Understanding the Role of Women in Nigeria's Non-State Armed Groups and Security Architecture

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Abstract

Since 1999, when Nigeria returned to civilian government after successive military regimes, it has continued to face enormous challenges to its legitimacy and monopoly of the use of force. Protest groups, social movements, and non-state armed groups have emerged over the years to demand good governance in some cases and, in other extreme cases, secession, self-determination, and subversion of Nigeria's secular political system. Many groups have been willing to take up arms against the state to pursue their objectives. Men are usually the significant actors in these armed groups, while most women are considered victims.

However, since 2014, when Boko Haram started deploying female suicide bombers and mobilizing more and more girls and women in its terrorist strategies, women's role in Nigeria's armed conflicts and their capacity to use violence have gained visibility. Despite this, ascertaining the role of women (mainly whether they occupy positions of power and can perpetrate violence) in non-state armed groups' activities against the Nigerian state remains difficult, judging by the overwhelmingly male-dominated recipients of the government's amnesty and deradicalization programs.

Relying on interviews with key respondents, this paper fills this gap by interrogating the role of women as victims or perpetrators in Boko Haram and Niger Delta insurgencies, Nigeria's two foremost insurgencies since the return to democracy in 1999, as well as engaging with the prospect of an effective legislative and policy response that is negotiated by increasing the number of women in security and political leadership positions.

Résumé

Depuis 1999, date à laquelle il a retrouvé un gouvernement civil après une succession de régimes militaires, le Nigeria pays a continué à faire face à d'énormes défis concernant sa légitimité et son monopole de l'usage de la violence. Des groupes de protestation, des mouvements sociaux et des groupes armés non étatiques sont apparus au fil des années pour réclamer une meilleure gouvernance dans certains cas et, dans d'autres cas extrêmes, la sécession, l'autodétermination et la subversion du système politique séculier du Nigeria. Nombre de ces groupes sont prêts à prendre les armes contre l'État pour atteindre leurs objectifs. Les hommes sont généralement les principaux acteurs de ces groupes armés, tandis que la plupart des femmes sont considérées comme victimes.

Cependant, depuis 2014, lorsque Boko Haram a commencé à déployer des femmes kamikazes et à mobiliser de plus en plus de filles et de femmes dans ses stratégies terroristes, le rôle des femmes dans les conflits armés au Nigeria et leur capacité à utiliser la violence ont gagné en visibilité. Malgré cela, il reste difficile de déterminer leur rôle (en particulier si elles occupent des positions de pouvoir et ont la capacité de perpétrer des violences) dans les activités des groupes armés contre l'État nigérian, à en juger par le fait que les bénéficiaires des programmes d'amnistie et de déradicalisation du gouvernement sont très majoritairement des hommes.

S'appuyant sur des entretiens avec des acteurs clés, cette note propose de combler ce vide en interrogeant le rôle des femmes en tant que victimes ou actrices dans les insurrections de Boko Haram et du Delta du Niger, les deux principales insurrections au Nigeria depuis le retour à la démocratie en 1999, et s'engage dans la perspective d'une réponse législative et politique efficace négociée en augmentant le nombre de femmes dans les postes de sécurité et de direction politique.

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Introduction

In the last two decades, the Nigerian state has faced enormous challenges to its legitimacy and monopoly of the use of force. The political culture (that is, widely shared beliefs, feelings, and values) in Nigeria is underlined by heightened tensions between the state and the society, contestations of power between elites from different ethnic groups who engage in violent competition for the control of central government and access to the nation's abundant natural resources (such as oil and gas, precious metals and stones and industrial minerals), and several armed conflicts. Protest groups, social movements, and non-state armed groups have emerged over the years to demand good governance in some cases and, in other extreme cases, secession, self-determination, and subversion of Nigeria's secular political system. Many groups have been willing to take up arms against the state to pursue their objectives. Drawing on the "Formative Event"[1] theory and "Fragment"[2] theory propounded by the political sociologists Martin Lipset and Louis Hartz, Nigeria's prevailing culture and psyche of violence can be traced to the country's historical legacies of colonial and military rule. In terms of the colonial legacy, the tripartite[3] influence of the arbitrary creation of states and state borders, politicization of ethnic and cultural identities, and pervasive use of violence during the colonial period continue to inspire inter-ethnic conflict and political violence.

Likewise, the long years of military rule in Nigeria have produced a lasting impact on the political climate that hinders the growth of democracy. The military has manipulated the aspiration for true federalism by installing a *de jure* only type of federalism with overly centralized power. The combined experiences of colonial and military rule in Nigeria "continue to inspire and amplify inter-ethnic tensions and conflicts, secessionist movements, protest groups and armed movements that challenge the legitimacy of the Nigerian state and its monopoly of the use of violence".[4]

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1. M. Lipset's "Formative Theory" explains how key events that happen when a country was founded can continue to have an enduring effect.

2. L. Hartz's "Fragment Theory" focuses on the impact of colonialism and imperialism on countries and societies.

3. The colonial experience and legacy in Nigeria (and in many other African states) involve three key dimensions: One, the arbitrary creation of states that do not conform with preexisting political and social authorities and groupings-hence, multiple ethnic identities are cobbled together in a state. Two, the politicization of ethnic and cultural identities-that is, the multiple identities were pit against one another such that it is difficult to build a national identity. Three, the prevalent use of violence by the colonial government.

4. M. Nwankpa, *Nigeria's Fourth Republic, 1999-2021: A Militarised Democracy*, New York: Routledge, 2022, pp. 63-64.

Since Nigeria returned to democratic government in 1999 after 16 years of successive military regimes, it has witnessed an increase in the number of non-state armed groups (that is, "armed organizations operating outside the control of the state and willing and able to use force to achieve their objectives")[5] and social movements (that is "organized and sustained non-formal collectives, independent from the state and market, and with shared identity and goals, engaged in protest against social, political, economic, or cultural hegemony to transform the status quo")[6] across its six geopolitical zones. For instance, the Niger Delta insurgent groups (operating mainly in the oil-rich south-south geopolitical zone) are driven by a demand for greater control of the region's abundant oil resources and protection against environmental despoilation, while the pro-Biafra groups based in the Igbo-dominated southeast region are fighting for secession and the creation of an independent Igbo nation. Similarly, the pan-Yoruba socio-political groups in the Yoruba-dominated southwest region are fighting for an autonomous Yoruba nation or varying degrees of control of the region's affairs, while jihadist groups in the northern region, such as Boko Haram and Islamic State – West Africa Province (ISWAP) are seeking to establish a sharia state in Nigeria. These armed groups and social movements, although differing in their (political, ideological, territorial, social, etc.) goals, objectives and methods, are similar in their underlying experiences of the oppressive Nigerian state. They all have in common the aim to challenge state power as well as the very centralized government with its unevenly distributed resources.

