Women in Conflict:
Militancy and Gender-Based Violence in Nigeria and Myanmar

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Summary

As the violence committed by Myanmar's army against the Rohingya and the rise of Boko Haram in Nigeria hit international headlines, distinct features of Gender-Based Violence against women in these conflict zones cannot be omitted. This paper outlines the systematic exploitation, physical abuse, and war-rape in these conflicts used as weapons of war. Similarly, it argues that the women in these war zones are viewed through the discourse of victimization. Moreover, it also discusses the characteristics of conflict and post-conflict situations. Rohingya women now participate in economic activities in their camps, even after experiencing post-conflict hardships as refugees, and difficult livelihood opportunities. Likewise, in Nigeria, many women survivors are in the process of reconstructing their lives. However, in the latter case, the paper discusses the controversial standpoint of gender empowerment through female participation in militancy. The paper argues that female terrorism contradicts the notion of female empowerment and represents another feature of Gender-Based Violence.

Introduction

The persecution of the Rohingya from the periphery of South Asia can be regarded as a "textbook" example of ethnic cleansing, according to the definition upheld by the United Nations. Ever since the citizenship law passed in 1982, the Rohingya have been subject of Myanmar's stratified ethnic hierarchy, which regards them as stateless "resident foreigners" (Human Rights Watch 2000). Facing systematic campaigns by the state, the Rohingya remain the most persecuted in the world (Khin 2017). In that regard, the propagation of violence by the state apparatus remains a focal point of debate.[1]

In a similar vein, the emergence of Boko Haram witness the perpetration of atrocities and actions by a non-state actor in heart of Africa. Although, the group's rise is related to ethno-religious divisions in the country (Elkaim 2012), its resurgence is ultimately based beyond the credo of identity and religious violence[2]. The literature suggests that the armed struggle by Boko Haram includes socio-economic and political factors, and remains directed primarily against the state (Comolli 2015). Similarly, among the root causes of the rise of Boko Haram identified include unemployment, poverty, and other economic problems (Adelaja and Penar 2018).

The continuation of conflict and war in these regions has put women disproportionately in an insecure position. Exploitation, physical violence and rape in these conflicts are constantly used as weapons of war. As the kidnapping of Chibok Girls or Rohingya's persecution and rape made headlines, key international players came out and condemned the actions. Nevertheless, the shocks did not last long, and failure to carry out long term political dialogue to engender accountability in an effective way in order to be able to deal with the crisis remains.

Testimonies from women who have faced these horrors reflect the impact and trauma that often follows for generations. Apart from physical and sexual violence, patriarchal societal structures prevail. As the male members of the family often represent the sole breadwinners in their respective societies, their displacement or death puts these women at an extra disadvantage. Therefore, a survival mode endures where basic necessities are prioritized over physical wounds and psychological trauma.

This paper outlines two case studies of conflicts in Myanmar and Nigeria. By drawing upon the backdrop of these issues and highlighting the differences in the origin and geographical context of these conflicts; it aims to represent elements of Gender Based Violence (GBV) common to both cases. It asserts that the perpetuation of violence is carried out by non-state and state actors in Nigeria and Myanmar respectively.

It also argues that in both cases, the portrayal of women who have been subjugated to oppression and violence as merely passive agents is such that they are reduced to being mere victims. In reality they are participating in all aspects of the conflict. Rohingya women now participate in economic activities in their camps. Even after passing through post-conflict hardships as refugees, and difficult livelihood opportunities, these women are opting for active roles, breaking the traditional patriarchy, and gender norms endorsed in their societies. Likewise, in Nigeria, many survivors are now trying to reconstruct their lives[3], thereby demonstrating that their portrayal solely as passive victims is reductionist at best.

However, there is another controversial standpoint of gender empowerment dimension in the latter's case. Many women in Boko Haram also actively participate in terrorism activities and other roles with the group. Frustrated by poverty, gender discrimination and cultural patriarchy, some women choose to join the terrorist group Boko Haram voluntarily. This paper will shed light on the challenges experienced by women in conflict zones, in particularly in Nigeria and Myanmar as part of Boko Haram and Rohingya respectively. It will also highlight the struggles for self empowerment, including turning to militancy, by these women and note the barriers which remain unsurmountable.

