



# **Weaponised and Displaced Women in Mass Atrocities and the RtoP**

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## **Abstract**

Terror groups, like al-Shabaab and Boko Haram, have emerged in recent years as key drivers of conflict in some African countries, generating mass casualties from routine suicide bomb attacks. The strategies of these groups include the increasing mobilisation and deployment of women in suicide bombing operations. At the same time, women have been among the most victimised by the activities of the terror groups, both as direct targets of attacks and as internally displaced people. The focus of this study is to discuss the twin dynamic by which women are both agents and victims of the terror groups. The study seeks to explore what existing knowledge tells us about possible future trends in the 'weaponisation' of women and mass atrocities. It also considers the place of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) tools in stemming the tide of the weaponisation of women. The nexus of gender, suicide bombing and displacement and what these mean for R2P are the sub-components of the analysis that underpins the article.

## **Résumé**

Les groupes terroristes, comme Al-Shabaab et Boko Haram, sont devenus ces dernières années les principaux moteurs des conflits dans certains pays africains, faisant de nombreuses victimes lors d'attentats-suicides. Les stratégies de ces groupes incluent la mobilisation et le déploiement croissants de femmes dans les opérations d'attentats-suicides. Dans le même temps, les femmes ont été parmi les plus impactées par les activités des groupes terroristes, à la fois comme cibles directes des attaques et comme personnes déplacées à l'intérieur de leur propre pays. L'objectif de cette étude est de discuter de la double dynamique par laquelle les femmes sont à la fois actrices et victimes des groupes terroristes. L'étude cherche à approfondir ce que les connaissances actuelles

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nous apprennent sur les tendances futures possibles de la « militarisation » des femmes et des atrocités de masse. Elle examine également la localisation des instruments de la responsabilité de protéger (R2P) pour endiguer la vague de militarisation des femmes. Le triptyque genre, attentats suicides et déplacements, ainsi que leur importance pour la responsabilité de protéger, sont les sous-éléments de l'analyse qui sous-tend cet article.

## **Introduction**

In the last few years, the world has witnessed an unprecedented increase in the number of female suicide bombers, leading various scholars to suggest that a process of the weaponisation of women is underway by terrorist groups (Monnet 2018). Some terrorist groups, mainly those that specialise in using women for violent actions as an instrument of terror, have gained notoriety in this regard, with Boko Haram and al-Shabaab standing out. This article intends to advance the understanding of the interplay between the victimisation and agency of women in the operations of terrorist groups like Boko Haram, in a broad context characterised by deep deprivation. To do this, the article focuses on the context and specifics of internally displaced women in Nigeria, and shows how displacement connects with Boko Haram activities to pose the question of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) as an issue of policy concern.

The questions raised by this study include the following:

- What does existing knowledge tell us about possible future trends in the 'weaponisation' of women and mass atrocities?
- What tools in R2P can be used by state and international actors (development aid and security agencies) to stem or reverse the current tide of women's weaponisation?
- How can capacity-building and mediation be better deployed within the current skewed gender context to help?

In addressing the question around the R2P tools that can be used to halt or stem the rising tide of the weaponisation of women, the study draws attention to the nature of the deprivation that Internally Displaced Persons (IDP's) generally, and female IDPs in particular, suffer, and how this intersects with their weaponisation and victimisation.

I theorise that given the historical, cultural and socioeconomic context of IDP women in north-eastern Nigeria, they are likely to be steered towards the exercise of rational choice in their own weaponisation. The resultant exercise of agency by the women perpetuates violence against women. Beyond being victims of the current crisis sustained by Boko Haram,

women are also weaponised as agents of violence. The R2P framework provides avenues through which efforts can be made to stem the deadly tide and cycle of violence that is taking place.