Nigeria's Six Geopolitical Zones
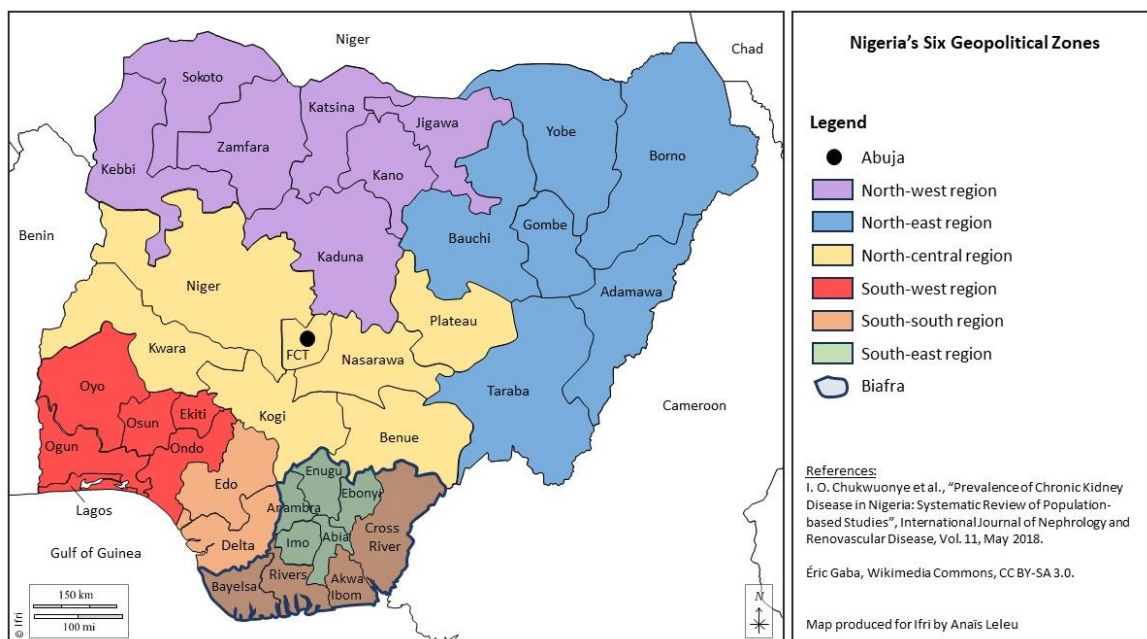
5. B. Berti, "What's in a Name? Reconceptualizing Non-state Armed Groups in the Middle East", *Palgrave Communications*, *2*(1), 2016, p. 1.
6. J. M. Mati, "Social Movements and Socio-Political Change in Africa: The Ufungamano Initiative and Kenyan Constitutional Reform Struggles (1999–2005)", *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 23*, 2012, p. 66.

Men are broadly seen as the principal actors in these armed groups, while most women are mostly considered victims. Historically, women in Nigeria were actively involved in the anti-colonial struggle. However, since Nigeria gained independence, it has been difficult to ascertain the role of women in non-state armed groups' activities against the state, particularly whether women occupy central positions of power within these groups and can perpetrate violence. Since 2014, when Boko Haram started deploying female suicide bombers and mobilizing more and more girls and women in its terrorist strategies, women's role in Nigeria's armed conflicts and their capacity to use violence have gained visibility. Generally speaking, women have shown the capacity to engage in armed conflicts as either willing and voluntary or coerced perpetrators of violence.[7] It is also possible that women who have gained high political positions in post-conflict states such as Liberia may have attained those positions based on their active participation in the conflict and peacebuilding process.[8] Consequently, as armed non-state groups like Boko Haram increasingly mobilize girls and women to perpetrate acts of violence, it becomes necessary for the government to respond adequately by, for example, considering an integrative gender legislative and policy response that involves increasing the number of female security personnel and female political leaders. Focusing on the period between 1999 and now, this paper interrogates the role of women in Nigeria's two foremost non-state armed groups, Niger Delta insurgents and Boko Haram. It analyzes women's participation and/or non-participation in Nigeria's security architecture.

The selection of Boko Haram and Niger Delta insurgent groups is based on the purposive sampling technique using four core sets of criteria: one, the period of operation (must be within the period marked as the Fourth Republic, 1999 till date); two, show large scale operations against the state and counter-response from the state; three, have an international or transborder impact; and four, present evidence of active women's engagement. Both groups fulfill these conditions. The paper relies on over ten years of fieldwork research in Nigeria and semi-structured interviews with four key respondents, including three retired military generals, senior officers, and a civil society organization executive. It is analyzed using a content analysis qualitative approach. It begins by discussing the role of security and conflict in postcolonial state formation, focusing on Nigeria. It then proceeds to an analysis of women's roles in Boko Haram and Niger Delta with a brief mention of a few other relevant conflict groups in Nigeria.

7. C. Lindsey, "Women and War", *International Review of the Red Cross*, *82*(839), 2000, pp. 561-580; H. Charlesworth, "Are Women Peaceful? Reflections on the Role of Women in Peace-building", *Feminist Legal Studies*, *16*(3), 2008, pp. 347-361; I. A. Badmus, "Explaining Women's Roles in the West African Tragic Triplet: Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Cote d'Ivoire in Comparative Perspective", *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences*, *1*(3), 2009.

8. M. M. Hughes, "Armed Conflict, International Linkages, and Women's Parliamentary Representation in Developing Nations", *Social Problems*, *56*(1), 2009, pp. 174-204; M. M. Hughes and A. M. Tripp, "Civil War and Trajectories of Change in Women's Political Representation in Africa, 1985–2010", *Social Forces*, *93*(4), 2015, pp. 1513-1540; K. Webster, C. Chen and K. Beardsley, "Conflict, Peace, and the Evolution of Women's Empowerment", *International Organization*, *73*(2), 2019, pp. 255-289.

Lastly, it discusses Nigerian women in leadership positions by analyzing the number of women attaining critical security and political leadership in Nigeria and the laws and policies created to guarantee women's access to such positions. These elements are considered essential to counter the growing mobilization of women in Nigeria's armed movements. The paper concludes that while men remain the main perpetrators of violence, the presentation of women as perpetual victims incapable of leading violence is reductionist and does not adequately capture the reality of gender roles in armed conflicts.

