

Out of the Shadows: The Women Countering Insurgency in Nigeria

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Moving beyond the focus on violence *against* women and violence committed *by* women, this article interrogates violence *countered* by women. The article sheds new light on the gendered practices of counterinsurgency in northeast Nigeria, with critical attention to why women joined the civilian resistance to the Boko Haram insurgency and their complex role and agency as local security providers. Using the voices and lifeworlds of women who joined the Civilian Joint Task Force (*yan gora*) in Borno State as well as the Vigilante Group Nigeria and Hunters Association (*kungiya marhaba*) in Adamawa State, the article underscores the layered and gender-bending role of women as frontline fighters, knowledge brokers, state informants, and producers of vigilante technologies. The article finds that women counterinsurgents mobilized after Boko Haram shifted its strategy toward using female insurgents, especially as suicide bombers. Women joined the war against Boko Haram for complex reasons, including personal loss, revenge, family ties, community attachment, patriotism, and a collective yearning for normalcy.

Keywords: Boko Haram, Nigeria, Civilian Joint Task Force, women, gender, insurgency, counterinsurgency

This article is about the women countering the violent insurgency of Boko Haram in northeast Nigeria, a predominantly Muslim region where women are seen but hardly heard. Women's role and agency in African wars have attracted critical attention in recent decades (e.g., Coulter 2008; Denov and Maclure 2006; Fox 2004; Keairns 2003; Marks 2017; Pearson and Nagarajan 2020). Existing scholarship shows, on the one hand, the manner in which internal wars reify gender

The author is grateful for the generous support of the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, whose Distinguished Scholar Award enabled this research.

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doi:10.1017/S1743923X21000283

1743-923X

stereotypes and reinforce the gendered division of labor (e.g., Sjoberg and Gentry 2007; Viterna 2013; Wood 2019) and, on the other hand, the distinct ways in which the traditional gender order is being challenged by women's role in internal wars, especially how conflict can disrupt, if *pro tempore*, gender norms and roles in often surprising and productive ways (e.g., Berry 2018; Freedman 2015; Mageza-Barthel 2015; Tripp 2015). While men prevail as the *fons et origo* of war, women have always been hugely influential in forming the social networks and infrastructure that both state and nonstate actors rely on for support and success (Dyvik 2013).

The wealth of research on gender dynamics in African insurgencies focuses on women's participation in either rebel groups (Cohen 2013; Marks 2017; Wood 2019) or African state armed forces (Baaz and Stern 2013); there is, however, a significant dearth of research on the gendered practices of counterinsurgencies. In particular, there is scant literature on the voices and lifeworlds of women vigilantes and hunters in West Africa and the Sahel, who are not only putting their lives on the line every day in defense of their terror-stricken communities, but also practically and affectively invested in ordering statecraft and reinventing order. This article is not so much about the belabored case of women as "weapons of terror" in African insurgencies as it is about women working to shield their local communities from agents of violence and extreme fear.

Women counterinsurgents are, of course, not a new phenomenon in African wars, nor are they specific to the continent. There is a growing corpus of scholarly accounts on women's role and contributions as counterinsurgents in African wars, from Sierra Leone to Liberia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (e.g., Coulter, Persson, and Utas 2008; Baaz and Stern 2012; Marks 2017). Beyond Africa, the case of Kurdish women guerrilla fighters is well documented (Wood 2019). By training our sights on the gendered practices of counterinsurgency in northeast Nigeria, of which remarkably little is known, this article contributes to knowledge of the versatile roles that women play in the course of African counterinsurgencies. It does this by engaging women counterinsurgents beyond the shadows of male counterinsurgents and Boko Haram women. In so doing, the article challenges the binary focus on the role and impact of women as victims or perpetrators and moves the literature beyond its fixation on women's involvement in armed rebellion.

The article focuses on the contributions of women to the Borno state-sponsored Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) or *yan gora* (youth with

sticks), the anti-Boko Haram vigilante movement that formed in early 2013 with the twin objectives of protecting members of their communities and assisting the Nigerian joint task forces in defeating Boko Haram. The analysis extends beyond the CJTF to include women vigilantes and hunters serving as a potent civilian counterforce to the Boko Haram insurgency in Adamawa State. The article asks, Why did women join the war against Boko Haram, and what role do they play in the civilian resistance to the deadly jihadist group?

Building upon emergent scholarship on the growing engagement of women and women-led civil society organizations in forms of counter-radicalization, civil resistance, and (in)formal peacebuilding in northeast Nigeria (e.g., Imam, Biu, and Yah 2020; Nwangwu and Ezeibe 2019; Usman, El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, and Hawaja 2020), the article underscores the versatile role of women in anti-Boko Haram vigilante groups in Borno and Adamawa States as frontline fighters, local knowledge brokers, friskers, investigators, and producers of vigilante technologies. The article suggests that the appreciable shift in Boko Haram's strategy toward using female insurgents (especially as suicide bombers) was a central factor in the rise of women counterinsurgents. Women, I argue, joined the war for a variety of reasons: personal losses, revenge, family ties, community attachment (i.e., sense of belonging), desire to ensure their own protection as well as that of their community, strong sense of duty (i.e., love of country), and collective yearning for the restoration of peace and normalcy to Borno State. By taking to public spaces and battlefronts (including roadside checkpoints and forests), women, this article demonstrates, have found a way of subverting the restrictive *purdah* system in northern Nigeria, which veils and secludes the Muslim woman from society and limits her movements outside the confines of her compound, whose gates are clearly marked *BA SHIGA*, meaning "No Entry."¹

This article draws theoretical insights from Laleh Khalili's (2011, 1475) gendered counterinsurgency thesis, which postulates that gender analysis is not just a complementary form of analysis in population-centric counterinsurgency but an integral one. By gendering, Khalili calls our attention to a set of practices and discourses that constitute men and women *and* masculinities and femininities in particular ways (1473).

1. For example, a "complete woman" is perceived among older men in Borno State as one who is always at home. In fact, religiously, a woman is not allowed to go out in the public, including the market (NSRP 2016, 16).

In her words, “The complex process by which ‘civilians’ are mapped to grids, and men and women are ‘read’ and interpellated according to the constructed notion of ‘civilian’ is one of the central forms that this counterinsurgency gendering takes” (1474). On the one hand, the gendered coding of counterinsurgency underscores the centrality of women to both the narrative and the practice of war. On the other hand, it provides a fundamental framework for considering how the bodies and sexuality of women are transformed into technologies of knowledge, power, and coercion in counterinsurgent zones. As Khalili points out, “Counterinsurgency doctrine and practice directly bring those bodies and spaces previously coded ‘private’ or ‘feminine’ — women, non-combatant men, and the spaces of the ‘home’ — into the battlefield; transform cities and homes and persons into highly gendered segments of the ‘physical and human terrain’; and utilize detailed knowledge about the quotidian (both perceived and coded as feminine) as ‘ethnographic intelligence’” (1474). By foregrounding the gendered practices of the war against Boko Haram, my hope is to show how counterinsurgency too often relies, if covertly, on women’s bodies and intimate knowledge for its success. In so doing, I hope to problematize the militarized masculinity narrative that has long dominated and distorted African wars.