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1 In the subsequent section, the paper will discuss how elements related to ethnicity and economic motives have been the reasons for Rohingya's persecution.
2 The concept of "Relative Deprivation Theory" is further discussed in this paper which, according to experts, is one of the main reasons behind emergence of Boko Haram.
3 This is achieved through vocational training programs organized by various NGOs. Some examples are: Future Prowess Islamic Foundation School, UN Refugee Agency, UNICEF, Norwegian Refugee Council etc.

Boko Haram's Rise

Nigeria in 2002 is a setting where inequality prevailed, and the state's lack of institutional capacity provided a space for the rise of the terrorist group Boko Haram. The group aims to overthrow the Nigerian government and was labelled as a terrorist organization by the US in November 2013. One of the reasons for group's rise is correlated with the polarized economic and religious nature of the society. High levels of corruption and poor distribution of wealth have provided the ground for the emergence of terrorist groups, who, through their anti-government rhetoric and deployment of religious rhetoric, exploit religion and problems of economic disparity for their own political ends.

Boko Haram re-emerged following the death of its founder, Mohammed Yusuf, in 2009 and is now regarded as one of the most lethal terrorist organizations (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2015). Correspondingly, within the confinements of their stronghold in the Sambisa forest, they have launched a series of terror attacks targeting different ethno religious personalities and national security forces (Onuah and Eboh 2011).

In order to understand the rise of the terror group Boko Haram, as mentioned previously, the persistent socio-economic divide in Nigeria needs to be taken into consideration. In that regard, Daniel Egiegba analyzes the beginning of Boko Haram based on the Relative Deprivation Theory. Egiegba emphasizes that the persisting economic grievances in the North has allowed flourishing of violent actions due to poor social standards. Furthermore, he says: "It is no coincidence that one of the worst forms of political violence in Nigeria today originates in the most socioeconomically deprived parts of the country - the North (Agbiboa 2013)." In contrast, Southern Nigeria has a large middle class, and the region also comes along with economic successes with western educated elites who hold positions of power. Therefore, the divisions between North and South of Nigeria economically, ideologically and structurally have played a large role in pulling the country apart in different directions (Bauer, Stolen Girls 2016).

Islamic scholars in the country use the term "Boko" (meaning Book in Hausa) when referring to the Western educated elites, who also remain in positions of power. The term Boko Haram means "Western education is a sin" (BBC, 2014). It dismisses Western centric education and culture. It also holds people from this background accountable for the persistence of poverty and lack of efficient governance in the region: alleging that they encourage corruption, thereby perpetuating the ills facing the country.

Local hunter known as Vigilante armed with locally made gun is seen on a pick up truck in Yola city of Adamawa State in Nigeria before they move to border region between Nigeria and Cameroon to support Nigerian army fighting with Boko Haram militants. (Mohammed Elshamy - Anadolu Agency)

Myanmar's Army and the Plight of the Rohingya

The mass exodus of the Muslim Rohingya's from Myanmar, which has dawned upon the conscience of politicians, journalists and aid agencies since August 2017, has been regarded as the fastest growing humanitarian crisis in the world today. The plight of the Rohingya is regarded as a text-book example of ethnic cleansing by UN officials (UN News 2017). The issue of the Rohingya community stems from atrocities conducted by Myanmar's security forces, and its neglect by government officials. It exemplifies through political power a culture of impunity is established, where discrimination, genocide, injustice and maltreatment gain legitimate grounds.

