



Returning from the Land of Jihad: The Fate of Women Associated with Boko Haram

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Principal Findings

What's new? The Nigerian military's battle with Boko Haram has led tens of thousands of women formerly associated with the group to return to government-held towns across the north east. While prejudice against them has waned, many women remain ostracised and exposed to abuse.

Why does it matter? The successful reintegration of former Boko Haram women can send a powerful signal to their fighter husbands, some of whom are eyeing the possibility of their own surrender. Conversely, their mistreatment could not only dissuade men from demobilising but also prompt women to return to the insurgents' ranks.

What should be done? The Nigerian government should better protect women returnees from sexual and other abuse; give them and communities greater say in their resettlement; avoid aid that targets only Boko Haram-linked women and provokes social discord; and increase funding for the north east's development, particularly for the education critical to its recovery.

Executive Summary

The return of women formerly affiliated with the Boko Haram insurgency to areas under the government's control is a challenge for Nigeria's authorities. Since 2015, tens of thousands have fled the group or been captured or rescued by the army. After varying degrees of screening and reintegration support, they live among civilians scarred by the conflict. Many initially faced intense stigma, regardless of their actual commitment to jihadism. That stigma has somewhat subsided as more returnees have arrived, but most former Boko Haram women still suffer ostracism and higher risks of sexual abuse and privation than other displaced women. Their hardship is a humanitarian concern but also could fuel the conflict: either because they could return to Boko Haram, thus boosting morale and supporting military operations; or because their plight could deter male insurgents inclined to demobilise from doing so. The authorities and aid groups should better protect returnees from abuses, give women and communities more of a say in their resettlement and ensure that aid to women does not provoke a backlash.

Conventional narratives about women and Boko Haram can mislead. Many women were abducted, like the girls from Chibok whose kidnapping by the militants provoked outrage in Nigeria and abroad. But others joined voluntarily. Some endured terrible abuse while with the group, while others found a sense of fulfilment or belonging. Apart from female suicide bombers, of whom there are fewer today, most women in Boko Haram committed no act of violence themselves, even if many were complicit in spying, recruitment or coercing other women. Many lived with the militants in fear, but nonetheless enjoyed a reliable food supply, religious education and basic services, including – particularly for those of privileged status – health care. These experiences shaped their expectations of what the state should provide on their return.

Many women associated with Boko Haram suffer considerable hardship on leaving. Their paths out of the insurgency have varied, ranging from escape or rescue to capture or surrender. But whatever their means of departure – and, indeed, no matter whether they were slaves or married to fighters – their life in proximity to the jihadists means that many fellow citizens perceive them as tainted by association. The overt hostility such women encountered in 2015 is waning. But they remain ostracised, their position precarious: unattractive on the marriage market, rejected by relatives, shunned at social gatherings and – without male partners – vulnerable to assault.

The Nigerian authorities' response has evolved since 2015, when the only alternative to military detention was a small, costly reintegration program. The state now sends women back to civilian life faster, sometimes even forgoing screening (assessment by the authorities as to the danger they pose). Women may thus miss the chance of receiving counselling or other types of support, but they also spend less time in the hands of security forces or allied vigilantes and militias, which appears to have lessened the scale of abuse that returnees endured in earlier years. Lobbied by human rights groups, the authorities also have taken steps to reduce abuses, while the profusion of humanitarian actors in Borno state has meant greater oversight over

the security forces. Nonetheless, sexual exploitation persists: rape still occurs, and many women find themselves forced into “survival sex”, the exchange of sex for protection or resources.

The plight of female returnees is not only a humanitarian concern; if not rectified, it could hinder efforts to end the conflict. Flawed reintegration could force more women to return to the insurgents. Women are a boon to both Boko Haram factions (the group split in 2016) as they can play important support roles for men. Conversely, women who leave Boko Haram could help de-escalate fighting. Their return home could be a litmus test for male fighters, whose defection and reintegration into society is crucial to ending the insurgency. Indeed, in some instances male fighters appear to have explicitly charged wives or sisters to leave and explore prospects for their own demobilisation. If returnee women report fair treatment, they may convince disillusioned insurgents to leave Boko Haram’s ranks.

The federal government, together with authorities in the north-eastern states, in particular Borno, the hardest-hit, should take the following steps:

- ❑ **End abuses.** The military’s screening of women emerging from Boko Haram should be professionalised, with clear, standardised assessment criteria and a civilian state body, such as the National Human Rights Commission, providing oversight and minimising the likelihood of mistreatment. Borno state’s State Emergency Management Agency should work with the police, army and Civilian Joint Task Force to shield women from abuse, including by their own staff. They should raise awareness of the seriousness of both rape and sexual exploitation driven by women’s vulnerability, working to create a culture of accountability.
- ❑ **Give women returnees a say in where they resettle.** Given continued prejudice, some women may prefer to relocate far from their original homes. The authorities also should give communities in which women will settle the opportunity to voice concerns and discuss how those concerns can be met.
- ❑ **Ensure that aid distribution avoids backlash.** Aid providers should avoid targeting only former Boko Haram women, which can stoke resentment among other displaced people or within communities where such women resettle. Moreover, given that many in the north east see programs that empower women as neglectful of men, aid providers should continue to ensure they do not pass over unmarried young men and elderly men when distributing food, as has happened in the past.
- ❑ **Allocate more money for the internally displaced, including women returnees, and for regional development more broadly.** In 2019, according to the UN, 7.1 million people (2.3 million girls, 1.9 million boys, 1.6 million women and 1.3 million men) in north-eastern Nigeria relied on humanitarian aid. Local authorities badly need funds to meet their needs. Particularly important are funds for education, which returnees value and are critical to the north east’s recovery.

These measures in themselves will not end the crisis in Nigeria’s north east. As a recent Crisis Group report on one Boko Haram faction, now calling itself the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), details, doing so requires President Muham-

madu Buhari's government to look beyond the military campaign, step up efforts to fill gaps in its provision of basic services that militants increasingly exploit to win support, while avoiding tactics that risk harming civilians. But by helping women who have left Boko Haram return to civilian life in safety and dignity, the authorities can lower risks that those women return to the insurgents' ranks and potentially encourage further demobilisation, including among male militants. Increasing support for people displaced by the conflict and more generally for the north east's development can help repair the frayed relations between state and society in north-eastern Nigeria that have fuelled the insurgency.

Abuja/Dakar/Brussels, 21 May 2019

This report focuses exclusively on women associated with Boko Haram who have returned, voluntarily or through military operations, to civilian areas and camps for the internally displaced in Maiduguri state, as well as other local government areas. Because the full and most precise descriptive term for such women – “women associated with Boko Haram” – is cumbersome in such a long report, we have used “returnees” as shorthand. As we hope the report shows, the complexity of this group defies neat description. Some of the women associated with Boko Haram have suffered abuse, and are survivor returnees; some have rejected the group, and are genuinely “formerly associated”; others remained devoted, even if physically delinked from the group, so they are “associates” and “returnees”, at the same time. We are aware that the term “returnee” normally connotes conventional civilian IDPs, rather than those returning from armed groups. But for the purposes of this report, which also highlights the pervasiveness of stigma, it carries a less pejorative tone than “Boko Haram women”, a phrase that also elides the distinctions among the women themselves. Hence we use the term “returnee” throughout, with all the above caveats.

Returning from the Land of Jihad: The Fate of Women Associated with Boko Haram

I. Introduction

Boko Haram, the jihadist insurgency roiling north-eastern Nigeria since 2009, is back on the offensive.¹ In 2015, the Nigerian military, with the backing of neighbouring countries (Cameroon, Chad and Niger), began mounting a better coordinated campaign and recaptured much of the territory held by the insurgents. But having split in two in 2016, Boko Haram has regained momentum over the past year. One faction, now calling itself the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), has won a string of battles against the Nigerian army. It is building a proto-state on the banks and islands of Lake Chad, filling gaps in service delivery to cultivate civilian support. The second faction, run by Boko Haram's former leader, Abubakar Shekau, and based mostly in the Sambisa forest and along the Nigeria-Cameroon border, has also scored some recent military successes.² A number of towns and villages continue to be wrested back and forth between military and insurgent control. A decade in, the conflict appears unlikely to end any time soon.