This study comes from broader fieldwork on anti-Boko Haram vigilante militia groups in northeast Nigeria (Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa States) spanning June 2017 to July 2019. More immediately, it draws on fieldwork conducted between September and December 2017 and situated in two of the three states most adversely affected by the violent insurgency, namely, Borno (Maiduguri and Abadam) and Adamawa (Yola and Gombi). The selection of these field sites was based primarily on safety and accessibility and secondarily on the potential to extend my interview beyond the CJTF to include perspectives from the Vigilante Group Nigeria (VGN) and hunter associations. I started my fieldwork in Adamawa because it was relatively peaceful and could prepare me for the more volatile Borno State. In Borno, I spent most of my time in Maiduguri because the CJTF was headquartered there, but also because it was the safest place.

My fieldwork involved in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with members and leaders of the CJTF in Borno State as well as the VGN and hunter associations in Adamawa State. In total, I conducted 45 interviews with vigilantes and hunters (15 of whom were women in their 20s and 30s), who were asked about why they had joined the war

on Boko Haram and their role and contributions to the war against Boko Haram. Male vigilantes were asked about their perceptions of the role and contributions of women in their counterinsurgent work. The voices and lifeworlds of these interviewees are richly documented and critically analyzed throughout this article, supplemented by secondary-level data analysis of other women vigilantes contributing to the counterinsurgency campaign. This wealth of primary and secondary data helped “forge links between different knowledges that are possible from different locations and trace lines of possible alliances and common purposes between them” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 39).

With the assistance of a local translator, I conducted interviews and focus group discussions in Hausa, Kanuri, and Nigerian Pidgin, the predominant languages in northern Nigeria. Most interviews lasted between one and two hours in length, except for focus group discussions which sometimes lasted three hours. With the consent of my informants, I initially recorded interview sessions to assist the natural limitations of my own memory and note-taking. However, most interviewees felt uneasy about being voice-recorded. Anytime I brought out my digital voice recorder, I could sense their discomfort. Hence, I adjusted my approach and started to take extremely detailed handwritten notes after all interviews.

My fieldwork was facilitated by a local research assistant (whom I have worked with for four years), who tapped into his own situated knowledge and social networks to organize my interviews and focus group discussions. He also assisted with transcribing audio to text, although the burden of inductive content analysis and interpretation fell squarely on my shoulders. I typically sought consent to interview vigilante members from their leaders through a formal (written) request. In addition to constraints of safety and accessibility, the research was limited by the Islamic precepts and local customs in northeast Nigeria, which ensure that men can neither enter the homes of women they do not know nor engage women in extended conversation in isolation. Some women participants in Borno and Adamawa States were interviewed in their husband’s presence (such as Aisha) and with his oral consent, or in the presence of other male members of the household. Northern Nigeria is a patriarchal society that confers on men the power over women. Here, women typically rely on men or male guardians for status, access to resources and physical and social mobility. As one leader of a Muslim institution in northern Nigeria bluntly put it, “A woman from birth to death is the responsibility of a man. She does not take responsibility for herself” (cited in Usman, El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, and Hawaja 2020,

198, 204). Except where noted otherwise, all names are pseudonyms to protect the promise of anonymity made to my interlocutors.

The rest of this article is divided into four parts. The first briefly explores the increasingly active role of women in Boko Haram's terrorist activities as an entry point into the second part, which focuses on the emergence and modus operandi of anti-Boko Haram women vigilantes. The third part examines the often marginalized personal stories of CJTF women in the context of counterinsurgency in Borno State, the heartland of the Boko Haram insurgency. In the fourth part, I go beyond the complementary role of CJTF women to interrogate the frontier role of women vigilantes and hunters tracking Boko Haram insurgents in Adamawa State. The analysis spotlights the gender-bending role of Aisha, a brave "queen hunter" from the town of Gombi.

BOKO HARAM'S WOMEN INSURGENTS

Women's participation in insurgent groups often adds an "aura of legitimacy" to the message and methods of the armed group (Viterna 2013). Having women involved gives an armed group more social networks to use to persuade and recruit new members. It is not surprising, then, that the role of women in Boko Haram has become more sharply focused since 2014, when the jihadist group intensified its recruitment of women, girls, and widows of fallen fighters (Al-Amin 2017). Although these women were neither assigned to leadership roles nor part of Boko Haram's highest decision-making body, the Shura council, they assumed everyday roles as spies, messengers, managers, informants, recruiters, smugglers, IED (improvised explosive device) experts, domestic workers, frontline fighters, symbols of revenge, reproductive agents, and suicide bombers (see Botha 2021; ICG 2016; Nagarajan 2017). The opportunity to marry a wife at little to no cost drew droves of unmarried young men into Boko Haram, helped incentivize male insurgents to remain in the group, shamed young men into joining Boko Haram, and induced sympathy for Boko Haram's message. In northern Nigeria, where a man's marital and social statuses are closely intertwined, joining Boko Haram enabled marginal men to pay the often inflated bride price, marry, and acquire the desirable status of *masu gida* (household head).

Pressed for manpower, Boko Haram has also increasingly used women recruits as foot soldiers and suicide bombers. This move supports Reed

Wood's (2019, 23) argument that conflict severity and resource commitment often compel insurgent groups to deploy women in combat, thereby disregarding both traditional gender norms and their own gender biases. In contrast with other violent jihadi movements such as the Somalia-based Islamist militant group al-Shabab, in which women play neither a large nor active combat role, interviews with 119 former Boko Haram members indicate that four in 10 women respondents said they served as soldiers (Guibert 2016). At least 56% of Boko Haram's total suicide attacks between April 2011 and June 2017 were committed by women and girls (Warner and Matfess 2017). By incentivizing and coercing female recruits, Boko Haram took advantage of the patriarchal constraints on women as well as poor socioeconomic conditions in northeast Nigeria (Mustapha and Meagher 2020).

Since 2009, Boko Haram has kidnapped at least 2,000 girls and women, many of whom have been used as suicide bombers to attack checkpoints, bus stations, mosques, churches, schools, markets, and other soft targets (Al-Amin 2017). Women, of course, are ideal stealth weapons for armed opposition groups such as Boko Haram because they are less likely to be suspected or even searched. Boko Haram has used this positive security bias to its advantage as its male fighters commonly disguise themselves in female dresses to escape security attention (Punch 2018).

THE WOMEN COUNTERING BOKO HARAM

With the alarming rise and reach of Boko Haram women causing death, destruction, and extreme uncertainty across northeast Nigeria, scores of women have also emerged in terror-stricken communities to thwart the activities of women insurgents and suicide terrorists. As members of the government-backed CJTF, these women help soldiers and CJTF men frisk women at checkpoints, gather information and identify suspects, guard camps for the internally displaced, and sometimes also fight Boko Haram. Their emergence recalls the examples of similar female counterinsurgency movements in conflict zones such as Iraq and Syria, including the all-female Kurdish Battalions, the Yazidi female militia (known as the "Force of the Sun Ladies") trained by the Iraqi female Peshmerga, and the Assyrian female militias trained by the Kurds in Syria.