The role of security and conflict in postcolonial state formation: the case of Nigeria

In 1960, Nigeria gained political independence from Britain. Since then, it has faced an uphill battle in developing a stable democratic government and strong political structure that caters to its ever-increasing population of several ethnic groups.[9] Within the first decade of independence, Nigeria experienced multiple military coups and one of the most brutal civil wars in the continent. The Nigeria-Biafra Civil War (1967-1970). Within a single year, respectively in January and July 1966, Nigeria experienced two coups that would alter the course of its democratic growth and precipitate a costly (both in material and human sense) civil war between the Nigerian state and its breakaway Biafran (predominantly Igbos) nation. The conflict has resulted in the deaths of nearly three million Igbo, mainly due to the Nigerian state's blocking of food aid to the Biafran.[10]

As a response, the military began the centralization of the power process with its first intervention in January 1966: it abolished the federal system of government, which had been in place since 1960, and imposed a unitary system of government. The centralization of power became more entrenched during the Civil War when Major General Yakubu Gowon abolished the self-governing regional governments by creating twelve states across the federation on May 12, 1967. The creation of states by General Gowon was a strategic move aimed at undercutting the Igbo's dominance in the Eastern region. Except for a brief period of civilian-led government between 1979 and 1984, military rule became the norm in Nigeria.[11] Successive military regimes created more states, further centralizing power and the control of the nation's abundant resources. Essentially, the federal government (rather than states

9. Nigeria is an ethnically diverse country of over 200 million people from 300 ethnic groups (three major groups-Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa-Fulani) that speak over 400 languages.

10. In January 1966, Major General Aguiyi Ironsi, the most senior military officer from the Igbo ethnic group seized control of the democratically elected government of Prime Minister Alhaji Tafawa Balewa and oversaw the killing of key political leaders of Hausa and Yoruba ethnic extraction from the northern and western region, including Alhaji Tafawa Balewa. In July 1966, northern military officers carried out a countercoup, killing hundreds of Igbo military officers and up to 30,000 Igbo civilians residing in northern Nigeria. The July 1966 coup was based on the perception that the January coup was ethnically orchestrated by the Igbo officers, particularly as the major coup plotters were Igbos and no major Igbo figure was assassinated. These events led to the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War.

11. B. Agozino and U. Idem, "The Militarization of Nigerian Society", *Colonial Systems of Control*", 2008, p. 76.

or regions) controls most of the nation's resources, including land, oil, and minerals. In contrast, the state depends on the federal government for monthly allocations (using a redistributive sharing formula) and even its security. For instance, there is no state police. Instead, the Nigerian police is centralized. In 1999, Nigeria returned to civilian government after long years of successive military rule.

Nigeria has remained under civilian government since 1999, making it the longest democratic dispensation in the political history of Nigeria. This period is referred to as the Fourth Republic.[12] Yet, the Fourth Republic is highly militarized, which means that Nigeria has effectively turned into a national security state whereby the rule of force and violence rather than dialogue and compassion reflect everyday reality. It is denoted by a "pervasive military presence and ideology in its political and socio-economic affairs, increase in the number of armed non-state groups and resistance movements, redistribution of resources and government funds away from social programs into military-oriented security measures, increase in security budgets, weapon proliferation, increase in internal military interventions and occupations, and a general psyche and institutionalization of violence".[13] Nigeria's political system is therefore defined by its historical experiences of colonialism, civil war, and military rule. Together with the "life histories of individuals who currently make up the system",[14] the "collective history"[15] and experience of colonialism, civil war and military rule constitute the political culture of Nigeria.

For instance, in the Southwest, there are at least 87 groups that operate under Ilana Omo Oodua, formerly known as Yoruba World Congress (YWC), an umbrella body of all Yoruba socio-cultural and self-determination organizations, clamoring for an autonomous Yoruba nation or at least a restructuring of the polity. In the mainly Igbo Southeast, groups such as the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign Nation of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) have emerged since 1999 to demand secession and an establishment of an independent Igbo-dominated nation. In the oil-rich Niger Delta, several militant groups, mainly under the auspices of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), have risen to demand greater control of the resources of the region, condemn oil pollution, and push for self-determination. In Central Nigeria, predominantly Christian farmers have engaged mainly Muslim and Fulani herders in climate change-induced conflict rather than ethno-religious

12. The Fourth Republic is the current and longest democratic government in the periodisation of Nigeria's democratically elected governments. It distinguishes the periods when Nigeria has not been under military rule. The First Republic started from when Nigeria became a republic in 1963 to the first coup in 1966 when the Republican Constitution was suspended. The Second Republic was between 1979 and 1983; and the Third Republic represents a botched election in 1993.

13. M. Nwankpa, "Nigeria's Fourth Republic, 1999-2021", op. cit., p. 2.

14. L. W. Pye, "Introduction: Political Culture and Political Development", in L. W. Pye and S. Verba, *Political Culture and Political Development*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015, p. 8.

15. Ibid.

clashes, as often wrongly categorized for over two decades. In Northern Nigeria, particularly in the Northeast, the Nigerian military has battled Islamic extremist groups such as Boko Haram and its splinter groups, including the Islamic State in West African Province (ISWAP), an ISIS franchise.

There are differences in the goals expressed by each group and the level of violence applied in achieving their objectives. For instance, Boko Haram and ISWAP are driven by a religious fundamentalist ideology that is not easily reconcilable with Nigeria's secular political system. At the same time, Niger Delta insurgents and even Fulani militias are motivated by economic factors. However, regardless of the extremities of some of the groups, such as Boko Haram, and the criminality of others, such as the Fulani militias, all the groups have legitimate claims of injustice and oppression from the Nigerian state. But the more economically driven armed groups, such as the Niger Delta, have been easy to negotiate with as the government can pay off the militants and warlords. Negotiation and economic responses, such as the 2009 Amnesty offered to the Niger Delta militants, have brought short-term relief. Still, long-term solutions will be based on addressing the pervasive injustice across the country and resetting Nigeria's political culture that is based on institutionalized violence. Interestingly, men are the main actors in these socio-political movements and armed groups, predominantly functioning as combatants. Even though women participate mainly in providing intelligence, moral support and recruitment of female fighters and suicide bombers (as in the case of Boko Haram), they also play active combative roles, although they are often relegated to the periphery of the chain of command (or at worst, unwilling perpetrators of violence) and mainly always categorized as victims of violence.