Despite its uneven results, the government's military campaign has produced a stream of returnees from Boko Haram, mostly women and girls, to hometowns and internally displaced person (IDP) camps.³ At first these women found return very difficult. They were feared as potential terrorists, since Boko Haram had employed women as suicide bombers. They faced intense stigma, particularly if they had given birth to "Boko Haram children", namely children fathered by jihadists.⁴ In 2015, the stigma was so great that aid groups and local NGOs witnessed cases of infanticide: mothers felt their babies stood no chance at social acceptance.⁵

¹ Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°120, *Boko Haram on the Back Foot?*, 4 May 2016.

² Crisis Group Africa Report, *Nigeria: Coming to Terms with the Islamic State in West Africa Province*, forthcoming. See also "Islamic State ally stakes out territory around Lake Chad", Reuters, 30 April 2018; as well as Omar Mahmood and Christian Nduibuisi, "Factional Dynamics within Boko Haram", Institute of Security Studies, 6 July 2018. The faction led by Shekau has gone back to Boko Haram's original name, *Jama'tu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad* (People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad). On its renewed activities, see "Thousands flee north-east Nigeria after devastating Boko Haram attack", *The Guardian*, 17 January 2019. Supporters reject the Hausa name Boko Haram (generally translated as "Western education is forbidden"), a derisive epithet coined by Salafi critics. But given the term's wide recognition, this report uses it to refer to the group before the 2016 split and to denote the two factions together.

³ The notion of returnees employed in this report differs from the one that providers of humanitarian aid use. To humanitarian workers, it designates refugees or IDPs who return home. In this report, the term "returnees" applies strictly to those who, for one reason or another, return from places under Boko Haram control to government-controlled areas. This report also refers frequently to women or female returnees, a category which often includes girls under eighteen. In north-eastern Nigeria, marriage just after puberty is prevalent, and women themselves rarely make a sharp distinction between adolescent girls and older women.

⁴ "Bad Blood", UNICEF and International Alert, February 2017.

⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Maiduguri, December 2018.

Such stigma appears to have diminished but women associated with Boko Haram still feel the sting of social rejection. As ever larger numbers return, the hostility from state and society such women initially encountered has been replaced by a grudging tolerance. Moreover, both ISWAP and Shekau's faction focus on military targets, so now send fewer women to stage suicide attacks that kill civilians, meaning the stereotype of the female suicide bomber has lost some of its currency. The opprobrium attached to bearing militants' children has also waned. But many women and girls remain ostracised and dread maltreatment. Though data is insufficient to establish the scale of the trend, some have opted to go back to Boko Haram.

This report looks at the lives of Boko Haram-linked women in IDP camps and other state-controlled locales in north-eastern Nigeria and offers suggestions for easing their predicament. It is based on field research carried out in Nigeria's federal capital Abuja and in Maiduguri, capital of Borno state, in March, October and December 2018. It incorporates the views of Nigerian civil society organisations, including women's groups, canvassed at an October workshop held in Maiduguri. Interviewees included Boko Haram-affiliated women living in Maiduguri and others living elsewhere in Borno state (arrangements were made to bring them to the state capital), as well as international humanitarian workers, Nigerian government officials, humanitarian agency officers and former diplomats, soldiers and security experts.

II. Many Reasons to Join, Many Ways to Leave

A. Variety of Affiliations

The story of the Chibok girls has long dominated discussions about women and Boko Haram. The insurgents abducted the 276 college girls in 2014, turning them into a global cause célèbre and feeding the notion that most women who interact with the group do so against their will. Many women and girls were indeed captured in raids or inducted into Boko Haram under threat and coercion, and some endured horrific abuse. But as Crisis Group and others have shown, many also have joined Boko Haram voluntarily.⁶ Some have done so with family members' encouragement. Others have simply followed a male family member – a husband, father or brother – or joined to escape arranged marriages. For most women, motives have been a mix of agency and duress, all of which should be viewed through the prism of government neglect and entrenched patriarchy in the north east. Moreover, even among those captured in raids or coerced, some have found belonging and purpose.⁷

Women's roles and status in the insurgency vary. Some are wives and housekeepers, but many also serve a variety of support roles, including propaganda, trade, logistics and intelligence gathering. With the notable exception of the suicide bombings for which Boko Haram gained notoriety by repeatedly employing girls and women, women associated with the group have rarely been directly involved in combat or perpetrating violence.⁸ Women's status reflects their partners' seniority and level of ideological commitment. Wives of committed members and fighters, the *rijal* ("men" in Arabic), enjoyed considerable privilege. Women in families willing to live under the group but not to commit to it were *awam* ("commoners" in Arabic) subject to taxation and often hard labour. Some captured women as well as men were slaves obliged to work in *rijal* households.

The variety of roles and degrees of affiliation are important background for understanding the expectations of women returnees and the perceptions of others about them. Even women who left the group of their own volition tend to have higher expectations of civilian life under state authorities than they might have had previously, due to their time with the militants. Returnees often say the Nigerian government comes up short in comparison to Boko Haram, providing less security and education and fewer other services. Many women do say they are relieved to have left, despite the harsh conditions in the camps where they now live. Still, many, even some

⁶ Crisis Group Africa Report N°242, *Nigeria: Women and the Boko Haram Insurgency*, 5 December 2016. See also Hilary Matfess, *Women and the War on Boko Haram: Wives, Weapons, Witnesses* (Chicago, 2017).

⁷ See, for instance, the women discussed in Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, "The women rescued from Boko Haram who are returning to their captors", *The New Yorker*, 20 December 2018.

⁸ A number of women volunteered for suicide bombings as a ruse to escape the group and then surrendered to the military without detonating the explosives. Crisis Group interviews, Maiduguri, October and December 2018. See also "Boko Haram strapped suicide bombs to them. Somehow these teenage girls survived", *The New York Times*, 25 October 2017.

whom Boko Haram forced to join, feel that they gained opportunities and a sense of empowerment through association with the group.⁹

Many women in Nigeria's north east, where patriarchy runs deep and under-development is acute, saw in Boko Haram a means of access to education (in the form of Quranic teaching), public space (during religious gatherings), and both general and reproductive medical care, sometimes for the first time. The most privileged among them, the wives of the *rijal*, were spared some or all of the harsh labour demands usually placed on women, particularly in rural areas, thanks to the recourse to *awam* or slaves. For them in particular, food tended to be plentiful, largely thanks to Boko Haram's plunder of non-affiliated communities.¹⁰

For its women members, Boko Haram thus brought both exploitation and opportunity. Many women, including girls as young as twelve, were forced into marriage, sometimes under threat of death, and subsequently subjected to marital rape. But for many others, and even to some of the former, Boko Haram also offered a decent standard of living relative to that they had previously experienced. While many abducted women were coerced into sexual relations with husbands Boko Haram pressed on them, once married they were protected from rape or sexual abuse by others, whether authority figures or strangers.¹¹ Moreover, Boko Haram's interpretations of Islamic law upheld some of the rights of wives vis-à-vis their husbands. Indeed, some women interviewed by Crisis Group say they filed for divorce in Boko Haram's courts when they judged that their husbands – *awam* and *rijal* alike – were not fulfilling their obligations.¹²

Somewhat counter-intuitively, given Boko Haram's infamous hatred of Nigerian state-run education, Boko Haram also met the aspirations of some of its female associates regarding access to education. Many returnees express disappointment that their children have no access to schooling where they live now, whether religion education, which Boko Haram provided, or a basic state curriculum. They recognise that such education is important for their children's social betterment.¹³

Overall, therefore, women's reasons for joining the insurgency and their experience within it are varied and complex. Research on Boko Haram tends to cast the decision to join as either a matter of survival or a rebellion against patriarchy. Yet neither characterisation fully captures the interplay of state corruption and neglect, the stunted aspirations of women in the male-dominated north east, and the space afforded by a militant movement that was seen by many as brutal and predatory but by others as offering justice and empowerment.

⁹ "We Were Changing the World": Radicalization and Empowerment among Young People Associated with Armed Opposition Groups in Northeast Nigeria", Equal Access, October 2018.

¹⁰ ISWAP seems generally less predatory in its treatment of civilians, though there are reports of onerous taxation and kidnapping for ransom. See Crisis Group Report, *Nigeria: Coming to Terms with the Islamic State in West Africa Province*, op. cit.