In Borno State alone, there are 122 registered CJTF women, with many more unregistered women who work informally with local vigilante groups as informants, offering information discreetly on Boko Haram insurgents,

financiers, and their activities (ICG 2016, 11). Some CJTF women have received military training through the Borno Youth Empowerment Scheme (BOYES) and now fight alongside their male counterparts. Others guard camps for the internally displaced, frisk women at checkpoints, and conduct house-to-house searches for Boko Haram members hiding in their wards. Bakura, CJTF Sector 5 Commander in Maiduguri, told me,

Actually, these women . . . follow us outside the metropolis for war against the insurgents. They're doing their best. Even inside the metropolis, during *Jumu'ah* prayers [a congregational prayer that Muslims hold every Friday], if you go to the mosques you will see our women searching other women. When it is time for Eid al-Fitr festival [which marks the end of the holy month of fasting], you will see our women come out in numbers to search other women.

The vast majority of CJTF members are still men and, like most residents of Borno State, Muslim. However, as noted earlier, the Islamic religious and cultural system forbids nonrelated men from entering women's homes. As a CJTF man in Maiduguri recounted, "Women play a vital role in this vigilante work because Islamic religion doesn't allow men to enter houses and we make use of the women to go into these houses for either surveillance or arrests." This brings home the fundamental but precarious role that women play in providing consent and legitimacy for counterinsurgent vigilantism, which includes frisking and arresting suspected Boko Haram women in their homes and at security roadblocks. Through their tactical innovation, specific social positions, and socially marginal identities as women, and through the practical domesticity of their daily life, CJTF women are uniquely positioned to gain possession of intimate information about their local communities that can prevent Boko Haram attacks and help counterinsurgent forces overcome the problem of knowledge. "Their assistance is in giving vital information to us about Boko Haram's female insurgents and helping us gather local intelligence," said Adamu, a leader of the CJTF in Abadam Town, Borno State, adding, "You know there is something that women can see just standing that we the men cannot see, even if we climb up the tree. Women also help us with inspection. You know as a man you cannot be checking a woman from back to front. So, women help us a great deal."

During the course of my fieldwork in Borno State, I spent several hours at security checkpoints and roadblocks staffed by the CJTF, particularly

along the Maiduguri-Damaturu-Kano Road. I encountered several women vigilantes, some of them wielding daggers and frisking passengers of the ubiquitous commercial tricycle-taxis (known as *keke NAPEP*) and drivers of private vehicles. I also encountered women friskers at the crowded Monday Market — the largest market in Borno State and the site of multiple female suicide bombings in 2014.

One CJTF woman secured her dagger under her left arm so that she could use both hands to search under the women passengers' *himar* (veil) or *niqab* (a Saudi-style dress) as they disembarked from the tricycle-taxi. The woman's name is Habiba, and she joined the CJTF after her children were arrested in August 2013 by Nigerian joint task forces who conducted house-to-house night raids in Maiduguri neighborhoods, accusing them of working for Boko Haram. "Up to now, I have never seen my children," says Habiba. Sadly, stories such as this one run like a leitmotif throughout Borno State, emboldening more and more women to use their intimate knowledge to identify and arrest the *real* members of Boko Haram hiding among them and to act as state informants (Umar and Adamu 2014). "Women are working as informers for us," said Ganiyu, a leader of the CJTF in Maiduguri. "They're in the communities. When they see anything suspicious, they will call us quickly and tell us. And there are also those who are active with uniforms working with us." Not infrequently, indiscriminate violence was used strategically by Nigerian joint task forces to compel compliance and induce loyalty among so-called suspect communities aiding Boko Haram. As Stathis Kalyvas (2004) tells us, violence tends to be used by state armies against civilian populations in order to shape their behavior. Victimized women like Habiba stuck with the state not because they supported its scorched-earth tactics, but because it offered their best chance of survival. Other women rationalized security force abuses as a reaction to Boko Haram, which they saw as the original source of their predicament.

Many CJTF women have seen their husbands and/or children killed by Boko Haram. Their loss leaves them vulnerable, both in terms of grief and financial security. Having lost their household's breadwinner, they find themselves alone, often with children, whom they now struggle to care for (NSRP 2016, 40). For these women, joining the CJTF emerges as an opportunity to avenge the loss of their loved ones and, in doing so, reclaim their dignity and safeguard their community. Take the case of Zara, who joined the CJTF after Boko Haram killed her husband and children during an attack on her town, Benishek. In her words,

“Revenge was my sole aim when I joined the fight and I have succeeded in seeing to the destruction of many of the insurgents. I will not rest until I see the death of them all. I will not relent in my effort” (*Daily Trust* 2015).

Another CJTF woman from Maiduguri, Zainab, described how her family house in the Garnam area was razed to the ground by Boko Haram in 2013 after her brother refused the group’s invitation to join and instead fled to Lagos in southwest Nigeria. According to Zainab, Boko Haram killed her mother before dragging her to a compound at Umurari, about 4 miles outside Maiduguri, where she was repeatedly brutalized as a sex slave for five months. “I don’t know the whereabouts of my other relatives, or what happened to my mother’s corpse,” said Zainab, who added that “soldiers stormed the area one day and freed us” (Abubakar 2016). This experience inspired Zainab to take up a *gora* (stick) and join the CJTF to prevent other women in her community from suffering sexual violence. She later encountered one of the insurgents who had violated her at Umurari, only this time the context was different. As she recounted,

I witnessed two arrests that made me very happy. One day I was around the timber shed along Baga Road, and I saw a large crowd. It turned out that a Boko Haram suspect was apprehended and was being taken to the army sandbag of Sector 1. When I checked clearly, it was one of the boys that dragged me to Umurari and raped me serially, after killing my mother. . . . I knew he recognized me, but had no opportunity to talk to me. He could not deny being a member of the Boko Haram sect. He admitted there and then, and I watched him being whisked away. Though I wept when I remembered what they did to me. I was very happy and I felt considerably better that at least one of those accursed rapists and murderers had been nabbed. (Abubakar 2016)

In Maiduguri, I interviewed Fatima, a 27-year-old woman studying at Ramat Polytechnic. Fatima who is one of the 1,800 CJTF members selected and trained under the state-endorsed BOYES. As part of her BOYES paramilitary training, Fatima was sent to the Kofi Annan Peace Keeping Training Center in Accra, Ghana, to take the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration Foundation Course. Fatima told me, “I joined in November 2013 and I work with CJTF men to protect my neighborhood. We work in the community as security operatives to frisk people in the mosques, markets, and other busy places. You know there are many women in Boko Haram, and so we also join to counteract them. They have disturbed us and we had to leave our houses for close to two years so we joined the fight.” Asked about the role that women

play in the CJTF, Fatima replied, “We have lots of things to do. Like in the market, we search women just like men search men. We check every gate of Monday Market. We have handheld security scanners that we use to screen women who enter the market for improvised explosive devices. Our duties also depend on the nature of given operations, like we cook food for the men when we go to the bush to fight but we don’t fire guns [like men].” The sense of patriotism, especially the responsibility to protect fellow women in extremis, is central to why another woman in Borno State said that she joined the CJTF:

It was the love for my country . . . you see a lot of young people taking up arms and killing indiscriminately. They create a lot of widows and orphans . . . You know it is us women who bear the burden of raising a child in the father’s absence. What happens is that young men take guns, kill people, and then come back to the neighborhood . . . that’s why I made the decision to stand out, and provide information to the soldiers to arrest these young men [the perpetrators]. (Usman, El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, and Hawaja 2020, 218)

Halima, a CJTF woman in Maiduguri, told me that she joined the group to help in searching other women. “A woman can search any other woman anywhere and nobody will raise eyebrows,” said Halima. “Securing Maiduguri is now a collective responsibility, irrespective of age, gender or status. The safer the town, the better for all of us.” Fatima’s and Halima’s responsibilities within the CJTF reinforce the gendered practices of counterinsurgency, particularly the appropriate gender-based division of labor in militia groups, which reflects the cultural norms of society (see Khalili 2011; Viterna 2013, 132; Wood 2019, 14). The role of women friskers is a culturally sensitive one. The culture in northeast Nigeria objects to a man passing his hands over a woman in the name of searching for hidden weapons. In Borno State, many husbands forbid any man (including Nigerian joint task forces) from frisking their wives and daughters. Initially, when soldiers carried out the frisking of women in transit spaces in Maiduguri, married women openly protested against it (Idris 2013). So, without women frisking other women, Boko Haram was able to take advantage of the loophole to escape notice and conduct its jihadist attacks with relative ease.