Table 1: Characteristics of main armed groups

Groups/ Metrics	Boko Haram	ISWAP	Niger Delta	IPOB	MASSOB	OPC	Fulani Militia
Type	Islamist/ fundamen-talist	Islamist/ fundamen-talist	Resource control/ self-determination/ redistribution	Secessionist/ self-determination /separatist	Secessionist/ self-determination/ separatist	Vigilante/self-determination	Resource control/ redistribution
Objective	Establish shariah law in Nigeria	Establish shariah law in Nigeria	Control the resources (oil and gas) produced in the region. Achieve equitable distribution of the oil wealth generated from the Niger Delta region. Cause economic sabotage.	Form an independent Biafran nation. Establish a separatist government.	Establish a separatist government. Form an independent Biafran nation.	Reclaim the stolen Yoruba mandate.[16] Provide some form of neighborhood policing. Fight against crime and criminality in the region.	Protect the economic interests of the Fulani herders and people. Engage in crime (kidnapping-for-ransom) for possible wealth redistribution for the group.
Modus Operandi	Assassination, kidnapping, arson, suicide bombing, Vehicle borne IEDs (VBIEDs)	Assassination, kidnapping, arson, suicide bombing, Vehicle borne IEDs (VBIEDs)	Kidnap-for-ransom/ bombing of oil facilities and other infrastructure/ piracy and oil theft	Protests/civil disobedience (by abstaining from elections and voting), media propaganda/ attacks on policemen and police stations.	Protests/civil disobedience (by abstaining from elections and voting), media propaganda	Use of charms and other diabolical means. Use of guns, cutlass	Kidnap-for-ransom.[17] Crop destruction
Period of operation	2002/3-2009 2009-till date	2015-till date	1998-2009	2012-till date	1999-2012	1994-	2015-till date
Status (highly, low, inactive)	Highly active	Highly active	Low active	Highly active	Low active	Low active	Highly active
Participants/ Stakeholders	Boko Haram insurgents Nigerian military Regional Multinational	Boko Haram insurgents Nigerian military Regional Multinationa	Niger Delta militants Nigeria's Joint Task Force (JTF) Multinational oil companies	IPOB activists and separatists Nigerian military and police	MASSOB activists and separatists Nigerian military and police	OPC militants Nigerian military and police	Fulani militias Nigerian military and police

16. In the botched Third Republic, the 1993 election victory of Moshood Kashimawo Abiola, MKO, a Yoruba man from the southwest was annulled by the military government of President Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida, IBB.

17. The Fulani militia, made up of several hundreds of loose militia gangs and networks, mainly targets schools, kidnapping large numbers of school children, who are then exchanged for ransom from the government or parents of the kidnapped children.

Joint Task Force (MNJTF)	l Joint Task Force (MNJTF)					
		International community				
International community	International community					
ISIS/Al-Qaeda networks	ISIS/Al-Qaeda networks					
Extent of women's participation (high, medium, low, nil)	High	Low or nil	Medium	Medium	Medium	Low	Low or nil

Women's role in Nigeria's armed conflicts

Women are mostly seen as victims rather than perpetrators of violence. However, just as men, they have shown the capacity to perpetrate acts of violence either as willing, voluntary, or coerced perpetrators in armed conflicts.[18] It is essential to understand the role, if any, that women play in Nigeria's armed conflicts. The key questions here are: do women play any significant role, particularly involving the use of violence in armed conflicts? Are women willful or coerced participants in the production and sustenance of violent conflicts? The victim-perpetrator dichotomy remains hotly debated in the discourse on women's participation in armed conflict.[19] Women are primarily victims. For example, Naval General Commodore Olawunmi has no doubt that women are "always victims" of violence and armed conflicts. Concurrently, Major-General Amusu,[20] the second woman to attain the rank of a Major-General in the Nigerian army, also thinks "women are victims [and] not perpetrators." However, according to Lt Colonel Dibal (rtd),[21] the pioneer head of Nigeria's first-ever women's battalion, 25 percent of women in armed conflicts are perpetrators.

Historically, women participated actively in Nigeria's anti-colonial struggles and other social actions, such as the Aba Women Riot of 1929 and the Egba Women Revolt that occurred from 1941-1947.[22] In contemporary Nigeria, women have played relevant roles in a wide variety of conflict groups including vigilante groups such as O'Odua People's Congress (OPC), self-determination and secessionist organizations such as the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), insurgent groups such as Niger Delta, terrorist organizations like Boko Haram and even pro-government counter-insurgency organizations, e.g. the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF).

18. C. Lindsey, "Women and War", op. cit.; H. Charlesworth, "Are Women Peaceful?", op. cit.; I. A. Badmus, "Explaining Women's Roles in the West African Tragic Triplet", op. cit.

19. Ibid.

20. Interview with Major General Tilewa Amusu (rtd), 2021.

21. Interview with Lt Colonel Susan Dibal (rtd), 2021.

22. C. Ukeje, "From Aba to Ugborodo: Gender Identity and Alternative Discourse of Social Protest Among Women in the Oil Delta of Nigeria", *Oxford Development Studies*, *32*(4), 2004, pp. 605-617.

Niger Delta

In the case of the Niger Delta insurgency (1998-2005), the experiences of the Niger Delta women and their active involvement in the struggle for resource control and self-determination are well-documented.[23] Although the predominant view is that women participated as protesters, demonstrators and campaigners, they played far more critical roles as combatants in the armed struggle. Temitope-Oriola (2012) argues that women in Niger Delta participated in different capacities, including as "gun-runners, combatants, mediators and emissaries of insurgents".[24] He further foregrounds this argument but cautions against generalization due to the limited number of female combatants (14) interviewed and the scant information available.[25] Women may account for only a small percentage of fighters in the Niger Delta insurgency. It is, therefore, not surprising that a negligible number (about one percent of the 30,000 beneficiaries) of women benefited from the 2009 Niger Delta Presidential Amnesty. The amnesty largely benefited male Ijaw insurgents and ignored women and other ethnic groups such as Ogoni, Itsekiri and Urghobo, creating conditions that reproduce conflict and potential for future violence. On the one hand, excluding women and other ethnic groups in the Niger Delta from the Amnesty program diminishes their importance and contribution to the Niger Delta struggle, thereby pitting the groups against one another. On the other hand, and even more critically, it creates the incentive for further violence as it sends a dangerous message that a group can only access resources and rewards by applying violence.