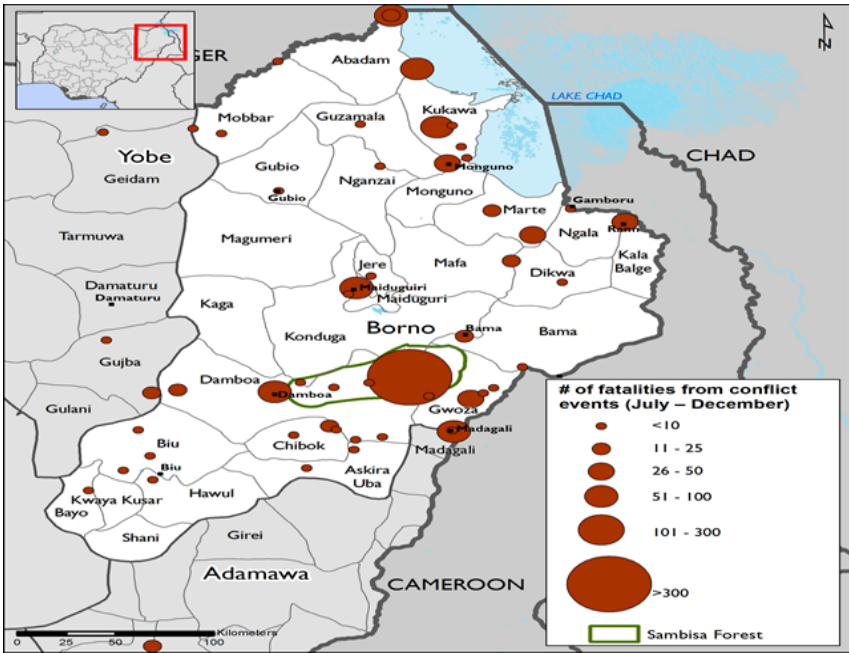
## **Background Context**

Data from research carried out by Mendelbaum and Schweitzer (2018) shows that, in 2017, 126 women and girls, accounting for 92 per cent of female suicide bombers globally, were deployed by the Boko Haram sect. Most of their attacks took place in north-eastern Nigeria. Not surprisingly, on account of Boko Haram's activities, there has been a burgeoning population of IDPs in north-east Nigeria. Primarily made up of women, the IDPs lack the critical infrastructure and support they need to survive. These IDPs are a direct product of terrorist activities carried out by Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa (ISWA).

As terrorist activities have escalated, so too has the number of IDPs recorded in north-eastern Nigeria. Though conscious of its obligation, the government has found it challenging to cater to the needs of the IDPs, especially with regard to providing basic amenities and services, including healthcare and education (Mooney 2005; Deng 1994; Ferris and Winthrop 2010; UNHCR 2004). The level of deprivation in the IDP camps impacts on the physical and mental health of displaced persons, quite apart from undermining their faith in the ability of the government to take care of their core interests as citizens and humans (Loughry and Eyber 2003; Porter and Haslam 2005; Roberts et al. 2008; Getanda, Papadopoulos and Evans 2015; Mujeeb 2015). Other studies have highlighted the negative side effects of the sad conditions in IDP camps, which include the breeding and perpetuation of illiteracy, sexual exploitation and gangsterism (Alobo and Obaji 2016; Deng 1994; Akuto 2017; Madsen 2003).

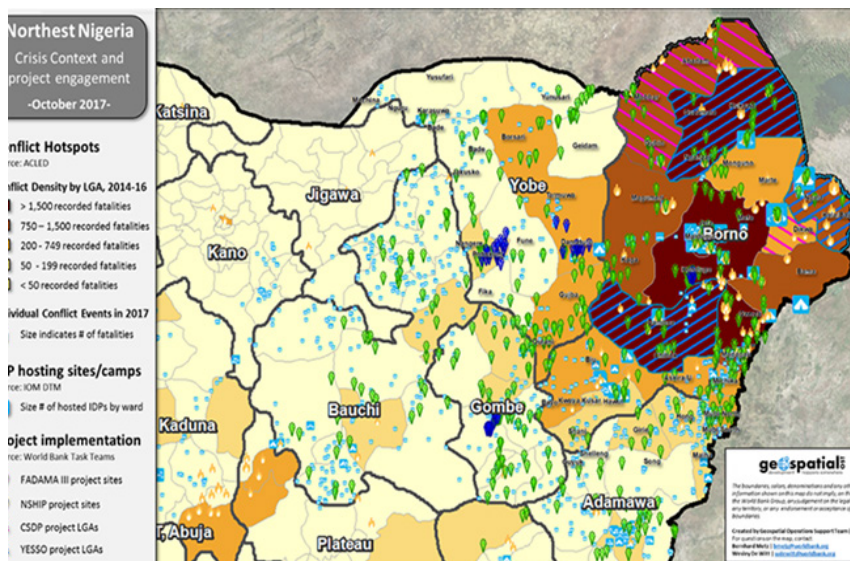
The *Punch* newspaper of Nigeria (November 2018) published a report that offers a glimpse into the deplorable conditions IDPs live in, the mostly tragic details of their daily existence, and the coping mechanisms they have developed in order to survive. Some of these survival mechanisms include transactional sex to meet their basic needs, as reported by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) (2014). The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) also reports that the Boko Haram insurgency continues to be the biggest driver of internal displacement in Nigeria. The centre reports that as many as 341,000 new displacements were associated with this conflict in 2018. The figure for the total number of people displaced in 2019 was put at approximately 2,216,000 IDPs (IDMC 2019).