A stateless[4] Muslim minority from the state of Rakhine, the Rohingyas have faced constant human right violations throughout the decades (Dussich 2018).The persecution can be traced to Burma's (now Myanmar) independence in 1948. Not having any individual rights due to lacking a proper nationality, is linked with

being a Rohingya ever since the citizenship act of 1982 (Human Rights Watch 2000). The crux of the issue is also related to the ethno-religious binary between a pro-Buddhist[5] state apparatus with hardline sentiments against the Muslim population and economic motives of Myanmar's state and the military (Sassen, Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy 2014). The latter is also highlighted in a report by Amnesty International. The report states that since the exodus of the Rohingya from Rakhine state in Myanmar, state authorities have embarked on infrastructure and investment projects in the regions vacated by the Rohingya (Amnesty International 2017).

Similarly, the lines of inter-communal and ethnic conflict is also telling of Myanmar's political scenario since its return to democracy in 2011. Azeem Ibrahim argues that the orchestrating of genocide provides space for the military to return to rule (Ibrahim 2016). In that regard, as the military is one of the most powerful establishments in the state, it has control over vast lands in Myanmar. Therefore, to boost economic prospects, the military has allocated lands owned previously by the Rohingyas for corporate development (Sassen 2017).

A Rohingya Muslim women, fled from ongoing military operations in Myanmar's Rakhine state, hold papers after getting off a boat while fleeing to a temporary makeshift camp, crossing Naf river, after crossing over from Myanmar into the Bangladesh side of the border, in Shah Porir Dwip near Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. (Onur Çoban - Anadolu Agency)

These actions by the state merge together and implement a nationalistic discourse, where institutionalized discrimination of preserving a dualistic scheme of "us" vs "them" gains leverage. The former being Buddhist hardliners and the latter, the Rohingya. Similarly, apart from the ethnic and the religious aspect of the problem, military-economic interests are part of the forced displacement of the Rohingya .

4 The context behind persecution of the Rohingya has layers of history that are beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, to understand the issue from historical point of view, refer to The Rohingya Crisis: A People Facing Extinction by Muhammad Abdul Bari
5 The pro-Buddhists hardliners supported by the state belong to an extreme fringe of Thervada Buddhism.

As Wives and Weapons: The Women of Boko Haram

The Sambisa forest in northeast Nigeria serves as the headquarters of the terror group Boko Haram. Within the dark confinements of the forest's swamps and trees, experiences of Nigerian women held captive by the group set itself as an example of Gender Based Violence in the 21st century. As the group's actions against women -ranging from forced conversion, forced-marriage and rape – continued to make international headlines, the group also set about incorporating women into their modus operandi as fighters and suicide bombers.

One of the key reasons Boko Haram both uses and targets women is because it garners attention in the international arena. Boko Haram is able to use such attention to gain a platform on which to advance its ideas. The kidnapping of the Chibok Girls is case in point. The issue immediately gained international attention as the hashtag of #BringBackOurGirls gained momentum on social media. Additionally, many high-profile women (including Michelle Obama and Angela Merkel) were vouching to free the abducted girls and called upon the Nigerian government to take action.

As this section proceeds it will highlight that women's experiences with Boko Haram comes as both victims and actors (International Crisis Group 2016). While putting a greater emphasis on the latter, the discussion highlights that for some women, their willingness to participate as terror operatives was tied to a desire to escape the grim social conditions many of them face in the northeastern region of Nigeria (Moaveni 2019).

Karla J. Cunningham from RAND Corporation puts forth her analysis of female participation in terrorism by intersecting it with evolutionary theory and survival assessment. She argues that "altered assessments of survival help to explain how women can become violent, even to the point of sacrificing their lives, within sociocultural settings that would seem to preclude such behavior." Furthermore, her findings also conclude that "evolutionary theory is both consciously and unconsciously framed in politically violent settings to mobilize females into politically violent behavior while retaining and maintain existing sociocultural gendered frameworks of public and private, male and female". While various groups and movements[6] have deployed female suicide bombers, Boko Haram has exceeded them in comparison. Over a year and a half, Boko Haram sent out 90 female suicide bombers, highest amongst any insurgencies around the world (Stewart and Fox 2015).

