

Women and the War on Boko Haram: Wives, Weapons, Witnesses, by Hilary Matfess. London: Zed Books Ltd., 2017

Títílope F. Ajàyí

Women and the War on Boko Haram is a bold and coherent effort to decolonise victim narratives about women's roles in, and experiences of, the conflict in Nigeria's northeast. Before this book, although there had been a growing focus on women as perpetrators and enablers of violence by scholars like Freedom Onuoha, Elizabeth Pearson and Jacob Zenn, women were primarily seen (as victims) through the lens of the students abducted by the group known as Boko Haram from their Chibok school in April 2014. But Matfess' book is not just about women; it offers critical and insightful commentary on the broader underlying conflict and suggests informed management strategies. *Women and the War on Boko Haram* also shows how the essentialisation of women's conflict experiences, their exclusion from response strategies, and disjointed state and humanitarian responses are prolonging the conflict unduly.

Following a detailed historicisation of violent extremism in northern Nigeria and the specific instance of the Boko Haram conflict, Matfess analyses women's roles in terms of the three main categories - *Wives, Weapons Witnesses* - which make up the second part of her colonic title. These are presumably for analytical convenience as readers quickly come to see that each category is fluid and multisectional. In breaking open the bounds of roles played by women in this conflict, it is significant that she begins with the category of wives because this was "frequently identified as a conduit into the group for women" (105). Matfess weaves multiple narratives about wilful and unwilful matrimony, the latter being really a euphemism for organised/systematised rape, showing that although some women and girls joined Boko Haram voluntarily, many were co-opted forcefully. Women were abducted to perform several roles, but the task of reproduction was paramount as a strategy to produce the next generation of fighters (123-124).

In the second broad categorisation of female roles, the weaponisation of

femaleness by state and non-state actors is multifaceted. The chapter (Five) dedicated to this begins with a discussion of how Boko Haram seized the now famous Chibok captives from their government school in April 2014. However, Matfess is quick to assert, as does Pereira (2018), that this public mass abduction is one of many that form part of a deliberate strategy of violence against women and girls aimed at impelling them to comply with Boko Haram's religio-cultural dictates (80). This is crucial because, as Matfess discusses, the Chibok abductions and transnational movement for their release accorded the girls a "mythic" status (80–81) that galvanised global activism in their support. At the same time, this status reinforced their symbolic value in the eyes of their captors and prolonged their captivity. A similar dynamic informed Joseph Kony's resolve to prolong negotiations over the Aboke Girls, kidnapped in 1996 from their school in northern Uganda by the Lord's Resistance Army, the moment he realised how famous they had become (De Temmerman, 2001). As I discovered during recent fieldwork, the mythification of the Chibok girls has caused rancour and led some to question the authenticity of Bring Back Our Girls which has campaigned primarily for their return.

Women and girls were also directly and indirectly involved in acts of violence, although Matfess foregrounds direct acts of violence. These range from the disciplining and alleged killings of disobedient female captives to female suicide bombings. She points out that stigma from being associated with Boko Haram and rejection and/or disdain by communities, state actors and social workers have led women to downplay their autonomy regarding the group (96). Such stigma is also obscuring the women's access to much-needed help. While Matfess does not include activists in her conceptualisation of women as weapons, it is fitting to consider NGOs like the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations of Nigeria and the Bring Back Our Girls networks running the campaign pressuring the government to remedy its protection lapses by rescuing the Chibok girls and all other female captives.

Matfess is not explicit about the composition of the category she designates as "witnesses to the violence and post-conflict rebuilding processes" (1) but all the women and girls she describes throughout the book, and many others, belong here in varying ways. Three main points draw together her discussion of women's multiple roles. First, these roles are not static or linear; women occupy

multiple roles simultaneously and shift around within the matrices of roles as their positionalities modulate. Second, several factors mediate women's roles in, and experiences of, the conflict, including age, religion, marital status (this includes the rank of Boko Haram husbands) and attitude to the group's norms and ideologies. Finally, and importantly, Matfess problematises women's agency, illustrating with excerpts from life histories how different women exercise this as much in what they (choose to) do as what they choose not to (101-109). This is important because the question of choice, and the constraints on it given the narrow options available, are often inflected by fear.