The number and active involvement of female combatants (or militants) in the Niger Delta may have been deliberately understated and downgraded to exclude them from any post-conflict benefits and rewards.[26] Laine Munir (2020), in her criticism of the Niger Delta traditional Chief's failure to interface the dialogue between women and the Nigerian state, argues that he inadvertently denies female agency. More dangerously, he appears to reinforce the dominant narrative that women's interests are or should be negotiated through the lens of masculinity and male leadership.[27] This explains why the beneficiaries of the Niger Delta Amnesty were

23. T. E. Turner and L. Brownhill, "Why Women Are at War with Chevron: Nigerian Subsistence Struggles Against the International Oil Industry", *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, *39*(1-2), 2004, pp. 63-93; S. Ekine, "Women's Responses to State Violence in the Niger Delta", *Feminist Africa 10 Militarism, Conflict and Women's Activism*, *10*, 2008, pp. 67-83; M. O. Hudson, "Women's Response to the Question of Development in the Niger Delta, Nigeria", *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology*, *1*(01), 2010, pp. 133-149; T. Oriola, "The Delta Creeks, Women's Engagement and Nigeria's Oil Insurgency", *The British Journal of Criminology*, *52*(3), 2012, pp. 534-555.
24. Ibid., p. 536.
25. T. Oriola, "'I Acted Like a Man': Exploring Female Ex-insurgents' Narratives on Nigeria's Oil Insurgency", *Review of African Political Economy*, *43*(149), 2016, pp. 451-469.
26. A. Babatunde, "From Peaceful to Non-Peaceful Protests: The Trajectories of Women's Movements in the Niger Delta", in *The Unfinished Revolution in Nigeria's Niger Delta*, New York: Routledge, 2018, pp. 103-119; M. Nwankpa, "Nigeria's Fourth Republic, 1999-2021", op. cit.
27. L. Munir, "When Local Law Impedes Conflict Resolution: Women's Oil Protest in the Niger Delta", *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review*, *10*(1), 2020, pp. 28-49.

overwhelmingly male. Women who play significant roles in combat and war are often not recognized[28] after the war ends.[29] Women may have been strategically excluded from the Niger Delta Amnesty because that would negate the securitized motive for the Amnesty. In other words, including women would validate the claim of environmental abuse and governance failure and make the government guilty and liable to address fundamental issues. It is, therefore, strategically advantageous for the Nigerian government to categorize women as victims because the "DDR" (Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration) program was not created for justice.[30]

Boko Haram

Unlike in the Niger Delta, where the number of women involved in actual combat and direct use of violence is low, women play a significant role in the direct use of violence (as active combatants, suicide bombers, and weapon handlers) in the case of Boko Haram. Boko Haram insurgency changed the gender dynamics of conflict in Nigeria. According to Kemi Okenyodo, the executive director of the Rule of Law and Empowerment Initiative (also known as Partners West Africa-Nigeria), "It was the Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast that raised the profile of women as active perpetrators in insurgency or activities of non-state." From June 2014, when Boko Haram first deployed a female suicide bomber in Gombe state, and following the subsequent deployment of girls and women in its operation as suicide bombers, weapon couriers, recruiters/scouts and intelligence gatherers, the portrayal of women in armed conflict as perpetual victims is no longer sufficient to explain the dynamics of the insurgency. For example, between the first deployment of female suicide bombers in 2014 and February 2018, 468 females were deployed or arrested in 240 suicide attacks.[31] Boko Haram's use of female fighters and suicide bombers is not peculiar as other global terrorist groups such as the Tamil Tigers and Al-Qaeda have applied the same tactics, but the "forced conscription and deployment of young women and girls" and the disproportionate use of female suicide bombers are what set Boko Haram apart from these other groups.[32] For example, in 2014, the Nigerian counterterrorism force arrested three women, Zainab

28. Recognition here is seen as closely related to legitimation, a normative process that legitimizes the claim (s) of a social group-making it possible for validation and reward (or punishment), see M. Clement, A. Geis and H. Pfeifer, "Recognizing Armed Non-state Actors: Risks and Opportunities for Conflict Transformation", in *Armed Non-state Actors and the Politics of Recognition*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021, pp. 3-29.

29. M. D. Sankey, "Women and War in the 21st Century: A Country-by-country Guide", ABC-CLIO, 2018.

30. M. Folami, "The Gendered Construction of Reparations: An Exploration of Women's Exclusion from the Niger Delta Reintegration Processes", 2016, p. 13.

31. J. Campbell, "Women, Boko Haram, and Suicide Bombings", Council on Foreign Relations, March 15, 2020, available at: www.cfr.org [accessed 04/04/2023].

32. M. Bloom and H. Matfess, "Women as Symbols and Swords in Boko Haram's Terror", *Prism*, 6(1), 2016, pp. 104-121; M. Nwankpa, "Boko Haram: Whose Islamic State?", James A. Baker III Institute for Public, Policy Research Paper, 2014.

Idris, Hafsat Usman Bako and Aisha Abubakar, who were members of Boko Haram and allegedly helping to recruit women.

Yet, the women deployed by Boko Haram are often considered "unwilling cocoons" who are kidnapped, conscripted, forcefully converted into Islam (for non-Muslims), and forced to kill on behalf of Boko Haram.[33] Indeed, many female perpetrators in Boko Haram may have been coerced into committing acts of terror, including suicide bombing, but some have acted voluntarily. For example, Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, a Nigerian novelist and journalist, writes about the individual stories of rescued Boko Haram wives, including wives of Boko Haram commanders such as Aisha, Zara and Dorcas Yakubu (one of the abducted Chibok girls who featured in a 2017 Boko Haram video wielding weapon), who are voluntarily returning to Boko Haram enclaves after undergoing the government's deradicalization program.[34] In a different context that involves the trafficking of Nigerian women but applicable to the Boko Haram case, Lo Iacono[35] (2014) presents the complex interaction and overlap between victims and perpetrators ("madam") of sex trafficking and the distinction between these two roles not being always clear-cut. In sex trafficking cases, the transition from victim to perpetrator is not usually negotiated through coercion but motivated by greed.