Moreover, as argued by Mia Bloom, such involvement of women also challenges the existing cultural norms of a given society (Bloom 2007). Therefore, participation may reflect greater female empowerment and "a heightened sense of gender equality" by these organizations. however, ultimately this is difficult to ascertain (Bloom 2007). My argument is that women empowerment can never be reached by this. Even though the willingness to participate deviates from the bias of victimization, gender stereotypes are still reinforced by hijacking women's agency through psychological abuse and brainwashing: a key characteristic of GBV used by terrorist groups to deprive subject of their autonomy.

According to a journalist from TRT World interviewed for this research, deploying women as weapons/suicide bombers is a shrewd and manipulative strategy by the group. Gender stereotypes regard women to be inherently peaceful; a young girl (most subjects of Boko Haram) is perceived as harmless with her appearance, age, and dress. Their feminine façade does not reflect violence, therefore, circumventing security checks and suspicion (Bloom, 2014). This corresponds to Boko Haram's usage of women as shields and weapons to sow disorder.

Reinforcing the gendered stereotype, the image of a "peaceful woman" is used by terrorist groups to pursue their own violent agenda. Boko Haram exploits and takes advantage of a broken social system (Moaveni

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[6] One example is Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. The group was a Sri Lankan ethno-nationalist terrorist group which emerged in 1976. They fought for an independent Tamil state in the North and Northeast area of Sri Lanka. The LTTE is also known for deploying female suicide bombers and cultivating extreme violence through female participation in the region of South Asia.

2019) to meet their own aims. Boko Haram has pushed the envelop of radicalization and oppression by abusing the rhetoric of religion to further their own agenda.

In a book by Wolfgang Bauer entitled "Stolen Girls: Survivors of the Boko Haram Tell Their story", Bauer investigates experiences of women captives of Boko Haram. Through featured interviews with 60 women and girls, Bauer outlines the horrors of their captivity.

Some interviews conducted with former captives reveal that some women willingly joined the insurgency. One girl's version, with the name of Talatu, informs us that she came across terror operatives in the organization who had also been kidnapped and would say "we have also been kidnapped, but you have got to get over it, we are carrying out the work of God here (Bauer 2016)." This affiliation with a purpose in life towards extreme fringes provides us with the two-fold element for understanding participation mechanisms within Boko Haram: people's need to find a meaning in life through identity and to overcome economic and social structures they are part of. Even so, conducting such extreme acts of violence is condemnable and can in no way be condoned.

According to Josh, women who participate with the group come from the margins of the society. As the women in these societies are not seen as a productive force and hence deemed meaningless, Boko Haram manipulates them and instill in them false meanings by tapping into identity and self.

Besides being used as cannon fodder, women's experience with Boko Haram also include forced conversion, rape; and being used as insurgent's slaves, forced to cook, carry weapons etc. Many women are impregnated, therefore, the group uses women's reproductive capacity to widen the insurgency's power dynamic (Matfess and Bloom, 2016). This represents Boko Haram's forms of violence that is tied to a symbolic representation and meaning, which as Mia Bloom and Hilary Matfess put forward by saying that, "the image of persecuted Muslim women, the model of the righteous Muslim wife, and the symbol of Muslim women as vessels for the next generation of jihadi fighters are valuable propaganda tools" (Matfess and Bloom, 2016, p. 113).

The above examples demonstrate that through symbolism, exploitation of religion, coupled with taking advantage of a fractured system has been an effective strategy adopted the group. Boko Haram's tactics goes beyond arms, and reinforces trauma in psychological makeup of its captives. Fragile political structures in developing regions with complex historical contexts has led to the emergence of non-state participants that come with strategies and actions that threaten societies around the world.