In direct contestation of the claims by the Nigerian government that they have defeated them, Boko Haram and ISWA have increased their activities in north-eastern Nigeria since December 2018. Boko Haram, for example, has captured many villages and towns in the area and carries out opportunist attacks across much of the north-east region of the country and beyond. The consequence has been devastating. According to UNOCHA, 1.4 million people remain internally displaced in Borno State, one of the main theatres of the operations of Boko Haram in north-east Nigeria (see Fig.1). An additional 400,000 are displaced in Adamawa and Yobe states as a result of the situation of insecurity caused by Boko Haram. In the face of such a massive humanitarian crisis, the Nigerian government has struggled, with little success, to uphold its Responsibility to Protect the people (R2PMonitor 2019).



**Figure 1:** ReliefWeb/Google 2016: Conflict Area and Fatalities in Borno State, north-east Nigeria

Figure 1 shows a map of Borno State, in the north-eastern part of Nigeria. It particularly highlights the conflict areas, and indicates that the number of fatalities ranges from less than ten fatalities from Boko Haram attacks in Biu to over three hundred, between Gwoza and the Bama area.



**Figure 2:** World Bank 2017: Crisis, Conflict Hotspots and IDP Camps

The World Bank crisis and IDP camp map in Figure 2 shows the various IDP camps distributed across north-east Nigeria. The areas around Borno and Yobe states have the highest conflict density, recording between 200 and more than 1,500 fatalities in an attack. These areas also have the highest number of IDP camps.

## The Responsibility to Protect, IDPs and the Case for Women and Girls

R2P is an agreed framework for the protection of people from genocide, crimes against humanity, mass atrocities and war crimes. It was endorsed by the United Nations (UN) in 2005 and carries the responsibility of protecting 'at-risk populations', building capacity for them and carrying out various preventive measures (UN 2010). The United Nations recognises the identification of states affected and the execution of an early warning assessment as under its purview.

The recognition of the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world (Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948). This declaration inspires most of the norms of the United Nations, including the R2P. It is argued by some that the idea of human rights as set forth by international bodies such as the UN is culturally biased in

favour of the Western liberal tradition and lacks enough cognisance of regional differences (Dupre 2011). In spite of this, most countries still make an effort to abide by the norms and standards agreed to within the negotiating framework of the UN, in the expectation of enjoying the benefits that could accrue from them. Such benefits include the R2P if a particular state ever needs it.

Boko Haram has kidnapped over 300 girls and women from schools and villages in north-east Nigeria. Many of them were suddenly and violently separated from their homes and countries, and made to play roles as cooks, sex slaves, wives and housekeepers to the members of the group. Boko Haram's terror activities do not rule out the probability of 'rational choice' by some women who voluntarily opt to join or stay with the group, either because they subscribe to its ideology or are motivated by reasons of socioeconomic survival (Matfess and Warner 2017; Nwaubani 2018). In recent times, some of the kidnapped girls have also been deployed as suicide bombers. In May 2015, Boko Haram abducted and detained 276 schoolgirls, compelling the International Criminal Court's Prosecutor, Fatou Bensouda, to rule that the crimes committed by Boko Haram fell within the jurisdiction of the Court, which has authority over cases of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide.

