Beginning with UNSCR 1325 on women, peace and security, the last two decades have witnessed a sustained and growing world-wide effort to establish a normative platform upon which to base national and international policies and initiatives to achieve greater protection of women and girls in situations involving armed conflict. UNSCR 1325 has been amplified by a number of additional UN Security Council resolutions, which for the most part have focused on measures to address sexual and gender-based violence against civilians, and particularly against women and girls. Examples include UNSCR 1820, noting the need to prevent sexual and gender-based violence in armed conflict (UN, 2008), and UNSCR 1960 (UN, 2010), which defined institutional tools for combatting impunity of perpetrators of sexual and gender-based violence, and setting out steps to prevent violence and to protect women from it.

To implement the requirements of UNSCR 1325, nations have been encouraged to develop their own national action plans (UN Security Council, 2005: 2–13). As of July 2018, 74 countries had established their own plans. Some of these plans are very recent, such as Mozambique’s, which was established in June 2018 (Peace-Women, 2018). Other countries, however, began establishing their national action plans shortly after UNSCR 1325 was promulgated. The UK, for example, was already working under its fourth national action plan in 2018, as will be discussed in Chapter 5, ‘UK strategy, doctrine and gender’. Before exploring the gendered effects of armed conflict that UNSCR 1325 was intended to address, it is important to note that neither the resolution itself nor the international and national efforts to implement its goals and principles are without blemish or critics. To best assess the impact of UNSCR 1325, it is therefore useful to first briefly review the general context of armed conflict with regard to women and girls today, and to specifically examine what textual language the UN Security Council agreed to when it passed UNSCR 1325.
War’s impacts and UNSCR 1325’s main provisions

In general, armed conflict today tends to happen more often in areas which are less economically developed. Martin (2009) estimates that between 70 and 75 percent of people dislocated by war as either refugees or displaced persons are women and their minor children, and that children account for about 50 percent of all refugees (1). Kim and Conceição (2010) estimate that between 1990 and 2005, over 3 million people died in armed conflicts occurring in developing countries (31–38). Women in these areas are more likely to have a relatively inferior social and economic status as compared to men, and this gender discrimination and its effects make women more at risk to the impacts of armed conflict (Gardam and Jarvis, 2001: 8–9). These negative effects occur irrespective of whether women are in the roles of civilians caught up in the fighting, refugees or even combatants (Prescott, 2013: 87–90).

With this general picture in mind, it is now useful to examine what the UN Security Council committed to in approving UNSCR 1325 (UN, 2000). In its Pre-amble, the resolution set out four main conditions that needed to be accomplished to achieve greater protection for women and girls. First, there needed to be ‘equal participation and full involvement’ by women ‘in all efforts for the maintenance of peace and security’, particularly with regard to decision-making. Second, gender perspectives needed to be ‘mainstreamed’ into peacekeeping operations. Third, specialised training needed to be developed ‘for all peacekeeping personnel on the protection, special needs and human rights of women and children in conflict situations’. Fourth, and as noted earlier in the Introduction, the UN Security Council recognised the need ‘to implement fully international humanitarian and human rights law that protects the rights of women and girls during and after conflict’.

‘Full’ implementation of IHL and international human rights law does not mean implementation of only those areas that IHL and international human rights law have in common, such as their respective prohibitions of sexual and gender-based violence. This is not what the resolution states. In this sense, the significant number of UN Security Council resolutions subsequent to UNSCR 1325 that focus on sexual and gender-based violence are undoubtedly necessary and beneficial, but they might have obscured the full scope of UNSCR 1325’s requirements (Prescott, 2013: 103–04). The potential implications of ‘full’ implementation to the other areas of IHL such as the use of force in kinetic engagements must be explored to comply with the resolution’s requirements. Although other criticisms of UNSCR 1325 or efforts to implement it are not so focused on IHL and are therefore largely outside the scope of this book, they are worth briefly reviewing to better understand the interests and positions of other stakeholders in the resolution’s implementation at the national and international levels.

Critique of UNSCR 1325

Some of the criticisms of UNSCR 1325 and national implementation efforts are political or philosophical, but others are more directly tied to operational concerns. For example, some argue that the steps taken by different nations under their national
action plans to incorporate gender perspectives in their military activities and operations are inconsistent with the intent of the drafters of the resolution. The drafters’ intent, these writers argue, was to eliminate war, not to ‘make war safe for women’, and the ‘militarisation’ of UNSCR 1325 is therefore counterproductive to achieving the resolution’s goals (Weiss, 2011; Shepherd, 2016: 332–33). Whilst this was undoubtedly part of the historical context of the resolution’s creation, the subjective intent of civil society actors cannot control the meaning of its plain text as approved by the UN Security Council. ‘Full’ implementation of IHL suggests that the council recognised that it would still be quite some time before war became safe for women.