¹¹ Crisis Group interview, representative of local NGO working on gender issues, Abuja, January 2019. A recent study by a local woman's NGO in Maiduguri noted that "violent abuses against women are relentless, systematic and widely tolerated, if not explicitly condoned". "Study on the Perception of IDPs on Violence against Women and Girls in Some Host Communities in Borno State", Gender Equality, Peace and Development Centre, 2018, p. 1.

¹² Crisis Group interviews, Maiduguri, December 2018.

¹³ Crisis Group interviews, Maiduguri, December 2018.

B. *Variety of Returns*

The influx of women returning from Boko Haram began with the Nigerian counter-offensive of 2015, when areas that Boko Haram had held for months or years began falling back under government control. The military and associated vigilantes captured many of these women, while others escaped amid the chaos of fighting between the army and militants. The army has transferred most such women to sites in Maiduguri, or to one of the two dozen towns that it reconquered and has been using to host displaced civilians in areas still threatened by Boko Haram in Borno state (known locally as “garrison towns”).

The returnees number at the very least in the tens of thousands – in 2016 alone, the army said it had brought more than 12,000 people back from Boko Haram areas – and seem to be predominantly women and children. Official accounts of army operations mention only minorities of male survivors (less than 20 per cent of the adult survivors in 2016, for instance), whether captured Boko Haram fighters or liberated *awam* or slaves.¹⁴ Many returnee women suspect that males found in combat zones are either executed or detained, often indefinitely and incognito, in military prisons, and human rights NGOs and other researchers have documented certain cases (the army denies such abuse).¹⁵

Some women are accidental returnees, finding themselves stuck in government-controlled areas while travelling to trade or get treatment for themselves or their children. Others are caught up in the insurgency’s factional split: some whose husbands left the Shekau faction to join ISWAP are biding their time in camps, waiting to see if their husbands settle in one place, so they can join them.¹⁶ Finally, some work as scouts for men, sent to query the military or humanitarian workers as to whether they could guarantee the men’s safety, were they to surrender.¹⁷

A further flood of returns likely lies ahead. ISWAP’s expansion in 2018 has brought thousands more civilians under the militants’ control. In early 2019, more than 800,000 people reportedly lived in what are euphemistically called “hard-to-reach areas” – places where state authority is absent and Boko Haram influential.¹⁸ Many women in these areas are not directly associated with the insurgency, but assuming at least some of such areas are recaptured from militants, the state will suspect many of having joined.

¹⁴ According to its Facebook page, the Nigerian army brought back 12,331 persons from Boko Haram areas in 2016. Gender and age breakdowns are available for only 663: 71 men, 261 women and 331 children.

¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, wives of disappeared men suspected of Boko Haram involvement, Maiduguri, December 2018. See also “Assaulted by Boko Haram, raped by soldiers – the story of Nigerian women”, TRT World, 20 July 2018; “Nigerian military rejects Amnesty International report”, Voice of America, 3 June 2015; “Nigeria: Interminable Insurgency?”, Chatham House, September 2014, pp. 15-17.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, IDPs, Maiduguri, December 2018.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian workers, Maiduguri and Abuja, December 2018.

¹⁸ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Humanitarian Response strategy, January 2019, p. 22: “an estimated 823,000 people [who] remain hard to reach by humanitarian actors”.

III. The Authorities' Response: Improvement by Default?

A. First Encounters

Women have felt the war's effects since its beginning. In 2009, at the outset of the insurrection in Maiduguri, the state detained many wives and other female relatives of militants in the city's jails and military barracks for questioning or as a punitive measure. Boko Haram leaders actually said they began kidnapping civilian women in retaliation, with the aim of securing their relatives' release.¹⁹ When the returns began in 2015, the military interned hundreds of women at Giwa Barracks, the main army-run prison in Maiduguri, for months on end. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have documented the dire conditions of detention, including sexual abuse by soldiers.²⁰ While held at Giwa Barracks, the women underwent interrogation but did not go on trial. The army never made clear what it considered their legal status – material witnesses or militants in their own right – to be.

Members of the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), a vigilante group with many chapters, including in IDP camps, and whose formation the army strongly encouraged, played a key part in screening detainees to assess if they posed a threat. The CJTF members were locals, which meant they assessed women, at least in theory, largely on the basis of the women's past personal and familial associations with Boko Haram.²¹ The army released some women as a result.

The military and civilian authorities, even after having nominally screened the women, were understandably vexed as to how to deal with them, as their affiliations with Boko Haram were enormously diverse. Some had signed up voluntarily; others had not. Some had participated in the insurgency and its abuses; others had not or had themselves suffered abuse. The authorities also began taking notice of human rights organisations' criticisms of how they were treating Boko Haram prisoners, male and female.

The Borno state government experimented in 2016 with a pilot program called the Safe House in Maiduguri. State authorities never formally described the program as a "deradicalisation" effort, preferring the euphemistic term "Safe House" (subsequent efforts discussed below have largely used the term "rehabilitation"). But the safe house program involved a former national security adviser who also helped craft the government's "deradicalisation program".²² The house hosted about 36 women, some with children, in good conditions under guard and removed from surviving adult family members. The cohort was diverse, including women married to both senior and low-ranking fighters. For around sixteen months, all received psychosocial support, skills training, lessons in what the state called "moderate Islam" and therapy designed to make them reject Boko Haram's violence and intolerance. The process involved an assessment by staff of a local NGO, headed by the former national

¹⁹ See Matfess, *op. cit.*, pp. 82-84.

²⁰ "Nigeria: 'If You See It, You Will Cry': Life and Death in Giwa Barracks", Amnesty International, May 2016; "Children Detained as National Security Threats", Human Rights Watch, July 2016.

²¹ On the CJTF, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°244, *Watchmen of Lake Chad: Vigilante Groups Fighting Boko Haram*, 23 February 2017.

²² Nwaubani, "The women rescued ...", *op. cit.*

security adviser, of women along a spectrum of zealotry, based on their responses to or views on predetermined questions.

The project was resource-intensive but ultimately not very successful; fourteen of the 36 women reportedly had returned to the insurgents by the end of 2018.²³ While it is impossible to know what proportion of women outside the Safe House return to militancy, it is striking that a program that offered vastly greater support to women than any other circumstance conceivable, whether in IDP camps, host communities or subsequent programs, did not achieve a better outcome.

Critics in Maiduguri who observed the Safe House experiment said its emphasis on reverse indoctrination was both excessive and misguided.²⁴ The program devoted too little resources and time to training and preparing women to work and support themselves afterward. Instead, it focused closely on seeking to gauge and reverse the women's ideological fervour, often through discussions of religious scripture. One woman who went through the program mentioned that an expert involved did not speak the local language. "He waved the Quran in the air and asked us to name which were the bad passages", she said.²⁵ This approach, which in her eyes insulted scriptural tenets, made her and others distrustful.²⁶ It overlooked the legitimate political and social grievances that underpinned the group's appeal. It seemed to have little traction with the group in part because of its infantilising premise: that women – and indeed other Boko Haram recruits – were blank slates for brainwashing.

Meanwhile, the project made few distinctions among the returnees, reportedly housing *awam* women alongside committed wives of *rijal*. Keeping Boko Haram members in good conditions also sparked hostility in the neighbourhood and among other IDPs.²⁷ This animosity, along with keeping the women in detention, albeit relatively comfortable detention, and apart from their families, made it harder to reintegrate them into society.

B. Reintegration

Following criticism from human rights organisations, Nigerian authorities run a very different process of screening and reintegrating women returnees today. Borno state closed the Safe House, sending the women and children back to their families at home or in IDP camps, and the army reportedly released all women from Giwa Barracks.²⁸ The army has sought to streamline the treatment of female returnees, in order to allow for faster release and a focus on male suspects.

²³ Crisis Group interviews, NGO workers, officials formerly associated with the Safe House and returnees, Maiduguri, December 2018. See also Nwaubani, "The women rescued", op. cit.

²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, NGO workers and officials formerly associated with the Safe House, Maiduguri, December 2018.

²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, NGO workers and women formerly associated with the Safe House, Maiduguri, December 2018.

²⁶ Crisis Group interviews, women formerly associated with the Safe House, Maiduguri, December 2018.

