



SURVIVING BOKO HARAM CAPTIVITY: GENDER ROLES, AGENCY, AND RESILIENCE AT THE INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CENTRE, EDO STATE (NIGERIA)

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ABSTRACT: *This article examines the experiences of young women and children affected by Boko Haram's violence—a terror group in Nigeria, focusing on how their lives within the insurgency's grasp provide a lens into broader gender dynamics. It highlights the roles of resilience and agency, particularly in the context of captivity and escape. While the sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) they faced is acknowledged in several literatures, the intricate dynamics of surviving captivity and navigating escape are underexplored. Drawing on qualitative data from the International Christian Centre, this study examines the ways in which young women and children actively navigated their captivity through expressions of agency, resilience and complex gendered dynamics. It explores both their adherence to and reshaping of traditional gender roles, framed through the lens of multiple or 'overlapping identities.' This approach informs diverse survival strategies embedded in the integration and normalization of gender dynamics within the context of captivity, escape and survival strategies.*

KEYWORDS: International Christian Centre, Boko Haram, Gender (dynamics) Roles, Agency, Resiliency.



INTRODUCTION

Young women and children from Northeastern Nigeria have endured extreme abuse during captivity by Boko Haram—a terror organization in Nigeria, where many were forcibly integrated into the group’s operations and subjected to roles as “wives,” sex slaves, spies, suicide bombers, forced labourers, and victims of sexual violence, leading in many cases to forced pregnancies (Amnesty International, 2024; Zen & Pearson, 2014). These circumstances underscore not only the severe oppression they faced but also the adaptive survival strategies they developed. Frequently portrayed as lacking agency and resilience or as passive tools within Boko Haram’s strategic operations, this article challenges such reductive portrayals by examining the ways in which young women and children actively navigated their captivity through expressions of agency, resilience and gendered dynamics, including both embracing and reshaping traditional gender roles, characterized through the prism of multiple or ‘overlapping identities’ (Crenshaw, 1989; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020).

Instead, from the vantage of Boko Haram’s survivors as well as the centre’s coordinators, at the International Christian Centre: a missionary and religious organization, this approach emphasizes the critical role of agency and resilience in understanding women’s experiences of captivity and their eventual escapes. Rather than viewing these survivors as passive victims, the emphasis is placed on their capacity to navigate their circumstances and actively participate in their own survival trajectories (Honwana & De Boeck, 2005). Specifically, this article engages with current debates on the lived experiences of sexual-based violence, captivity, and escape among young women and children, situating these within broader dynamics of gender roles and survival strategies, as well as the utility of theoretical frameworks that address these issues (Oriola, 2017; Okoli & Azom, 2019; Agbaje, 2020; Ajayi, 2020).

In shedding light on gender dynamics further, the concept of multiple or ‘overlapping identities’ within Boko Haram’s camps and subsequent escape into the mountains and caves is introduced (Botha, 2021). This study draws upon Crenshaw’s (1989, 1991) exploration of intersectionality. Crenshaw’s work highlights the complex ways in which race and gender intersect to shape the experiences of African American women confronting institutionalized systems of racialization, patriarchy, marginalization, and oppression. Similarly, in the context of Boko Haram captivity, survivors navigate overlapping identities of gender, age, and vulnerability, which shape their lived experiences and survival strategies. This intersectional framework offers a lens through which the multi-layered challenges of captivity, as well as the dynamics of escape, can be more fully understood.

Put in another way, embracing an intersectionalist approach for the young women and children at the centre involves recognizing the interconnectedness of gender, sexuality, and age as mutually constitutive aspects of identity (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020, p. 5). Additionally, it requires careful consideration of diverse and overlapping power structures, along with systems of inequality, marginalization, exploitation, and violence (ibid). How do these intersections of identities collectively illuminate gender performativity and the gaining of agency and resilience evident during captivity and escape? Closely related to these questions is how young women and children situate themselves in the retelling of the Boko Haram violence. In other words, how were young women and children inscribed within the Boko Haram life world? What does it mean to be a child, especially a young boy, and a young (Christian) woman, within Boko Haram’s performativity or sphere of control? What kind of coping strategies did they devise to survive the instances of abduction, captivity, and escape?



