Victims or vanguards of terror: Use of girls as suicide bombers by Boko Haram

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Abstract: Boko Haram gained international notoriety as a terrorist group in 2014 with the abduction of more than 200 students in Chibok, North-Eastern Nigeria. This group has perfected a system of using young girls as tools of terror and considering the devastating effectiveness of Boko Haram’s strategy of feminisation of terror, there is a wide negative perception about the complicity of these young girls in terrorism. Using criminal culpability as a framework of analysis, the paper undertakes a review of the strategies of Boko Haram, reviewing public perception of young female suicide bombers in Nigeria and the operational response of the security services to the roles of these girls in terrorism. It also evaluates the adequacy, or otherwise, of Nigeria’s counter-terrorism strategy from a human rights-based perspective as it relates to the gender-sensitive handling of potential suicide bombers. It further examines the legal culpability of these girls in light of Nigeria’s criminal law regime and international and regional human rights frameworks. The paper finds that the girls are largely victims of Islamic fundamentalism and the failures of the Nigerian state.

Keywords: Book Haram; girls; Nigeria; suicide bombing; Terrorism

1. Introduction
One of the challenges scholars face in the study of the headline-grabbing phenomenon of suicide attacks in the last three decades is the question of definition, as different writers have defined the
same phenomenon as suicide bombing, suicide terrorism, suicide missions, and suicide attacks, among other usages (Horowitz, 2015).

A larger number of scholars conceptualize suicide bombing as an attack where the death of the bomber is the primary means by which the attack is carried out, thus excluding attacks where the bomber’s chances of survival are infinitesimal but theoretically probable (Crenshaw, 2007). While another group of scholars only considers the high likelihood of the death of the bomber as the most important definitional threshold (Pedazhur, 2005). All sides consider the weaponization of the human body as critical in defining the concept.

While Nigeria has had a long history of internal conflicts, Boko Haram introduced a new dimension in 2011 with the attack on the convoy of the Inspector General of Police through a suicide bomber (The Vanguard Newspaper, 2011) and another suicide attack later in the year on the UNDP office in Abuja, killing people and destroying the property (The telegraph, 2011). These two successive attacks shattered the long-held illusion that Nigerians love life and will not take to suicide bombing in pursuit of any ideology. The rest, they say, is history, as suicide attacks have become a permanent feature of the Nigerian security and governance landscape.

However, Boko haram introduced a new dimension to the violence in June 2014 with the use of a female bomber to attack a military quarter-guard in Gombe. The female suicide bomber detonated the explosive concealed in her hijab, killing herself and a soldier (The Vanguard Newspaper, 2014). This was followed by another attack by another suicide attack by a female suicide bomber at an energy depot in Lagos (The London Evening Post, 2015) and a long line of attacks by female operatives of the Islamist movement.

Since Sana’a Mehaidli, on behalf of the communist Syrian Social Nationalist Party in 9 April 1985 blew up herself and a truck of explosives next to an Israeli convoy in Lebanon during the Israeli occupation of south Lebanon (Bloom, 2007), several terrorist groups and insurgency movements have perfected the use of female suicide bombers to undertake attacks. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, a Marxist revolutionary organization committed to the overthrow of Sinhalese rule over the Tamil portions of Sri Lanka, adopted the strategy and put it to brutal efficiency, reportedly deploying at least 46 women on suicide missions (Strafor Worldview, 2015; Dolnik, 2006). Also, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) dominantly used female suicide bombers against Turkish military and police targets, with a source stating that “eleven out of the PKK’s fifteen successful suicide bombings have been carried out by women” (Alagha, 2017).

The Chechens became the first Islamist movement to employ women as suicide bombers and other groups such as the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, HAMAS, and al-Qaeda adopted the strategy and have weaponized women in conflicts in Lebanon, Sri Lanka, Chechnya, Israel, Iraq, and Jordan.