However, in ideological-driven armed conflicts such as Boko Haram, coercion plays a central role in the female victim-perpetrator dichotomy as much as there are willful participants. The paradox in the role of women as victims and perpetrators of violence proves that "it is difficult to discern women's motives for participation in Boko Haram's activities".[36] Boko Haram has carried out indiscriminate attacks on both male and female, Muslims and non-Muslims in northeast Nigeria. In 2014, Boko Haram gained international notoriety with the kidnapping of 276 boarding schoolgirls in the Chibok area of Borno State. It has also conducted targeted attacks on schoolboys. For instance, in 2020, Boko Haram kidnapped over 300 schoolboys in Kankara town in Katsina state.

However, its disproportionate deployment of girls and women for suicide bombing and other acts of terror is unique. The strategic deployment of women as a tool of terror and violent attacks on women generally may be partly due to the Nigerian state's indiscriminate arrest and detention of Boko Haram family members, including women, in the early years of the insurgency as well as a strategic response to the difficulty of deploying male

33. T. B. Oriola, "Unwilling Cocoons: Boko Haram's War Against Women", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, *40*(2), 2017, pp. 99-121; F. C. Onuoha and T. A. George, "Boko Haram's Use of Female Suicide Bombing in Nigeria", 2015; M. Bloom and H. Matfess, "Women as Symbols and Swords in Boko Haram's Terror", op. cit.

34. A. T. Nwaubani, "The Women Rescued from Boko Haram Who Are Returning to Their Captors", *The New Yorker*, December 20, 2018, available at: www.newyorker.com [accessed 10/09/2023].

35. E. Lo Iacono, "Victims, Sex Workers and Perpetrators: Gray Areas in the Trafficking of Nigerian Women", *Trends in Organized Crime*, *17*(1), 2014, pp. 110-128.

36. M. Bloom and H. Matfess, "Women as Symbols and Swords in Boko Haram's Terror", op. cit., p. 113.

fighters in the urban guerrilla warfare.[37] Adeyanju (2020) argues that the depletion of Boko Haram's male fighters is driving Boko Haram's forceful conscription and deployment of women.[38] Some Boko Haram scholars have asserted that Boko Haram's violence against women mirrors northern Nigeria's patriarchal society and gendered culture that subjugates women.[39] However, not all Islamist groups in northern Nigeria mistreat women. For instance, unlike Boko Haram which embraces the Salafi-Jihadist position, the Izala Society or Jama'atu Izalatil Bid'ah Wa Iqamatus Sunnah (Society of Removal of Innovation and Re-establishment of the Sunnah), which is similar only to Boko Haram in their shared Salafist orientation, accommodates the Nigerian secular state including promoting women's participation in education and democratic practices.

Women's participation in other selected case studies (OPC, MASSOB, IPOB, CJTF)

Women have also played central roles in other kinds of conflict groups, such as Oodua People's Congress (OPC), a vigilante group operational in southwest Nigeria, secessionist groups in the southeast including the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), a pro-government civilian-led counterinsurgent organization.[40] Although these groups are often male-dominated and may be perceived as threatening women's security, they also open space for female agency. For instance, in southwest Nigeria, women occupied vital positions and performed critical roles in shaping and performing the activities of OPC.[41] All the other groups also have women's wings. For example, in 2021, Amotekun recruited scores

37. J. Zenn and E. Pearson, "Women, Gender, and the Evolving Tactics of Boko Haram", *Contemporary Voices: St Andrews Journal of International Relations*, *5*(1), 2014; M. Bloom and H. Matfess, "Women as Symbols and Swords in Boko Haram's Terror", op. cit.

38. C. G. Adeyanju, "The Gender-based Violence as an Instrument of Warfare in Armed Conflicts", *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs*, *6*(2), 2020, pp. 57-70.

39. T. Oriola, "The Delta Creeks, Women's Engagement and Nigeria's Oil Insurgency", op. cit.; B. Maiangwa and D. Agbiboa, "Why Boko Haram Kidnaps Women and Young Girls in North-eastern Nigeria", *Conflict Trends*, *2014*(3), 2014, pp. 51-56; M. Bloom and H. Matfess, "Women as Symbols and Swords in Boko Haram's Terror", op. cit.; C. G. Adeyanju, "The Gender-based Violence as an Instrument of Warfare in Armed Conflicts", op. cit.

40. OPC is a pan-Yoruba socio-political organization established in 1994 primarily to fight for the restoration of the Yoruba mandate that was denied following the annulment of the election victory of Moshood Abiola Kashimawo by military ruler Ibrahim Babangida. OPC was instrumental to the security architecture of the southwest in the early years of the Fourth Republic. A new structure, Amotekun was created in 2020. MASSOB and IPOB are pro-Biafra secessionist groups established in 1999 and 2012 , respectively, that are seeking the restoration of the defunct Biafran state, which is an independent Igbo nation. IPOB was proscribed in 2017 as a terrorist organization. CJTF is a vigilante group established in 2013 and comprising Northeast youths fighting against terrorist attacks from Boko Haram and the collective punishment from the Nigerian army. CJTF has since been integrated into Nigeria's counterinsurgency operations and has been instrumental to some of the successes recorded by the Nigerian army.

41. I. Nolte, "Without Women, Nothing Can Succeed: Yoruba Women in the O'Odua People's Congress (OPC), Nigeria", *Africa*, *78*(1), 2008, pp. 84-106.

of women in Osun State. On 17th August 2018, the Nigerian police arrested 114 IPOB women who were protesting the strange disappearance of Nnamdi Kanu,[42] the IPOB leader. In September 2021, IPOB women in London protested his recent arrest. Considering the increasing use of females by Boko Haram, CJTF, a local pro-government vigilante group that was primarily constituted to combat Boko Haram's threat, started recruiting women to assist in gathering information and confronting Boko Haram female suspects. In 2017, CJTF had up to 100 women responsible for reconnaissance, intelligence gathering, searching of women in public places and arresting female Boko Haram members.[43]

The women's wings of these groups often operate at the fringe of the male-dominated main group, and the percentage of female aggressors in these conflicts is usually very low. For example, out of the 302 OPC members detained in Lagos in 2000 for violent encounters with the police, only three percent were women.[44] Nonetheless, the evidence shows that beyond the soft contributions, including providing intelligence, moral guidance, and spiritual protection, women also actively participate in the group's violent operations. The few women who can transcend their peripheral roles often show a willingness to engage in ruthless violence as the price of transcending the confinement of marginality that describes the position of most female actors in armed conflicts. Kemi Okenyodo describes those women as being "more aggressive and more vicious [needing] to use violence to negotiate power, to negotiate relevance".