In addressing these inquiries and based on the various trajectories observed among the survivors, this research engages with the notion that young women and children experience different forms of entanglement within Boko Haram's sphere of control. The findings reveal that these groups are not mutually constitutive but instead have distinct identities and experiences, particularly regarding their roles and conditioning within Boko Haram's framework. As this work will explicate, the distinctions lie in the fluid and shifting roles—or what Botha (2021, p. 264) refers to as multi-stage experiences and overlapping identities—that they adopt or are subjected to in vulnerable or high-risk situations during their encounters with Boko Haram's violent activities. This aligns with Oriola's (2017) concept of a 'gender and genderless' approach to understanding the experiences of young women and, by extension, children within these contexts.

Children's and young women's involvement with Boko Haram's *Lebenswelt* provides insight into how gender roles and survival practices are shaped by the group's operational framework. Under the late Shekau's leadership, Boko Haram imposed rigid gender roles, subjecting women and children to abusive practices. This included enforcing strict sexual conduct regulations (e.g., flogging women for fornication) and casting children, particularly boys, into "hyper-masculine combat roles" (Zenn & Pearson, 2014, p. 51). Testimonies from young women at the Christian Centre illustrate their positions within Boko Haram as wives, girlfriends, coerced weapons, and recruiters, while young boys acted as spies, child soldiers, and escorts for the women (Field notes, 08/01/2019).

Focusing on these (violent) practices, it becomes evident that Boko Haram enforces "explicit gendered hierarchies and binaries," creating idealized norms for men, children, and women within a patriarchal structure (Roose & Cook, 2022, p. 1). However, many young women and children constructed agentive roles and cultivated resilience by adapting to and normalizing the gender dynamics of their captivity and eventual escape, ensuring their survival in such a hostile environment.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

This theoretical engagement probes deeper into the everyday experiences of displaced children and young women of North-east Nigerian extraction in the literature, particularly in the context of how they develop coping strategies, highlighting their practices of survival during captivity and escape (Ajayi, 2020).

Gendering Roles

The idea of gendering roles is very crucial in the fields of gender studies and anthropology. In anthropology, gendering roles refers to the investigation of how gender roles, identities, and expectations, are created and preserved in various cultures. The fact that gender is formed by social, cultural, and historical settings rather than being an absolute or universal notion is acknowledged. Gendering roles become more pertinent when they are applied to the cases of Boko Haram victims since the terrorist organization's actions have exerted a significant influence on the dynamics of gender in the afflicted areas of Nigeria.

In summary, the concept of gender roles emphasizes the intricate and ever-evolving nature of gender as a multifaceted social construct deeply intertwined within human societies. It



challenges conventional roles attributed to men, children, and women during times of conflict. This concept serves as a source of both empowerment and disempowerment, agency and vulnerability, resilience, and destruction.

Resilience Theory

The notion of resilience focuses on the numerous socio-cultural, religious, and environmental aspects that might improve an individual's or a group's capacity to deal with difficulties and retain well-being amid adversity. These frameworks consider how various settings might build resilience by utilizing religious and cultural traditions, community structures, and social support. In this way, Urie Bronfenbrenner's (2005) so-called bioecological model has an impact on how resilience is understood. According to this model, a child's development or experience of trauma is a dynamic process that is influenced by interacting with the various systems in their environment, including their families, communities, and the larger society (Cicchetti, 2010; Masten, 2011; Masten & Narayan, 2012). To this end, Ann Masten defines resilience as the "capacity of a dynamic system (individual, family, school, community, society) to withstand or recover from significant challenges that threaten its stability, viability, or development" (Masten, 2011, p. 494), and also intersects with "both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being, and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided in culturally meaningful ways" (Ungar, 2011, p. 10).

Agency

Anthropologists High (2010) and Keane (2003) describe agency as assumptions about the liberated subject, self-transformation, and self-awareness. It is shaped by varying levels of influence and control over choices, often manifested through collective decisions. Rather than arising from a single action with a positive impact, agency results from the interaction of social, religious, and political factors. For Boko Haram survivors, agency is a complex interplay of individual will, cultural orientation, external forces, and non-human influences. Perkins (1995) emphasizes the transformative role of agency, while Keane (2003) frames it as a tool for self-interpretation. Mahmood (2009) critiques the notion of agency as a desire for autonomy or defiance of social norms, instead situating it within power dynamics. She suggests that such subordinate relations can paradoxically empower individuals, drawing from Foucault's view of agency as an ethical formation that reshapes human subjects. This perspective aligns with Honwana's (2005) concept of tactical agency, which refers to a fragile, intermittent agency that navigates societal constraints by exploiting available opportunities (Honwana, 2005; Chidozie, 2016).

