

**Beyond Victimhood:  
UNSC Resolution 1325, Women and the Fight against Boko Haram in  
Nigeria**

Prof. Isaac Olawale Albert,  
Institute for Peace and Strategic Studies,  
University of Ibadan, Nigeria

and

Dr. Modupe Oluremi Albert,  
Department of Politics and International Relations,  
Lead City University, Ibadan, Nigeria

**Abstract**

There is a plethora of literature on the Boko Haram crisis in Nigeria. Where gender is ever mainstreamed into the analyses, the focus is exclusively on what women and girls suffer in the hands of the insurgents and how they have been passive recipients of humanitarian assistance. Atomized in these existing works is what women contribute to managing the crisis. This age-long academic tradition explains why women are hardly mentioned in extant literature on how wars were fought and won globally. Our paper attempts to reverse some aspects of this problem in the study of the ongoing Boko Haram crisis in Nigeria from the prism of the “participation” pillar of the UNSCR 1325. The first leg of our study relates to how some girls abducted in 2014 by Boko Haram in Chibok organized their escape: first while being taken away by their abductors and later when their hope of being rescued by the government waned. By this act, the Nigerian state had less girls to rescue from Boko Haram through the costly negotiation it engaged in. The second focus is on how a brave woman leads a band of hunters on search missions for Boko Haram members and abductees in Sambisa forest. The third issue is the controversial role played by “Mama Boko Haram” as a go-between the Nigerian state and some Boko Haram members she had a “motherly” relationship with before the commencement of the crisis in 2009. The three issues underscore how women and girls could help themselves to attain some objectives of the UNSCR 1325 rather than waiting “endlessly” for the prescribed state interventions that may not come.

**Introduction**

There are three major stakeholders in situations of violent extremism and terrorism: the perpetrators (namely the violent extremists and terrorists), the victims (those who get killed, maimed and displaced in the conflict process and their relations), and the interveners (those helping to manage the crisis). Existing literature on the experiences of women and girls in violent conflict situations are largely framed in victimhood terms. Our position in the present paper is to move the study of Boko Haram in Nigeria beyond the victimhood prism and show that women and girls too contribute to the counter insurgency, no matter how little. The value added by this kind of academic position is that when the history of the crisis is written in the future it would be shown that men did not do everything; women too contributed their own quota to the counter insurgency processes.

The theoretical, policy and global frameworks for our kind of analysis is the UNSCR 1325 passed in 2000 preventing and redressing the problems faced by

women, most especially in conflict situations. It has four pillars: (i) participation, (ii) prevention, (iii) protection, and (iv) resolution and recovery. The participation pillar which is particularly emphasized in the present study makes a global call for the participation of women in decision making processes at national, regional and international levels. The pillar particularly ‘encourages’ states and other relevant institutions to ensure that women are included in political decisions concerning peacebuilding, conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction processes. Not many countries fulfil this obligation of enabling the participation of women in managing conflict situations. What then should women and girls do at helping themselves in the context of the latitude provided by the UNSCR 1325? Our paper attempts to answer this question; it has more to do with how Nigerian women and girls got and get themselves included in the management of the Boko Haram crisis even when not officially invited. They are motivated into action largely by their commitment to the responsibility to protect.

### **Boko Haram and Nigeria’s UNSCR 1325**

Boko Haram is a radical Islamist movement whose origin can be dated back to 2002. Its founder, Muhammed Yusuf, who had been having running battles with the security system in Nigeria for a long time was killed extrajudicially by the Nigerian police in 2009. To avenge his death, the movement now led by Abubakar Shekau, resorted to terror attacks on the Nigerian state. It took the combined efforts of the Nigerian military and the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) to disgorge the group out from Maiduguri to Sambisa forest from where they launch their guerrilla attacks on soft and hard targets across northern Nigerian until recently when it restricted its activities to the border communities of Cameroun, Chad, and Niger. The group is notorious for kidnapping women and girls which are used as sex slaves, domestic servants, suicide bombers and bargaining chips with the Nigerian state.