On the broader conflict and responses to it, the book outlines in Chapter Six the massive scale of the humanitarian crisis engendered by the conflict before exposing evidenced inconsistencies in state and humanitarian responses to it. Matfess points out that, compared to Syria and Sudan, the "international community" has been restrained (145, 179-181) and thus complicit in humanitarian response shortcomings that "disproportionately affect women" (183-185). This is surprising given that the crisis was labelled by UNICEF as one of the worst in the world (145) (Withnall, 2016). These shortcomings include "haphazard" approaches to humanitarian aid that encourage dependency, worsen the breakdown of interpersonal relationships and "undermine women's social, legal and political empowerment" (187). For its part, the Nigerian government's actions are disjointed as reflected in arbitrary arrests and unlawful killings of suspected extremists (151), a "clumsy" demobilisation programme (159) and "opaque" screening and deradicalisation processes (153), as well as prolonged and unlawful detention of terror suspects in unsanitary conditions at the notorious Giwa Barracks (155-157). This apt indictment is compounded by corruption, low bureaucratic capacity to coordinate interventions, among myriad actors, scarce resources, abusive and predatory agencies, and military appropriation of conflict narratives through state censorship and control of the media. The absence of "nuanced policy" for women and girls betrays a gender blindness that cuts across all aspects of the government's counter-extremism strategy.

Citing research on the "importance of female inclusion for social stability and durable peace" (192), Matfess rightly identifies the critical need to empower women as a way to mobilise their agency and inspire their greater involvement in politics in order, ultimately, to enhance their resilience to violence and "build

more stable, peaceful societies” (192). However, she does not discuss the need to approach this holistically alongside efforts to create space for better gender parity in the domestic context by targeting repressive mindsets about gender ideologies. Recalcitrant ideologies have militated against more equitable participation of women after violent conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone and other post-conflict contexts in Africa, showing that policy and structural alignments with global norms and frameworks are not enough to make women more equal (in the aftermath of conflict). She acknowledges the need to avoid considering women in isolation, in light of how male disempowerment can lead to post-conflict intimate partner violence based on men’s feelings of inadequacy amid changing gender roles (197-198). Such violence is currently occurring in northeast Nigeria (Nagarajan, 2017). However, I would add that it is equally important to address contextually-coloured mindsets that construct “deeply entrenched and internalised” norms about proper roles for women (188) which make some men feel emasculated by their women’s new economic power.

Matfess’ suggestion that the international community can “intervene” in the gender-progressive recovery from Boko Haram and “facilitate the expansion of norms” of women’s empowerment (213) is troubling on two grounds. It evokes imperialist arrogations about the “West” as custodian of global norms that bind the rest of the world. It also overlooks, as she herself states on page 211, that this approach has failed in the past and that the most successful interventions have been driven by the agencies of domestic actors and civil society constituencies. With particular reference to improving the landscape of women’s rights, history shows that the impulse must come from within, given past and present frictional encounters between domestic and global norms and frameworks. This is partly due to domestic views of global norms and their implementation as foreign imports whose uncritical application has caused backlashes that are delaying progress.

Relatedly, while it is instructive to acknowledge recurrent ideological and operational patterns between the strategies of Boko Haram and those of groups like the Lord’s Resistance Army (97-98), it may be too reductionist to lump the groups together for analytical convenience in order to assign definitive labels (98). These end up essentialising the characteristics of the entities labelled in this way.

A final omission is the absence of discussion of women on the other side of Boko Haram, as responders to violence. These comprise female hunters, female

members of the Civilian Joint Task Force, female members of the National Security and Civil Defence Corps, and women security personnel (police and army), who share in the precarity of all females in conflict but confront specific challenges that stem from their situatedness within diverse security frameworks. Nonetheless, *Women and the War on Boko Haram* is a compelling, richly informative and enjoyable read, based on wide-ranging interviews, and is highly recommended for audiences with an interest in women and security in contexts of violence.

References

- De Temmerman, Els. 2001. *Aboke Girls: Children Abducted in Northern Uganda*. Kampala: Fountain Publishers.
- Nagarajan, Chitra. 2017. "Gender Assessment of Northeast Nigeria". Managing Conflict in North East Nigeria (MCN). Available at <https://chitrasudhanagarajan.files.wordpress.com/2018/03/gender-assessment-of-northeast-nigeria.pdf>
- Pereira, Charmaine. 2018. "Beyond the Spectacular: Contextualizing Gender Relations in the Wake of the Boko Haram Insurgency", *Meridians* 17 (2): 246-68.
- Withnall, Adam. 2016. "Nigeria suffering 'worst humanitarian crisis in the world' amid war with Boko Haram, UNICEF warns". *The Independent*, 29 September. Article available at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/nigeria-boko-haram-conflict-unicef-malnutrition-farming-un-appeal-msf-oxfam-a7337836.html>