The Concept of Intersectionality

Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the idea of intersectionality in feminist discourse and critical racial theories in the later part of the 1980s (cf. Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). The notion of intersectionality is crucial in the understanding of and dealing with social disparities, inequality, and discrimination. It emphasizes how important it is to take into consideration how identity elements interact in complicated ways when analysing social problems and to create policies and tactics that take these complexities into consideration. In the feminist and social justice movements, it has played a crucial role in fostering a more inclusive and complex awareness of and response to many types of privilege and oppression (Crenshaw, 1989). Its



effects on the fields of anthropology, sociology, and other social sciences are more extensive. Identifying and researching the intersections of numerous social categories allows one to obtain a greater knowledge of the processes of power, privilege, and oppression, and to promote social inclusion (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2016). A dedication to the intersectionalist approach requires being aware of the significance of multifarious identities related to ethnicity, religion, gender, socioeconomic status, and geographic location. These intersecting identities are mutually constitutive, rather than independent markers of identity, and they attune to diverse and overlapping power structures and systems of inequality, marginalization, exploitation, and violence (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020, p. 5). Intersectional modes of analysis in the context of displacement studies show how Boko Haram victims' experiences of trauma and PTSD and their search for safety are shaped by a diversity of intersecting and overlapping identity markers, such as ethnicity, religion, gender, socioeconomic status, age, and cultural and geographic location, as well as by a variety of power structures (Oriola, 2017; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

This study forms part of doctoral research conducted at the International Christian Centre between 2018 and 2021, focusing on survivors and the management of the Centre. The research utilized participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and field notes gathered from selected young women, children, and coordinators. Drawing on Korac's (2003) approach, which emphasizes qualitative analysis to understand survivors' worldviews from their own perspectives, the study explores the broader dynamics of trauma, particularly gender-based violence. The strength of qualitative research lies in its flexibility and adaptability, tailoring insights to the unique circumstances of individuals (Ní Raghallaigh, 2011). The choice of the International Christian Centre is informed by the scarcity of studies on trauma experiences, specifically those resulting from Boko Haram-induced gender-based violence, within the sanctuaries of a religious institution.

Data Collation

The data collection process, centered on a qualitative approach, involved interviews with ten young women (aged 18 to 21), eight boys under the age of 14, and Pastor Folorunsho¹, the leader of the centre. With permission from the centre's head, all survivors participated in the interviews, and pseudonyms were used to protect their identities, except for Pastor Folorunsho, who consented to the use of his real name. The interview data was transcribed and coded,

¹ To ensure anonymity, every name used in this work is a pseudonym. But for this study, the Centre's leader asked that his true name be used; also, I acknowledged that certain aspects of this methodology have been used in: Chidozie, E. (2024) Examining Resilient Practices through Configuring Survivors' Lives at the Noodle's Kitchen in International Christian Centre (Edo-State, Nigeria) *OLÓGÈ LASUED International Journal of Humanities Education*. 1(1), 166- 176 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36349/olijhe.2024v.01i01.019>; Chidozie, Mandolessi, & Devlieger (2024). Echoes of Resilience: Retelling the Memories of Trauma Among Survivors of Boko Haram's Violence at the International Christian Centre, Edo-State (Nigeria). *African Journal for the Psychological Studies of Social Issue*, 1(27), 112-129



ensuring the preservation of participants' voices through narrative and informal dialogue (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Ní Raghallaigh, 2011). This approach is particularly suited for research involving vulnerable populations, with a focus on psychological trauma and coping mechanisms.

Data Analysis

The data was drawn from a variety of sources, including interview transcripts, field notes, observations, and multimedia materials such as photographs and website information. During the data analysis process, hypotheses emerged organically from the gathered data, which then informed the theoretical framework. Using a qualitative approach, and drawing on Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological method, the data was processed using Microsoft Word to organize files by subject matter. Summaries were created for each subject, and recurring themes were analysed in relation to one another. Colaizzi's method, which has proven effective for creating and analysing narrative datasets, was employed to assess both the convergence and divergence of themes (Edward & Welch, 2011). Colaizzi's approach was very helpful in determining the fundamental elements of the phenomena and confirming conclusions using participant input. The analysis shed light on the lived experiences of gender-based violence during Boko Haram captivity, emphasizing how survival is mobilized as a resource to cultivate agency and resilience through the normalization of gender dynamics.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The Complex Realities of Women and Children in Boko Haram Captivity

"I accepted to be his wife in order to have enough food to eat" (Amina).