Winslow (2009) notes that certain feminists are critical of UNSCR 1325’s failure to address root problems because of its focus upon women and girls, rather than identifying the relationship between masculine identities during armed conflict and violent behaviour patterns that are accepted during those times because they are seen as ‘male’ (534). This criticism could be operationally relevant, although perhaps not in the way these writers were thinking. For example, some studies have attributed armed conflict between different pastoral peoples in Kenya to the impact of climate change (Pearson, 2017: 2–3). Other studies of conflict between two of these peoples, the Turkana and the Pokot, suggest instead that one significant component of the raiding of each other’s cattle are sets of ‘masculinities’ – young men striving to meet societal expectations of masculine strength and to fulfil the traditional male role of providing these valuable assets and food for their families (Schilling, Froese and Naujoks, 2018: 181).

Winslow (2009) notes as well that others have criticised UNSCR 1325 because it does not include ethnicity or class relations (543). This omission might also have operational consequences. One review of the UN mission in Eritrea and Ethiopia suggests that UN women soldiers from Ghana and Kenya interacted better with local women than did their ethnic European counterparts (Valenius, 2007: 36). Finally, in the wake of revelations of widespread sexual abuse against women and girls in the Democratic Republic of Congo by UN peacekeeping troops shortly after the passage of UNSCR 1325 (UN Secretary General, 2005), the UN’s commitment to UNSCR 1325 was seriously questioned. Although there have been subsequent cases of similar misconduct by UN troops (Oladipo, 2017) and the UN has been criticised for the handling of these cases as well (Anderlini, 2017), it is important to note that the UN has undertaken important steps to help educate and train personnel regarding their responsibilities to protect women and children, a number of which will be discussed in Chapter 9, ‘Gender in military activities and operations’. With these criticisms in mind, let’s now turn to the more specific ways in which women and girls are impacted by armed conflict.

Women and girls in armed conflict

*Impacts on women and girls as civilians caught up in the fighting*

There has been significant progress in recent years, but historically analyses and reports on armed conflicts’ effects on civilians have not tended to differentiate
Armed conflict and gender experiences of civilians based on their gender. Indeed, Gardam and Charlesworth (2000) note that the particular concerns of women have been marginalised in such assessments (150). Although women’s and girls’ gender-differentiated experiences of war occur within specific contexts, it is useful first to assess the general conditions under which many women in the world live today. In terms of relative affluence, women constitute the majority of the more than one billion people who live in poverty. Because of their traditional family roles in many cultures, women are generally less mobile than men, less likely to be employed outside the home (Gardam and Jarvis, 2001: 8–9), and generally less educated (Gardam and Charlesworth, 2000: 151, 153). Armed conflict tends to exacerbate these factors to the further detriment of women. Importantly, however, these descriptions are general—they do not apply everywhere all the time, and care must be taken in any specific operational gender analysis to determine whether and how they do.

Although modern armed conflicts involve women as military leaders (Davis, 2010; Biank, 2014) and combatants (Wright, 2011; Lemmon, 2015), the majority of women who are impacted by armed conflict are in fact civilians (Gardam and Charlesworth, 2000: 152), and they ordinarily do not have much control over the manner in which war affects them. In terms of physical insecurity, Jones (2010) notes that women are very often victims of rape, sexual assault, virtual enslavement and torture during the course and often in the aftermath of armed conflict (19–20, 58, 84, 101, 134–35, 143, 150–51, 161–62, 172). As described by Valenius (2007), other forms of sexual violence against women in these circumstances include ‘forced prostitution, . . . forced impregnation, forced maternity, forced termination of pregnancy, forced sterilisation, . . . strip searches and inappropriate medical examinations’ (20).

The brutal sexual assaults that occur during the course of armed conflict can have serious and long-lasting negative health effects for victimised women and girls. One study of rape survivors from the Democratic Republic of Congo (Leaning, Bartels and Mowafi, 2009) noted that 85 percent of the women reported vaginal discharge afterwards, and that 10 percent reported having been impregnated. Particularly serious were the large number of women who reported symptoms consistent with having suffered fistulas (tears in their vaginal, urinary and anal tracts causing unnatural connections between the two) after their rapes – 41 percent reported discharging urine or faeces from the vagina. And 77 percent of these women also reported experiencing insomnia and nightmares, and 91 percent reported suffering from feelings of shame and fear (188).

The ripple effects of these injuries upon women degrade their levels of social and economic security, as well as those of their children (Jones, 2010: 58, 161–62). Dharmapuri (2011) explains that rape and sexual violence against women can destabilise the economic productivity of communities, because they are unable to safely leave their homes and villages to go the fields to tend their crops, or to markets to sell and obtain food. This diminishes their ability to feed their families and earn currency (64). Women and girls can also find themselves at higher risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases, because they are at greater risk of sexual
violence in the lawless and chaotic situations that often arise in humanitarian disaster and armed conflict situations, and might even need to trade sex for food and other essential supplies (Decker et al., 2009: 72).