The UNSCR 1325 was framed to address the kind of human security crises created by Boko Haram in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin countries. That the insurgents still keep some of the girls and women taken from Chibok and Dapchi and have hundreds of others in their custody suggests that more is needed for meeting the expectations of the UNSCR 1325 in the region. How can girls and women complement the efforts of the government in this respect? This is where the “participation” pillar of the UNSCR 1325 becomes very important. It speaks amongst several other things to how girls and women could participate in solving the problems that confront them rather than being perpetually seen as passive victims of violent extremism and endless recipients of humanitarian support in Nigeria. For illustrating this, the following sub-sections of this paper focus on three important considerations: (i) how some abducted Chibok girls bravely escaped from their Boko Haram (ii) how Aisha the brave huntress and other women participate in the search for abductees in Sambisa forest, and (iii) the exploits of “Mama Boko Haram” as a go-between Boko Haram and Nigeria. The call of the paper is for community participation in peace operations.

### **Brave Chibok Girls**

The abduction of Chibok and Dapchi girls by Boko Haram in 2014 and 2018 respectively brought the sect out as a group opposed to women’s rights and the education of the girl child. The rescue of the girls remains a global question today.

It has been impossible for the military – whether operating alone or in concert with the international community - to free the girls. Those of them that survived the Boko Haram abduction returned home as a result of the condescending negotiations Nigeria had with the insurgents. As the world remembers the agonies of the girls there is the need to also salute the courage of the Chibok girls that organized their own escape from their abductors. They attained what neither the military might nor negotiation skills of Nigeria could achieve. For this reason, the girls are branded in this paper as “brave victims”. The world needs more of such girls in situations of violent extremism and terrorism. Though what the girls did is very risky this response option helps to further reason around the “participation” pillar of the UNSCR 1325: the need for abductees to participate in facilitating their rescue. Rescue options may not have to be left to the third party responders alone; the abductees have a role to play in helping the process.

The Chibok girls abducted on 14 April, 2014 had no chances of escape from the school where taken. They were captured by Boko Haram members who claimed to be officers of the Nigerian army sent to protect them. They were subsequently loaded into trucks. It took them time to realise they had been abducted. Under different circumstance 53 of the over 270 girls later escaped; leaving behind more than 200 others<sup>1</sup>. In other words, about 20 per cent of the girls escaped.

How did the girls escape? Some jumped out of the truck taking them to the forest<sup>2</sup>, some ran into the bush at Sambisa while the insurgents were either sleeping or not observing. They trekked for days in the bush before finding help. Some of the girls who stayed with the insurgents long enough to get pregnant delivered while escaping but lost and buried the babies on their journeys<sup>3</sup>. They all took great risks but what happened to their peers left behind were more harrowing. They were subjected to a life of misery and starvation; converted to Islam and forced to recite verses of the Quran<sup>4</sup>. They were subjected to multiple sexual harassment, forced to carry out manual duties and suicide attacks; sold off as sex slaves to as far as Central African Republic, and even killed for disobeying orders. Some died of snake bites, some fell sick and died, and a few died as a result of friendly fire from those seeking to rescue them from their abductors.

### **The Boko Haram Huntress**

Following the abduction of Chibok girls in April 2014 some hunters constituted search parties for the abductees in Sambisa forest. Incidentally, one of their leaders is a woman named Aisha Bakari Gombi. Her gallantry earned her the nickname, the ‘queen hunter’ in local communities and in the Nigerian media. She grew up at Gombi, a village in the vicinity of Sambisa forest. Before the Boko Haram crisis, she hunted antelopes, baboons, and guinea fowl with her grandfather in the forest and therefore has an excellent knowledge of the terrain where the military now fight Boko Haram. The woman is also believed to have the sorcery powers for freely navigating such a dangerous environment.

Aisha’s passion is for freeing abducted women and girls and liberating her community from the clutches of Boko Haram. Her first rescue mission for the Chibok girls, organized from Dagggu, near Chibok was not a total success. The hunters, male and handful of female she worked with, went as far as the spot where the abducted girls were being held. However, they could not launch any meaningful

attack because of the limited weapons at their disposal compared to what the Boko Haram members were having. Whereas Boko Haram is powerfully armed, has sophisticated drones and the capacity to down military aircrafts, Aisha only goes on her missions with a double-barrel shotgun. As she said, “We could free them if the military would give us better weapons.”<sup>5</sup>. Her group work more on helping to rescue abducted girls and women and bringing to justice those harbouring them in the forest rather than being involved in full blast military operations.