The role of women as local knowledge brokers has been acknowledged by a number of studies on vigilantism in southern Nigeria. In a study of women’s participation in the ethnic vigilante group O’oduwa People’s Congress in southwest Nigeria, Insa Nolte (2008, 96) writes,

Through their daily work as household organizers, traders, mothers, stepmothers and co-wives, women are often the holders of intimate knowledge about changes and news in their compounds as well as in markets, shops and schools. Women also frequently observe or hear about the suspicious behavior of individual members of their communities, and they pass on this information to the male members. Holding important information about private goings-on in their parts of the town, and being able to pose as innocent inquirers in various circumstances, women act as informers for nearly all vigilante activities.

Further afield, in conflict zones such as Iraq and Afghanistan, cultural sensitivities and the absence of female soldiers to frisk women allowed terrorist networks such as al-Qaeda to use women to gain access to its intended targets. Women have also provided better opportunities for concealing IEDs. In 2005, Muriel Degauque, a young Belgian woman, evaded security measures and blew herself up in an al-Qaeda-inspired attack on a U.S.-military convoy south of Baghdad (Rennie 2005). This was possible because some checkpoints in combat zones lack women security operatives, which — again, due to religious and cultural Muslim systems regarding gender relations — made it sensitive to effectively frisk women passing through, rendering them potent “weapons of terror” (McKay 2005). The U.S.-backed Iraqi forces reacted to the growing threat of women suicide bombers by beginning to screen both men and women passing through checkpoints. This reaction, however, played into the hands of al-Qaeda leaders who charged Iraqi men to reject the aggressive humiliation of their wives, sisters, and mothers being subjected to stop and search by uniformed men. In this way, the terrorist network was able to position itself as a protector of the traditional gender order and masculine identities that are under threat.

Starting in early 2009, after encountering the restrictions on male soldiers investigating Muslim women in Iraq, the U.S. military recognized the importance of integrating women into its counterinsurgency operations. Female members of the U.S. Army and Marines, known as Female Engagement Teams (FETs), were introduced in Iraq and Afghanistan in a mission carefully worded as “non-lethal targeting of the human terrain” to “enable systematic collection of information from the female population in a culturally respectful manner to facilitate building confidence with the [local] population” (Khalili 2013, 198). The introduction of FETs was informed by the U.S. counterinsurgency policy that winning the hearts and minds of Afghan women is key to ensuring the success of its war on terror (McBride and Wibben 2012). FETs

proved successful, allowing Iraqi women to be searched for concealed weapons and contraband items at military checkpoints and during a wide variety of missions (Anderson 2017). In Afghanistan, the U.S. military also began to deploy small groups of women as detachments to male infantry units conducting counterinsurgency operations on the ground. Serving as advisers and liaisons, these all-women teams were able to collect vital information on insurgent networks from families and communicate with Afghan women without enflaming cultural sensitivities surrounding gender (Bumiller 2010).

Recognizing a more salient role for female security officers as practitioners and targets in the climate of terror in northeast Nigeria, especially of physical and sexual abuse in internally displaced people (IDP) camps, the Nigerian Army has made modest efforts to increase its recruitment of women. Upon the graduation of 133 cadets, including 18 women from the Nigerian Defense Academy in Kaduna in 2016, former chief of army staff Tukur Buratai stated,

We have a situation whereby we have to bring female officers on board. We have considered several options and several implications as regard our cultural sensitivities and general environment. We need to have them where they will have to play their role in the military. We need to address the issue of gender both in peace and war times. Look at what we are facing in the North East: majority of the IDPs are females. Female officers have important roles to play for the IDPs. (*Premium Times* 2016)

Buratai's statement illustrates the ways in which counterinsurgency assigns men and women to different categories of various utility for the sake of combat and pacification (Khalili 2011, 1479).

Despite the growing recruitment of women by Boko Haram, the Nigerian joint task forces prosecuting the war against Boko Haram (Operation Lafiya Dole) are still 98% male (Hassan 2017), and gender is not critically reflected in most of the postconflict plans for northeast Nigeria. This marginalization, exclusion, or adverse incorporation of women in the doctrine and practice of counterinsurgency reflects deeply embedded norms of masculinity — norms concerning the roles and duties of women and men in society (Goldstein 2001; Wood 2019, 3). As Synne Dyvik (2013, 416) argues, “women are not considered the referent object of counterinsurgency doctrine, nor are female soldiers necessarily regarded as primarily soldiers. Rather, their role as soldier is subordinate to their real value as women.” If women officers want to be treated with the same respect as their male counterparts, they often have

to suspend or exit their normative identities as mothers, girlfriends, and wives (Marks 2017, 447).

A significant portion of the women who have joined the CJTF identified themselves as wives, girlfriends, or sisters of CJTF men. Their critical intervention has resulted in the arrests of hundreds of Boko Haram female insurgents bearing arms and IEDs. To evade security checks, some of these female suicide bombers concealed IEDs under their *himar* (veil) and on their back as if they were carrying babies. Many were arrested in busy public places such as markets and bus terminals. Other women who were apprehended in their homes by CJTF women were found to be in possession of small arms and light weapons hidden in plastic buckets and sacks of grains. Some of these women claimed they were aware neither that their husbands kept such arms in their homes nor that their husbands were members of Boko Haram. In some cases, detained women insurgents confessed that they worked as spies and ran errands for Boko Haram, who rewarded them handsomely with payments ranging from \$12.91 to \$29. Others said they were forced to do the bidding of Boko Haram because the group had threatened to kill their families if they refused (Odunsi 2013). This lends support to a report by the International Crisis Group that found that Boko Haram used a combination of coercion and incentives to recruit women and men, especially in urban and rural communities (ICG 2016, 6).

