(Impossible) Women and Boko Haram: The Paradox of Female Support to Sharia Law

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Since its upsurge in 2009, Boko Haram has been manifesting an increasing interest in women in both its actions and propaganda. Recent literature on the insurgent group points to the fact that Boko Haram calls for severe limitations on women in the public sphere, yet it also advocates for their right to an Islamic education and financial empowerment, thus becoming involved in the debate around the role of women in society in Northern Nigeria. In an environment where poverty, early marriage and illiteracy are the norm, a growing number of women see in Boko Haram the opportunity to advance their rights. However, the stigma associated with the group often skews understanding of the different experiences of women within Boko Haram.

This paper, therefore, seeks to explore the perceived paradox of how a Nigerian woman who (supposedly) enjoys democratic rights and equality before the law in the Nigerian secular state can join or support an insurgent group like Boko Haram, which actively promotes her subjugation through Sharia Law. In this respect, it will be argued that it is crucial to identify which conceptualizations of women's agency – or lack thereof – are mobilised in public and academic debates and what kinds of political response they may motivate. Indeed, discussions on the role of gender in the crisis have been too often reduced to recalling the outrage of the Chibok abductions and praising the subsequent advocacy movement #BringBackOurGirls. Nonetheless, while kidnapping and coercion are undoubtedly a feature of Boko Haram insurgency, they do not capture the totality of women's experiences.

In arguing so, the paper will first analyse the #BringBackOurGirls campaign as an emblematic example of victimisation narratives that help define the acceptable roles women can have in the insurgency – what the essay will refer to as 'possible women'. Then, the second section will explore how such narratives build upon neo-colonial power relationships between the Global North and the Global South, eventually calling for Western masculinity to intervene and save Muslim women. The following section will then look at Boko Haram's gender politics by highlighting how, while still regressive and patriarchal by Western liberal standards, the group might represent a significant improvement for (impossible) women within the local context of Northern Nigeria. This opens up to debates around whether Muslim women's capacity to act can be informed by a religion that is often perceived to be oppressive. To this extent, the last section will explore how conceptualisations of 'embedded agency' help us recognise that agency can be differently informed by historically, culturally, and socially specific interacting social forces. Overall, the purpose of this paper is not to propose a theory of agency, but rather to analyse agency in terms of the different forms it may assume.

#BringBackOurGirls and the 'politics of pity'

#BringBackOurGirls was born in May 2014 as a Twitter hashtag following the abduction of 276 female students in Chibok (Nigeria) by the insurgent group Boko Haram operating in the North-Eastern area of the country. However, in a few months, the hashtag transformed into a widespread online social movement. The group's opposition to Western education (particularly for women), and the perceived inaction of the Nigerian government after the abduction saw both the Nigerian and the international public flock to social media and share the hashtag to raise awareness for the abductees. For many, the campaign came to represent feminist ideals. 'Bring back our girls' was a cry for missing daughters and sisters, and a plea for international support (The Obama White House 2014). The

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kidnapped students – who unfortunately represent only the tip of the iceberg of Boko Haram's violence against civilians – came to symbolise the struggle of women all over the world, and the hashtag soon converted into a 'broader rhetoric about girls' education and rights in the Global South' (Khoja-Moolji 2015, 348).

Indeed, the campaign resonated a significant number of issues that had historically been fundamental to women's movements, such as education and equal opportunities for women in the Global South and women's exploitation more broadly. While it is true that the campaign shed light on an unreported issue, media coverage of the #BringBackOurGirls movement portrayed the abducted girls as Cynthia Enloe's 'womenandchildren', defining them by their helplessness and need for protection, as well as by a conflated notion of femininity and infantilism (2014, 1). Hence, the problem in the propagation of the #BringBackOurGirls campaign is that, as people in the Global North repeated the hashtag, they reproduced gendered power relations that are intimately related to oversimplistic conceptualisations of 'girlhood' and 'womanhood' (Berents 2016, 514). The Chibok girls were indeed made legible to the Western audience only because of their (alleged) aspirations to participate in neoliberal practices of womanhood – most crucially to be educated. As such, their mediatised identity was driven primarily by a Western notion of appropriate womanhood that is dependent on and reproduced by power and privilege. The use by the Global North of stories of women's experiences from the Global South thus 'replicate and reinforce neo-colonial narratives and consciousness' (Berents 2016, 517). The so-called 'politics of pity' – that is, portraying distant 'Others' as victims to be pitied – feeds on unequal relationships of power, gender, race and class (Chouliaraki 2010). Eventually, such representations disempower the 'Other', reproducing imaginaries of vulnerability and need for protection.