"Even though I was a Christian, I was forced to recite the Koran" (Haruna).

The interviews conducted with young women and children provided traumatic insights into the diverse forms of abuse they suffered in Boko Haram's captivity. These ranged from physical and psychological torment to forced labour, religious coercion, and participation in violent insurgent activities. Participants recounted their experiences of being forced to recite the Koran, marry insurgents, endure sexual violence (including rape), and undergo emotional abuse. The captives, most of whom were Christian women and children abducted from Gwoza, faced systemic brutalities in Boko Haram camps.

Pastor Folorunsho described these events as "horrible experiences," detailing the brutal treatment of women who were raped, forced into marriages, or who witnessed the violent deaths of family members. The atrocities extended to children, many of whom were either killed, trained as child soldiers, or used as suicide bombers. Pastor Folorunsho shared a vivid account of the escape efforts, which often involved fleeing through burning bushes or walking on bodies.

The survivors' stories illuminated the multifaceted roles that women and children played in Boko Haram's lifeworld, where they became both victims and instruments of war. As Hilary Matfess (2017) observed, women captives served as wives, war weapons, and witnesses to violence, fulfilling symbolic and functional roles that shaped the insurgency's operations. This



gendered exploitation is not unique to Boko Haram; similar patterns of abuse against women have been recorded in conflict zones across Africa, including Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, and Côte d'Ivoire (Coulter, 2009; Specht, 2013; Liebling-Kalifani, Mwaka, Ojiambo-Ochieng, Were-Ogut, Kinyanda, Kwekwe, Howard & Danuweli, 2011).

These findings underscore the critical intersection of gender roles and survival strategies within conflict settings, revealing how women and children navigate the complexities of agency and resilience amidst extreme violence.

Gendered Dynamics, Intersection and the Experiences of Survival in Boko Haram Captivity

Several young women and children, including 17-year-old Happiness, who was in high school before she was carried off to Boko Haram's camp in the bush, highlighted how she and others were routinely forced to cook, clean, and perform some household chores while in Boko Haram custody. She stated:

My job in the camp was to cook every day for a 15-man group that was in the same section of the bush where we were kept ... the young boys gathered wood for cooking, and they were forced to recite the Koran every day, the older boys were trained to join them in their operation (raiding communities along Gwoza) and sometimes they supervised us while we cooked and prayed. These boys whom I am older than whipped us badly if we missed a line in our recitation of the Koran.

In many ways, the story of Happiness provides insights by which Boko Haram's practices of bifurcation were gendered, especially in its performative roles for young women and children, categorized as young and older boys. Put straightforwardly, the dynamics of gender affected young women and children differently. However, in the case of Solomon, who was about 11 years old when he was kidnapped by Boko Haram, his assigned tasks contributed to both categories: being a child and a young woman. By belonging to these various social categories simultaneously within Boko Haram's sphere of control, he retells his experience through the intersection of gender and (forced) task-related nuances including his final escape:

In the camp we were watched constantly by the members of Boko Haram. We usually wake up at 4 in the morning. At five in the morning, we begin our morning prayers. I was selected by the head (of Boko Haram) to supervise the women during the time for prayers ... Our daily feeding is dependent on Boko Haram's members being successful in pillaging nearby villages. Many of the children got sick in the camp. On some days, when they were lucky with some animals they shot in the bush, I was asked to join the women in the kitchen to cook. After cooking, we cleaned the kitchen. That is how we saw life until we were able to escape. It took us a month to plot how to escape.