So notable is Aisha’s contributions to the counterinsurgency in the North East that Al Jazeera television had to do a 25-minute documentary on her titled *Aisha: Boko Haram Huntress*<sup>6</sup>. The filmmaker, Rosie Collyer, who spent a year in the North East region following Aisha and the Nigerian army on a number of missions, focused the production on Aisha's incredible bravery and championship<sup>7</sup>. In the film, she complained about her team’s consistent inability to procure enough weapons for carrying out their missions. This problem happens probably because though the woman has a good relationship with the military they were opposed to her involvement in any unauthorized operations. What is considered authorized in this respect is when she is formally invited by the military to join rescue missions for abducted women and girls and not when she launches her independent operation. Even then, the woman does not get sufficient credit or reward for her exploits. Calling attention to this problem Al Jazeera observed that “Government troops are quick to call on Aisha for her skills but slow to reward her efforts financially...While she is unable to liberate many more captives held by Boko Haram due to a lack of resources, she will never stop trying”<sup>8</sup>.

Calling attention to the kind of collaborative work Aisha does, Rosie Collyer made reference to an occasion when she was invited by a familiar military officer to join the search for some seven women and four children abducted by Boko Haram from Daggu and taken deeper into Sambisa forest in February 2017<sup>9</sup>. Her team responds timeously to such regular invitations and in the process is known to have facilitated the rescue of hundreds of people, most especially women and children. Their operations also lead to the arrest of several Boko Haram members.



Source: <https://www.okayafrica.com/aisha-boko-haram-huntress-is-the-story-of-a-fearless-female-warrior-fighting-extremism-in-northern-nigeria/>

The documentary provides detailed information on why and how Aisha got into counterinsurgency operations. She was motivated into action by the kind of devastations she saw Boko Haram cause in the communities around her in the North East. She is joined to hunt for the insurgents because of her experience as a professional hunter. She learnt the trade from childhood from her father and grandfather. One of the women in her team, Hamsat Hassan, claimed to have equally joined the band of hunters to avenge the abduction of her sister in 2015. That was the last she saw of the woman. As she said, "I couldn't fire a gun when I asked to join the Hunters' Association in a town also called Gombi, but all I knew was that I wanted to avenge the people who abducted my sister,"<sup>10</sup>.

Though a Muslim, Aisha believes in traditional spirit worship. Hence, her team members do not go out on any mission without carrying out appropriate protection rituals. In the forest, they communicate with one another using sign, animal and bird languages. While in the forest Aisha multitasks by teaching the other hunters how to identify medicinal plants and prepare secret potions that protect them from bullets and help to repress hunger and thirst for staying longer in the mission<sup>11</sup>. She acquired the skills from her grandfather and has continued to use them for the good of her immediate community.

### **Mama Boko Haram**

The third and last case considered in this paper is Aisha Wakil popularly known in Nigeria as "Mama Boko Haram". She is one of the biggest confidants of Boko Haram in Nigeria; the sect has a lot of respect for her. She helped to circumcise some of the sect members in their infancy and decided to stay close to them since then. Explaining the situation she said: "When I came here in 1989, some of the boys had reached circumcision age. I helped in circumcising them...the tradition here is that after circumcision, you're expected to kill a chicken for them then use fire or hot water on their 'something'. So I did all that for them". She became a "mother" to several of the youths long before the founder of Boko Haram, Muhammed Yusuf, arrived Maiduguri to start indoctrinating them. She visited, cooked for and played with several of the militants when they were growing. The last to join Aisha's social network was Yusuf, the founder of the Boko Haram. Commenting on this the woman said: "So when Mohammed Yusuf came, my relationship extended to him and his father-in-law. Like it is my tradition, every evening, I cook for people within and outside my home. So every evening, they all troop in here do come to eat"<sup>12</sup>. Included in the list of those that benefitted from Aisha's pots were some almajirai (Islamic school children) under Alhaji Fugu, Yusuf's father in law<sup>13</sup>. In other words, food contributed significantly to building the relationship between Aisha and some of the Boko Haram militants. Commenting on this, she said:

... because I am from the southern part of the country, I normally prepared southern dishes, which Yusuf had always come to eat. In fact, he liked my egusi soup very much, and we became very close when his father-in-law told him that I was the one who cooked the food. So anytime we met, he expressed delight and prayed that Almighty Allah would reward me, for he was eating from my pot and that was how I established a strong relationship with him,"<sup>14</sup>