2. Contextualizing the nexus between terrorism and legal culpability
Central to the question of criminal responsibility under the Nigerian criminal law regime is the question of human freewill to make a choice to engage or not to engage in an act, and the question of age. However, the minimum age of criminal responsibility varies among Nigerian states. The Criminal Code as well as the Criminal Law of Lagos State defines criminal responsibility as “liability to punishment as for an offence” (LFN)

For one to be legally culpable for an act or omission under the Nigerian criminal law regime, a person must satisfy three basic conditions: the capacity to understand what he/she is doing; the capacity to know that he/she ought not to do the act or omission; and the capacity to control his/her actions (Oraegbunam & Julian, 2015). The Court of Appeal in Njoku V State lucidly explained the concept when it stated that “It is also trite that criminal responsibility for the commission of a crime is premised on the satisfactory proof of the two pillars of actus reus and mens rea, the doing of the act
that constitutes the offence and the requisite mental capacity and the duty is always on the prosecution to prove the commission of a crime by proving the act done and the requisite guilty mind of the accused person beyond reasonable doubt. In other words, in a criminal trial, before an accused person is asked to undergo any sort of sentence, there must be a finding by the trial Court on the concurrence of the two main elements of any crime; that is, the actus reus and the mens rea. Actus reus is taken to be the wrongful deed that comprises the physical components of a crime and that generally must be coupled with mens rea. Mens rea is the criminal intent or guilty mind of the accused. For the prosecution to establish a criminal act against an accused person, it must go beyond establishing the commission of the unlawful criminal act by the accused and establish that the accused had the correct legal criminal mind of committing the act. The two must coexist, whether explicitly or by necessary implication" (NMWL, 2013).

Also, one cannot be responsible for an act or omission, unless he/she has attained a certain age. The Child Rights Act does not specify a minimum age of criminal responsibility but defines a child as “a person under the age of eighteen years” (Child Rights Act [CRA], 2003). The Children and Young Persons Act defines a child as “a person under the age of twelve years” and a juvenile as “a male or female person who is 7 years of age or above and below the age of 16 years” and a young person as “a person who is twelve years of age or more but under the age of sixteen years.”

Section 30 of the criminal code provides that: “A person under the age of seven years is not criminally responsible for any act or omission. A person under the age of twelve years is not criminally responsible for an act or omission, unless it is proved that at the time of doing the act or making the omission, he had the capacity to know that he ought not to do the act or make the omission. A male person under the age of twelve years is presumed to be incapable of having carnal knowledge.”

Also, section 50 of the penal code provides that: “no act is an offence which is done—act of child. (a) by a child under the age of seven; or (b) by a child over the age of seven but under the age of twelve who lacks the maturity of understanding to judge the nature and consequences of that act.

Under Sharia law that is applicable in nine states in northern Nigeria (Oraegbunam, 2014), the age of criminal responsibility is set at puberty. According to Sharia law, children are eligible for had (for which the prescribed punishment is mandatory) and qisas (punishment by retaliation) punishment from the age of puberty (Abiad and Mansoor, 2010),2017

The cumulative position of these legal provisions has implications for the criminal culpability of the female suicide bombers recruited by Boko Haram for suicide missions. By the combined effect of the provisions of Section 30 of the Criminal Code and Section 50 of the Penal Code, suicide bombers under the age of seven are deemed incapable of fulfilling the legal conditions required for the commission of an offence. What happens to suicide bombers who are above age 7 but less than 12, which happens to be the prominent age bracket of the girls that have been deployed as suicide bombers by Boko Haram.

Section 50 of the Penal Code provides a caveat for this age bracket with the provision that “a child above seven years of age but under twelve years of age who has not attained sufficient maturity of understanding to judge the nature and consequence of that act.” This provision is in pari materia with section 30 of the Criminal Code. These sections put into view the concept of forensic mental health assessment to establish the dol i incapax for children under the age of 12 years, used by Boko Haram in suicide missions.

Conceptually, the focus of assessment of criminal capacity in children is concerned with the child’s level of psychosocial development and the focal variables among others will include: intelligence, cognitive development, age, exposure and social competence (Pillay, 2006). These variables are some of the most critical markers in maturity and human development and are
measurable. Creating an index or proxy for measuring them in the context of legal culpability is essential to establish guilt. While there is no accepted definition of intelligence, there are two prominent theories of the concept: the ability to think and reason abstractly, and the capacity to learn and acquire knowledge (Sternberg & Powell, 1983). Courts are concerned about “sufficient intelligence to know the nature and consequences of their conduct or to appreciate that it was wrong” for the sake of children’s legal culpability (Snyman, 2002).