²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, civil society figures and NGO workers, Maiduguri, December 2018.

²⁸ One NGO worker questioned the extent of the release. Crisis Group interview, NGO official, Maiduguri, December 2018.

In 2016, with donor support, the Borno state government repurposed a home for the disabled in Bulumkutu, a Maiduguri district, as a “rehabilitation centre”, known as the Bulumkutu Transit Centre, for women. The women from Giwa Barracks were the first to be sent there. The centre, which has a holding capacity of just over 300, is the only place of its kind in the north east. It is supposed to house women for about three months. It has moved away from the Safe House model, and puts all residents into group therapy run by social workers. It also offers spiritual guidance from religious leaders, delivered in local languages and with a focus on ethics, forgiveness and non-violence. The centre then reconnects women with their families, who often live in IDP camps, and releases them. The centre has hosted many more people than the Safe House – more than 2,000 women and children went through the Bulumkutu Transit Centre from 2016 to December 2018 – but capacity is insufficient for the many thousands who may require its services in the years ahead.²⁹

The centre is not without problems. It can only accommodate so many women at a time, leading, in some instances, to women being sent straight back into camps or communities from Boko Haram areas. In at least one case, the centre cut short its skills training because of pressures to take in more women.³⁰ In another, in October 2018, the army put a number of male ex-insurgents released from its demobilisation program into the centre because their hometown had resisted taking them back. The gender mixing proved problematic as the ex-fighters began to harass the girls and women, and a separate male centre is now close to opening. Also, some women trained in Bulumkutu did not get the follow-up assistance or machinery needed to put their skills, often embroidery or food processing, to work.³¹ Many of these skills training programs are not based on proper market assessment of local demand and end up garnering women negligible income.³² Little provision is made for formal education.³³

In this light, whether creating more centres in Maiduguri and other major towns would make sense is hard to judge. Women associated with Boko Haram, whatever the nature of their ties, say they would benefit from the support such facilities offer. But state agencies and humanitarian groups can also offer counselling, skills training and other kinds of support within IDP camps and communities. What seems more urgent is rectifying the lack of state and federal resources for such programming, wherever it takes place.

Overall, the experiences of the Safe House and Bulumkutu Transit Centre suggest that reintegration programs appear most effective when they involve help to both returnees and ordinary citizens, by offering parallel tracks of support and counselling that prepare both sides to live together again. Civilians who have lost family members, homes and livelihoods to the insurgency need to see that returnees are not simply dropped back into daily life or receive more assistance than they do themselves. For their part, returnees are often traumatised and need assistance and fol-

²⁹ Crisis Group interview, humanitarian official, Maiduguri, December 2018.

³⁰ Crisis Group interview, former resident of Bulumkutu Transit Centre, Maiduguri, December 2018.

³¹ Crisis Group interview, former Bulumkutu resident, Maiduguri, December 2018.

³² Crisis Group interview, returnee women, former Bulumkutu residents, local NGO staff, Maiduguri, December 2018.

³³ Crisis Group interview, government official, Maiduguri, December 2018.

low-up care in coping with their experiences and rebuilding livelihoods through work. Ensuring skills training is based on realistic marketplace assessments is a priority.

For now, the vast majority of women returnees do not go to the Bulumkutu centre and seem to be screened by the military rapidly, in just a few hours, sometimes without questioning, before being transferred to IDP camps in Maiduguri or one of the garrison towns. One avowedly committed female member, the long-time spouse of a Boko Haram militant, was released in this fashion – though whether she herself had committed any crime is unclear (few of the women have).³⁴ Authorities promptly released another equally committed member because she had several children with her and the military officers in charge of screening felt that detaining her would be too complicated.³⁵

Nor do camp authorities or the CJTF spend much, if any, time screening. Occasionally, they will return to the military a woman they believe to be suspect because of her past affiliation or current behaviour. But for the most part, they release women quickly, trusting the military's screening. Several camp officers interviewed by Crisis Group noted that they had not reported a female suspect to the authorities for months, sometimes more than a year.³⁶ The speedier screening, made necessary by the larger caseload, might be letting dangerous people go. On the other hand, by cutting down the time that women spend in detention, it has certainly done a lot to reduce abuses.

C. *Continued Abuses*

Sexual and other abuse of female returnees can occur at almost any phase of a woman's emergence from insurgent territory. Very little is known about capture in the field. Most women interviewed by Crisis Group said soldiers and CJTF members did no more than hurl invective at them. A few mentioned beatings. None mentioned sexual violence.³⁷ Some humanitarian workers, however, think that significant abuse happens at this stage because it is largely unmonitored, despite what the women say.³⁸

More abuse appears to take place later. There are several "gates" at which soldiers or militiamen may exploit women. Armed men control access to passes for leaving the camp, for instance, as well as access to a variety of assistance programs. Confirming reports by human rights and local civil society organisations, a number of women interviewed by Crisis Group reported abuses at the hand of security forces – insults, threats, thefts and various forms of sexual violence. Several noted that the army is now less harsh than the CJTF. Indeed, two women recounted episodes of soldiers intervening to prevent CJTF members from perpetrating abuses. Both incidents occurred when a CJTF man recognised a woman from back home whom he knew to be associated with Boko Haram.³⁹

³⁴ See Matfess, *op. cit.*, pp. 130-135.

³⁵ Crisis Group interview, female returnee, camp authorities, Maiduguri, December 2018.

³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, female returnees, camp authorities, Maiduguri, October and December 2018.

³⁷ Crisis Group interviews, female returnees, Maiduguri, October and December 2018.

³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, female returnees, Maiduguri; humanitarian workers, Maiduguri and Abuja, December 2018.

³⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Maiduguri, December 2018.

Patterns of abuse appear to have evolved. Several sources insist that soldiers have moved from rape to demanding “survival sex” from women and girls, trading sex in exchange for small favours that can make a big difference in the women’s lives.⁴⁰ The few recent rape cases Crisis Group heard about involved the CJTF.⁴¹ Persistent confusion in communities over the CJTF’s role, which spans participation in military operations to community policing, resulting in weaker oversight, may be part of the problem. A desire for revenge may also be at play.⁴² Abuse seems more prevalent in garrison towns than in Maiduguri. In Borno state’s capital, camps have now been in existence for several years and have established populations that know each other and fewer newcomers, making rape – but not survival sex – somewhat less likely. This is not the case in garrison towns nearer to the conflict’s front lines.

D. *Accountability and Protection Dilemmas*

Slowly, returnees are organising to press the government for greater accountability for the security forces’ abuses. One notable effort is the Knifar movement, in which some 230 returnee women living in Maiduguri banded together in 2017 to make public their experiences of abuse at the military’s hands.⁴³ Though both civilian and military authorities vehemently reject allegations of major wrongdoing, the returnees’ efforts, along with pressure from human rights NGOs, notably Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have pushed them to take some action.

Many observers, however, see such action as pro forma. The army, for instance, has produced new manuals on international humanitarian law and detention policies.⁴⁴ But it is unclear how widely it disseminates the texts. According to one expert, an officer can expect to receive only twelve hours of lessons on international humanitarian law in his entire career, training that has improved but remains subpar.⁴⁵ In February 2016, the army set up a human rights desk at its Abuja headquarters, adding a branch office in Maiduguri in October 2018 and assigning officers to each unit in the field who, in addition to their regular duties, are responsible for that unit’s adherence to human rights commitments. The Maiduguri office, however, sits in the middle of the city’s main barracks. Few plaintiffs, let alone women with links to Boko Haram, are likely to feel confident attempting to gain entry.

When the state takes legal action against abusers, it often does not publicise the outcome. In one famous case, in December 2016, soon after Human Rights Watch released a damning report on abuses against IDPs, the police arrested four soldiers,

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, community activists, local NGO leaders and staff, Maiduguri, December 2018.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interviews, returnee women, Maiduguri, December 2018.

⁴² Crisis Group interviews, civil society activists, women returnees, Maiduguri, December 2018.

⁴³ The Knifar movement has also petitioned the government for information about disappeared husbands and children. Thus far, it has collected more than 2,000 additional signatures of women demanding clarity about the fate of 1,269 husbands, sons and daughters.