The foregoing notwithstanding, Aisha's main focus was on her "children". She started to notice some negative changes in them when they started to return home late around 11 or 12 midnight from attending Muhammad Yusuf's lectures and preaching. According to her, "Soon, the children began to be conscious of themselves. It was then that the rumour started that they were planning a war. When I heard of it, I went straight to Muhammad Yusuf ... When I realized that Muhammad Yusuf was frequently being arrested, detained and released, I went to Baba Fugu<sup>15</sup> and asked him why his son-in-law was always being detained? But I learnt he was always preaching things the government didn't like and insulting them." She staged a number of protests towards halting the radicalization process; she counsel the youths around her on the need for peace. She continued to counsel the Boko Haram members after they resorted to revolutionary violence. She was quoted during one of the outings to have said: "My sons, I have been begging you since in silence to come out and state your grievances and stop destroying your homeland. Please come out and state your grievances and stop these killings"<sup>16</sup>.

Beyond the food she provided them before the escalation of the Boko Haram crisis Aisha is respected for several other reasons. The woman came from the Christian dominated Enugu State in South eastern Nigeria but converted to the religion of Islam when she got married to Wakil Gana a judicial officer in Borno State in appreciation of the man's excellent character. She studied Law at the University of Maiduguri and soon became respected by the society as a human rights activist working with the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) in Borno State as a specialist in Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR)<sup>17</sup>.



Though opposed to western education, the youth in the Boko Haram movement must have been in love with how Aisha used her legal training probably to help secure the release of some of them detained at the early stage of the crisis. Unlike her kind of educated persons in Northern Nigeria, Aisha was never seen in the public without being fully veiled from the crown of her head to the sole of her feet. So much is the respect they have for her that she helped to secure the release of

several persons abducted by Boko Haram simply by placing a call to them. Commenting on this she said: "I have released so many people that were kidnapped. I will just call them and say 'you took my house girl or sister or best friend' meanwhile I do not know these people and they would be released"<sup>18</sup>. It was through her that Nigerians and the international community got to learn that the girls abducted in Dapchi in 2018 were actually taken by Boko Haram and not any other terrorist group.

She tried severally to make the federal government negotiate with the insurgents through her but the efforts were rebuffed. However, she was appointed a member of the Committee set up by the administration of President Goodluck Jonathan in 2013 to negotiate with Boko Haram. The Committee could not meet because of the disagreement between the government and the insurgents about representation and the agenda for the dialogue process. Unable to properly place the woman's stand in the fight against Boko Haram, the government had to declare Aisha wanted in August 2016 alongside a journalist, Ahmad Salkida, to whom Boko Haram members were always sending their breaking news. Also declared wanted at the time was Ahmed Bolori, alias "Peace Ambassador". They were accused of being accomplices of the Boko Haram sect. This happened shortly after Boko Haram released a video showing some of the abducted Chibok schoolgirls were still alive. Aisha was believed to have helped to procure the video. The woman and the others were later released.

Barrister Denise Ritchie, a New Zealand-based barrister and founder of Stop Demand Foundation, regarded the declaration of Aisha as being wanted to be ill-advised. Rather than declare her wanted she expected the government to have seen the relationship between the woman and Boko Haram as an evidence that the latter is approachable and would have respected her as a mediator in ending the Boko Haram crisis quickly. She observed that "Boko Haram spokesmen have previously said that they would be willing to talk with the government through Ms Wakil, also known as 'Mama Boko Haram... So it is unfathomable that to date no one from the Buhari-led government has approached Aisha Wakil to explore facilitating such a meeting. More so, given that in March this year I attended with Ms Wakil, two meetings with Boko Haram representatives in Maiduguri... How is that a New Zealand woman visiting Maiduguri can attend with the woman dubbed 'Mama Boko Haram', two meetings with key Boko Haram representatives while the government has made no attempt to arrange even one such meeting through her?... Aisha Wakil is highly respected by many. She is highly regarded by many within Boko Haram"<sup>19</sup>. Denise argued that the environment of the meeting that she attended with the representatives of Boko Haram in Maiduguri, including two commanders of the sect, suggested to her that the Islamists are 'approachable and respectful' as several issues including the Chibok girls were discussed with them. It was at that meeting that Aisha got the video evidence that the Chibok girls were still alive.