Undoubtedly, women do have agency. They can demonstrate tactical deployment of violence, which is the perpetration of aggression for survival's sake or coerced to partake in violent acts, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, apply violence deliberately for strategic gain.[45] For example, many of the Boko Haram commanders' wives who are returning to the Boko Haram fold, as described above, are partly motivated by the power and privileges that they enjoyed as commanders' wives, regardless of the price that they have to pay, including deployment of violence. In their comparison of the Civil Wars in Nigeria, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, Mama and Okazawa-Rey (2012) find more evidence of females actively involved in the production of violence in Liberia and Sierra Leone than in Nigeria. Women also played critical combative roles in West African civil wars in Sierra Leone and Cote

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42. On August 17, 2018, over 100 women were arrested in Imo State for protesting the arrest of Kanu, the leader of IPOB. The women were charged with treasonable felony and terrorism and detained by the magistrate court. Their arrest and detention sparked several campaigns for their freedom by Amnesty International and other civil society groups using various means including the #FreeIPOBWomen Twitter hashtag.
43. "The Role of Women in Countering Violent Extremism: The Nigerian Experience with Boko Haram", Relief Web, 2017, available at: https://reliefweb.int.
44. I. Nolte, "Without Women, Nothing Can Succeed", op. cit.
45. A. Mama and M. Okazawa-Rey, "Militarism, Conflict and Women's Activism in the Global Era: Challenges and Prospects for Women in Three West African Contexts", *Feminist Review*, *101*(1), 2012, pp. 97-123.

d'Ivoire.[46] Although men remain the dominant actors and perpetrators of aggression in the theatre of armed conflicts, the pervasive gender dichotomy that presents men as combatants, life-takers, and warmongers and women as non-combatant, life-givers, and peacemakers does not adequately capture the reality of gender roles in armed conflicts.

Some of the strategic gains for women's participation in the production of violence can include the leverage to negotiate better positions in the post-conflict era. For instance, some scholars have hinted that women's involvement in armed conflicts may strategically benefit them and account for the increasing leadership roles that women attain in many of Africa's post-conflict states.[47] For example, active involvement in wars and conflicts can be transformative and beneficial to women as they create opportunities for the inclusion of women in post-conflict societies. This is not evident in Nigeria beyond the fact that women who willingly join Boko Haram, for instance, may have joined for their own survival, besides other practical considerations. The absence of governance, state protection, and economic opportunities in the northeastern region may have pushed some women to participate in Boko Haram in exchange for protection. Other scholars maintain a contrary view, seeing conflict as detrimental to women's interests as it dims the prospect of democratization, social justice, and genuine security.[48] It is evident in the Nigerian case that there is no immediate link between women's mobilization in armed conflicts and their representation in government positions. For example, women that participated in the Niger Delta and Boko Haram insurgency were excluded from post-conflict amnesty and reward packages.

46. A. Badmus, "Explaining Women's Roles in the West African Tragic Triplet", op. cit.

47. M. M. Hughes and A. M. Tripp, "Civil War and Trajectories of Change in Women's Political Representation in Africa, 1985–2010", op. cit.; M. M. Hughes, "Armed Conflict, International Linkages, and Women's Parliamentary Representation in Developing Nations", op. cit.; K. Webster, C. Chen and K. Beardsley, "Conflict, Peace, and the Evolution of Women's Empowerment", op. cit.

48. A. Mama and M. Okazawa-Rey, "Militarism, Conflict and Women's Activism in the Global Era", op. cit.

Nigerian women in security leadership positions

Understanding women's role in social movements and armed conflicts is essential in designing and applying an effective policy response. For instance, knowing that women play a significant role in armed conflicts should encourage the election of more women into security leadership positions and their recruitment into peacebuilding missions and other security architecture. However, "women are underrepresented at all levels of decision-making worldwide".[49] The situation is far dire in Nigeria, where only about eight percent of women occupy ministerial positions, compared to Rwanda (51.9%), South Africa (48.6%), Ethiopia (47.6%), and Seychelles (45.5%).[50] Women in Nigeria are underrepresented in leadership, political and decision-making positions, despite constituting half of the population. For example, as of 2019, women in Nigeria's national parliament (including the Senate and House of Representatives) constituted a meager six percent. There were 29 women in both Houses compared to 440 men.[51] The number of females in the 2023 elections represents 8.9 percent. Of the 4,259 contestants for the presidential and parliamentary positions, 381 were women, and out of the 416 Governorship candidates in about 28 states, 25 were women. Nigeria has produced neither a woman president nor a female governor of a state. Increasing the number of women in legislative positions and improving the ratio of female-to-male higher education attainment could be crucial to reducing intrastate conflicts.[52] Unfortunately, there are still gender biases in Nigeria that are rooted in cultural and religious codes that define gender positions and roles. Other inhibitions include lack of economic power, low-level education, lack of capacity, the overly

49. " Facts and Figures: Women's Leadership and Political Participation", UN Women, 2023, available at: www.unwomen.org.

50. Z. Musau, "African Women in Politics: Miles to Go Before Parity Is Achieved", United Nations, April 8, 2019, available at: www.un.org.

51. "Gender Representation in National Parliament in Nigeria 1993-2019", Statista, December 12, 2022, available at: www.statista.com; see also D. T. Agbalajobi, "Women's Participation and the Political Process in Nigeria: Problems and Prospects", *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, *4*(2), 2010, pp. 75-82; C. O. Ngara and A. T. Ayabam, "Women in Politics and Decision-making in Nigeria: Challenges and Prospects", *European Journal of Business and Social Sciences*, *2*(8), 2013, pp. 47-58.

52. E. Melander, "Gender Equality and Intrastate Armed Conflict", *International Studies Quarterly*, *49*(4), 2005, pp. 695-714.

competitive, money-driven, and violent political arena, and Nigeria's profoundly patriarchal culture.[53]

However, since the return to democratic government in 1999, Nigeria has made great strides in improving gender relations and creating an enabling environment for women to participate fully in every sector, including the military. In the military, for instance, women have, since 2011, been able to enroll in combative roles and previously male-exclusive corps such as the Nigerian Defence Academy. This opportunity has accelerated women's ascent to leadership positions within the obviously patriarchal military institution. There has been a slight increase in the number of female military personnel from six percent in 2006 to ten percent in 2021.[54] The increased prospect of more senior-ranking female officers means that decisions concerning women and gender in general can be addressed appropriately. More so, the increased number of female military personnel, in general, would help respond to the changing dynamics of modern warfare, particularly the increasing use of women and girls by insurgent groups like Boko Haram to perpetrate acts of violence. The increasing gendered nature of armed conflict in Nigeria, with groups such as Boko Haram increasingly deploying women in their acts of terror against the state and the general populace, requires a shift in policy. This can manifest at three levels of engagement. First, the state and other relevant stakeholders should provide economic and educational opportunities for girls and women that would improve their livelihood and discourage their mobilization into armed conflicts. Secondly, Nigeria would need a legislative provision that makes a significant percentage of leadership positions for women mandatory, particularly in the areas of peace and security. Thirdly, more women should be recruited into the country's army and other security outfits. This would bring Nigeria up to speed with many countries where more "women are taking up arms as members of the armed forces".[55] Nigeria would, however, need to increase the number of female operatives beyond its current 10 percent. Therefore, the military's commitment in its Gender Policy of 2021 to achieving the 35 percent stipulated in the National Gender Policy for women to participate in all governance and decision-making processes in all sectors, including the military, is a welcome development.