⁴⁴ Office of the Chief of Army Staff, “Nigerian Army Handbook on Domestic and International Laws Guiding the Conduct of Operations”, December 2017; Chief of Army Staff, “Policy Directive on Arrest, Detention and Interrogation”, April 2018.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview, international humanitarian law expert, Abuja, December 2018.

two policemen, two CJTF members and other officials.⁴⁶ No information is available on their fate. A woman interviewed by Crisis Group likewise reported that a soldier who had raped her in Giwa Barracks was sent to court-martial after another soldier reported his crime. She does not know what has become of the case.⁴⁷ It was encouraging, though still a rarity, to see the media report the dismissal of a junior officer guilty of abusing a teenage female IDP.⁴⁸

The lack of transparency was particularly striking in the case of the Judicial Commission on Armed Forces Compliance with Human Rights, which the government created in August 2017, partly in answer to continuing criticisms of the military's behaviour. It carried out hearings in Maiduguri, in which Knifar movement representatives participated, and other places in Nigeria. It then submitted its report to President Muhammadu Buhari that December. As yet, however, the government has not publicised that report.⁴⁹

In civilian courts, problems mar efforts to hold perpetrators of abuses accountable. Procedures are slow, costly and psychologically humiliating to survivors of abuse.⁵⁰ Legal cases cannot be brought forward without collecting evidence, and often women who are sexually abused do not know that they must avoid bathing to allow for forensic examination.⁵¹ Even when women present themselves at hospitals for evidence collection, doctors can be reluctant to examine them, fearing that the court will summon them to give testimony.⁵² In many rape trials, judges and lawyers ask doctors legal questions about the alleged perpetrator's culpability that stray well beyond their forensic expertise.⁵³ Such inappropriate questioning exposes doctors to harassment from perpetrators' families and contributes to their reluctance to collect and submit evidence.⁵⁴ Trial judges question victims in open courtrooms in front of family members, a process that one official called "not survivor-focused" and deeply shaming in Nigeria's conservative culture.⁵⁵

The authorities and humanitarian groups have taken steps to help women report rape and get medical assistance. Humanitarian organisations working with the Ministry for Women and Social Affairs have made progress in disseminating information as to how women can do so. Some police stations, including in IDP camps, now have female police officers to handle such complaints, with the aim of making the police more helpful and less intimidating, and encouraging women to report abuse. The Ministry for Women's Affairs often takes an active role in case management, supporting women and families.

⁴⁶ "Nigeria: Officials Abusing Displaced Women, Girls", Human Rights Watch, 31 October 2016; "Soldiers, policemen arrested for raping IDPs", *Punch*, 7 December 2016.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group, interview, Maiduguri, October 2018.

⁴⁸ "Court martial dismisses soldier from service for defiling 14-year-old female IDP", *Sahara Reporters*, 2 April 2019.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group electronic communication, human rights expert, March 2019.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, government officials, Maiduguri, December 2018.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, NGO staff and government officials, Maiduguri, December 2018.

⁵² Crisis Group interviews, government officials, Maiduguri, December 2018.

⁵³ Crisis Group interviews, government officials, Maiduguri, December 2018.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interviews, government officials and civil society leaders, Maiduguri, December 2018.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, government officials and NGO staff, Maiduguri, December 2018.

Much, however, remains to be done. Policewomen are still few. In Dalori II, a camp hosting 17,000 displaced persons in Maiduguri, for instance, there is only one, and she is present only during daytime. Camp leaders and some women said the reluctance to make formal complaints remains entrenched, and stems from a mistrust of authorities in general and lack of confidence that perpetrators will be held accountable.⁵⁶ Overall, human rights specialists think that the array of changes has so far failed to solve the problem and that what improvements have taken place depend too much on local commanders' and officials' good-will.⁵⁷

Nor are informal justice mechanisms a credible alternative. The power of abusive officials, along with entrenched cultural concerns about honour and privacy, result in many women and their families preferring to pursue cases within their communities. But those who take complaints to traditional elders often do not see action taken that would genuinely serve as deterrence. One *bulama* (a chief, in Hausa) in Maiduguri said he deals with rape perpetrators by gathering a circle of elders and "telling the young man not to ever do such a thing again".⁵⁸ In some camps, consequences have included perpetrators receiving only sweeping duties as punishment.⁵⁹

The lack of protection against rape in areas under the civilian rule of the federal and state government is a significant gap. Some female returnees perceive it as a sign of the Nigerian state's fundamental immorality.⁶⁰ This is particularly true because, as described, some women are returning from an environment where, despite widespread forced marriage and marital rape, there was protection from sexual violence perpetrated by strangers. Many such problems are especially felt in informal IDP camps, where the government and aid groups offer fewer services and women have little potential for economic activity. Sexual exploitation matters as part of women's suffering, but also because it fuels the insurgency. "You have to be a harlot to stay in the camps", said one returnee woman, who said she knew at least three Boko Haram women who found life in the camps intolerable and returned to the militants.⁶¹

The broader insecurity, including the threat of sexual abuse, faced by many returnee women underpins the desire of many to remarry.⁶² Indeed, in the north east married women tend to live in greater safety. Apart from physical protection, a partner provides women in this deeply patriarchal society a measure of social status, assistance in economic activities, like selling wares or food for longer hours in the market, and an emotional bridge to normal life as part of society.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interviews, camp leaders, NGO staff, female IDPs, Maiduguri, December 2018.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interviews, local NGO staff, activists, government officials, health workers, Maiduguri, December 2018.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, traditional elder, Maiduguri, December 2018.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, civilian camp official, Maiduguri, December 2018.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interviews, female returnees, NGO officials, Maiduguri, December 2018.

⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, female returnee, Maiduguri, December 2018.

⁶² Crisis Group interviews, three women civil society activists, Maiduguri, December 2018. Clearly, some married women have suffered sexual abuse or rape. Marriage cannot offer ironclad protection, but the view that it made a protective difference, through a first-degree partnership and embedding women in a network of family relations, surfaced in a significant number of interviews with civil society figures.

For the state and its international partners, who are working to improve protection from sexual violence, how best to promote marriage or remarriage remains a dilemma. Some women's groups advocate programs that enable women to remarry as an obvious, pragmatic solution given the north east's conservative mores. "Marriage is protection", said one female civil society leader, a point echoed by other civil society representatives polled by Crisis Group.⁶³ They point to the traction Boko Haram has long gained with young people, both men and women, due to its capacity to broker marriages. In this light, they propose giving the state or civic groups some role in doing the same, potentially through subsidies for young couples together with rigorous procedures to ensure matches are serious and reflect mutual respect and care and a counselling requirement.⁶⁴

Other female activists instead favour skills training and programs that build women's economic autonomy as a means of warding off at least sexual exploitation that is driven by need. International groups overwhelmingly support this latter approach, in line with recent trends in global aid delivery that focus on women's empowerment. Both approaches may have a role in Borno state; they are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

E. *Aid and Oversight*

The growing presence of humanitarian organisations in the IDP camps since 2015 has brought a greater degree of protection to their inhabitants. This effect is particularly clear in Maiduguri, though less so in the garrison towns, whose camps those organisations find it harder to enter.

Different authorities and organisations share responsibility for the returnees' well-being. The presence of organisations providing humanitarian aid in the north east means that returnees are no longer living under military control. Instead, a mix of local officials, community leaders, and local and international NGOs provide services. The Borno state officials most directly involved are from the State Emergency Management Agency, which provides camp managers, the Ministry of Women's Affairs, which provides social workers, and the Ministry of Health, which provides medical staff. Coordination meetings bring together international NGOs and security and government officials at both the camp and state levels. These meetings should continue: certainly, this disparate network of actors can benefit from stronger coordination, to ensure that they meet local needs while not duplicating their efforts.

All these groups provide a form of oversight and create conduits people can use to reach out for help if necessary. While humanitarian workers, community leaders and even some civil servants have no formal authority in the camps, locals contact them with a wide variety of concerns, which they pass on to the relevant state authorities, police, or local and international NGOs. They report abuses, negotiate disputes and

⁶³ Crisis Group interviews, NGO and civil society activists, Maiduguri, October and December 2018.