Further, Gardam and Jarvis (2001) observe that ‘Armed conflict is invariably accompanied by the disintegration of societal structures, which will leave women more disadvantaged because of their inferior position than men’ (20). Because women in general have access to fewer economic resources to begin with in many societies, they are both less able to resist the hardships caused by armed conflict and less likely to have the resilience to rebuild after the conflict has ended. In addition, women may be dependent upon the men of their families to earn a living, and armed conflict will often take men away from their homes and livelihoods as either combatants or refugees (Gardam and Charlesworth, 2000: 151–53). In terms of the gender-differentiated impact of armed conflict, Buscher (2009) notes that in non-international armed conflicts, whilst young men find themselves forming a recruiting pool for combatant groups, often because of their limited economic choices, young women and girls will often find themselves dropping out of school to take on chores additional to their ordinary tasks such as drawing water, collecting biomass for energy and caring for family members (88).

Women and teenaged girls therefore often become the providers and protectors for their families, in addition to the time-consuming domestic duties they already perform (Gardam and Charlesworth, 2000: 153; Valenius, 2007: 23). Coupled with their often lower levels of education and training, these great responsibilities are not matched by opportunities for women and girls to obtain meaningful and remunerative work. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR; 2008) finds this is particularly the case with the diversion of resources that occurs in conflict situations that might otherwise be used for capacity-building purposes (306–10), and Gardam and Jarvis (2001) note that it occurs as well in the generally austere conditions that characterise post-conflict situations (40).

Unfortunately, women civilians experience armed conflict’s negative effects even if they are not caught up directly in the fighting. Buscher (2009) details how armed conflict disrupts livelihoods, by decreasing access to markets and financial assets, reducing access to land for growing crops or herding animals, and damaging vital infrastructure (89). The insecurity caused by armed conflict often restricts women’s freedom of movement, often forcing them to lose their livelihoods (88–89). In addition, because women in these conflict zones are not likely to be able to equitably access economic resources even during times of relative peace, their resilience to withstand the hardships caused by armed conflict or to rebuild quickly once the fighting is done might be severely impaired (Gardam and Charlesworth, 2000: 151, 153).

**Impacts on women and girls as refugees**

Refugees in general are ‘exposed to foreign – and often inadequate – living conditions, and consequently tend to be more prone to accidents, injuries and disease’
Armed conflict and gender (Gardam and Charlesworth, 2011: 124). The risks of such events, however, are greater for women than they are for men. Women who find themselves as refugees from armed conflict must survive under particularly trying circumstances. Refugee camp living conditions are often substandard, and women therefore often lack appropriate hygienic facilities or basic medical care. Shortages of contraceptive supplies mean that women are at risk of increased pregnancy during these times of intense stress (Gardam and Charlesworth, 2011: 125). Refugee camps also present an increased risk of sexual violence to women, but the specialised medical services necessary to treat victims of sexual assault might be in very short supply (UN News Centre, 2011).

This is not to say that sexual assault and its effects are suffered only by female refugees. Storr (2011) points out that men are likewise subject to sexual violence, and they too are at greater risk of its occurrence when they are uprooted from their homes during armed conflict. Sexual violence against men tends to be under-reported, notes Valenius (2007), and reported by victims as ‘torture’ rather than sexual assault because of masculinity concerns and cultural taboos in different societies (18). For these reasons, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (2012) has drawn up a list of indicators to help identify men who have been victims of sexual violence (8–9). The international community has also been paying more attention to this violence experienced by male refugees as a result of war, as demonstrated by the recent UN High Commissioner for Refugees’ report on the sexual abuse of men and boys in the Syrian Civil War (Chenoweth, 2017). Women and girl refugees, however, still constitute the majority of the victims (UNHCR, 2003: 6).

In refugee camps, when food is scarce, cultural attitudes will often mean that women and girls eat what is left over after the men and boys are fed – or they might simply not eat at all (Gardam and Charlesworth, 2000: 155). Women, girls and boys must often exchange sexual favours for food in refugee camps (Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2002: 27). Jones (2010) has identified the special challenges that face women who are permanently displaced from their homes in making new lives as refugees (172). She also notes that because of their generally inferior status, women often find themselves without marketable skills as they try to adapt to life as refugees (172, 202–28).