3. Boko Haram historical perspective

Prior to the emergence of Boko Haram in 2002 and the explosion of fundamentalist violence in 2009, Northern Nigeria had a long history of Islamist fundamentalist movements, some dating back to as far as the 19th Century, the Dan Fodio-led revolution (Alasia, 2015). However, the first attempt at imposing a religious ideology on a secular, independent Nigeria was the Maitatsine uprisings of 1980–1985, which affected the cities of Kano, Kaduna, Yola and Bauchi. Scholars have compared the ongoing Boko Haram insurgency to Maitatsine uprisings compared in terms of philosophy and objectives, organizational planning and armed resistance, and modus operandi (Isichei, 1987).

The group Jama'atuAhlis Sunna Lidda'awatiwal-Jihad (“People of the Sunnah for Preaching and Jihad”), which goes by the moniker “Boko Haram” (while there is contestation about the etymology of the term, it is widely believed to mean “western education is sinful” in the Hausa language (BBC News, 2016), is an Islamist movement that has its origin in the North Western Nigerian city of Maiduguri. The group is believed to have been founded in 2002 by Mohammed Yusuf in the city of Maiduguri as a puritanical Islamic sect seeking to impose Islamic Sharia Law on Northern Nigeria and dismantle the current educational and social governance structures in the region (Morten, 2012). Boko Haram, like its distant predecessor, focuses on imposing its version of the Islamic ethos on the Nigerian state. The group asserts that western-styled government systems, especially the school system, which is perceived as heavily influenced by Christianity, contradict the Quran and are a colonial imposition intended to permanently subjugate Muslim society and values. Therefore, the sect not only rejects Western education, culture, and modern science as unIslamic, but it advocates strict adherence to puritanical Islamic values (Omuoha, 2014) Boko haram in a decade of engaging in active insurgency against the Nigerian state (2009–2019) have caused between 20,000 to 30,000 fatalities and more than 2million people have been displaced. (Omenma et al., 2020).

While Boko Haram remains largely the face of Islamist extremism in Nigeria, there has been an evolution in the leadership structure, modus operandi, and outlook of the Jihadist group, and there are new entrants into the Islamist terror market in the North-western region of Nigeria. In 2016, there was a split in the leadership of Boko haram and a breakaway faction sworn allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), the second faction remained under the leadership of the late Abubakar Shekau and the third faction, known as the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) was formed under Abu Musab al-Barnawi, one of the sons of the original founder of Boko Haram (Eromo, 2019).

The splinter in the terror franchise in Nigeria has further complicated the already burdened Nigerian state and worsened security and public policy challenges for the Nigerian government and other regional stakeholders as these terror groups have different focus. ISWAP tends to carry out more surgical strikes against military-aligned targets and installations, while Shekau and the ISIL favour softer targets and civilian installations (Eromo, 2019). No doubt, Boko Haram and its splinter franchisees are the foremost threat to regional security in the Lake Chad region.

Unfortunately, the government’s interventions in the last decade have largely failed to stem the tide of Islamist extremism, which raises fundamental questions about the utility of the current government strategy. This assertion is validated by the current spread of the operations of extremist movements from Northeastern Nigeria to other regions in Nigeria and the continuous targeting of civilian populations in Nigeria, so much so that a section of civil society is calling on the
government to commence negotiations with Islamic groups. (Maram, 2020) Also, jihadist groups continue to operate and hold significant territory within Nigeria.

The global pre-eminence of Boko Haram is such that it was consistently classed among four of the world’s deadliest terrorist groups between 2007 and 2017, joining the evil triumvirate of Al-Qa’ida, Taliban and ISIS (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2017). One common operational tactic of these groups is the use of bombings and explosions, particularly suicide bombings, which are responsible for around a quarter of all attacks by these groups (GTI, 2017).