According to former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, in a 2009 report entitled 'Implementing the Responsibility to Protect', the pillars of the R2P are:

1. First, the state's primary responsibility for the protection of populations from genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing.
2. Second, international assistance and capacity-building by the international community as a responsibility to assist and encourage states in fulfilling their protection obligations.
3. Third, timely and decisive response, if a state fails to protect its population from these crimes or perpetrates them, using appropriate diplomatic, economic, humanitarian and other peaceful means to protect people. Where inadequate, the international community must take stronger action, including collective enforcement measures under Chapter VII of the UN Charter.

According to the UNHCR/UNOCHA, 2004:

Internally Displaced persons are persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence in particular as a result of armed conflict, situations of generalised violence violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters and who have not crossed an International State border.

Individual nations or states are responsible for the welfare of IDPs under international law; they are required to follow the UN's 'Guiding Principles' in fulfilling their responsibilities. It is worth noting, however, that these principles are not legally binding.

Though similar to the refugee, the internally displaced woman lacks legal status in international law or rights binding on any entity or organisation regarding her situation. The UNHCR points out that the term 'internally displaced person' is descriptive (Ferris and Winthrop 2010). An essential part of being a refugee is going across an international border. Since IDPs are displaced persons within their national borders by choice or otherwise, they are not refugees, regardless of the fate they suffer. IDPs and refugees also differ in that IDPs require a durable solution for their situation; while the return to their homes may be risky, there are no mechanisms for resettlement, monitoring and protection or guarantees by organisations like the UNHCR (Mooney 2005).

### **Conceptualisation of Weaponisation and Deprivation and their Operationalisation**

Suicide bombings carried out by women for terror groups have now generally come to be referred to as the 'weaponisation' of women (Monnet 2018). This applies to the various circumstances under which women put on suicide vests and play multiple roles in Boko Haram's terror activities, either as victims or as persons with agency. The guiding principles and similar tools produced by the UN have defined the groundwork for the treatment of IDPs by states. Continental bodies like the African Union (AU), of which Nigeria is a member, have produced the Kampala Convention on the protection of IDPs among its member states. Article 9 of the Convention lists the obligations of states to protect people from the following abuses:

States shall protect IDPs against sexual and gender-based violence in all its forms, notably rape, enforced prostitution, sexual exploitation and harmful practices, slavery, recruitment of children and their use in hostilities, forced, and human trafficking and smuggling; and starvation.

The convention states further that:

States Parties shall:

- a. Take necessary measures to ensure that internally displaced persons are received, without discrimination of any kind and live in satisfactory conditions of safety, dignity, and security;

- b. Provide internally displaced persons to the fullest extent practicable and with the least possible delay, with adequate humanitarian assistance, which shall include food, water, shelter, medical care and other health services, sanitation, education, and any other necessary social services, and where appropriate, extend such assistance to local and host communities.

Several of the key terms used in the convention are germane to this study.

### **A Tale of Terrorism, Displacement and Deep Deprivation: Boko Haram in North-Eastern Nigeria**

By 2018, there were more than 40 million IDPs worldwide and approximately two million IDPs in Nigeria, representing 5 per cent of the global total. The state of IDPs in north-eastern Nigeria is, by all accounts, dire and marked by profound privation. There is a lack in all spheres, including proper sanitary conditions, health and education (Alobo and Obaji 2016; Deng 1994; Akuto 2017). The growth in the number of IDPs in Nigeria is primarily due to Boko Haram activity and the devastation it has produced (Ejiofor, Oni and Sejoro 2017). Madsen (2003), in his argument on the role of IDP economic deprivation as a factor in the dynamics of terrorism, shed some light on the nature of the vulnerabilities to which displaced persons are exposed. The suffering experienced by IDPs includes the unavailability of sanitation, medical care, employment opportunities, nutrition and education. In their seminal work on IDPs and security, Choi and Piazza (2016) suggest that dealing with the challenges that produce internal displacement and taking measures to enhance human rights and access to its basics could help significantly to reduce terrorist incidents.