Buscher (2009) notes that for those female refugees who flee to urban areas rather than camps, there might be more employment opportunities, but often they will be required to seek permission to work there, which can be difficult for them to obtain (94). Often, those who had engaged in land-based work raising their own crops or tending livestock are only able to find work in menial and marginalised trades, such as maids or servants, which not only likely pay little but can also be socially humiliating for them as well (90). Even if they do return to their homes, these women often find themselves marginalised in peace negotiations and in the rebuilding and reconciliation process. Further, Valenius (2007) reports that although the ‘official’ conflict might be over, women will still face the threat of continued violence, discrimination and untreated medical problems in these often austere environments (16, 22–23).
Impacts on women and girls as combatants

There can be very real differences between the experiences of a professional woman soldier in the military of a developed country and those of a woman who finds herself in the role of a combatant in a less developed country, often on behalf of a faction or an insurgency rather than her country’s formal military. As gender barriers continue to fall in the militaries of developed countries, women now find that many combat positions that were once closed to them solely on the basis of their sex are available to them. Canada and New Zealand opened all of their military positions to women in 2001 (Cawkill et al., 2009: 17, 27), Australia in 2011 (Department of Defence, n.d.) and the UK (Ministry of Defence and Prime Minister’s Office, 2016) and the US (Pellerin, 2015) in 2016. This potentially increases opportunities for promotion and positions that will further develop their leadership and technical skills.

Even Japan, which by many different measures is very male-normative and male-dominated in its economic and political spheres, with defined and limited social and economic gender roles for women, has begun making a deliberate effort to increase the number of women in its Self-Defense Forces, and to open up military positions to them (Prescott, Iwata and Pincus, 2016: 1–2), as will be discussed in detail in Chapter 9, ‘Gender in military activities and operations’. Frühstück’s (2007) research has shown that historically, Japanese female service members have been concentrated in communications, intelligence, medical and accounting specialties, and in general duties units (91). As an example of increased gender equality, the Japan Air Self-Defense Force recently opened up the role of fighter pilot to women (NBC News, 2017). Prior to that, women had not been allowed to fly fighters because of concern that it would impact their ability to bear children (Ministry of Defense, 2014: 351).

In many developed countries today, female service members’ employment and operational experiences will be increasingly more like their male comrades’. As they work in these new roles they have chosen, these women will still be receiving the same benefits, health care and otherwise, to which they would be entitled under their respective national systems if they were serving in what were considered more traditional positions for women service members. These women are likely to be recognised for their leadership and actions in combat (Wright, 2011). Returning home, although there continue to be strong concerns that the needs of female veterans are neither fully understood nor properly provided for (Neuhaus and Cromptvoets, 2013: 530–32; Medill Reports Chicago, 2016), they will likely be reintegrating into societies that accept and value their career choices. They will have developed skills and resources that would allow them a high degree of economic agency in civilian life. The position of women combatants in less developed countries, particularly in non-international armed conflict situations (Dharmapuri, 2011: 62), can be quite disadvantaged by comparison.

Young women and girls in these conflicts might find themselves fighting on behalf of factions or insurgencies, often unwillingly, without the social and
economic safety net, their countries’ regular military organisations have available to them. In some cases, women combatants might have been members of their countries’ armed forces but decided to switch sides. In many others, they may be fighting for revenge because of losses inflicted upon their families. Although these women and girls perform many tasks that are same as the men they fight alongside (Korge, 2013), their roles, statuses and experiences are not completely the same (Dharmapuri, 2011: 62). For example, Valenius (2007) notes that these women fighters also function in many logistical roles, such as cooking, setting up camp and transporting equipment and materiel; often as sexual partners for the men; and as spies (23).

These women and girls sometimes achieve leadership roles in their irregular military units, and become well-known for their martial skills, such as ‘Black Diamond’, a Liberian rebel soldier who became prominent for her ferocity in the Liberian civil war (Huffman, 2013: 7–8, 20–22). Another example might be Colonel Umuraza, a rebel officer in the M23 insurgent group in the Democratic Republic of Congo, whose story is among the many of female fighters documented in Francesca Tosarelli’s photo documentary ‘Ms. Kalashnikov’ (2013). The women who fight in the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga are perhaps one of the better-known examples of female frontline combatants serving in an army that has in many respects the characteristics of a national military force (Nilsson, 2018: 265–71). Similarly, the daring raid into Iraq in 2014 by Syrian Kurdish women soldiers and police belonging to the People’s Protection Units and Women’s Protection Units to rescue tens of thousands of Yazidi refugees on Mount Sinjar from Islamic State forces (Tax, 2016: 41–42) stands out as an example of small unit leadership and tactical competence. As one rescued Yazidi man noted, ‘Women fighters – they saved us. My society, Yazidi society, is more, let’s say, traditional. I’d never thought of women as leaders, as heroes, before’ (Enzinna, 2015).

Although not the case with the Kurdish female combatants (Tax, 2016: 143–46), in many other non-state forces women will often bear and care for children as the result of rape or relationships with the men, including forced marriage, and their reintegration into post-war societies presents them with very significant challenges. Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration provisions in post-war settlements often fail to recognise their special needs (Valenius, 2007: 23). Wessells (2011) has pointed out that official programmes are often heavily military and security oriented, and therefore ill-suited to address returning women fighters’ needs in civilian society. Conversely, unofficial programmes conducted by humanitarian organisations might be better crafted to help the women fit back in to their communities, but they tend to be under-resourced and unevenly available to impacted populations (189–90).