Amina, 17, a Nigerian woman living in Malkoli camp in the Yola city of Adamawa, is seen near her sewing machine. Nigerian families who fled the violence of Boko Haram in Gwoza city of Borno took shelter in Malkoli camp in the Yola city of Adamawa. (Mohammed Elshamy - Anadolu Agency)

Rape as a Weapon in Myanmar

Over a million Rohingya have been displaced since the early 1990s. In the present context according to UNHCR, the violence, which broke out last year in Rakhine state, has driven 723,000 refugees to Bangladesh (UNHCR 2018). According to a report by Human Rights Watch "Burmese [Myanmar's] security forces have committed widespread rape against women and girls as part of a campaign of ethnic cleansing against Rohingya Muslims in Burma's [Myanmar's] Rakhine State" (Human Rights Watch, 2017, p. 1). Although, various other elements related to Gender Based Violence (GBV) relate to the issue, rape as weapon of war against the Rohingya will be highlighted in greater detail.

The usage of rape represents the instrumentalisation of the act in order to inflict long-term harm on the Rohingya community. In a study conducted by Jonathan Matusitz, war rape is "systematically" used in conflict situations "as part of a large scale campaign to wipe out ethnic groups" (Matusitz, 2017, p. 830). Matusitz further claims that war rape is a form of terrorism, which holds a symbolic representative of ten themes[7]. Following his study, the first theme of "ethnic cleansing" is more reflective of the Rohingya experience. However, merging of all themes, according to Masquitz, have a common purpose which is "elimination of the enemy" (Matusitz, 2017, p. 830), thus reflective of state's neglect about the issue as mentioned earlier.

According to a TRT World journalist who was interviewed for this research, sexual violence against Rohingya women has been conducted by

Hamida, one of the women who were raped by Myanmar armed forces members, takes shelter at Leda unregistered Rohingya camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. (Zakir Hossain Chowdhury - Anadolu Agency)

[7] The ten symbols which Matusitz mentions in his article are: (1) identicide (Or ethnic cleansing), (2) punishment, (3) conquering territory, (4) proof of manhood, (5) wounded femininity, (6) wounded community, (7) rejection from family, (8) abjection, (9) ritual, and (10) fantasy. For more information on the article following is the link https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-017-9424-z

the hands of the military, sometimes in front of their families. A key point that was highlighted is the act of violence being conducted "inside their homes" (Chouwdhury 2018).

The effect of the deployment of rape as a weapon has meant a potential disenfranchisement of the Rohingya, possibly for generations to come. As a result of particular societal norms, a stigma is attached to the victims of rape. Abandonment from family members in case of pregnancy compounded with ongoing trauma need to be mentioned. According to Chouwdhury, desperate measures are also taken by using unprofessional techniques for abortion.

To highlight the above, Masquitz highlights:

In many societies, because virginity and chastity prior to marriage are cherished, rape transforms the victim into a woman inapt for marriage or motherhood. Such stigmatization has caused many victims (and babies born out of rape) to be ostracized by their own families. (Matusitz, 2017, p. 838).

Another impact after settlements in camps relates to the economic hardships and desperation, which leads refugee families to take actions that produce adverse conditions for women and girls within the refugee settlements. Under-age marriages is one way for families to escape severe financial constraints, and also to hide shame from unwanted pregnancy. Similarly, as reported by the UN Migration agency, young Rohingya girls in camps in Bangladesh are "sold into forced labor accounting for the largest group trafficking of victims" (UN News 2018). Sexual trafficking by criminal gangs at Cox's Bazaar has formed part of the sex trade of Rohingya refugees, which functions as far as trading the kidnapped women beyond the shores of Bangladesh to India and Nepal (Amnesty International 2018).

Furthermore, scholarly literature also suggests that power structure and patriarchy remain an integral part of the refugee camps. The post conflict situation in the Rohingya community brings loss in economic potential and mobility among men, who in many

communities in the developing world remain sole breadwinners. Therefore, as these men end up with no economic prospects to support, the women take up an economic role. This fosters a space where gendered norms seem contested. Sometimes these traditional gendered norms frustrate the men, which are projected onto women in the form of domestic violence (Solaiman and Krisna 2018).