Thus, the #BringBackOurGirls campaign relied upon power dynamics which served to enforce the hegemonic relationship between the Global North and the Global South. When the Chibok girls entered the public sphere they were allowed to appear only as victims suffering unspeakable violence – these are the 'possible women'. Perceived as unable to respond to their situation themselves, such girls are believed to require assistance and intervention. Therefore, the risk that comes with campaigns such as #BringBackOurGirls is that they can be turned into an open invitation to (Western) interventionism while leaving in the shade the broader dynamics of a conflict that has been wrecking Nigeria for more than nine years.

Masculinity and The Perils of Salvation Narratives

As discussed in the previous section, when the #BringBackOurGirls hashtag was first launched the Chibok girls were claimed as everyone's girls, capturing unprecedented media attention and galvanising worldwide support. But this changed as soon as Boko Haram released a video of the girls uniformly dressed in *hijabs*. Intense Islamophobia had indeed replaced the image of the innocent schoolgirls with a Muslim 'Other' to be feared. The forced conversion of the Chibok girls only reinforced pre-existent beliefs that women in the Global South are always in danger, at risk of co-optation by extreme ideologies (and men) who do not share the liberal, 'enlightened' values of the Global North. These women thus necessitate intervention by (men of) the Global North.

This intervention can assume two forms. On the one hand, it could be speaking on behalf of these women who are appropriated into hashtags, as highlighted by the above discussion around the #BringBackOurGirls campaign. On the other hand, intervention can also be seen in the logic of 'the necessity of superior military might and the inherent duty of the Global North to intervene with force to solve the problem' (Berents 2016, 517). Most importantly, such a narrative removes any complicity by states of the Global North in contributing to the crisis and structural violence that is being responded to. By portraying the Chibok girls as victims and depicting their experience as universal, men from the Global North feel they have the duty and authority to respond militarily to the threat presented by Boko Haram insurgents. Crucially, this observation reveals how Western notions of womanhood are deeply entangled with conceptualisations of masculinity that are based on 'white men saving brown women from brown men' (Abu-Lughod 2002, 784). The victimisation of the Chibok girls has helped construct Nigerian men as unable to respond adequately themselves – i.e. not being masculine enough – thus requiring the men of the Global North to intervene on their behalf.

The #BringBackOurGirls campaign builds precisely upon such neo-colonial power relations, feminising the Global South as incapable of addressing Boko Haram's violence and framing the insurgency as the dangerous Islamic

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'Other' to which these girls are vulnerable (Berents 2016). Thus, it should be evident how salvation narratives entail a sense of racial superiority and violence that are rooted in the dichotomies of 'Us' versus Muslims, North versus South, men versus women. In her gender analysis of the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan, Lila Abu-Lughod points out how 'these (Muslim) girls are made to invoke the gift of a share of this world, a world where freedom reigns under Christian skies' (2002, 785). We therefore need to de-construct narratives of salvation and look at the assumptions behind them, questioning the fact that they often pretend to fight Islamic patriarchy to then replace it with a more subtle form of Western neoliberal patriarchy. Moreover, we should also recognise that competing representations of masculinities are at the core of framings of global womanhood. The construction of women as victims is inherently linked to notions of a 'good' masculinity of the Global North that, through the bodies and stories of the Chibok girls, is contrasted to a fundamentally weak and dangerous masculinity of the Global South. This representation is problematic not only because it reinforces the dichotomy between the Global North and the Global South, but also because it silences the experiences of those women who actively choose to support Boko Haram's insurgency. Victimisation narratives therefore draw the boundaries between possible and impossible women, thus limiting our understanding of the insurgency.

Discursive (Im)possibility of Female Support to Sharia Law

There is a general stigma – both national and international – surrounding association with Boko Haram that incentivizes narratives of coercion and abduction rather than facing the murky issue of structural violence in Nigeria. Indeed, traditional accounts of what women are during wartime tend to assign them stereotypical roles, thus getting to define who 'possible women' are (Sjoberg 2016, 56). In the case of Boko Haram, Nigerian women have been often described and analysed as a category which men are assigned to and burdened to protect: men's honour is tied to providing protection to innocent women who are assumed to be unable to defend themselves. While traditional, patriarchal accounts of the nature of women's experiences in war seldom pay attention to their suffering, when they do so, they tend to describe them as pawns of an evil enemy who is willing to victimise innocent women and children to gain strategic or tactical advantages. In other words, 'women auxiliaries, victims, and potential victims, then, are wars' possible women' (Sjoberg 2016, 58).