⁶⁴ Ibid. Two other Nigerian states, Kano and Sokoto, have undertaken such programs in contexts not marked by such violence. Some experiences – programs that were insufficiently developed to avoid opportunistic matches – were less successful. But slower, more discreet and more thorough arrangements did manage to broker longer-term marriages. Crisis Group interviews, NGO leaders, NGO officials, civil society figures, Maiduguri, December 2018.

advise returnees on getting assistance. Some humanitarian organisations are sensitive to the different needs of men and women as well as the different risks they face, and provide, for instance, gender-segregated sanitation areas to reduce risks of abuse.⁶⁵

That said, aid groups' and local NGOs' programming can stir up resentment within communities that host returnees and even within individual families. Many men perceive that women, particularly those associated with Boko Haram, receive privileged attention. Many international actors distribute food aid through women, based on the notions that women will more likely use it for the whole family's benefit and that controlling the family's livelihood empowers women. While this approach has given some women sway over their husbands' behaviour, it has led some husbands to feel humiliated and resentful at being unable to provide and thus sown discord. The head of a local women's NGO recounted that she counsels women about how to prevent aid distribution from disrupting their marriages.⁶⁶ In the past, distribution systems have sometimes overlooked young men without female family members, leaving them little or no access to aid; some may have been pushed to join Boko Haram for subsistence.⁶⁷ But such gaps have since been addressed, and today all men receive food aid, either directly, or through their wives.

Plus, of course, many parts of the north east are beyond the reach of humanitarian aid efforts. Indeed, with Boko Haram's two factions back on the offensive, a number of humanitarian organisations have pulled out staff from areas caught in the violence or at heightened risk. Their departure leaves hard-to-reach areas, where the military's presence is at best scattered, with virtually no food aid or medical assistance.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interviews, international humanitarian workers, Abuja and Maiduguri, December 2018.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, Maiduguri, December 2018.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, representative of a local NGO, Abuja, January 2019.

IV. Female Returnees: The Dangers of Isolation Back Home

A. *Stigma on the Wane?*

There is broad consensus among international humanitarian officials and local NGOs that the stigma attached to returnee women has diminished, due both to the sheer number of women returning and the passage of time. To be sure, the humanitarian plight of IDPs in Nigeria's north east, particularly in Borno, continues to be severe, with food, medical care and economic opportunity all in short supply. Attacks on the camps themselves remain a threat. But, whereas in 2015 women beginning to return were widely regarded with suspicion, with their former lives under jihadist control shrouded in mystery and their loyalties deemed uncertain, today, four years on, with thousands of women returned, few people see them as immediate threats. As one humanitarian official puts it, "acceptance has improved. People are getting used to them".⁶⁸

There are other reasons that fewer people today regard former Boko Haram women as a danger. One is that, owing to the patriarchal logic of society in north-eastern Nigeria, few hold women returnees fully responsible for Boko Haram associations. A *bulama* from rural Borno never turns these women over to authorities because "they are just women".⁶⁹ The leniency also owes to Boko Haram's own tactics, since very few women have been involved in combat or other acts of violence. Suicide bombings are the obvious exception, but these have declined since the 2015 high.⁷⁰ Ex-Boko Haram women do not seem to consider themselves particularly responsible, which may explain why they freely express to interviewers their appreciation for the group's aims, as well as the lifestyle it provided (they also likely feel more comfortable airing these views to outsiders).

An array of NGO workers, communal leaders and local state officials are trying to ease tensions arising between returnees and other members of communities in whose midst they live. This often involves pushing all sides to work at understanding others' perspectives and abstain from negative judgment that could fuel disputes and further degrade the situation. Such efforts have ironed out some immediate problems – a woman's rejection by her husband or family, for instance.⁷¹

But how much they can change wider attitudes is uncertain. Adja, a once prosperous trader who lost everything to the war and is a chairwoman in the IDP camp where she has lived for seven years, was unconvinced:

Ah, yes. NGOs came. With food and drinks. We had a discussion on forgiveness. They are telling us we should forgive. But we can't forget our suffering. And Boko Haram, they have not even stopped.⁷²

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, international NGO worker, Maiduguri, 21 December 2018.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interview, international NGO worker, Maiduguri, 8 December 2018.

⁷⁰ Hilary Matfess, "Suicide Bombings against Civilians and Government Targets in Africa, the Middle East and Southern Asia", ACLED, 20 March 2019.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, local NGO worker, Maiduguri, December 2018.

⁷² Crisis Group interview, Maiduguri, December 2018.

Influential figures, notably religious authorities, some of whom have been targeted by Boko Haram militants, are in many cases not ready to practice forgiveness, let alone preach it. National efforts such as radio sermons by religious scholars from elsewhere enjoining tolerance only go so far.

With the insurgency ongoing and no transitional justice or reparations in place for those whose livelihoods Boko Haram destroyed, the apparent increase in tolerance for returnees is fragile. Moreover, the suspicion that female returnees retain ties to active militants, which partly drives animosity toward them, is on occasion not without basis. Some women remain in touch with their husbands. Reports suggest surreptitious nightly meetings between insurgent husbands and returnee wives in certain areas, as well as women faking errands to take supplies to the outskirts of towns for their fighter husbands.⁷³ These ties feed rumours and speculations that some female returnees may still be doing the insurgency's work, including gathering intelligence and recruiting.

If the stigma has diminished, many former Boko Haram women still experience ostracism and suspicion. People sometimes call them "Boko Haram wives" or "Sambisa women" (after the Sambisa forest, where Abubakar Shekau and his Boko Haram faction have a major base). Children in IDP camps sometimes bully youngsters fathered by Boko Haram fighters. While Crisis Group heard no report of physical violence by other IDPs against female returnees, some mentioned exclusion from community and family events and celebrations. Boreholes – the source of water and a major gathering place for women in IDP camps – are sites of tension, and several women suspected of association with Boko Haram report encountering verbal abuse or harassment there. Some said that as a result they fetch water at odd hours. One woman said she mostly stays in her tent and avoids mixing. To address these concerns, officials in one Maiduguri camp built a separate borehole for ex-Boko Haram women – which allows those women access to water but risks perpetuating their segregation.⁷⁴

B. *The Threat of Persistent Ostracism*

As the borehole issue illustrates, such ostracism can have an impact on women's livelihoods. Not all families welcome female relatives back, even if they were abducted. An IDP and vigilante whose wife and daughter were kidnapped by militants says:

If my daughter came back, I would not trust her. Those they keep in the bush, they brainwash them. So we can't trust them. We need to create another place for these people. They are trouble. They will never change.⁷⁵

As a result of such suspicion, women returnees often move from one camp to another, looking for someone willing to take them in. To pay for transport, they often sell goods in the resettlement packages they receive from humanitarian organisations. In one instance, one female returnee felt it was preferable to stay with a co-wife of her Boko Haram husband rather than her own relatives.⁷⁶ A number of women settle away

⁷³ Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian workers and IDPs, Maiduguri, December 2018.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Maiduguri, December 2018.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, civil society activist, Maiduguri, December 2018.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interview, returnee, Maiduguri, December 2018.

from their place of origin or from the IDP camps where their community has relocated. As a local civil society official remarked, “many women rent houses in Maiduguri now. They don’t want to go back”.⁷⁷ It is difficult to know whether women prefer the city because its anonymity erases their association with Boko Haram and tainted matrimonial history or because it is easier to find opportunities to make money there.

The ostracism also means that female returnees associated with Boko Haram are on occasion denied, or deny themselves, assistance or services. When camp authorities and partners make attempts to provide dedicated services, they are often accused of “pampering” the returnees. Many displaced civilians believe that Boko Haram women do not merit attention or support. For example, Yana, a Boko Haram fighter’s wife, claims that camp authorities denied her and other wives clothes during a clothing distribution at a camp in Maiduguri and excluded them from a project that gave grinding machines to women’s collectives.⁷⁸

Female returnees are particularly vulnerable because many are unmarried or with absent husbands, are shunned by relatives or have seen family networks destroyed by war. In north-eastern Nigeria’s patriarchal society, single, divorced and widowed women grapple with low social status. This is particularly so if they have children in their care, whom potential husbands often see as a burden. Women and girls unable to depend on relatives are often isolated and have to engage in risky behaviour, including survival sex. They cannot rely on family members to reach markets, which are generally seen as improper locations for women to visit in conservative Borno. Often, the only paid work available is labour on farms on the peripheries of garrison towns or fetching firewood outside camp perimeters. Both activities are perilous, with some women raped or kidnapped, and can be exploitative, with minimal compensation.⁷⁹ The lack of schools even in some IDP camps means that single women with children have to spend days caretaking rather than earning a living. The resulting combination of economic anxiety and emotional isolation is often devastating.