Boko Haram's performativity affected Happiness and Solomon differently based on their gender and allied intersectionalities (Namuggala, 2018). That is, their everyday assigned tasks handed down by the insurgents is not a-social; in fact, it creates its social orders, which is in part a rejection of the old order and sometimes a reproduction and strengthening of the old order. Illustrative of this point is the case of Boko Haram's camp wherein the differentiation between a boy-child and a young woman seems to be obvious. However, the differences between a boy-child and a young woman can also be blurred. In Gwoza, as in many places in



North-eastern Nigeria, the kitchen and food preparation dynamics are domains traditionally associated with women, as highlighted by Happiness. Nonetheless, in providing skills such as cooking and cleaning for the Haramites as well as supervising the women, Solomon, unlike Happiness, complicates and recasts this neat categorization of male-female spaces through his multiple or overlapping identities. In this way, he couches his experience at the intersection of his multiple social identities and their interactions (Crenshaw, 1989).

These findings demonstrate how Boko Haram's practices created new social orders that both reinforced and challenged traditional gender roles. The insurgents manipulated gender dynamics to maintain control, forcing captives into roles that served their militant purposes. However, individuals like Solomon and Happiness found ways to navigate and survive these oppressive circumstances, underscoring the intersection of gender, age, and social roles in shaping their experiences.

Gendered Roles, Resilience, Agency and Escape in Boko Haram Captivity

The research findings highlight how distinct gendered roles under Boko Haram's regime shaped survival and escape strategies for young women and children. Both Happiness and Solomon, despite the harsh conditions they endured, adapted to their changing environments in ways that fostered resilience and agency. For Happiness, her routine participation in tasks like cooking, cleaning, and reciting prayers while enduring physical abuse became part of her survival strategy. By hiding food in her wrapper when unobserved, she strategically planned her escape, showing foresight and an ability to improvise under duress.

Similarly, Solomon, though forced into roles traditionally associated with women, such as cooking and supervising others, internalized this new identity imposed by Boko Haram. His acceptance of these roles, while painful, was a means of coping and a calculated step toward eventual escape. Despite the constant threat of violence, Solomon maintained hope and engaged in problem-solving interactions with other captives, which sustained his desire to flee (Schweitzer, Greenslade & Kagee, 2007). He kept hope and his aspiration to escape alive amidst the pains of forced labour and constant gaze. Agency in this context emerges from the facades of desire and hope. These survival tactics align with the idea that agency often emerges from pain and hardship, a theme echoed by De Boeck and Honwana (2005) in their studies on African youth.

Gendered Roles as Instruments of Control in Boko Haram's Camp

The research reveals how Boko Haram reinforces pre-existing gender norms, using women and girls for domestic labor as a means of maintaining camp operations. Female captives, such as Happiness, were routinely assigned tasks like cooking and cleaning, aligning with traditional Nigerian societal expectations of women, particularly in regions like Gwoza. This exploitation of gender roles reflects Boko Haram's deliberate engagement with local cultural norms to legitimize its hierarchy, where women are positioned at the lowest level of power. This agrees with the findings of Oriola, a sociologist and criminologist: "Boko Haram's treatment of women in Nigeria draws on and is iterative of the status of women in Northeast Nigeria" as second-class citizens (2017, p. 100).

However, Solomon's experiences challenge these established norms, as his assignment to kitchen duties blurs the typically rigid division between male and female roles in the camp.



This indicates that while Boko Haram employs gendered roles, its approach lacks uniformity and can deviate from cultural expectations, further complicating the understanding of their practices.

In summary, Boko Haram's gendered division of labor reflects both conformity to and disruption of traditional societal roles, highlighting the complexity and inconsistency in how the group utilizes gender to maintain control.

Navigating Agency and Resilience through Normalizing Gendered Dynamics

Additionally, the binary understanding of gendering roles or norms foregrounds the narratives of Fatimah, a 19-year-old girl who was held in captivity for three months. In her words:

After killing my father and mother, they attacked and burnt our shops and carried my brother and I into the bush. They trained my brother on how to shoot guns and kill people. For me, they took me along each time they were raiding the villages ... (sobbing) ... So, they forced me to carry heavy loads on my head throughout the night. They add more piles of clothes and other things they stole from people's homes and shops...I fell and collapsed. One of them kicked me and asked me to keep walking ... But I survived as one of the commanders liked me and gave me special treatment (Oral interview, Dec. 2020).