4. The uniqueness of Boko Haram strategy
While other terrorist groups have used and are using female suicide bombers, Boko Haram has used more female bombers than any other terrorist group in history, surpassing the record set by the Tamil Tigers (The Economist, 2017). According to a recent study by Jason Warner and Hilary Matfess - x from 11 April 2011, to 30 June 2017, Boko Haram deployed 434 bombers to 247 different targets during 238 suicide-bombing attacks. At least 56% of these bombers were women, and at least 81 bombers were specifically identified as children or teenagers (Warner & Matfess, 2017).

The gruesome record of 44 over a decade set by the Tamil Tigers pales into insignificance when juxtaposed with the hundreds sent to death by Boko Haram in pursuit of its strategic objectives (Waldman, 2003).

Comparatively, Boko Haram strategy focuses more on the volume of attacks, media coverage, and the disruptive potential of attacks than on the lethality of suicide attacks. Boko Haram has a lower percentile of deaths from suicide bombings compared to other groups utilizing suicide bombers, with a report putting the fatality rate of attacks at 21.5% (Warner & Matfess, 2017) of the total 15,467 (Council on Foreign Relations [CFR], 2018) deaths between 2012 and July 2018. Compared to other studies that put the number of fatalities from suicide attacks at approximately 48% of terror attacks (Pape, 2005) and another study of the Palestinian conflict, which puts the number of fatalities from suicide attacks at more than 50% of all suicide mortalities (Benmelech & Claude, 2007).

Considering the number of unsuccessful attacks-interception of suicide bombers before the target is reached or killed fewer than three people- there are questions about the mental preparedness of the would-be bomber and the quality and quantity of explosives utilized by Boko Haram for attacks and the relative sophistication of its bomb factory.

In selecting targets of attacks for female operatives, Boko Haram has prioritized markets, schools, religious centres, and military barracks (Onuoha & Temilola, 2015). As an integral part of the urban landscape in Nigeria, markets are platforms and networks for the reception and distribution of agricultural produce, livestock, and seafood, as well as centres of social exchange and gatherings of people (Osasona, 2017). It is therefore easy to understand why Boko Haram prioritizes these centres for attack by female bombers, who would easily blend in.

Another feature of the Boko Haram strategy is the use of feminine suicide bombers who are minors. In 10 December 2016, Boko Haram used two girls aged between seven and eight-year-old to carry out a suicide attack in Potiskum (Punch Newspaper, 2016); in 14 March 2017 at least six persons were confirmed killed by four teenage girls who detonated explosives worn around their bodies at the outskirts of Maiduguri (Premium Times, 2017); in 17 November 2017 three female teenage bombers died in an attack on Maiduguri (Punch, 2017) and a report by CNN stated that: “Of the 134 suicide bombers whose age could be determined, 60% were teenagers or children. The youngest suicide bomber identified to date was just 7 years old. Boko Haram has used four times as many young girls as it has young boys” (Kriel, 2017).

The use of female minors as human incendiaries is geared towards confusing public perception of the imagery of a terrorist as a means of achieving its destructive objective. Boko Haram has
distinguished itself from other terrorist groups in history by its reliance on prepubescent and teenage female bombers.

Another distinguishing feature of the Boko Haram group in Nigeria is the deliberate singling out of school buildings, teachers and students as targets for attack in furtherance of the group’s Jihadist ideology. The assumed leader of the group, Abubakar Shekau has persistently called for an attack on schools, describing western education as “plot against Islam”. In 2012, he issued an audio declaration declaring that “You have primary schools as well, you have secondary schools and universities and we will start bombing them […] that is what we will do” (Global coalition to protect education from attack [GCPEA], 2014). Also, in an amateur video broadcast in 2013, the group’s leader said that “teachers who teach western education? We will kill them! We will kill them in front of their students, and tell the students to henceforth study the Qur’an”. (Guardian, 2013)