At a security roadblock in Maiduguri, a CJTF woman recounted, “These women [in Boko Haram] carry guns, bombs and ammunition for their husbands or for money, as they often confess to us. We have arrested some of them here and in some places, like Customs Market, Monday Market, and Gomari areas, in possession of poisons, IEDs and guns.” A CJTF woman from Baga in Maiduguri was convinced that poverty, illiteracy, and material inducements are factors that cause women turn to Boko Haram:

Some of these women are involved in the dirty acts because of poverty. It is either because they have lost their husbands who were insurgents or are orphans because their parents were killed, and they have no one to cater for them. Some of them may join because they don't know the danger associated with it. Illiteracy and poverty could also account for what they are doing because I don't see any reason why a woman should be involved in this ugly activity. Anything can happen to them. So, they have to face the music alone. (Odunsi 2013)

Bakura, a CJTF commander whom I spoke to in Maiduguri, was convinced that the vast majority of female suicide bombers in Borno State were brainwashed by Boko Haram:

I once arrested one female suicide bomber of Boko Haram alive. She was known as Aisha. I asked her: “Aisha, why do you put this *bam* [Hausa word for IED] to your body to come and kill innocent people here?” She told me that the Boko Haram insurgents told her that the people at Maiduguri are all Christian pagans. That if she comes and kills them, she will enter *al janna* [heaven]. I asked her: “Do you agree with that?” She said: “I don’t know.” So, my thinking is that she is grossly misinformed and miseducated. That is the reason why she has fallen prey to these insurgents.

In a trial of more than 1,669 Boko Haram suspects at the Wawa Cantonment in Niger Republic in February 2018 (after a three-year wait for a trial following the suspects’ arrest), it was found that women and girl insurgents in detention were lured into Boko Haram by their husbands, friends, relatives, and neighbors, reinforcing studies showing that most Boko Haram members are recruited by people they already know (Botha and Abdile 2019). Maimuna, a 30-year-old mother of seven, confessed to visiting Sambisa Forest (a major Boko Haram hideout) in July 2014 when her late husband’s friend, a member of Boko Haram, deceived her into accompanying him to her husband’s family home. Twenty-three-year-old Hafsat, whose husband initiated her into Boko Haram, was sentenced to five years’ imprisonment for the purpose of rehabilitation and to prevent her from rejoining her elder brother, who is still actively fighting for Boko Haram (Azu 2018).

Some women willingly joined Boko Haram in part because they were offered better lives by the group than under the Nigerian state and treated better by their Boko Haram husbands (Oduah 2016). Boko Haram, for example, had a dedicated fund for widows of their male fighters killed in battle. One study found that in areas controlled by Boko Haram, “marriage could bring a measure of security and well-being for women and their extended family” (ICG 2016, 9). Similar to their male counterparts, marriage is central to the social status, recognition, and respectability of women in northeast Nigeria. In fact, marriage has been termed the “highest degree” that Muslim women can achieve. Across Nigeria, unmarried women are often stigmatized and lack the agency and leverage with men that married women possess (NSRP 2016; Tegomoh 2002).

Following Daniel Jordan Smith (2010, 2–3), we must challenge the notion that young Nigerian women are somehow forced to marry against their will, and instead come to terms with the reality that “the overwhelming majority of young women seek marriage and parenthood

as the ultimate expression and fulfillment of their ambitions for themselves as persons.” In Borno State, especially Maiduguri, anecdotal evidence shows women escaping from IDP camps to return to their Boko Haram husbands in the bush (perhaps because of the local stigma associated with women who have children born to Boko Haram fathers) and women marrying Boko Haram men for financial gain — for example, because bride prices were often paid directly to them, not their family (Nagarajan 2017; Oduah 2016). In one case in the Marte area of Borno State, Boko Haram men married 80 girls by offering generous dowries of 15,000 Naira (about \$70) each — a significant sum in rural communities where people survive on less than \$1 dollar a day (ICG 2016 9). Human Rights Watch (2013) describes how Boko Haram regularly raided villages and “after storming into the homes and throwing sums of money at their parents, with a declaration that it was the dowry for their teenage daughter, they would take the girls away.”

In some cases, women divorced their husbands and married Boko Haram men. “I fell in love with him and he was treating me well. So when he asked me, I married him,” said one woman in Borno State who was studying to be an accountant when Boko Haram attacked her town of Bama (Ansbro 2017). Another woman explained that “my husband is a Boko Haram commander. He had three wives. He divorced all of them when he married me, because he loves me very much and I’m like his baby” (Oduah 2016). Some women also joined Boko Haram out of a desire to learn more deeply about Islam and memorize the *Qur’an*, which they found empowering (ICG 2016, 9). In light of this complex agency of women in Boko Haram, any umbrella attempts to dismiss women in insurgency as passive victims lacking freedom and autonomy is suspect.

Frisking other women and gathering information on enemy movements is dangerous work for CJTF women, because most suicide bombings in the region are carried out by women and girls. The usual pattern is for these women attackers to detonate their IEDs at the point when they are stopped and frisked by state security forces and/or vigilantes. Besides, since women are among the first people to enter the house of a Boko Haram suspect during house-to-house searches, they are often more susceptible to violent attacks. In one instance in Gamboru-Ngala in Borno State, Boko Haram traced one of the CJTF women to her house. She was lucky not to be at home at the time, but her teenage son was captured. He is still in the custody of Boko Haram.

The positive contributions of CJTF women to the war against Boko Haram, and the personal risk they assume on a daily basis, seem to be altering the traditional ways in which men perceive women in northeast Nigeria. CJTF leaders, for instance, regularly praised the strength, ingenuity, and courage shown by women vigilantes, even as they simultaneously referred to them as “our women” — indicating the sense of women-as-male-property and women as “pawns in a man’s game” that is still ingrained in northern Nigerian culture and society. “We have *our* women that played prominent roles even when the killings were so rampant,” said Bukar, chair of the CJTF in Hausari Ward. “These women were spared by Boko Haram. Unknown to them, they were spying for us.” Ganiyu, chair of the CJTF in Maiduguri, described the invaluable contributions of women to counterinsurgency in Borno State: “They are very important to our operations in Borno. They are mostly used for intelligence gathering. They give information which we report to security agencies and this has been decisive in arresting many insurgents. Without adequate information, we could not have achieved the level of success we recorded in the fight against terrorism.” This point was reinforced by Samaila, a provost at the CJTF headquarters in Maiduguri: “We have women in the CJTF that when you see them they look like women but are stronger than men. There are women that follow us to fight Boko Haram and there are others that carry out surveillance to equip us with secure enough evidence to arrest members of Boko Haram wherever they are. These women sacrifice themselves and enter various places and get us information that some men cannot take the risks of doing so.”

Despite initial praise for the CJTF as “new national heroes” (Agbiboa 2018), especially its decisive role in forcing Boko Haram out of Maiduguri in late 2013, the state-backed vigilante group has been implicated in a number of human rights abuses (both independently and in complicity with state forces) that have eroded its local support base. This reflects the ambiguity that marks the relationship of vigilante groups with governments and publics (Pratten 2008, 6). The CJTF has been credibly accused of subjecting Boko Haram suspects and captives to torture during interrogations in an attempt to extract information or positive confessions from them. A 19-year-old man recounted how he and his brother were tortured at Bama Prison after fleeing his village as a child:

CJTF men were the ones beating us, while the soldiers sat and watched. My legs and hands were bound together at the back and I was hung from a tree, head facing down. When they untied me, I couldn't feel my legs and hands and could barely walk. The same thing was done to my younger brother. They did that to us because we refused to accept that we were Boko Haram, during interrogation. The interrogation was done by soldiers and CJTF. They said it wasn't possible we would live for years with Boko Haram and not join them, so they said we were lying. . . My younger brother was beaten so badly that he could not eat with his hands. (Amnesty International, cited in Adebajo 2020)

In Biu, residents described how CJTF members killed suspects and burned their houses during their night patrols and street surveillance. These egregious actions were justified on the grounds of community protection. "We run from Boko Haram then our CJTF is again punishing us, where do we go?" said a man from Gwoza (Center for Civilians in Conflict 2018, 17).