Survivors like Fatimah experienced forced labor and objectification under Boko Haram's gendered hierarchies, a mechanism through which the group capitalized on traditional roles of caregiving and labor associated with women. This aligns with the findings of El-Affendi and Gumel (2015) wherein women have played central roles in the food production circle in many traditional African societies. Young girls, forced into roles such as porters or companions, exemplify how insurgent groups exploit traditional gender norms to fortify their operations. This exploitation paralleled the experiences of young boys, who were recruited into combat roles, reinforcing the hyper-masculine dynamics that Boko Haram perpetuates. This binary understanding of gendering roles or norms permits the Haramites to recast young boys into what Zenn and Pearson (2014, p. 50) call "hyper-masculine combat roles" that reflect "specific gendered hierarchies and binaries" within idealized roles for young women and children (Roose & Cook, 2022, p. 1). This reveals the rigid and exploitative structure of gender within Boko Haram's operational tactics.

Duality of Agency and Objectification

According to Fatimah,

"The commander liked my friend Amina and I very much. He says we are beautiful and wants to marry us. So, he made sure that other men did not touch us (sexual relations). So, we smiled and pretended that we liked him. We gained his confidence and soon he allowed us to move about freely in the camp....

While Boko Haram objectified young women through roles like "wives" or laborers, survivors displayed agency and resilience within these confines (Agbaje, 2020). Fatimah's strategic use of beauty and compliance enabled her to gain the favor of a commander, leading to improved conditions and ultimately facilitating her escape. This blending of agency within objectifying structures underscores the complexity of survival strategies that young women developed, highlighting how physicality becomes a site of negotiation within a patriarchal structure.



Kandiyoti (1988) in her article, “Bargaining with Patriarchy,” contends that women tactically bargain with different aspects of their lives to improve their welfare and social security without necessarily disrupting male supremacy. Taking this approach up, Ammann (2020, p. 10) illustrates “women in Muslim Kankan’s (Guinea) patriarchal society who understand the rules of the game and know how to play them. They mostly bargain within the boundaries of the socially accepted gendered norms....” This holds true for a few of the young women and children in Boko Haram captivity. Fatimah and her peers adapted to captivity by employing gendered pretenses, such as adopting behaviors and appearances that conformed to the expectations of their captors. This adaptive strategy allowed them to exercise limited autonomy within a rigid environment, showing how even in captivity, survivors negotiated their identities and forged pathways toward escape or, as Ammann (2020) puts it, as ‘playing along’ as devices that informed her crafting and negotiation with Boko Haram’s gendering practices that are structured around male domination or patriarchy.

Furthermore, patriarchal cultures impede (young) women and children’s agency. By this impediment, several of the abductees, such as Fatimah, exercise a tactical agency, an agency of the weak or vulnerable which is sporadic and mobile, and seized every opportunity that allows them to cope with the constraints imposed upon them (Honwana, 2005; Chidozie, 2016). Male supremacy is at the centre of patriarchy, wherein (young) women are required to play a secondary and a more subservient role. This understanding of the place and roles of (young) women in some cultures has played a part in tracing gender relations in several conflict conditions. In conflicts such as those experienced in Côte d’Ivoire, Liberia, Sudan, and Sierra Leone, women were purposely objectified and deployed as weapons of war, and performing numerous roles, such as being bush wives, cooks, cleaners, sex slaves, and spies (Coulter, 2009; Liebling-Kalifani et al., 2011).

Enduring Objectification and Resilience

Survivors’ experiences reflect the tragic reality of “bare life,” a term describing existence reduced to mere survival within dehumanizing conditions, stressing what Agamben calls “the most absolute *conditio inhumana*” (Agamben, 1995, p. 166). However, young women’s responses to this objectification, from forming alliances to using tactical beauty practices, underscore their resilience and capacity to navigate and eventually break free from oppressive circumstances (Honwana, 2005). In other words, the phenomenon of beauty and its conjunction with their performances of pretense became the fuel of their survival and eventual opportunity of escape. Their attentiveness and resilience was expressed through the opportunities for escape that were unlocked by their practices of beauty and pretense and their awareness of escape pathways (Burchardt, Evans & Holder, 2012).



DISCUSSION

The foregoing analysis reveals that survivors' narratives offer valuable insights into complex expressions of agency, resilience, and gendered dynamics within the context of Boko Haram's captivity and escape. Accounts of murder, physical abuse, forced conversions, coerced marriages to Boko Haram members as well as stories of survival were recurring themes in these stories.