### **Development and Socioeconomic Situation**

The peculiarity of the environment in which women who are recruited into terrorist groups live may inform their decisions to participate in the activities of groups like Boko Haram because of the benefits they expect to receive. Scholarly works on reasons why insurgency and terrorism may thrive show that the socioeconomic environment is a critical predictor. The response of people, especially women, to prolonged and sustained socioeconomic exclusion and marginalisation is to seek a home with organisations like Boko Haram and to participate in their activities (Meagher 2015; Mustapha 2015). Governance failure, corruption and economic marginalisation leading to poverty, unemployment, inequality and hunger are challenges people in Nigeria face to varying degrees. According to Matfess (2017), and corroborated by Walker (2016), some

Boko Haram women have exercised agency in joining the ranks of the group in order to improve their quality of life. Contrary to the argument of some scholars like Zedalis (2004) regarding this point, poverty does breed terrorism.

Radicalisation is also associated with poverty, in some cases (Shmid 2013). In the context of north-eastern Nigeria, radical groups offer economic prospects. A *TIME* magazine edition (June 2017) devoted to the accounts of victims of Boko Haram tells the interesting story of Fatima G. She narrates how fifteen of her female friends agreed to be suicide bombers after being fêted by the militants and told stories of martyrdom. Amartya Sen (2000: 203), in his seminal work on development as freedom, alludes to the fact that women's agency and wellbeing is critical to political and social action. The study showed that women's agency and voice through independence and empowerment in literacy, education, earning power and property rights are necessary for development. These same factors, or, more precisely, the lack of them, either correlate or can be associated with the exercise of agency in mass violence by suicide bombing.

## **History, Culture and Colonisation**

The history and culture of an area influence the nature of the insurgency that it experiences. A long history of drought, for example, had left north-east Nigeria impoverished long before the Boko Haram insurgency started. Long-term poverty in the area was also built on a history of marginalisation and exclusion that dated back to colonial times. The actions of the British colonial power in north-eastern Nigeria played an important role in the origins and history of conflicts in that part of the country. In handpicking the mountain people from Gwoza and making them the elite class at the expense of the larger Dweghe group, the British left a legacy of social fractures in the north-east. These fractures persisted over the years and proved fertile ground for Boko Haram recruits in the 2000s. It is not surprising that some of the militant Boko Haram fighters are Dweghes who harbour long-held grievances about marginalisation and exclusion (Walker 2016:157).

The Kanuri-speaking people, who are the dominant group in the region, live in Gwoza, Dgwhede and Borno. They also have a culture of *purdah* (seclusion of women) and *mubaya* (oath of secrecy) that feeds into the kind of Islam practised in the area, and which is reinforced by commonly held beliefs around patriarchy, polygamy, divorce and women's work on the farms (Cohen 1967; Matfess 2017). Meagher (2009) argues that the specific interactions of culture, agency and power in various social

contexts, and how they relate to economic networks and political process, affect outcomes in an area. History has evolved with a strong culture of structural violence against women in places like north-eastern Nigeria. This oppression manifests itself in limited opportunities for them and the repressive norms that are commonplace. It informs their participation with radicalised groups in a way that mixes coercion, consent and autonomy (Matfess 2017).

### **Stemming the Weaponisation of Women, and the R2P**

The peculiar and dire circumstances of female IDPs in Nigeria, the state of their wellbeing or lack of it, would seem to be key factors informing their agency or choice regarding terrorism. Rational choice theory, built on an incentive-based model, suggests that terrorists, like criminals, are rational individuals who act in self-interest and on opportunity cost. Like common crime, terrorism is influenced by poverty and lack of education (Atran 2003; Becker 1968). Given the opportunity or offer of safety, protection, provision of income, nutrition, non-food items and some form of religious indoctrination from Boko Haram, there is a likelihood that an IDP will accept and join the group as an exercise of rational choice.

With regard to the R2P, the world polity theory suggests that the global system is one social system with a cultural framework that can be understood as ‘world polity’. This takes into account every actor in the world system and the way in which he or she influences international organisations like the UN, participating states and individuals. The global social system is governed by principles and models that shape the course and objectives of social actors and what they do (McNeely 2012; Boli and Thomas 1997). An illustration of the workings of the world polity theory is offered by Berkovitch (1999), with reference to the successes of the international women’s movement in affecting the behaviour of actors in the international system. In the same vein, R2P has the potential from the world polity point of view to provide the global norms for dealing with IDPs in places such as Nigeria.