STORIES OF WOMEN WHO JOINED THE WAR AGAINST BOKO HARAM

In this section, I document the experiences and sacrifices of CJTF women through the personal narratives of Hauwa, Kaka, Altine, Zainab (*Punch* 2016), and Hannatu (BBC News 2017). All five women suffered personal losses (e.g., the loss of a close family member or friend) to Boko Haram, which was a primary factor in their decision to join the CJTF in defense of their local communities. These women were also encouraged to join the CJTF by their relatives, friends, and close neighbors. As studies elsewhere (such as Sierra Leone) have shown, trust-based social networks feature prominently in women's decision to participate in nonstate armed groups (Marks 2019). However, unlike the case of forcibly conscripted women in the Sierra Leone Civil Defense Forces and the Revolutionary United Front, CJTF women said that they joined willingly, "with my two eyes open." Women pointed to their love of community and country, especially their concern for the plight of fellow women, as a core reason for joining the CJTF.

Hauwa, a 35-year-old divorcee with two children, joined the CJTF at the height of the violent insurgency from 2014 through 2015. Her 15-year-old son, Mohammed, is also a CJTF member in Maiduguri. Hauwa described her main duties in the CJTF as collecting intelligence and reporting back to security agencies. She joined after the loss of her elder brother, Zannah,

and his friend, who were both killed by Boko Haram. According to Hauwa, “[Zannah] was one of the title holders at the Shehu’s palace. He was a Bureau de Change operator. They killed his friend in a bank. My brother was killed at home after attending his friend’s funeral. We cannot say why he was killed.” Hauwa said that she has personal knowledge of some of Boko Haram’s jihadi women because she helped raise a few of them. “What surprises me is that some of the insurgents are people that I knew as babies. I even strapped some of them to my back. It is really sad that those babies are now bearing arms against their country.” As a BOYES member, Hauwa receives a monthly stipend of \$38.72 from the Borno State government for her vigilante work. “Though the money is paltry,” said Hauwa, “I see my contributions as a sacrifice for the return of peace to Borno State. I do not see any danger. I have sworn to tread this path.”

Kaka is another female CJTF member supporting the military counterinsurgency in Maiduguri. A 30-year-old divorcee with a son, Kaka is a pioneering member of the CJTF in Maiduguri. Though no member of her family was killed by Boko Haram, Kaka said that she was “really touched” by the loss of two of her neighbors, Garba and Amadu, which increased her desire to “contribute hugely to the betterment of society.” Kaka recalled how she, along with her friends, became involved in gathering intelligence for Nigerian troops in Maiduguri. “When Boko Haram members were killing residents, we were all afraid to reveal their identities to the soldiers. But later, I and some of my friends summoned up courage and started exposing them. At the time, security forces were threatening to kill us if we did not expose the insurgents. When we discovered that exposing them was yielding results, we courageously joined the formation.” One of the positive results recounted by Kaka was exposing a Boko Haram commander. “He hid in the residence of his mother in our neighborhood. He was arrested and taken away by the military. This made me continue working to ensure peace for the overall interest of all. My mother encouraged me a lot.” In another incident, Kaka singlehandedly coordinated the arrest of a Boko Haram member on the “most wanted list” of the military. “It all started when soldiers gave me the number plate of a *keke* NAPEP [tricycle-taxi] belonging to a suspected insurgent. When I saw the tricycle, I pretended as if I was on the way to a place and quickly alerted the soldiers that we were coming toward them. The soldiers arrested him on the way.” Like Hauwa, Kaka is a BOYES member on a \$38.72 monthly stipend, but she wants the

state to do more to empower CJTF youth through strategic skills acquisition initiatives.

Altine is a 28-year-old widow with a son and four daughters. Like Kaka, Altine joined the CJTF during its formative days in Maiduguri in early 2013 after enduring several personal losses. Altine's sister, Hajju Mohammed, and her husband, Ahmed, a police officer, were killed by Boko Haram in Maiduguri's Gamboru Customs area. Ahmed was killed while on a routine patrol. Altine also lost a friend and three of her neighbors to Boko Haram. "All these irked me and eventually made me resolve to work against the insurgents by exposing them," she said. "I did not face any resistance from my relations when I decided to join," added Altine, whose two brothers, Mustapha and Abba, are also members of the CJTF. Unlike Hauwa and Kaka, Altine is not a BOYES member, and therefore she does not receive any stipend from the state government. This notwithstanding, Altine said that she has offered to sacrifice her life for the sake of peace and security. Through her intimate knowledge of the physical and social terrain in which Boko Haram lives and operates, Altine has helped thwart the plans of many Boko Haram insurgents trying to sneak into the market town of Gamboru to wreak havoc in the community. "I was able to recognize them," said Altine, "because they used to be my neighbors."

Lastly, there are Zainab and Hannatu. Zainab is a 35-year-old married woman with two daughters and three sons. She joined the CJTF after her brother, Ibrahim, was killed by insurgents in Maiduguri's Dala area. "The loss made me vow to expose them so that peace can be restored," said Zainab, whose husband encouraged her to join the group. Zainab started providing information about the hideouts and activities of Boko Haram insurgents even before the CJTF was born. Hannatu, a 34-year-old woman from the northeast town of Chibok, joined an anti-Boko Haram militia in 2014 after her husband, a vigilante unit commander, was killed by Boko Haram. Following his death, Hannatu took his place in the vigilante group, working alongside male vigilantes in Chibok. "We go after Boko Haram, catch them with our bare hands and kill them," said Hannatu, who also learned how to use guns during bush operations. She recalled an experience in which she and her fellow vigilantes went to Konzulari village, caught Boko Haram insurgents, and killed them. Hannatu's membership in the CJTF has been nothing short of transformative: "I was very scared when I first joined. But I've made a lot of progress. I am not scared of anything now."

The experiences and motivations of Hauwa, Kaka, Altine, Zainab, and Hannatu reflect not only the often neglected perspective and agency of women in joining the war against Boko Haram but also reinforce how conditions of personal suffering and loss, coupled with attachment to the community and collective yearning for order, drive women's participation in counterinsurgency. In short, in the face of government failure, insecurity, and victimization, women are more likely to choose voice and loyalty (i.e., stand and fight) over exit and defection (i.e., cut and run).

THE WOMEN HUNTING BOKO HARAM IN ADAMAWA STATE

Beyond Borno State, the epicenter of the insurgency, women have also been actively involved in counterinsurgency operations in Adamawa State under the Hunters Association (*kungiya marhaba*) and the VGN. Both of these local groups have been cooperating with the Nigerian military and police to repel Boko Haram in Adamawa State (from Gombi to Madagali and from Mararraban Pella through Maiha to Mubi and from Gombi to Garkida) since late 2013, when the CJTF forced Boko Haram out of Maiduguri into more peripheral parts of northeast Nigeria. As Boko Haram relocated to rural areas such as Gombi, more women from captured villages were forcibly conscripted into the Islamist sect to do *aikin Allah* (the work of Allah), reinforcing empirical studies demonstrating that women Boko Haram members are far more likely to be recruited by force than their male counterparts (Botha and Abdile 2019). In so doing, Boko Haram reclaimed a precolonial practice of raiding and enslavement in the Lake Chad region, whereby women are captured and integrated into the victorious group (ICG 2016, 6).