However, overly simplistic understandings of women's experiences in war based on the victim/perpetrator dichotomy entirely overlook a rather complex reality – that is, 'impossible women' (Sjoberg 2016, 62). Women actively joining Boko Haram are discursively impossible in the media coverage because women have been traditionally characterised as in need of rescue and vulnerable to religious conversion. While an analysis of Boko Haram's abuse of women is necessary as it reveals the group's misogyny, many of the narratives of victimisation (even inadvertently) entrench a number of gendered stereotypes that limit what Nigerian women – and men – are, thus restricting their possible roles in violent extremism. In doing so, such stories also distort the attention away from a disturbing yet well-documented reality. Women are the most marginalised by the state in Northern Nigeria, where the practice of *purdah* – i.e. women's seclusion from society symbolising a higher social status – generates a power disparity which, coupled with economic hardship, heavily impacts on women's inferior socio-economic position (Matfess 2017, 51). On top of this, child marriage – usually under the age of 16 – constitutes a major reason why the region has the highest percentage of female illiteracy and the lowest school attendance rate in the country (Oriola 2016). Marriage is indeed a significant marker of social status and a rite of passage for Nigerian men, whose public performativity of masculinity depends on their ability to provide for their wives. Extensive literature has covered how the gender politics in the country's North is oppressive to women, to say the least (see for instance Jacob and Pearson 2014; Comolli 2015).

Hence, if one looks at the structural inequality of the region, it should not come to surprise that some women can be attracted by Boko Haram, independently from how their subsequent treatment will be. It was already under the leadership of Mohammed Yusuf that the group capitalised on the marginalisation of women to obtain their support. Indeed, through marriage with a member of Boko Haram, women are offered high quality Islamic education, access to health care and financial empowerment. Within the group, for instance, bride price is widely given to the woman rather than to her parents or male guardian (Matfess 2017, 60). However, while some women may use the group to advance their own interests, this should not be confused with complete independence from a patriarchal system. Education for women within the insurgency is mainly motivated by the need to prepare them for their future role as

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mothers and wives – once again highlighting their gendered role in the Nigerian society. Nevertheless, access to education also means improved life opportunities as it transforms women into more suitable marital partners (Matfess 2017, 57).

However, this constant tension between activism and coercion makes it difficult to draw clear distinctions between actions that are voluntary and those that are merely coping mechanisms. In this respect, Ahmed-Ghosh's concept of 'patriarchy trading' might help us make sense of the fact that women, well aware of the patriarchal constraints of Boko Haram and Sharia Law, still choose the system that will best provide for their needs (2004). While Western liberal feminism might interpret this as immoral or aberrant, Muslim women's support for Sharia Law in Northern Nigeria could be an instrument to advance their rights relative to the status quo, as well as a reaction to the failure of the secular government to provide for security. Women's activism in Boko Haram, therefore, should not be seen purely as an individual interest, but also as a collective political response to the failure of the Nigerian government. To do so is crucial if we are to recognise the autonomy and agency of women in Islamist movements by looking at the socio-economic contexts that inform them.

Agency and Religion in Masculinised Spaces of Violence

As previously mentioned, one of the reasons behind the invisibility of Nigerian women actively joining Boko Haram is that they challenge assumptions about agency that are rooted in liberal secular traditions. Deviations from Western individualism are indeed often condemned as corrupt and inferior. Yet, the idea that only secularism can safeguard Muslim women's capacity is more of a Western obsession than a reality. In fact, the 'paradox' of women choosing an 'illiberal' option – often perceived as morally aberrant – cannot be analysed without critically engaging with the circumstances leading to this choice. It bears over-stressing that agency in Northern Nigeria – but also elsewhere – cannot be reduced to the subjugation/resistance dichotomy. Rather, it has to be informed by its surrounding socio-economic context.

In this respect, the notion of 'embedded agency' – capturing practices that do not entirely fit into the moral absolutism of dichotomous categorisations of coerced victims and willing participants – allows for a richer sense of how practices of subordination and domination shape the subjectivity that lies behind the capacity to act (Mihelich and Storrs 2003). By seeing agency as partly embedded in social forces like religion – which is typically believed to limit individual autonomy – one's capacity to act is not contingent on adopting liberal 'free will' approaches to subjectivity (Korteweg 2008, 438). In her work on the Egyptian Islamic revival movement, Saba Mahmood argues that liberal theories of freedom are the result of locally specific historical trajectories, rather than the universal set of norms and values they purport to be (2001). Mahmood, therefore, goes against those feminist theories that define agency solely as the capacity to resist dominant power relationships. She thus concludes that, for some women, agency does not flow from freedom (or those moments in our lives in which we are free from external constraints), but rather it is formed in direct and constant relationship with structures of subordination (2001). Building upon these considerations, female support to Boko Haram and Sharia Law cannot be understood as pure subjugation, nor pure resistance to the Nigerian secular state: it is a form of embedded agency of its own.