Wessells (2011) also notes that when these women and girls return, the behaviour patterns that they developed as fighters might seem unruly and disrespectful to their civilian communities. They might also experience sexual harassment (192–93, 200) and other forms of gender discrimination (Worthen et al., 2012: 26). They must often endure the social stigma that may attach to them as former female
combatants, such as being called ‘rebel girls’ (Wessells, 2011: 192). Further, while participating in the fighting, they were at risk from sexually transmitted diseases and damage to their reproductive systems, because they often were required to have sex with male fighters on demand, and the medical care they received while fighting was likely inadequate. These factors will often lead to these women not being seen as desirable marriage prospects (Wessells, 2011: 189, 192–93), which will also likely act to compromise their reintegration into their communities (IRIN, 2011). Women who were married when they were abducted into the fighting may find that their husbands reject them upon their return (Wessells, 2011: 193).

Because of this, when these young women and girls seek to reintegrate into communities, they often experience psycho-social distress and social isolation (Worthen et al., 2012: 25). Decker and her co-authors (2009) point out that the ‘restoration of physical, sexual, reproductive, and mental health is an important part of the reintegration process, and is typically a key priority of women and girls exiting situations of sexual exploitation’ (81). In one study of a reintegration programme conducted in Sierra Leone between 2001 and 2005 after the disastrous civil war there, the returning women actually described the stresses of trying to reintegrate as worse than what they had experienced as fighters (Wessells, 2011: 192). Significant numbers might not be able to return to their home communities, and those that do often find that it is difficult to resume relationships with their parents (Worthen et al., 2012: 26).

These returning young women and girls do not necessarily have economically valuable skills, and might find themselves relegated to occupations such as collecting firewood or farming other people’s land (Worthen et al., 2012: 25–26). Worse yet, the combination of stigmatisation, rejection by their communities and their lack of livelihood skills may force them to enter into sex work (Wessells, 2011: 189), which could unfortunately confirm negative opinions by community members as to their promiscuity. Not only will those who are young mothers of children fathered by fighters often suffer from stigmatisation, but their children will too (Worthen et al., 2012: 25–26).

Further, for girls who were fighters, reintegration programmes often try to fit them into vocational training that emphasises traditional gender roles, and therefore fail to accommodate the very non-traditional experiences the girls had as combatants (IRIN, 2013). On the other hand, the Sierra Leone programme noted earlier focused on four main lines of effort to smooth the reintegration process: increased access to health care, development of livelihood skills and income, increased educational opportunities and the strengthening of ‘community mechanisms for protection and reconciliation’ (Wessells, 2011: 193). Wessels also reports that evaluation of the programme after its completion noted significant increases in measures of reintegration progress by individual participants, often by proxy, such as increases in calorie intake, micro-financing loan repayment timeliness and the number of marriages (193–202).

All of these factors and experiences of women and girls as civilians, as refugees and as combatants are of course generalised when extracted from their specific
contexts and categorised this way. In any given operational theatre, these effects and problems might not all manifest amongst affected women and girls, and these same effects and problems might emerge in different times and different places. Therefore, it is important to consider how these factors and experiences might play out in a specific context so as to understand the complexities they present to conducting useful and actionable gender analysis in a theatre of operations. Let’s turn now to a case study of the impact of an armed conflict upon women and girls that has gained widespread international attention – the civil war between the government of Nigeria and the forces of a jihadi organisation known often by its abbreviation ‘JAS’ in Nigeria, and in the West as Boko Haram.1

A case study in armed conflict’s impacts on women – Boko Haram’s operationalisation of gender

Background

The Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria provides an unfortunately useful example of how these different, gendered factors affecting women and girls as civilians and as combatants play out in a non-international armed conflict. Boko Haram began as a very conservative Muslim religious movement around 2002 in Borno state, calling for the rejection of Western culture and Nigerian institutions that were not consistent with Islam (Comolli, 2015: 45–50; Matfess, 2017b: 10–11). The International Crisis Group (ICG) notes that this part of Nigeria is characterised by the practice of a conservative form of Islam, buttressed by the enactment of a strict form of Sharia law in many of the states that make up the region (2016: 2). Christians are a minority group in this region (Kriesh, 2017).

Economically, Nigeria’s northeast is impoverished. In 2012, 75 percent of the population of Nigeria’s northern states were living in poverty (Comolli, 2015: 2). Women may own household goods and have access to farm and pastoral land, but they are rarely land holders; in fact only about 4 percent of the landowners in this area are women. Women are marginalised from political life (Matfess, 2017b: 2), and the International Crisis Group (2016) notes that the female illiteracy rate was 72 percent in 2013 (2). Matfess (2017b) reports that only about 4 percent of girls manage to complete their secondary education (2017b: 47). Women and girls tend to marry fairly young, and females in this area have a high fertility rate, which is sadly coupled with a high maternal mortality rate (ICG, 2016: 3).