As a result of these deliberate targeting of schools by Boko Haram as an integral part of the group’s war tactics to abduct girls for operational purposes and for ransom, more than 300 schools have been destroyed and at least 196 teachers and 314 school children have been killed just between January 2012 and December 2014 in North-Eastern Nigeria that is the main theatre of the conflict and the attacks have not abated. The group has equally targeted universities and tertiary educational facilities in Nigeria, primarily as a means of abducting girls for operational purposes. (UNICEF Press Release, 2018). On the night of 14 April 2014, the Government Girls Secondary School in Chibok, was attacked by Boko Haram militants who burned down the school building and abducted more than 250 students who were writing their Senior School Certificate Examination. (Huffington Post, 2012)

The group on various occasions acknowledged carrying out the attack on the school. The abduction drew international attention to the ongoing conflict in North-Eastern Nigeria and gave birth to the “bring back our girls” movement. The school, just like all other schools attacked by the group, was an undefended civilian entity that had the responsibility of providing education for children in a region with one of the highest rates of out-of-school children in the world.

5. Recruitment and strategic motivation

One of the most baffling questions for security experts working to counter the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria remains—how does the group recruit young, innocent pre-adolescents and turn them into human bombs? How well does the rational theoretical perspective of some scholars of economic and political science leaning (Victoroff, 2005) explain the attacks by seven and eight-year-old suicide bombers that security officers—“thought they were looking for their mother? ”(Punch Newspaper, 2016) Or is the reward in the afterlife in paradise, a promising relief from the gruelling life of poverty that the girls have to contend with in North-eastern Nigeria, their primary motivator? Or is monetary inducement (in a region where a great percentage of people live below the poverty line) the compelling driver of this menace? It is hard to generalize, but the answer can be deduced from the circumstances surrounding some of the girls that Boko Haram has dispatched to their deaths.

Different studies and reports have constantly pointed to abductions and kidnappings as one of the main sources of the girls that Boko Haram uses as suicide bombers. This is understandable if one puts in perspective the global attention that the group attracted with the abduction of 276 girls from the Government Girls Secondary School in Chibok in 2014 (BBC News, 2016). According to Hilary Mattfess, “thousands of girls have been abducted by the insurgents” (Mattfess, 2018), UNICEF in a report also stated that “Since 2013, more than 1,000 children have been abducted by Boko Haram in north-eastern Nigeria” (UNICEF Press Release, 2018). In addition, Nnamdi Obasi stated that “the fate of the Chibok girls has come to symbolise the horror of the insurgency, because the victims have been publicly identified by name and face. But there have been countless other incidents where unnamed thousands have been abducted, brutalised, sexually violated and shared out as “wives” to insurgents. Scores have been sent to their death in suicide bombing missions.” (Obasi & Ayo, 2016)
Also, in a bizarre show of support for the ideals of Boko Haram, some members of the local communities where the insurgent group operates donate their young children to the group as a form of support. The case of a 13-year-old female suicide bomber who failed to detonate her suicide belt at the Kano City Textile Market in 2014 highlights this reality. She claimed she was handed over to Boko Haram militants by her father as a form of support for the group. (Premium Times, 2014)

Some of the girls used in suicide missions Boko Haram are children and widows of Boko Haram fighters who have been radicalized and conditioned to undertake bombing missions not only for revenge against the state and community responsible for the death of their loved ones, but also in furtherance of the religious call to martyrdom.

One very important reality is that some of the female suicide bombers joined Boko Haram voluntarily in the hope of pecuniary benefits. Putting into proper perspective the fact that the region that has borne the brunt of the insurgency is one of Nigeria’s poorest. According to the former Emir of Kano, “North-West and the North-East, demographically, constitute the bulk of Nigeria’s population, but look at human development indices, look at the number of children out of school, look at adult literacy, look at maternal mortality, look at infant mortality, look at girl-child completion rate, look at income per capita, and you will see that the North-East and the North-West of Nigeria are among the poorest parts of the world” (Punch, 2017a).

Hilary Mattess (2017), in her vivid account of the main drivers of females joining Boko Haram, stated that some women who joined the group were motivated by the opportunity the group provided for them to have a Quranic education, their only shot at having an education in the region where female adult literacy is as low as 14.9% (The Vanguard, 2018). According to the author, others were motivated to join because of money, as the insurgent group paid women married to Boko Haram fighters their pride price instead of the customary practice of paying such to their families.