My fieldwork in Adamawa State took place in Yola and Gombi in September 2017. While there was an appreciable lull in insurgent attacks during this time, there was nonetheless an uneasy calm and suspicion that pervaded the air. Yola is the capital of Adamawa State and the headquarters of the VGN, a community-based security provider that officially joined the state war against Boko Haram in November 2014, following a formal invitation from the Adamawa State government (see the appendix in the supplementary material online). Currently, there are an estimated 500 VGN members working across every local government area in Adamawa, according to Aliyu, VGN state commander. The VGN is divided into two main groups, composed of uniformed vigilantes

and local hunters. One group enjoys the patronage of the state government, while the other is supported by the Lamido of Adamawa, the traditional ruler and chair of the State Emirate Council. Although the VGN participates in active combat and bush operations against Boko Haram, its central role is to ensure peace and stability in recaptured towns and villages. On the role that women play in the VGN's campaign, Aliyu recounted,

The ideal of bringing women into vigilante work is specifically in the area of information gathering. There is some information that you may not get as a male vigilante, but if you use women, you can get it. So, we are getting a lot of intelligence report from women and that is a vital role that women are playing for us. Also, sometimes if we want to make arrest, we find it easier to arrest stubborn insurgents if we use [the sexuality of] women.

At Gombi, about 100 kilometers from Yola, I organized focus group discussions with leaders of the Hunters Association Adamawa State and the VGN at the office of the Presidential Committee on the North East Initiative. In total, five men and one women attended the FGD. The six participants had all been actively involved in the fight against Boko Haram. I asked the group about the role and impact of women in their vigilante work. The men ordinarily dominated the discussion and saw it as their prerogative to speak on behalf of Aisha (whose story I tell later), the only woman present at the focus group discussions and a respected "queen hunter" from the town of Gombi who has fought many battles against Boko Haram in Sambisa Forest. The silence of Aisha reflects the culture of patriarchy in northern Nigeria that relegates women to subordinates.

Ibrahim, a 52-year-old hunter, began the discussion by claiming, "The men are in a better position to explain the role of women in the fight against the insurgents. The women that worked with us have done their best and are still doing their best in the fight against Boko Haram. We are advising our government and traditional leaders to encourage more women to participate in the war against these insurgents." According to Namtari, a 62-year-old hunter who led 1,500 hunters at different times to fight Boko Haram in Gombi and Madagali,

Women have a big role to play in this war. If you look closely, you will notice that in the execution of war worldwide, women and children are really the ones that suffer the most. Their role is great. They exhibited their competence in handling other women and children, provision of food to our fighters and the affected population like pregnant, lactating mothers

and children, and they proved very useful in searching suspicious women because there is a limit to what a man can do in this area . . . One time when we were fighting Boko Haram, there was this lady called Patricia who saved a girl of about 8 years old from an insurgent running away with the child and shot him dead. Some women are even stronger than men. An example is Aisha here with us who has proved herself as a heroine with a huge track record of bravery in the war front. She is a man among women.

Perceptions of women as “better than men” or “men among women” reinforce the androcentric culture of counterinsurgency, especially the way women’s roles as counterinsurgents are told on the basis of their gender. As one scholar observes, “Women who are strong fighters or notorious for their ruthlessness can gain a special cachet for how they transcend gender norms. Their ability to use violence to protect themselves [and others] and build affinity with male fighters can help them carve out a more gender-equal sphere than that occupied by other women in the group” (Marks 2017, 447). Weighing in to the discussion, Wokenso, a 59-year-old hunter, described women as hidden resources that vigilantes and hunters use to defeat Boko Haram. He noted,

Women have their unique skills in achieving successes in warfare and there are various ways that they influence fights, but these things are better left unsaid because some of these things are our secrets and we don’t say them out [loud]. There was one of our members that was defeated in a fight with the use of a woman. If women are employed by hunters and vigilantes, they influence a lot of things. We know the time they can contribute, but this is our secret and we will not divulge this to all.

This recurrent view of women as men’s secret weapon reinforces the unequal gendered coding of counterinsurgency that not only attaches value to women in relation to their male counterparts but also eroticizes women’s subordinate status (see Becker 1999; MacKinnon 1979). Men remain the center of gravity, the ultimate reference point for women in conflict. Throughout the focus group discussions, Aisha remained silent, with an occasional nod of approval. This is due in part to the cultural setting that puts a premium on male voice and female compliance, in addition to the premium on age that ensures that older men are treated with respect. After the discussion, a private meeting was arranged with Aisha to learn about her experience in the battlefield.

AISHA: THE STORY OF A QUEEN HUNTER

Women's role in the war against Boko Haram extends beyond complementing the work of their male counterparts through their information-gathering capacities. In other words, women assume frontier roles in counterinsurgency, not just as winners of hearts and minds (the so-called soft approach), but also as warriors ("militarized masculinity"). This is true of Aisha (see [Figure 1](#)), a 38-year-old woman who occupies the role of "chief female hunter" (*sarauniyar maharba*) in the town of Gombi, Adamawa State. Gombi lies in an area that suffers periodic attacks by Boko Haram hiding in the nearby Sambisa Forest, an extremely thick and thorny forest covering 60,000 square kilometers across northeast Nigeria. Gombi came into the spotlight in July 2014, when Boko Haram fighters kidnapped Nitsch Eberhard Robert, a German teacher who was conducting vocational training in the town. Nitsch was later freed in January 2015 following a special operation of Cameroon forces helped by "friendly nations" (*Reuters* 2015). In October 2014, Gombi was one of three towns in Adamawa captured by Boko Haram. It was recaptured in December 2014 by a joint operation of soldiers, hunters, and vigilantes (Yusuf 2014). In January 2016, two suicide bombers detonated their bombs at the grain section of the international market in Gombi, killing ten people and injuring several others (Channels Television 2016).

It was here in Gombi that I first met Aisha, who leads a command of men aged 15 to 30 who communicate using sign language, animal sounds, and even birdsong. The interview with Aisha was conducted in her house and in her husband's presence. Dubbed "Queen Hunter" because of her bravery on the battlefield, Aisha has acquired a kind of celebrity status in Gombi as one of the very few women hunters (in a male-dominated hunting profession) tracking Boko Haram in Sambisa Forest and helping locate the Chibok schoolgirls abducted by Boko Haram. In this, Aisha is part of a particular category of "woman-of-power" in counterinsurgency who is "comfortable with, and in fact positively values, breaking through security spaces coded as masculine" (Khalili 2011, 1475). Aisha grew up near Sambisa Forest and used to hunt antelopes, baboons, and guinea fowl with her grandfather. "I did not join this hunting work but inherited it from my family," said Aisha. "I grew up to find my family as hunters. I started as a young girl following my family on hunting expeditions up to the time I grew up and was fully equipped to be on my own. This went on until we were called to join hands and fight the menace of Boko



FIGURE 1. Photo by author.