Despite adopting gender policy in virtually all sectors of the economy, progress towards attaining gender equality is very slow. It seems it will take a long time (if ever possible) before gender equality is realized. To overcome

53. I. A. Badmus, "Explaining Women's Roles in the West African Tragic Triplet", op. cit.; D. T. Agbalajobi, "Women's Participation and the Political Process in Nigeria", op. cit.; C. O. Ngara and A. T. Ayabam, "Women in Politics and Decision-making in Nigeria, op. cit.; O. Oloyede, "Monitoring Participation of Women in Politics in Nigeria", National Bureau of Statistics, Abuja: Nigeria, 2015, available at: https://unstats.un.org; G. K. Garba, "Building Women's Capacity for Peacebuilding in Nigeria", *Review of History and Political Science*, January 2016.
54. M. Nwankpa, *Nigeria's Fourth Republic, 1999-2021*, op. cit.
55. C. Lindsey, "Women and War", op. cit., p. 561; M. D. Sankey, "Women and War in the 21st Century", op. cit.

the challenges to the attainment of gender parity, Nigeria would have to make "a deliberate policy [that] makes it possible for women to participate", according to Major-General Amusu. The deliberate policy may take the form of constitutional and legislative measures involving introducing a quota system at all levels of government that promotes equitable representation of women).[56] For instance, countries like Rwanda and South Africa, with high levels of women's political participation, have taken affirmative actions, including constitutional directives that mandate reserving at least 30 percent of parliamentary seats for women. Nigeria's overwhelmingly male-dominated National Assembly has rejected the Gender Equality Opportunities bill that makes such provisions, citing religious and cultural reasons that sadly subjugate women. The Gender Equality Opportunities Bill promises several guarantees to women, including rights of women to equal opportunities in employment, rights to inheritance, equal rights for women in marriage and divorce, and equal rights to education, property, and land ownership. Creating an enabling environment through access to education, economic empowerment and increased women's participation in politics and leadership positions can help mitigate against women's violent mobilization.

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56. C. O. Ogbogu, "The Role of Women in Politics and in the Sustenance of Democracy in Nigeria", *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, *3*(18), 2012; A. O. Olufade, "Nigerian Women, Politics and the National Identity Question", *African Educational Research Journal*, *1*(3), 2013, pp. 161-170; O. Oloyede, "Monitoring Participation of Women in Politics in Nigeria", op. cit.

Conclusion

The paper concludes that although women are, in most cases, victims of armed conflict in Nigeria, they can also be perpetrators of violence. This much was proven by the Boko Haram insurgency, where women have played significant roles in the upswing of terrorist acts in the last decade. To some extent, the women used by Boko Haram to perpetrate acts of violence, including suicide bombers, are likely to have been coerced and manipulated. Boko Haram has abducted thousands of girls and women who are indoctrinated, trained in acts of terror, and forced to perpetrate violence.[57] Many other women have also joined Boko Haram willfully. For some of these women, joining Boko Haram may be a better option than an absentee and/or coercive state. There is a palpable absence of government and governance in many of the places where Boko Haram operates. More so, the Nigerian military's heavy-handed response to the insurgency appears to have been counterproductive. In other cases, including the Niger Delta insurgency, the active involvement of women in combative roles is undeniable. However, it is difficult to fully establish the widespread use of violence by women. Nonetheless, it is essential to recognize female agency in the production and sustenance of violence, as this will aid proper legislative and policy response.

Women are rightfully categorized as victims of armed conflicts. However, denying female agency excludes women from benefitting from critical post-conflict intervention programs and rewards. For instance, the resolution of the Boko Haram insurgency and rebuilding of the conflict-ravaged northeast Nigeria demands an integrative gender approach. Women will be relevant in the design and implementation of such policy. It is, therefore, crucial that the capacity of women, particularly in northern Nigeria, is improved to take on the task of conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Nigeria already has significant legislative and policy frameworks that increase the prospect of improved women's engagement in peacebuilding in Nigeria. However, the number of women in decision-making positions remains insignificant. The challenge lies with implementation. Nigeria would have to take decisive affirmative action to increase the number of women in parliamentary and other important political positions. Passing the Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill into law would be one step in the right direction. However, including women based on their perceived naturally peaceful nature that inclines them to pursue a non-violent method is fundamentally flawed. Women can be as violent as men. It is, therefore, simplistic to present women as non-combatants, life-

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57. "Boko Haram: 2000 Women and Girls Abducted: Many Forced to Join Attacks", Amnesty International, 2015, available at: www.amnesty.org.uk.
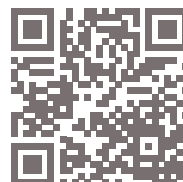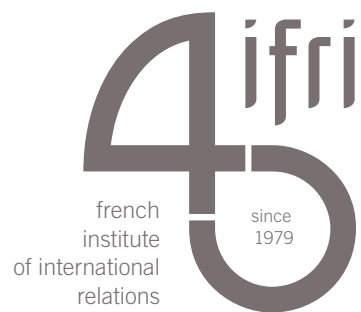
givers, and peacemakers, while men are seen as combatants, life-takers, and warmongers. Such representation misrepresents the reality of gender roles in armed conflicts. Women's participation should, therefore, be based on their equality with men rather than "based on women's utility to peace"[58]. Globally, although there has been an improvement in women's participation in politics and high-level decision-making positions, women are still underrepresented. In Nigeria and many African countries' patriarchal societies, achieving gender equality would be an uphill task.

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58. H. Charlesworth, "Are Women Peaceful?", op. cit.

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