## **Conclusion**

The position of this paper is that there is more to the experiences of women and girls in Nigeria's Boko Haram crisis than that of victimhood; they also participate as interveners. The three cases above graphically illustrate how courageous some women could be in situations of armed conflict. The Chibok girls that escaped from

Boko Haram could have been killed while escaping but they took the risk. Aisha the huntress took a great risk going after the well-armed Boko Haram members with her double barrel gun. Her case reminds us of the need for governments to get more women recruited into security services. Mama Boko Haram too has what it takes to facilitate a peace meeting between the Nigerian state and Boko Haram but she has not been given the needed safe space. Her case reminds us of the need for government to accommodate more women mediators in their processes. What all of these issues have shown is that given the right support, Nigerian women and girls have a lot to contribute to the management of violent extremism in Nigeria most especially in the contexts of the UNSCR 1325. The Nigerian situation provides some cursory international lessons.

---

<sup>1</sup> BBC News, “Nigeria abductions: Chibok raid warnings ‘ignored’”, BBC News, 9 May 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-27344863>

<sup>2</sup> Mark, M. (2015). Chibok girls who escaped Boko Haram defy militants by returning to school. *The Guardian* (London), 3 February, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/03/chibok-girls-escaped-boko-haram-new-fear-return-school>

<sup>3</sup> For the testimonies of some of the girls kindly watch the YouTube “These girls escaped Boko Haram...”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v3lGwWPlvSE>

<sup>4</sup> Watch the YouTube “What happened to the girls kidnapped by Boko Haram”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EnkJSntktBQ>; also “Kidnapping survivor on her amazing escape from Boko Haram”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0qj-dps1e0>

<sup>5</sup> Collyer, R. (2017). Meet Aisha, a former antelope hunter who now tracks Boko Haram. *The Guardian* (London), 8 February. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/08/antelope-hunter-boko-haram-nigeria>

<sup>6</sup><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SQDF7tIbhkw>

<sup>7</sup>Durosomo, D. (2018). Aisha: Boko Haram huntress’: Is the story of a fearless female warrior fighting extremism in northern Nigeria, *OkayAfrica*, 16 March 2018, <https://www.okayafrika.com/aisha-boko-haram-huntress-is-the-story-of-a-fearless-female-warrior-fighting-extremism-in-northern-nigeria/>

<sup>8</sup> Al Jazeera (2018). Aisha: Boko Haram huntress. *Witness*, 12 April 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/witness/2018/04/boko-haram-huntress-180409084625309.html>

<sup>9</sup> Collyer (op. cit.)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Collyer, R. (2018). “Filmmaker’s view”, Al Jazeera, 12 April. <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/witness/2018/04/boko-haram-huntress-180409084625309.html>

<sup>12</sup> Adaoyichie, G. (2016). Meet Igbo woman who circumcised Boko Haram members. *Pulse*, 6 September, <https://www.pulse.ng/news/local/aisha-wakil-meet-igbo-woman-who-circumcised-boko-haram-members-video/wzlgj34>

<sup>13</sup> Vanguard (2016). The woman, Aisha Wakil, Boko Haram calls mummy is Igbo. *Vanguard*, 20 August, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2016/08/the-woman-aisha-wakil-boko-haram-calls-mummy-is-igbo/>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.



---

<sup>15</sup>The late Alhaji Baba Fugu Mohammed was Mohammed Yusuf’s father in law and Aisha’s spiritual father in Islam. He was summarily executed by the Police the day Yusuf was killed.

<sup>16</sup> Vanguard (2016) op.cit.

<sup>17</sup>Adaoyichie, G. (2016). 10 Interesting facts about Aisha Wakil that you don't know”, *Pulse*, 23 September, <https://www.pulse.ng/news/local/mama-boko-haram-10-interesting-facts-about-aisha-wakil-that-you-dont-know-video/h6by1f1>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Adaoyichie, G. (2016). New Zealand female lawyer meets Boko Haram commanders twice, advises Buhari [EXCLUSIVE PHOTOS, VIDEO], *Pulse*, 22 September, <https://www.pulse.ng/news/local/chibok-girls-new-zealand-female-lawyer-meets-boko-haram-commanders-twice-advises/62xp5dr>