Led by the charismatic cleric Mohammed Yusuf, Boko Haram steadily gathered increasing numbers of supporters, and increasing political and financial influence in the area (Comolli, 2015: 52, 79–80; Matfess, 2017b: 17). Boko Haram’s message of Islamic order, Islamic education for women and a recognised status for women also attracted a significant number of female followers (ICG, 2016: 4, 5). For a significant number of women, life under Boko Haram held the promise of being more predictable and less onerous than in the more secular northern communities (Matfess, 2017a: 6, 57–58). As Boko Haram grew in strength, friction developed
between it and the Nigerian government, culminating in violence between Boko Haram members and police forces, and attacks on police stations and government buildings (Comolli, 2015: 53).

The Nigerian government violently cracked down on Boko Haram in July 2009, sending in military units to support the police. Comolli (2015) recounts how Yusuf surrendered to the military, and was then turned over to the police, who apparently then executed him (54–56). Surviving members of the movement dispersed, and began conducting revenge and guerrilla attacks. Men suspected of having assisted the Nigerian security forces were attacked and killed. Kidnappings of women and children, initially of Christians, began in 2013, ostensibly to secure hostages to exchange for detained family members of Boko Haram leaders. From this point on, the kidnapping of women became a common Boko Haram tactic. As civilian vigilante groups from Christian and Muslim communities emerged to fight Boko Haram later in 2013 (the so-called ‘Civilian Joint Task Force’), Boko Haram fighters began capturing Muslim women as well (ICG, 2016: 6–8). Although there were documented instances of killings of women, particularly those who sought to escape or who refused to convert to Boko Haram’s teachings, as the insurgency continued Boko Haram tended to spare them, but kill the men it captured outright (Bauer, 2016: 62; ICG, 2016: 7; Matfess, 2017b: 25, 89).

Ironically, Boko Haram’s attacks on women have resulted in women assuming combatant and leadership roles that probably would not have occurred otherwise. Nigerian women have now joined the different vigilante groups protecting their communities (ICG, 2016: 11), performing searches of women suspected of smuggling weapons for Boko Haram or being suicide bombers (Comolli, 2015: 128). Collyer (2017) reports how one Muslim woman, Aisha Bakari Gombi, who grew up hunting with her grandfather, now works as a hunter of Boko Haram, assisting the Nigerian military and local people by tracking and recovering abductees by leading a team of men. Another Muslim woman, Hamsat Hassan, is a fellow insurgent hunter likewise leading a team of men, who joined the fight because Boko Haram fighters kidnapped her sister.

**Treatment of abducted women and girls by Boko Haram**

Over time, as the Nigerian military and the vigilante groups have clawed back territory from Boko Haram control, kidnapped women and girls have managed to escape or have been freed. A 2014 Human Rights Watch (HRW) report based on interviews with returning Christian women and girls abducted by Boko Haram documented the abuses they suffered at the hands of their jihadi captors. Some were threatened with death unless they renounced their religion and accepted Islam, whilst others were threatened with whippings or beatings if they did not. Those who refused to convert were often forced to become ammunition bearers in military operations, or forced to work as porters carrying plunder from villages that had been attacked by Boko Haram. Unfortunately, Matfess (2017b) reports that a number of women also suffered sexual abuse at the hands of their Nigerian military liberators (30–31).
A number of female victims stated that they had been subjected to rape, generally after they had been forced to marry Boko Haram fighters. According to social workers who have worked with some of the victims, the rape of abductees has been underreported due to the conservative nature of the communities in north-eastern Nigeria, which has led to stigmatisation of victims of sexual abuse (HRW, 2014). Other reports based on interviews with women who escaped suggest that hundreds of women were raped, many repeatedly (Bloom and Matfess, 2016: 110). Fearing rejection from her husband, one married woman interviewed by Human Rights Watch who had been abducted and raped chose not to inform him of what had happened to her, which complicated her receiving the medical and psychological care she required (Braunschweiger, 2014).

Braunschweiger (2014) also detailed another young woman being used as a decoy to lure Christian men into Boko Haram control, where they would be given the choice of either converting to Islam or being killed. When the captured men refused, their Boko Haram captors slit their throats. Although this woman managed to escape, she was later informed that because Boko Haram fighters believed she was pregnant with their leader’s child, they were seeking to recapture her. In this sense, Boko Haram’s physical and psychological impacts on the returning women can continue long after they escape its grasp. Those displaced by fighting involving Boko Haram suffer negative impacts as well, even if they were not directly attacked.