There are both tactical and strategic benefits to Boko Haram’s choice of female suicide bombers. The use of female suicide bombers by the group provides easy access to targets due to deep socio-cultural practices that make it improper to search for women and the deflection of attention by security actors, as girls do not fall into Boko Haram stereotypes. Nothing highlights this hesitancy more than the public debate in Nigeria on the proposal to ban the hijab and burka in public places for security reasons (Aderibigbe, 2015). Also, the use of female suicide bombers creates more media headlines and helps boost the group’s global notoriety.

6. Legal culpability of Boko Haram female suicide bombers under Nigerian legal regime

Female suicide bombers that Boko Haram has used to carry out attacks in the past can be broadly categorized into four groups: minors under the age of 10, teenagers between age 11 and 17, females who were hypnotized/coerced/deceived, and females who willingly undertake suicide expeditions. This categorization is essential for determining criminal responsibility under existing Nigerian criminal law regime. However, in practice, there is little or no distinction in how Nigerian security officials treat females with alleged links to Boko Haram, as more than 4,826 females, including 2,438 children, have reportedly been arrested for links to Boko Haram, a figure indicating more females than males (“Daily Trust,” 2017).

Cognitive development, on the other hand, refers to the process through which a child’s perception of the environment changes as a function of age and experience, and the ability to understand the concept of consequences is key to determining a child’s cognitive capacity. (Feldman, 1987). Exposure and social competencies are contextualized within children’s immediate socio-cultural environment, and their ability to adapt to the demands of their local environment is essential to determining their culpability.
Putting into perspective the stark illiteracy figures for states in North-East Nigeria that have borne the brunt of Boko Haram attacks and the lack of educational opportunities for girls in the region (The Guardian Newspaper, 2017), how knowledgeable is the average 12-year old girl with little or no education on IEDs and the extant anti-terrorism legislation in the country? This definitely impacts the culpability of these female suicide bombers.

There are a group of girls used by Boko Haram who, according to reports are drugged and hypnotised before being dispatched on suicide missions (The Independent, 2017). One of the girls arrested after a failed suicide mission stated that: “So, after one week, they said since I have refused to get married, I should be taken to Maiduguri for a suicide mission. So, three of them held my hands and they injected me [...] then, I never knew what was happening again” (The Express, 2017). These groups of suicide bombers are within the provisions of Section 51 of the Penal Code which states that: “nothing is an offence which is done by a person who, at the time of doing it, by reason of unsoundness of mind, is incapable of knowing the nature of the act, or he is doing what is either wrong or contrary to law”.

The small group of female suicide bombers who choose to join Boko Haram for pecuniary benefits, ideological persuasion, purpose of revenge or any other reasons informed by conscious choice are within the purview of Section 2 of the Terrorism Act, 2013 and are culpable of the crime of terrorism.

Deductively in the Nigerian criminal law regime, children are considered vulnerable and dependent, and consequently, they deserve special care. This perception of a child as a vulnerable being informed the creation of special legal frameworks within the criminal justice system to handle cases involving children and young people when they come into contact with the law and require care and protection. Instructively, the juvenile justice system in Nigeria is an offshoot of the inherited colonial criminal justice and thus one of the specially designed legal frameworks within the criminal justice system for juvenile delinquents in our society. Thus, Nigerian criminal justice is marked by the difficulties associated with systems dominated by the protective approach and the traditional approach to dealing with crime. (Chinwe & Naomi, 2003)

7. Victim of governance and cultural systems

In 2020, Nigeria emerged as the poverty capital of the world. North East Nigeria, the region most affected by the Boko Haram insurgency, is very poor, even by Nigeria's low standards. The region is blighted by unbelievable poverty; states in the region have as much as 71% of their respective populations living below the poverty line (NBS, 2020), and health outcomes are very atrocious across the seven component states in the region. The region has the highest number of school-children in Nigeria, with an average adult literacy rate of 29.7%. Youth unemployment in the region is one of the highest in Nigeria. (Premium Times, 2019) These poor socioeconomic outcomes highlight the direness of responsive and accountable governance systems in the region.

