they explained it to me and said that if I did plus reciting Sura Al-Bakara I will straight go to Paradise, I declined and told them I will not do it, they now told me that they would dig a hole and bury me alive because that is what they do to all women who refuse to adhere to their demands, and they said they meant what they said, I now complied (Ahmad, 2014)

Majority of the girls are married off after abduction, and those of them that refused to accept the marriage option are forced to go on suicide mission (Worley, 2016). In essence, kidnapping and abduction of girls have ensured steady availability of instruments for suicide mission.

A bizarre case was the donation of a girl to Boko Haram for suicide mission. On 24 December, 2014, security forces arrested a girl suicide bomber who later confessed that she was donated to Boko Haram elements by her father in Kano (Ahmad, 2014). But this has remained a marginal one case incident. The donated girl was then forced to become a suicide bomber, from where she escaped. In addition to that, Boko Haram also has women wing, that carry out domestic chores and act as recruiters, spies, informants and sympathisers, with the possibility of embarking on suicide missions (Daily Trust, 2016, Crisis Group, 2016). It has been established that Boko Haram from inception has been able to attract quite a number of women into its fold. This it had done through inducement, force and indoctrination (Crisis Group, 2016). Yusuf, the founder of Boko Haram, has been able to exploit the grinding poverty in north-eastern Nigeria through philanthropic gestures while advocating for practice of Islam in its puritanical form. This attracted large followers of youths who were already disenchanted with the Nigerian state that has not been able to meet its material need. The blame was that the society has been corrupted by people who had access to western education, hence the name Boko Haram. Within the ranks of the followers were quite a number of women who are either married to members of the sect or out to seek more knowledge about Islam (Crisis Group, 2016). The point here is that there are committed women members of the group who will be willing to embark on suicide mission to attain martyrdom. However, few arrested ones and escapees have attributed their involvements to force and intimidation by Boko Haram terrorists (Pffhanz, 2014).

Freedom Onuoha (2015) identified other likely sources as children of widows of Boko Haram members killed by security forces; who will be motivated by sense of revenge against the security forces; women or girls recruited through their female scouts; children of orphans whose parents have been killed by Boko Haram in the course of their violent activities and sourcing through cartels that are involved in human trafficking. These are largely speculative as no concrete evidences are presented to validate their veracity. What is abundantly clear is that majority of the girls being used for the suicide bombings are forced into doing so.

**Fig. 2: A 13-year old arrested in Kano, with suicide belt strapped to her body**



Source: Daily Post, <http://dailypost.ng/2014/12/13/police-arrests-13-year-old-female-suicide-bomber-kano/>

As shown in the picture, most of the girls are too young to make a rational appraisal of the gravity of the mission they were being sent to do. This is why it has been quite easy for Boko Haram to exploit the girls in pursuance of their deadly objectives.

### **Boko Haram and feminization of terror**

The increasing usage of females as suicide bombers by Boko Haram amounts to what Freedom Onuoha (2015) captured as feminization of terror in Nigeria. However, for a better understanding, the trend should be situated within the context of intentions and motives. The narratives of arrested female bombers indicate clearly that most of them were minors who couldn't make rational decisions; and that their participations in such extreme acts of deadly violence were products of force and intimidation (Pfhanz, 2014). This indicates that the girls are mere pawns in the hands of the terrorists (Anaedozi, 2016:223). This forceful feminization shows some developments. First is

exploitation of female gender by male on the basis of superiority, aptly captured as “exploitative men asserting their hegemonic masculinity” (Anaedozie, 2016: 217). The exploitation of a supposed ‘weaker’ vessel by a ‘stronger’ one is a manifestation of patriarchal culture prevalent in the society. Here, the girls’ choices were not needed. They only had to carry out instructions given by the men. The girls had been conditioned to see the men as the stronger force. Second is the exploitation of younger ones by the elderly. Images of arrested or escaped ones show that they were young girls, much more than their abductors. The elderly Boko Haram elements were able to use the advantage of their advancement in age to force younger ones to commit horrendous crimes against fellow human beings. This tallies with the culture of old ones exploiting the innocence of younger ones. This is what Boko Haram is doing by using the young girls for suicide missions. The third issue is what has been captured as the commodification of the female body and the downplay of their ‘heroic’ role after successful completion of each mission. Normally, Boko Haram do take responsibilities of deadly actions, except in the case where the girls were the bombers (Anyadike, 2016). It then means that they are not regarded as serious martyrs. The worthlessness of the female bombers is aptly captured in the words of Pearson: “they (the girl bombers) have left no videos; their attacks are not claimed; they have no glory. Women and girls have predominantly struck markets, bus depots and civilian gatherings, rather than higher value targets” (quoted in Anyadike, 2016).

## **Conclusion**

The specter of female suicide bombing is a major security challenge in the Nigerian state. Boko Haram violence has resulted in the death of thousands of Nigerians and displacement of several millions of people. It has also escalated hunger and poverty in the region. The Nigerian government has stepped up major offensive against the insurgents. The army has succeeded in degrading the insurgents. The vast swathe of land it once occupied has been retaken and the group has been restricted to a corner of Sambisa forest. On Christmas eve of 2016, Camp Zairo, the major command of the insurgent inside their Sambisa fortress was conquered by the army. This represents a major step against the insurgents. However, this has not stopped the gale of female suicide bombings from happening. Rather, they are increasing and the sect have even devised the strategy of using nursing mothers to perpetrate suicide bombings. This is a dangerous development in the atrocities perpetrated by the militants.

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