Haram.” Like many hunters in Gombi, Aisha is a Muslim and believes in the close link between magic and warfare. In Gombi, it is common knowledge that hunters have the power to disappear at any time. During the course of our interview, Aisha described her ritual of dousing her fellow hunters with a magical portion that makes their bodies bulletproof in preparation for battle.

Aisha said that she joined the hunt for Boko Haram out of the love she has for Nigeria and for the many women and children who bear the brunt of the violent insurgency: “I see my role as a nationalist trying to protect my country and its population.” Given the marginality of female voices in the Boko Haram literature, I was keen to learn more about Aisha’s experience as a woman in a male-dominated hunting profession. “There is a big role for women in this job,” said Aisha. “There are no less than 100 women in Adamawa alone who are hunters and engaged in this hunting work. They may not be as popular as I am, but they are also hunters just like

me and work as vigilantes. One striking difference is that I join males to war fronts and fight insurgents whereas most women do not go to war.” To my question about whether she was afraid to do this work, Aisha confidently rejoined, “Boko Haram insurgents are something to fear but this is not enough for people to back out and allow them to eat their cake and have it. If we all allow them to go ahead the way they started, they can destroy the whole country and make it uninhabitable. All Nigerians are supposed to be patriotic and fearless in fighting Boko Haram. We are created by the same God. We need not fear them if we are to bring peace to our dear nation.” Aisha’s remarks run contrary to prevailing counterinsurgency discourse in which qualities of patriotism and courage are usually not applicable to women, who are variously seen as disloyal, emotional, fearful, manipulable, and nonconfrontational. In fact, the category of the civilian has historically been feminine (Dyvik 2013, 414), which explains why women in wars are often seen as victims.

One of the primary weapons available to hunters such as Aisha during bush operations against Boko Haram are their local firearms, often spiritually fortified. According to Aisha, “Our weapons are mostly Dane guns [a type of long-barreled flintlock musket originally imported into West Africa by Dano-Norwegian traders] which we use in local hunting, but mine is even better as it is modified to take four rounds of ammunitions. There are people among us that go out with bows and arrows, while some take only cutlasses, and yet we gain the upper hand when we meet the insurgents.” Aisha reckoned that hunters have achieved “great success” in the war on Boko Haram in Adamawa because of their local knowledge and bravery. She recalled “the first attack Boko Haram launched on our town. They were woefully defeated and none of them survived and this is enough to say we are succeeding. From then on, we have been pushing them back till we reached Madagali.” A town in Adamawa State, adjacent to the Nigerian border with Cameroon, Madagali has been plagued by Boko Haram’s suicide bombings since 2014 (BBC News 2015).

In Adamawa State, especially Gombi, the relationship between hunters/vigilantes and the Nigerian military has generally been one of complementarity rather than opposition or resistance. As Aisha recounted, “We really enjoyed working with the military till date because they are the ones that support us with guns and bullets. At times if we defeat the insurgents the military would allow us to use the weapons we seize from Boko Haram. These are items that are later returned to the military.” Contrary to the popular perception of Nigerian

security forces with daggers drawn on local residents in other parts of northeastern Nigeria (e.g., Maiduguri), in Gombi, soldiers enjoy a significant degree of communal support. While a handful of hunters have received training from the Nigerian military, the vast majority rely on the hunting skills inherited from their parents. “Most of us received our training from our parents and professional hunters,” said Aisha. “The Army has also trained some people recently after the insurgents were driven away but I was not among them.” Like thousands of local hunters in Adamawa, Aisha was enlisted by the military to lead the fight against Boko Haram on an ad hoc basis. According to Aisha, “When the fight was ongoing, we were supported with food items. But now that the fight is over, we are only volunteering to work and not getting anything from anybody.”

The families of hunters killed in bush operations against Boko Haram often received minimal support from the state and from traditional leaders on a selective basis. As Aisha recounted, “Two months ago, one of our commanders who was responsible for nine local government areas lost his life along with two other vigilantes in a fight with Boko Haram insurgents in Sambisa Forest. The state governor gave N500,000 (\$1,290) to his family, but the families of the other two injured persons received nothing. This year nobody got injured, but two years ago, all those that got injured were brought to the Federal Medical Centre for treatment and the government and His Highness, the Lamido of Adamawa, donated \$1,290 for treating the injured.” These selective efforts notwithstanding, Aisha insisted that the state should do more to support hunters and vigilantes risking their lives daily to shield their communities. “I have already said that we need more arms, ammunitions and vehicles. There are youths among us that have no work. The state can empower those youth with set skills and train those without skills to do something good for themselves.” Aisha maintained that the need for support is *now* rather than after the insurgency:

We want the state to help us *now*, not when the war is over. We need working tools, like the vehicles required to enter the Sambisa Forest. We are using our resources to fight the war now so government should support us fully. People don't agree to hire out vehicles to us out of fear of their vehicles being burned by Boko Haram. There was a time we walked for 43 kilometers, fought for three hours and trekked back the same distance. Most of us have our various vocations and if empowered now we can be given deadline the way government gives the military and you will see action . . . the government should think of what it can do to us after the

war, but we need to be armed and equipped to fight to finish, to prosecute the fight to a logical conclusion.

When the Boko Haram insurgency comes to an end, Aisha looks forward to returning to her former occupation as housewife and tailor, which were disrupted by her involvement in the war.²

CONCLUSION

Although studies of women's role in violent insurgencies have attracted growing attention in recent decades, their active involvement and distinct experiences in counterinsurgency are still inadequately understood. There seems to be a stubborn reluctance in existing scholarship to transcend the simple gender binaries of men as violent and women as peaceful. As Ali Mazrui (2014, 120) argues, "women became marginalized not because they lost control of the means of production but because they were excluded from the means of destruction." Counterinsurgency doctrine and practice remain repeatedly skewed toward men, even as scholars are at pains to underscore the complex agency and frontier roles of women in conflict and peacebuilding.

This article has interrogated the gendered practices of counterinsurgency in northeast Nigeria, with particular focus on women vigilantes and hunters prosecuting the war against Boko Haram. Women, the article argues, have helped propel local security providers to gain the upper hand in the effort to overcome Boko Haram. Moving beyond the usual focus on violence *against* women (Medie 2020) or violence committed *by* women (Viterna 2013), this article has interrogated violence *countered* by women. The article found that women counterinsurgents were mobilized after Boko Haram shifted its strategy toward using female insurgents, especially as suicide bombers attacking markets, hospitals, mosques, and churches. Women joined the war for various reasons: personal loss, family ties, a sense of belonging, a desire to defend their people and homeland, or a collective yearning for normal lives. In safeguarding their communities, women leveraged not only their intimate knowledge of the private sphere ("hearts and minds") but also adapted their inherited skills as hunters ("military masculinity").

2. In December 2020, I read that Aisha had been appointed as "special assistant" to the governor of Borno State. The appointment letter stressed Aisha's track record rather than her gender: "Your appointment is based on your personal merit, wealth of experience, dedication to duty and service to your community" (*Premium Times* 2020).

Beyond the belabored focus on women as weapons of terror or as victims and perpetrators, this article calls for a critical engagement with the role and agency of women *dying to save*, who are too often relegated to the shadows of war.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X21000283>

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