The women’s plight is crucial to understanding a core policy dilemma faced by the authorities and organisations responsible for caring for them: should they advocate marital support policies, as some local civil society groups do – in essence helping former Boko Haram women to remarry – or instead offer livelihood programming, which other civic and most international aid groups do? Women’s protection rides on balancing the aim of short-term security, which may be most easily provided through marriage, with the long-term aspiration of social autonomy, achieved through economic independence. Because the women themselves view the utility and appeal of these pathways differently, and because one helps address immediate protection needs while the other builds the potential for long-term independence, offering women the choice of either or both, might be one way forward.

The uncertain status of some women’s marriages to Boko Haram fighters is another challenge. Some, both wives of *rijal* and *awam*, do not know whether their husbands are still alive and prefer to wait to find out. Even those wishing to marry may

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, former government official, Maiduguri, December 20, 2018.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interviews, UN official, humanitarian worker and female returnee, Maiduguri, December 2018.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interviews, community activists, female IDP camp residents, Maiduguri, December 2018.

find doing so a challenge. The obstacle is not legal: most Nigerians do not consider the marriages Boko Haram celebrates in the bush to be binding, and a provision in Islamic law allows women to obtain divorce after the husband is absent for two years. It is socio-cultural: many men are reluctant to marry an ex-Boko Haram woman, especially one with numerous children.

V. New Directions for Female Returnees

Since 2015, Nigerian federal and state authorities and their international partners have struggled to address the challenges resulting from the influx of returnees, from their immediate protection and humanitarian needs to their eventual reintegration. Since Crisis Group proposed an agenda for women affected by the Boko Haram insurgency in 2016, policies have somewhat improved.⁸⁰ Yet advances appear to have had as much to do with circumstance as design, as a wave of returns overwhelmed the military and CJTF screeners, people gradually became more accepting of women returnees as they arrived in larger numbers and Boko Haram scaled back its suicide attacks, which were predominantly carried out by women.

The Presidential Committee on the North East Initiative, a body created by President Buhari in 2016 and which put forth a plan for the region's reconstruction, includes a number of gender-sensitive provisions, including for cash transfer, maternal health, psychosocial trauma counselling and "rehabilitation" support.⁸¹ It even floats an intervention dedicated to "women and girls in battle", though it provides virtually no further detail.⁸² Whether it has done anything to implement this intervention is unclear. The "Bama initiative", a joint program of the Borno state and federal governments laid out by Buhari's committee, has focused on the reconstruction of private and public buildings. But observers mostly feel its results in revamping service provision, a key factor in making garrison towns more amenable to both men and women returnees, have been limited.⁸³ In fact, the federal government's overall attention to the region seems to have lapsed, due to its sense that the insurgency is now less urgent than the country's many other challenges.⁸⁴

The harsh truth is that, until the insurgency ends and civilians, men and women alike, find some degree of closure, women viewed as attached to Boko Haram will continue to suffer some stigma, even if levels continue to decline. In the meantime, however, the government can take steps to facilitate the return of women associated with Boko Haram, decrease the likelihood that they rejoin the insurgency and signal to militants still with the group that reintegration into civilian life after Boko Haram is an option. Key recommendations from the 2016 Crisis Group report, from facilitating access to land and credit or to education for women, remain pertinent.⁸⁵ In addition, the authorities should take further steps to protect women, give them and communities a greater say in how they are reintegrated back into society, avoid provoking a backlash with programming and step up their provision of services, especially education, across the north east.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group Report, *Nigeria: Women and the Boko Haram Insurgency*, op. cit., pp. iii-iv.

⁸¹ "Rebuilding the North East: The Buhari Plan, Volume I", Presidential Committee on the North East Initiative, June 2016, pp. 90-102.

⁸² "Rebuilding the North East: The Buhari Plan, Volume II", Presidential Committee on the North East Initiative, June 2016, p. 104.

⁸³ Crisis Group interviews, civil society activists, Maiduguri, October 2018; international NGO workers, December 2018.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomat and African senior military officer, Abuja, February 2019.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group Report, *Nigeria: Women and the Boko Haram Insurgency*, op. cit., pp. iii-iv.

A. *Better Protect Women Against Abuse*

Women formerly associated with the insurgency single out sexual exploitation and abuse as a leading source of distress in their newly reclaimed civilian lives. Such abuses must be addressed: primarily to curtail women's suffering but also to improve their perceptions of the state, particularly since Boko Haram has made a name for itself among some of its members as a provider of justice, albeit often a rough and selective form.

More work remains to be done to protect women in IDP camps. The State Emergency Management Agency should work together with the police, the military and the CJTF to shield women from predation, including abuse by personnel from these institutions themselves. The sanctions, court-martials and gender desks installed in military units are welcome. But more is needed to spread awareness of the seriousness of both rape and pressuring women into survival sex, and to create a culture of accountability. The authorities must step up efforts to train the military and the CJTF in their international humanitarian law obligations. They should better educate communal leaders who minimise the trauma of rape and respond to allegations with slaps on the wrist. They should recruit more women into the police and security forces, in line with previous Crisis Group recommendations.⁸⁶ They should make public the verdicts of court-martials for sexual violence and make the consequences more severe.

The authorities can take steps outside the camps, too. They should channel more state resources to the Borno State Ministry of Women's and Social Affairs, which takes a lead in case work and suffers grave funding shortages.⁸⁷ They should move quickly to recognise formally the informal settlements in Maiduguri's outskirts, as this would make available more funds and bolster the presence of national and international NGOs at sites where many formerly associated Boko Haram women and many other exposed women returnees reside. Critical, too, is to deploy civilian authorities to the garrison towns where the state has encouraged civilian return.⁸⁸ Stronger coordination among all state agencies and NGOs, local and international, providing support and programming is vital, and needs greater and more sustained commitment.

Professionalising military screening is critical. The military should establish clear, precise and uniform criteria procedures, to avoid arbitrary and uneven decision-making, and streamline them to ensure women's immediate humanitarian needs are met while they await assessment. It should deploy well-trained, dedicated teams that include women soldiers or other women security officers, from the police or the National Security and Civil Defence Corps. Screening should direct women not to be assessed as a risk to IDP camps and communities and remove only women who they assess pose a high risk for a more tailored reintegration program. The federal government together with the military should identify an appropriate civilian state agency, potentially the National Human Rights Commission, to monitor screening sites.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group Report, *Nigeria: Women and the Boko Haram Insurgency*, op. cit., p. iv.

⁸⁷ Crisis Group interview, government official, Maiduguri, December 2018.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interview, civil society organisations, Maiduguri, December 2018.

B. Tailor Policies So That Women Have a Say

Particularly important is to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to women leaving the insurgency. Some general tasks are critical: improving and expanding the provision of dialogues, counselling and training that enable reintegration into communities, formalising camps and rebuilding civilian infrastructure destroyed in the fighting, for example. But women formerly associated with insurgents will face different challenges as they work to settle themselves and their children.

The authorities should allow women to choose where they wish to live, be it among their communities of origin, whether displaced or not, or in other communities, notably in the IDP camps. They should set up community dialogues that help women associated with Boko Haram and community members readjust to living alongside one another. In towns and cities where the state is involved in reconstruction, it should consult with residents as to how they feel about returnee women living among them and how concerns can be addressed.

This type of consultation is crucial. People's responses can then shape and direct local programming that helps communities as a whole reframe their views of Boko Haram-associated women. Local and international NGOs call this "community sensitisation", aimed at helping people understand that returnee women have also often suffered abuse, and that tolerance, even if personally distasteful, is crucial to the whole community's recovery.

