

Polarized ideologies: International Women's Day and Boko Haram

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HRWF (24.03.2015) - International Women's Day on 8 March 2015 boasted global celebrations promoting gender equality and women's rights. [UN Women](#) emphasized the importance of the '[Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#)' and asked governments to address the gaps that still remain in gender equality through the [Beijing+20 campaign](#) "Empowering Women, Empowering Humanity: Picture it!" The European Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality also held an [inter-parliamentary committee meeting](#) which focused on the empowerment of women and girls through education. These efforts aim to highlight the stereotypes and inequalities that put women in vulnerable positions in society and keep them in poverty. These initiatives serve as a platform to inspire and drive change.

Just the day before, on 7 March 2015, Abubakar Shekau, head of the Nigerian jihadist group Boko Haram, [pledged allegiance to ISIS](#). Experts did not find this news completely surprising and believe the significance of this allegiance may be simply symbolic with no immediate implications [1]. Yet the timing of Shekau's announcement and International Women's Day coinciding within hours of each other underscores the stark differences between the two movements, polar opposites in respect to the status of women. Boko Haram, whose name means 'Western Education is Sinful,' strongly opposes all international standards in regard to the rights and protection of women [2].

Background and Ideology

Boko Haram was established in 2002 by Muhammed Yusuf with a message to return to a perceived form of primitive Islam, a defining doctrine of Salafism [3]. Boko Haram uses violence to facilitate its stated aims to oppose 'the secular westernisation of Nigeria' and to create an Islamic state, especially in the northern Nigerian states where Muslims are the majority [4]. Sharia was adopted in the 12 northern Nigeria states around the same time Boko Haram was established. Boko Haram's terrorist activities have been strongly opposed by the Nigerian government, which succeeded in killing Yusuf in 2009 [5]. The current leader, Abubakar Shekau, took power in 2010, leading to a surge in more sophisticated attacks and the deepening of jihadist ideology. Against the backdrop of Boko Haram's expansion, women have been increasingly used tactically to achieve the group's objectives [6].

Women and Gender-Based Violence in Boko Haram

Although Sharia does not explicitly call for violence against women, it is often interpreted by fundamentalist movements like Boko Haram to oppose the basic rights and of women and to promote restrictive gender roles for men and women [7]. Since gender roles are context-based and learned through socialization and because gender-based violence (GBV) is already deeply rooted in Nigerian culture, violence against women found a ready home within the ideological framework of Boko Haram. Christian women and children have become prime targets for Boko Haram as they are also considered to be 'the weakest members of an infidel outcast' [8].

There is no evidence of direct involvement of women in the main operations of Boko Haram. Women are scarcely found within the ranks of militants. Men may disguise themselves as women in order to penetrate areas that would be more difficult for men to go. There are

also reported instances of women hiding guns and other weapons underneath their clothing and of women being used more frequently as suicide bombers [9].

Kidnappings

In 2012, Shekau first threatened the kidnapping of women and children, specifically those related to government officials, in retaliation for the government's arrest and detention of the wives and children of Boko Haram's leaders. He made good on those threats a year later in 2013 when Boko Haram attacked a police station in Bama, killing 100 and taking 12 women and children hostage. The hostages were eventually exchanged; however, the use of women as pawns by both Boko Haram and the Nigerian government violates international law. It also sets in motion a deadly cycle that continues and is now escalating [10]. Reports suggest an increase in instances of GBV perpetrated against Christian women residing in northern Nigeria, including rape, torture and killings [11]. Women have also been used to lure soldiers into situations where they are vulnerable to attack.

In addition to kidnappings being used as tactical retaliation, they have also served a punitive purpose - one which strikes at the heart of International Women's Day - to keep women ignorant and subservient. Acknowledging that women are the 'key transmitters of values and beliefs' within their circles of influence, Boko Haram finds it necessary to keep women from receiving education or practicing any religion outside of Islam [12]. It is reported that 45% of the women and children killed are Christian. Women are also reported to suffer forced marriages and compulsory conversion to Islam [13].

Survivors have said that women are raped as a form of 'Jizya,' which is a reference to a type of tax that early Islamic rulers used to demand from their non-Muslim subjects [14]. The 'tax' in this case is sex. Women, if returned, are often shamed as they reunite with their families, possibly pregnant, infected with sexually transmitted diseases and dishonoured in the eyes of their community. [15] Unsurprisingly, young girls are frequently the target, as exemplified in the April 2014 mass abduction of 276 Nigerian girls from a government-run boarding school in Chibok in Borno State, northeastern Nigeria. While 57 of them escaped initially, the remaining 219 remain missing [16].

The group may be becoming more extremist in recent months, as seen with the [attack on the town of Baga](#) from 3-7 January 2015 where widespread killing took place and approximately 300 women were taken into captivity [17].

Moving forward

In the days and weeks following International Women's Day, it is [important to remember](#) that these girls and women are being targeted because of their gender, for their pursuit of education and for their desire to exercise their right to self-autonomy, principles which are the foundation of the International Women's Day movement. The timing of these events is an opportunity to discuss how polarized indeed these two ideologies are. It is also clear how harmful it can be for women when the ideals for which International Women's Day stands are not supported. The Nigerian women who stand in the line of fire and who are suffering at the hands of Boko Haram merit much more attention from the international community.

References

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- [4] Zenn and Peason, pp. 46
- [5] Ibid
- [6] Ibid
- [7] Zenn and Peason, pp. 51; Barkindo, Gudaku and Wesley, pp. 9
- [8] Barkindo, Gudaku and Wesley, pp.16.
- [9] Zenn and Peason, pp. 49-50
- [10] Note: Nigeria is signatory to: the United Nations Convention on the Declaration of Human Rights (1948); the United Nations Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979); the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989); the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention on Forced Labour and Minimum Wage (1999); the United Nations Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, especially on the Sales of a Child, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography (2002); and the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (2000). Others include the African Charter on Human Rights (1980); the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa (1981); Africa Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990), and the Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS); Jungudo, Maryam M. (2014), 'Gender and Human Rights Implications of Women Trafficking in Northern Nigeria', *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol 5, No. 26, pp.18
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