**The camps for internally displaced persons**

Perhaps as many as 2.8 million people have been displaced by the conflict, and in 2017, Matfess reported that more than 4.4 million people were experiencing severe food insecurity, the majority of both sets being women and children (2017b: 146–47). Women and girls who escape from Boko Haram have often found themselves having to live in government-run camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs), or sometimes informal camps operating with little or no government assistance. Women and girls in these camps, which are generally staffed and guarded by men, have been victims of sexual violence, or have had to prostitute themselves to obtain food, money or permission to leave the camps (ICG, 2016: 14).

The camps have often been lacking in adequate food, clean water and proper medical facilities and services for pregnant women (Omole, Welye and Abimbola, 2015: 941), particularly the informal camps (Matfess, 2017b: 174–75). Within the camps, women who were abducted by Boko Haram are often viewed with disfavour and socially isolated. In research conducted by the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and International Alert (2016) among women in IDP camps, the services and items provided to the women and girl survivors of sexual abuse that were particularly appreciated were ‘psycho-social support, maternal health care and distribution of hygiene kits’ (12). They also noted that ‘The lack of livelihood opportunities for women inside IDP camps, especially for those who have been rejected by their husbands and separated from families, has reportedly created destitution. Some women and girls have exchanged sexual activities for money’ (13).
**Difficult homecomings**

When women returning from areas controlled by Boko Haram sought to reintegrate back into their communities, they often found themselves the subject of suspicion as to whether their loyalties still held with the group. People in the receiving communities feared that they might become suicide bombers (ICG, 2016: 15) or even recruit others to join Boko Haram (UNICEF, 2016: 15). Even when young women and girls are accepted by their families, the psychological damage they have suffered can make it difficult to actually reintegrate with them (Baker, 2017). Women with children fathered by Boko Haram fighters have also often been regarded unfavourably by their families, even in instances where the pregnancy was forced, given the conservative mores of the north-eastern communities regarding extra-marital sex. The children brought back by these young mothers have often been stigmatised themselves, as being of ‘bad blood’ (ICG, 2016: 15), and that they will grow up to be the next generation of fighters (UNICEF, 2016: 9). Community members sometimes threatened to kill these children (Bauer, 2016: 47).

In some cases, the social ostracism is so intense that women will move to different locations to avoid it (Amusan and Ejoke, 2017: 58), further delaying their reintegration into civil society. The UN Children’s Fund and International Alert (2016) report that there are often concerns among family members and the young women and girls whether they will be able to marry later (17). In many cases, because of the physical and psychological trauma experienced by the kidnapped women, they are not healthy enough to fully engage with efforts to provide them vocational training or employment (Amusan and Ejoke, 2017: 58). By way of comparison, Yazidi women abducted by Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant fighters in Iraq suffered many of the same conditions and attacks experienced by these Nigerian women (Tax, 2016: 40–41). Yazidi refugees too have struggled to recover after the trauma of the Islamic State attacks, and still evidence psychological scars despite being in relatively safe locations (Erdener, 2017: 63–69). Clearly, these sorts of impacts are not limited to victims of Boko Haram.

**Rehabilitation and ‘de-radicalisation’**

International attention focused on this civil war in 2014 after Boko Haram fighters raided a Christian girls’ school in Chibok and kidnapped 276 girls. When 82 of them were released in May 2017, they were placed in a specially designed residential facility where they stayed for nine months, receiving health services, psychological counselling, trauma therapy and remedial education courses (Baker, 2017). As the Nigerian government regained control over areas of the country’s northeast, the international community also became aware that it was not just the female victims of Boko Haram who required attention, but its female supporters as well. In one case, a number of wives of Boko Haram members and their children were placed in a ‘de-radicalisation’ centre. These women were under armed guard, and not allowed to leave the centre, but women social workers were actually responsible for them. It is unclear whether participating in this programme would actually assist these women and their families reintegrate back into their communities (ICG, 2016: 16).
In another case, the director of the Nigerian National Security Agency’s Behavioural Analysis and Strategic Communications office, Dr Fatima Akilu, announced in 2015 that 20 women and girls who had been recruited by Boko Haram were undergoing a rehabilitation and de-radicalisation programme (The NEWS, 2015). This programme provided medical care, psycho-social support, counselling for post-traumatic stress disorder, education and livelihood training, but it was no longer in operation by the end of 2015 (UNICEF, 2016: 10). The programme was funded by the EU and the UK (Freeman, 2015). The UN Children’s Fund and International Alert (2016) reported that ‘Communities believe that the government-led “de-radicalisation” process for those who spent time with JAS in captivity is a necessary precondition for their reintegration’ (18). After she left government in 2015, Dr Akilu founded the Neem Foundation, a non-governmental organisation that specialises in research and providing services in the field of preventing violent extremism (Neem Foundation, 2016), and which builds on the work she and her team performed with their earlier Countering Violent Extremism Programme for the National Security Agency. In a later interview, Dr Akilu explained that although women might successfully complete the de-radicalisation programme, they might still experience stigmatisation in their communities (Matfess, 2017a).