C. Avoid Backlash

A major preoccupation of all those providing support to returnees should be to avoid a backlash by provoking resentment against either women in general or women associated with Boko Haram in particular. Humanitarian organisations and local NGOs, often supported by donors, have shaped part of their programming with an eye to women's empowerment. This perspective informs the delivery of a broad range of policies and services, from food aid to livelihood support. Food aid for households, for example, now tend to go through women, because humanitarian groups found that when men received the assistance, they often used it to acquire additional wives rather than buying food for the family. Reorienting assistance to ensure it reaches families is understandable, given the disempowered and vulnerable position in which many women find themselves in the Nigerian north east. But many women on the ground, including some women's groups, report that some such approaches sow social divisions.

Striking the right balance is no easy task. Programs that target women for skills training, counselling and livelihoods advice should also engage men, especially young and old men who are socially vulnerable. Residents should not see aid or programming for women as designed to abandon or sideline men or upset what they regard as important values and societal norms. Local NGOs often have an intimate reading of how humanitarian assistance affects gender dynamics; international NGOs should consult with them more closely and develop policies and approaches that consider how to support men and women according to their separate needs, while taking care to avoid tensions and the perception that outside actors are seeking to alter traditional values or impose their own.

More broadly, interventions intended to help women associated with Boko Haram should target not only those women but always other groups – other women or family members with no history of affiliation – so as to avoid further stigmatisation or resentment.⁸⁹

D. *Provide Basic Public Goods*

The government should do more to provide education, health care and religious instruction for women and children, thus offering services that some may have found with Boko Haram. This effort would span both the regular Nigerian curricula, which many returnees – the insurgency’s criticism of it notwithstanding – are keen on procuring for their children, and high-quality Islamic education, for children as well as women. For women especially, education is a singular pathway to social autonomy and opportunity. The government must build more primary and secondary schools employing salaried teachers who can provide basic instruction to girls and boys in the camps in Maiduguri and garrison towns alike. The government, along with partner Islamic institutions, should also provide Quranic or religious instruction for those women who desire it, alongside the creation of safe, public gathering spaces for women which can be used for these and other purposes. It is difficult to overstate how essential education is to Borno state’s long-term recovery and the opportunity it offers the state to renew its contract with citizens.

⁸⁹ The ratio is three to one in certain operations, which appears to dilute the intention enough to blunt resentment or stigma. Crisis Group interviews, December 2018.

VI. Conclusion

Life in Nigeria's north east is a chronic struggle for women, whether under the federal government, which often fails to provide basic services to its citizens, particularly women, or under the insurgency, which exploits women to achieve its aims. Yet if women are hurt by state neglect and insurgent tactics, they are not passive objects of either. Many sought out and continue to support Boko Haram, while others abandoned its cause. The notion of women as Boko Haram's archetypal victims ignores a long history of women's suffering in the north east and obscures the ways in which women's aspirations have fed, but also could help resolve, the conflict.

The tens of thousands of women who have left the insurgency and are now in Maiduguri and garrison towns all over Borno state could have a role to play in helping end the rebellion. Managing their return well could show their insurgent husbands and brothers, some of whom reports suggest are exhausted by fighting and ready to put down their arms, that both the state and their fellow citizens will tolerate the militants' return to civilian life.⁹⁰ Since the insurgency emerged in response to concerns about recognition, respect and justice, the treatment of female returnees is a benchmark for insurgents and many others in the north east.

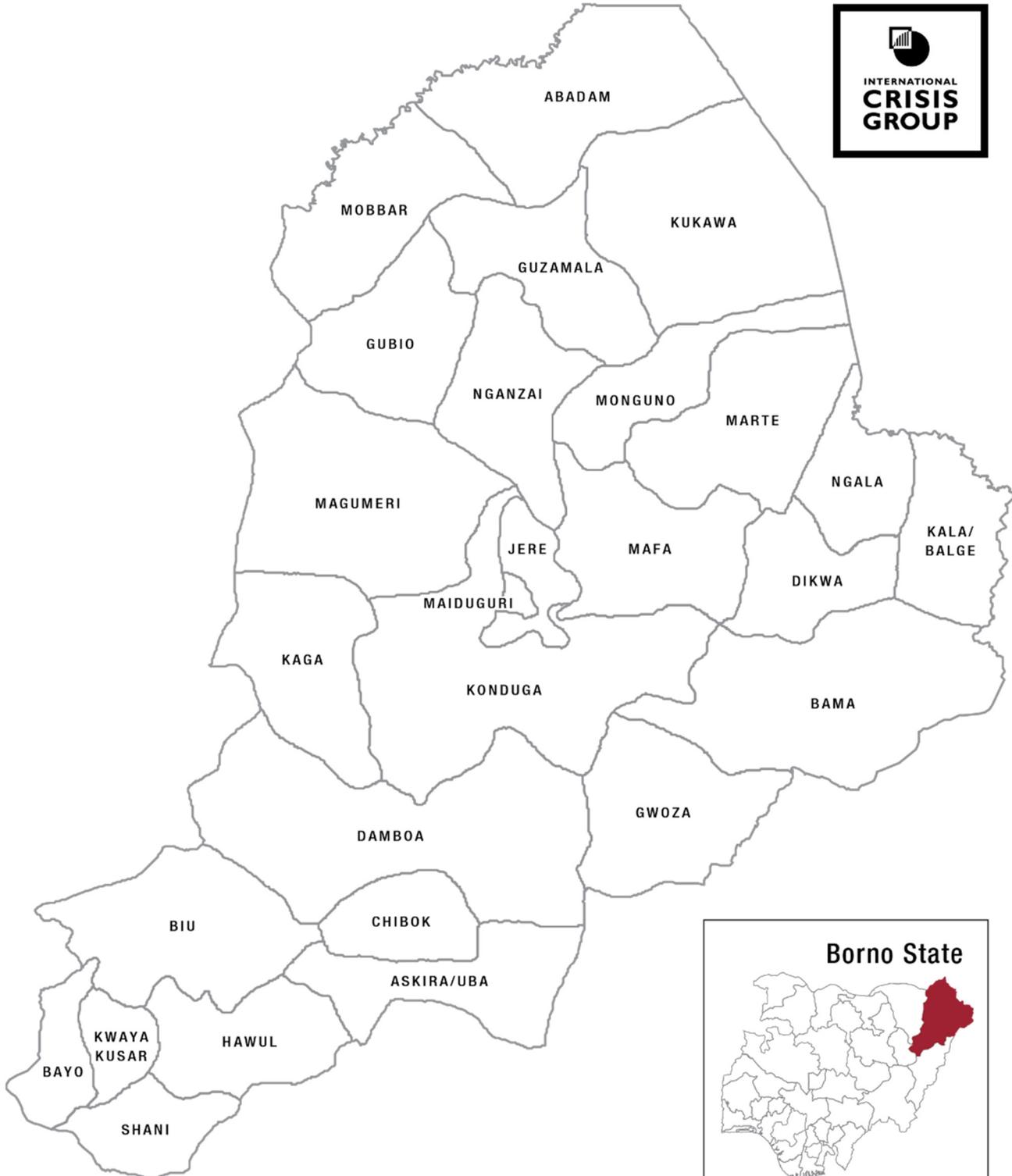
As a recent Crisis Group report on the Islamic State in West Africa Province shows, ending the crisis will take time and requires the Nigerian government (and, to a lesser extent, those of Cameroon, Chad and Niger) to look beyond force and seek to weaken insurgents' ties to locals by improving services in areas under government control, even as they take care to conduct military operations as humanely as possible and in a manner that protects civilians. Engaging insurgent leaders in dialogue is likely to prove an uphill struggle, but Abuja should nonetheless keep lines of communication to the insurgency open and press at least for local deals that can ameliorate the human cost of fighting.

In the interim, the authorities and their international partners need to do everything possible to help women returnees from Boko Haram survive this bleak period. Genuine reintegration and resettlement may well remain elusive while violence rages, but returnees and other citizens should be encouraged to tolerate one another in preparation for the day when the fighting stops and the real work of rebuilding Nigeria's north east can begin.

Abuja/Dakar/Brussels, 21 May 2019

⁹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, women formerly associated with Boko Haram, Maiduguri, 2018.

Appendix A: Map of Borno State



Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Algiers, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Hong Kong, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Mexico City, New Delhi, Rabat, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, Germany Federal Foreign Office, Irish Aid, Japan International Cooperation Agency, Principality of Liechtenstein, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign Affairs, New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the UK Department for International Development, and the United Arab Emirates Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

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