Status of Women and Children Who Refused Conversion in Boko Haram's Camp

Refusal to convert often results in severe punishments, including death or forced servitude within Boko Haram camps. Enslaved individuals, particularly women and children, form the labour foundation of Boko Haram's camp, performing essential, enforced tasks. Indeed, slaves are the cornerstone upon which the Haramites sought to build their mini-empire or camp in the bush (Bauer, 2016). The Haramites forced the children to convert to Islam with the use of the whips and then recruited them to fight their battles. They enslaved older women as labourers. Young women, especially the Christians who refused to convert, were monitored, beaten, made submissive, and forced to do the lowliest of tasks. This aligns with the findings of Barkindo, Gudaku and Wesley (2013):

Boko Haram concept of women is based on this Sunni ultra-salafi radicalism² ... Women are traditionally treated as second-class citizens under this salafi ideology. However, Christian women are in even worse straits than Muslims because they are the weakest members of an infidel outcast. Whatever abuses Muslim women and girls may suffer, Christian females suffering is aggressively more intense and life threatening ... (p. 14).

Also, Boko Haram's attitude to women, especially sexual slavery, has parallels in the era of slavery in America. Oriola (2017, p. 114) writes:

Slave women often became unwitting concubines to slave owners, incubators for new slaves as well as beasts of burden in the homes and plantations. Enslaved women were exploited as slaves and women ... Female slaves also endured suffering related to their gender. Such women had to endure from an early age the facticity of being objects of the sexual desire of their master ... They were required to have sex with whomever their master wanted ... They were unwilling participants in "slave breeding" geared toward producing as many slaves as possible....

To this end, the experience of these young women and children, especially the boys, echoed a similar trend among those of so-called slave women in America. Like the slave owners of the American plantation, Boko Haram controlled and conditioned the lives of these young women through its imposition and weaponization of sexual slavery, including recasting the children (boys) into the enforcers of sexual slavery. Invariably, these young women and children were gendered in the roles foisted on them by the Haramists. For these young women and children, it became a tale of abduction, powerlessness, humiliation, pain, coercion, conscription, and radical loss of agency. These young women and children declined the call to convert,

² Salafism as a word comes from the first generation of Muslims collectively referred to as al-Salaf al-Saleh meaning pious predecessors which could include the companions, the followers of the prophet and the followers of the followers of the Prophet. This is because amongst the Sunni Muslims especially, "temporal proximity to the prophet is associated with the truest form of Islam (Barkindo et al. 2013, p. 14).



participate, or adjust to Boko Haram's framing of gendering roles. By remaining single young women and Christians, they endured sexual violence and were denied their agency, thereby becoming victims of sexual violence (Ola, 2020). Some of these young women and children were broken and afflicted with STDs, and others died in the process of resisting rape. However, a few survived and became symbols of the resilience of the human spirit.

Emphasizing Gender and Cultural Dynamics

The treatment of young women by Boko Haram exemplifies entrenched patriarchal norms and cultural attitudes concerning the value and role of women, particularly exacerbated for Christian women, who are regarded as outcasts and subjected to even harsher treatment. Boko Haram's gendering roles "draws on prevailing attitudes and cultural practices regarding the social value, market value, and ultimately desirability of women in a patriarchal society" (Oriola, 2017, p. 108).

This is evident in Boko Haram's treatment of women, including its practice of forcibly acquiring women and child brides, which echoes similar cultural narratives surrounding marriage and gender roles prevalent in some parts of Northern Nigeria.

Oriola (2017, p. 114) writes:

Within the (Northern) Nigerian cultural milieu, the problem is not that Boko Haram is marrying off young girls and using them as breeders; the only problem is that Boko Haram is kidnapping young girls. This is interesting because some of the forced marriages in peacetime involve episodes like kidnapping reluctant child brides.

Also, taking young girls as brides is not culturally abhorrent in Northern Nigeria. Senator Ahmed Sani (born in 1960), a former Governor of Zamfara State, justified his marriage in 2010 and another in 2006 to a 15-year-old girl by drawing on the case of Prophet Mohammed who was said to have married a 9-year-old girl (Oriola, 2017). According to *Save the Children* (2021) regarding Borno State, the birthplace of Boko Haram:

89.13% of women aged between 15 and 49 were first married before age 15, 59% of them had no education whatsoever, 42% had some level of primary school education, and 100% had no secondary school education. Among women who are in a marital relationship or union, 46% have spouses who are older by 10 years more.³