Matfess (2017b) notes that there are reports of young women who have been through this sort of intensive programme who then decide to re-join their husbands in Boko Haram. The reasons vary, but for many it seems that they have assessed that their quality of life was actually better in the insurgency – for example, if they were married to more senior Boko Haram commanders and enjoyed a higher social status. The payment of the bride price by many suitors directly to women in areas under Boko Haram control rather than to the women’s families appears to have been a significant factor in many women’s perceptions of their treatment under the insurgency. Perhaps related to this calculation, the de-radicalisation programmes for women have been critiqued as not focusing on allowing the women to acquire skills or providing training that could help these young mothers, now single, support themselves and their families (60–61).

The complexity of gendered effects

To focus only on the grave sexual abuse of the women and girls Boko Haram fighters kidnapped is to fail to appreciate the full scope of the gender complexity of this armed conflict. Tragically, many young women have become suicide bombers (Bloom and Matfess, 2016: 105). This is in contrast to Al Shabaab in Somalia, another African jihadi terrorist group, which rarely appears to use female suicide bombers (Davis, 2017: 113–14). Although Davis states that ‘For Boko Haram, the only operational role for women is suicide-bombers’ (2017: 107), Boko Haram might also have found places for women in its ranks as actual leaders and fighters. Interviews with former Boko Haram fighters suggest that it had between 500 and 1,000 female members, who mainly served as foot soldiers. Others served as recruiters for the organisation, as spies and as explosives experts (Botha and Abdile,
This report of Boko Haram’s use of women as actual combatants is perhaps corroborated to a degree by certain other reports of female insurgents taking a direct part in hostilities (ICG, 2016: 10), and Matfess’s recent field work in the area of Boko Haram’s insurgency (2017b: 130–34). Matfess did note reports of women with higher-ranking social status in Boko Haram becoming ‘enforcers’ of Boko Haram theology when the men fighters are away from their communities (122–23).

Summary

The gendered nature of armed conflict’s impacts upon women and girls poses significant problems for countries and communities trying to stabilise their security situations in times of armed conflict. The impacts have profound negative effects on community cohesion, economic development and individual women’s and girls’ physical and mental health. From an operational perspective, it is important for militaries to realise that regardless of how successful their actions against insurgents might be in terms of destroying the insurgents or neutralising their influence in civilian-centric environments, these efforts alone might not be sufficient to generate the durable stability in these areas that the militaries are seeking to achieve. Unless complementary efforts provide some degree of employment and health security to female victims of armed conflict, as well as fostering environments where they are less subject to social, political and economic discrimination, lasting stability could be elusive.

To be operationally useful, gender analysis must be granular, that is, accurate, detailed and specific to the operational theatre. For example, from the perspective of understanding the strengths and nature of one’s adversary, as noted previously regarding areas formerly controlled by Boko Haram, marriage to Boko Haram fighters was often viewed positively by women and their families in both a social and an economic sense. The International Crisis Group (2016) reported that officially, wives appear to have enjoyed a more favourable status than mere captives, and that Boko Haram fighters would often offer relatively attractive dowries for brides (8–9). Further, as noted earlier, the dowries were often paid directly to the women rather than their families, incentivising young women to voluntarily agree to marriage to Boko Haram insurgents (Matfess, 2017a). Also, women might find themselves, willingly or not, in the role of enforcers of insurgent ideology or religious practices, and this further complicates their reintegration into post-conflict societies (Moaveni, 2015).

If Mao was correct that the people are like the sea in which the insurgent swims (1937: Chapter 6), these gender-related factors cannot be discounted in terms of Boko Haram’s continuing ability to wage its war amongst the people and retain a degree of resiliency in the face of concentrated government military action (Nigeria, 2016: 21262–63). This presents a dilemma potentially for deploying forces – insurgencies might actually enjoy a sense of heightened legitimacy among local women as compared to the status quo society ostensibly protected by the host nation the deploying forces are there to support. Challenging deficiencies in the governments of
host nation allies is delicately done. If, however, such positions are supported by a rigorous gender analysis that helps focus on specific action items rather than broad cultural judgements, this conversation could be conducted properly and respectfully, and deployed force units should not therefore shy away from these tasks for fear of giving unintended offence. Finally, from an environmental perspective, these issues also factor into community, family and individual resilience to the effects of climate change in those areas where climate change is having a gendered impact upon women and girls. With that in mind, let’s examine the relationship between gender and climate change.

Note

1 The full name of the organisation is Jama’atu Ahlus-Sunnah Lidda’awati Wal Jihad, sometimes also referred to by the abbreviation of this name, JAS.

References


Armed conflict and gender