In fact, while the insurgent group's appeal to women should be traced back to the entrenched patriarchal system and widespread observance of Islamic precepts in Northern Nigeria – where women are socially and politically marginalised – women's activism should not be entirely attributed to their environment. Such framing facilitates a more nuanced representation of Muslim women as both agents and religious subjects. Indeed, it assumes that Muslim women's agency is shaped by social, cultural, and political motivations that intersect with, but also move beyond, religion per se (Korteweg 2008, 439). Studies that focus on 'Muslim women' often trigger assumptions in the Western imagination concerning Islam's patriarchal and misogynist qualities. Far more than issues of democracy and violence, the 'woman question' has been central to Western critiques of Islam. The strong legacy of colonialism has certainly helped secure this essential framing: colonialism rationalised itself on the basis of the inferiority of non-Western cultures, from which local women had to be rescued through the agency of colonial rule (Mahmood 2001, 189-90). This helps us explain why women actively joining Boko Haram are not taken seriously enough. However, suggesting that they have been deceived by charismatic men into believing that Boko Haram is the solution to all their problems is a gendered reading of radicalisation. Only women are tricked. Only women lack the necessary

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agency and political engagement to *want* to support or join the insurgency. The problem with both victimisation and deception narratives is that they misrepresent women's radicalisation as an essentially passive process that eventually obscures the (striking) degree to which women themselves are actively involved in violent extremist groups. Moreover, such stories also overlook people's capacity to act informed by religiosity. Aiming for a more nuanced understanding of the gender dynamics of Boko Haram is crucial. Indeed, the way we frame and understand phenomena greatly influences the kind of solutions we are able to imagine.

Conclusion

Overall, this paper has sought to explore the question of women's agency in a highly masculinised space of violence as it is the Nigerian insurgent group Boko Haram. In doing so, it has challenged gendered discussions on the abduction of the Chibok girls. Indeed, while the event must be regarded as a key element in the group's actions, it has become almost the exclusive prism through which Western understandings of women's agency within Boko Haram have been shaped. Indeed, misrepresentations of women's experiences in wartime – including silence towards most women's experiences and distortions of others – create gendered media coverage and information. In this respect, it is worth noting that media outlets emerge as active agents of the reproduction of gender-stereotyping and gender-subordinating perceptions of conflict. These narratives limit both men and women, not least by contributing to the discursive impossibility of women as active agents in violent extremism.

However, suggesting that it is important to recognise women's diverse agencies should not be confused with the misleading claim that women necessarily join radical groups such as Boko Haram for different reasons or in different ways than men do. Moreover, the analysis of women's active engagement with Boko Haram's insurgency should not be misread as resting on a claim that those women constitute a large portion of the overall experience of women within the group. Indeed, it is their bare existence that is conceptually significant. Therefore, when deploying notions of womanhood, we should critically consider how to – or even whether we can – avoid problematic narratives that obfuscate the complexity of women's experiences. In fact, the gendered and racialised conceptualisations of womanhood that often circulate through the media shape the way conflict, violence and the experiences of women in the Global South are understood and reproduced globally (Berents 2016). In this respect, the notion of embedded agency helps us shed light on the way forces like religion have multiple effects on women's agency. By approaching agency as embedded in such forces, public debates can move away from associating liberty and freedom with saving women from the socio-economic contexts that shape their agency and ultimately subjectivity. Conceptualizing Muslim women's agency as embedded thus enables an analysis that does not predicate women's capacity to act on distorted notions of liberal freedom.

Therefore, as for the case of Boko Haram, women should not be represented and analysed only as bystanders and victims as in the cases of mass abductions that have sparked international outrage. In fact, a significant number of women play a crucial role within the group as messengers, recruiters, smugglers, as well as suicide bombers. For instance, while the Nigerian army has long tended to stop and check male suspects, women – commonly seen as innocuous – were increasingly exploited by Boko Haram for these roles as they were able to move around more freely. In a similar vein, the stigma carried by women identified as previous Boko Haram members often isolates them together with their children from society, spawning new resentment and frustration (UNICEF 2016). While any in-depth analysis of the multiple roles women have in the insurgency goes beyond the scope of this paper, gender-based dynamics, if left unaddressed, are likely to play a key role in feeding the group. Therefore, understanding the experiences of women within Boko Haram – as bystanders, victims and active agents – should be central to future efforts to tackle the roots of the insurgency, so that women can actively contribute to stability and security in the area. As for the role of the Global North, a first step could be to understand what it can do to make people's lives better elsewhere besides rescuing them from their culture.

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