Jacques P Leider gives an interesting insight into the persecution of Rohingya. His argument stands against the 'victimization narrative', which has characterized most of the coverage regarding the crisis. He says:

Self-identification as victims harms the long-term interest of victimized individuals and groups to be perceived as actors in their own way. Secondly, it seemingly deprives outside actors and observers alike the chance to step back and look at competing interpretations and understandings of history as part of a diverse reality and an inevitably frictional process to search for truth and safeguard an open space for political dialogue (Leider, 2018, p. 117).

This can also be elaborated within the context of violence against Rohingya women. Breaking the issue down only to evoke a sense of victimhood in the global stage may further deprive agency for these women to act and stand on their own behalf. Similarly, media and humanitarian networks need to understand this condition with intuitive study and analysis which enshrines critical and historical analysis of subject matter, as Leider argues. The late reaction of global actors, as a result, becomes reflective of ignorance and a lack of authentic understanding of an examination to understand the conditions of a society, which come with detrimental consequences, making it too late for actors to act.

Conclusion

Based on the case studies above, it can be argued that even though different actors (state and non-state) were involved in perpetuating violence, there is a similarity in the violent experiences and constant subjugation faced by the women in conflict in the form of GBV.

First, the state of Myanmar and Boko Haram used war rape as an "instrument of terror" (Matusitz 2017). Also, the act in both situations was sometimes carried out in front of women's family members who were later killed in front of the raped subject. As a result, the trauma and psychological impact rape creates in one's physical and mental agency has long term implications. Unwanted pregnancies, along with societal stigma follows these women and their families through their lives.

Secondly, the cases also represent women as active agents in the society; although with a negative and a positive aspect in Nigeria and Myanmar's case respectively. In case of Boko Haram, women participating as terror operatives and suicide bombers is another form of GBV. It is also a form of brainwashing led by male counterparts and a violent terrorist group, which employ these tactics to further their own power, while abusing religion and gender for their own agenda.

Rohingya women, once settled in refugee camps, became involved in economic roles, thus shifting the stereotyped element of the male being the sole breadwinner. Nevertheless, the shift away from the social gendered norms subjects women to be targets of domestic violence by their male counterparts. Also, these societal norms are intersected with the act of rape, effects of which follow the Rohingya women in the post conflict scenario.

Both cases also highlight the lethargy of the regional and international states that failed to address the complex historical dynamics of the problem. This failure by leading institutions and key actors to respond with promptness since the beginning is symptomatic of the decline of the world order. The evolution of Boko Haram rests on economic disparity in Nigeria and different societal dynamics, providing an environment for the neglected population to be misguided and brainwashed by a terrorist group and hence take up arms against the state to seek recognition through a "hardline" identity to find meaning and purpose.

Likewise, in Myanmar, the state's neglect towards the Rohingya, created a space to carry out genocidal atrocities by the army. However, the anti-Rohingya sentiment is inherently linked to a longstanding xenophobic element pursued by extremist Buddhists.

In both cases, the fanatic actions exist in a 'legitimate' and an 'illegitimate' grounding. In Myanmar, according to the International Crisis group, extreme Buddhist nationalist rhetoric has led to an upsurge of anti-Muslim sentiment and hate speech across the country (International Crisis Group 2017). This is mainly carried out by organizations[8] led by hardline Buddhist monks, who have been legitimized by the state. In Nigeria the rise of the terrorist organization Boko Haram, has taken thousands of lives and displaced countless more. The Council on Foreign Relations has claimed Nigeria's fight against Boko Haram as "one of the region's deadliest conflict" (Campbell and Harwood 2018).

Similarly, as the patriarchal rules still pervade their ideologies and power, violence against women in both spheres forms a lasting mark of physical and psychological trauma. The burdens that follow even in the post conflict situation through the elements of GBV need to be dealt with appropriately by state, non-state actors, NGO networks and global participants accordingly.

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[8] According to the ICG report, one such organization is Association for the Protection of Race and Religion (MaBaTha). It consists of charismatic monks, influencing population across the state, espousing anti-Muslim violence and jingoistic speech in name of protecting race and religion.

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