The implication of this sort of early marriage for young women as highlighted through the gendering practices of Boko Haram's lifeworld is the undervaluation of the girl child and the belief that their role is solely within marriage including procreation. Before the rise of Boko Haram in Nigeria, young women were often routinely rounded up for marriage, and their parents' paid pittance for survival. Some survivors navigated their survival within the constrained and fragile conditions by cooperating and conforming to the imposed regimens of forced marriage—a form of tactical agency (De Boeck & Honwana, 2005; Honwana, 2005). Conversely, other Christian women who resisted conversion were objectified, subjected to

³ Save the Children. (2021, November 6). 78% of girls in the northern region of Nigeria marry before the age of 18, a new report by Save the Children International reveals [accessed 17th March 2023]. Retrieved from <https://nigeria.savethechildren.net/news/78-girls-northern-region-nigeria-marry-age-18-new-report-save-children-international-reveal>.



sexual exploitation by Boko Haram members, and compelled to bear children intended to serve as the group's future generation of fighters.

Gendered Intersections and their Implications

Survivors' use of their identity markers—such as religious affiliation, sexuality, ethnic background, and gender positioning—reveals how these elements intersect, often reinforcing or invoking broader structures of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989). Through these intersections, the survivor's experiences reengage with the complex reality of being both a woman and a Christian from a minority ethnic group in Gwoza. Additionally, they illustrate endeavors to mold young boys into hyper-masculine roles, mirroring and responding to the broader structures of oppression prevalent in North-eastern Nigeria, especially under the rule of Boko Haram.

The oppression of young Christian women and children has been of aggravated victimhood, including Boko Haram's display of gendering roles in the differentiation of Muslim women from their Christian counterparts. This is to say that young Christian women and children were subjected to a series of unwarranted suffering in such a way that these forms of physical abuse amongst others reshuffled their everyday life. Also, they were objectified as expendables (slaves, forced marriage and conversion, recruits) in Boko Haram's gendering lifeworld. Their expendability within Boko Haram's camp reinforces "gendered victimhood amidst entrenched patriarchal and masculinist stereotype" (Okoli & Azom, 2019, p. 1217). This implies that Boko Haram's deployment of violence and gendering roles impacted and affected males and females differently. Happiness, for instance, will still hold unto Christ, albeit secretly, despite being recast and foisted with a 'female Muslim' role or identity. On the other hand, Fatimah's brother will be inscribed with the signification of 'weapons of war,' or child-soldiering, and Musa will be tasked with firewood gathering and supervision of new converts.

These dynamics influenced Boko Haram's operations, aligning with what Onapajo and Uzodike (2012) describe as an extension of entrenched discriminatory practices against Christians in Northern Nigeria. It is alleged that discrimination against indigenous Christian communities in North-eastern Nigeria is endemic. There are several reports which indicate that Christian neighborhoods were often overlooked for development or basic amenities (Barkindo et al., 2013). These neighborhoods were often seen as enclaves of infidels and unbelievers, an allegation that several governmental authorities in Northern Nigeria have roundly denied. Additionally, children and (young) "women have faced broad discriminatory practices in both the professional and domestic spheres. They have been targeted in acid-attacks for 'un-Islamic' practices, such as a failure to wear the hijab, or for taking a job" (Zenn & Pearson, 2014, p. 50).



CONCLUSION

This study investigates survival mechanisms among young women and children held captive by Boko Haram, focusing on gender dynamics, resilience, and agency. Drawing on qualitative data from survivors at the International Christian Centre, the research examines how intersecting factors—such as gender, age, and imposed social roles—shaped their strategies for navigating extreme circumstances. These survivors, often stereotyped as passive and lacking agencies, reveal instead complex strategies of adaptation and resilience.

Assuming multiple roles (such as forced laborers, wives, sex slaves, spies, or disposable assets), survivors navigated Boko Haram's strict and oppressive structures by cooperating or submitting in ways that enabled tactical agency (Crenshaw, 1989; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020; Honwana, 2005). This form of agency, operating within vulnerability, underscores a strategic resilience (Ungar, 2011). Despite overwhelming constraints, they managed to survive and sometimes escape by adapting to the gendered expectations imposed on them. This resilience highlights their struggle within a broader context of patriarchal cultural norms in Northern Nigeria, where traditional gender roles were manipulated by Boko Haram to enforce control, though paradoxically providing survivors with a framework for resistance and survival.

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