Nothing highlights the challenges of governance in the region beyond very poor socioeconomic outcomes of rural communities in a region where agriculture is the main source of livelihood and most communities are rural. (Ekpa et al., 2017) Rural households in the region host the largest number of poor people in Nigeria, and the region is home to almost half of all the poor in the country. (World Bank, 2019)

Critical gaps in leadership have made it difficult for most states in the region to maximize local potential in terms of human minerals and mineral deposits. It has also been argued that the poor management of the various poverty alleviation interventions at the national and sub-national levels, ineffective utilization of resources, lack of private enterprise and reliance on civil service jobs are some of the factors that have caused and perpetuated poverty in the region. (Khan and Cheri, 2016)
In spite of the humongous amounts expended on poverty alleviation interventions in the region, the region has witnessed a steady increase in rural poverty both in absolute and percentage terms (Khan and Cheri, 2016). For a vast majority of the millions of young people in rural communities across the region, the prospects are very dim, with the government’s impact missing in almost every facet of life, making banditry lucrative and alluring in a region blighted by poverty and lack of economic opportunities.

Irrespective of the set of data one chooses to look at, one plain fact emerges- the scourge of poverty and lack of opportunity in the part of Nigeria affected by the Boko Haram insurgency is an incontrovertible fact, and it is massive, pervasive, and engulfs a large proportion of the population. These socioeconomic failures increase the risks for girls in communities affected by the Boko Haram insurgency.

The government has continuously failed to prioritize the protection of schools and children from attacks by insurgents and other armed groups, with the state at every turn claiming that the government does not have the means to secure schools and protect children. Thus, it emboldens Islamist fundamentalist groups and other criminal gangs in Nigeria to continue the practice of targeting girls for abduction and use as human bombs. (Amnesty International, 2021)

Beyond that, the general socioeconomic outcome in the region, girls suffer additional disadvantages as a result of various socio-cultural practices. Religion in the region is central to the cultural lives of the people of the region in different spaces of human endeavour. Religion in the region greatly influences the socio-economic and political direction of formal and informal governance institutions (Makama, 2013). Therefore, the status of women in the region is dependent on the various is an outcome of the interpretation of religious texts and the cultural and institutional set-up of religious communities. The outcome is a practice that keeps women largely in domestic space.

Girls across north Nigeria constitute 60% of the 13.5 m out-of-school Nigerian children in the region (The Vanguard Newspapers, 2021) and socio-cultural practices are the drivers of this sad reality that puts girls in the region in a vulnerable position. Socio-cultural beliefs and customs determine the enrolment of girls in schools, the years of schooling, and academic performance as well as grade level attainment. Cultural and religious practices that prioritize the roles of girls as mothers and wives have a strong negative bearing on their formal education (Ishaku, 2020). The girl-child in the region is discriminated against by virtue of her sex. The structure of society, its values, traditions, and institutions all have an in-built discrimination against women. In a region where there is high illiteracy, particularly in the rural areas most affected by the Boko Haram insurgency, parents have a preference for their female children doing domestic chores rather than enrolling them in schools.

Traditional beliefs and customs greatly hamper the progress of girls in the region and leave them open to exploitation by extremist groups. These cultural practices range from traditions that girls do not carry on the family name like boys do and are thus expected to marry young to cultural practices that assume women are supposed to be chaste and indoors (Ishaku, 2020). Region blighted by poverty, scarce resources are used to train boys, to the detriment of girls.

8. Conclusion
One of the glaring areas of distinction between the terror campaigns by Boko haram and its other Islamic fundamentalist groups across the world is the co-option and use of female operators for strategic ends. Boko Haram’s integration of females into its operational framework is a product of the cultural and operational environments in which the group operates.

There are both tactical and strategic advantages to Boko Haram’s choice of young female suicide bombers. The use of female suicide bombers by the group provides easy access to targets due to deep socio-cultural practices that make it improper to search for women and the deflection of attention by security actors, as girls do not fall into Boko Haram stereotypes. Also, the use of
female suicide bombers creates more media headlines and helps boost the group’s global notoriety, and this is the main driver of the group’s strategic decision to co-opt the use of female suicide bombers.

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