### **Responsibility to Protect and the IDP Female**

The overarching theoretical perspective is the use of a feminist lens to engage with this subject. Studying the IDP situation cannot be complete without attention to the particular challenges faced by the female IDP.

Why does it matter to look at R2P in the Boko Haram crises through a gendered lens? True (2003) points to the people at the margins, like displaced women and non-state actors in world politics, and shows how feminist perspectives bring alternative conceptualisations of power and fresh thinking for inclusion. Accordingly, it has also been shown that the most efficient allocation of international development aid is often to provide women with appropriate socioeconomic infrastructures like health, credit and education resources. Feminist theory can inform ethical guidelines for humanitarian intervention, development aid and human rights protection, among other global norms and values (Benería 1982; Charleton, Everett and Staudt 1989; Tronto 2006; Hutchings 2000).

Normative Feminism, which engages with the process of International Relations theorising as part of a normative idea for global change, is applicable to the nexus of gender equality, peacekeeping and R2P (True 2003; Goldstein 2001; Caprioli 2000; Tronto 2006; Hutchings 2000: 122–3; Mohanty, Russo and Torres 1991). The findings from the studies cited highlight the following key propositions:

1. First, states with greater domestic gender inequality are also more likely to witness the escalation of violence in crises. Nigeria reflects this correlation, ranked 133 out of 149 in the Global Gender Gap Report 2018 (WEF), with gross gender inequality between the sexes on all indices measured.
2. Second, the particular impact of conflict on women, including sexual and gender-based violence, calls for the inclusion by the UN of the state's responsibility to protect women citizens, as part of its R2P goals.
3. Third, a strong case rests for acknowledging geographical, historical and cultural specificities in looking at the 'Third World Woman' (Mohanty et al. 1991). In this case, the experience of the north-eastern Nigerian woman comes with some contextual factors that should be factored into the implementation of R2P by the state and international actors.

## Methodology

In the operationalisation of deprivation and selection of the keywords for analysis, I relied on the indices deployed by the UN, IOM and other NGOs in administering humanitarian aid in Nigeria. I conceptualise aid as material help in various forms given to IDPs.

Methodologically, the study is based on the following approach:

**Method:** I carried out a content analysis of situation reports released by the UNHCR, the IOM, NEMA and UNOCHA between 2017 and 2019. These reports are specifically on the humanitarian interventions in

the north-eastern part of Nigeria where Boko Haram has caused the mass displacement of people. Seven of these reports were selected for the study, and NVivo was the tool used for qualitative analysis. This analysis aimed to find out what the most significant area of deprivation or need is for IDP populations in Nigeria. This will guide future policy in the area, inform interventions and reduce the potential or risks of internally displaced women choosing terrorism because of deprivation. The reports were selected for their representation of UN, NGO and Nigerian government intervention in the IDP crises. These organisations represent consistent supporters of the women in their plight.

**Unit of Analysis:** The analysis included seven codes—SGBV, Education, Food, Health, NFIs (non-food items), Shelter and Poverty—used to interrogate the seven situation reports from the humanitarian agencies. The data and reports used were retrieved from the available online archives of the organisations, and NVivo helped in coding, building relevant nodes and data analysis. The rationale and primary consideration that went into data selection was a timeframe covering events in the study. Between 2016 and 2019, there was an increase in terrorist activity and a consequent displacement of people that is currently at a plateau in Nigeria. This bears researching. While the data may not be adequate for conclusions, it does serve the purpose of this preliminary study.

**Keywords:** In this study, the codes represented nodes, which contained the following keywords and which helped organise the unit of analysis: girls, women, sexual (SGBV); blankets, mattresses, sanitary towels, toilet rolls, bathing soap (NFIs); feeding, nutrition, malnutrition (Food); vaccines, immunisation, mental, trauma, treatment, disease (Health); tents, camp, temporary, school buildings (Shelter); teacher, supplies (Education).

**Data Analysis and Interpretation:** The findings are presented in two parts. First, I detail the results in two tables, as well as a word query map and Pareto chart for visual representation. The second part is a comparative analysis of the coverage of each type of intervention, how it reflects the kind of IDP deprivation in Nigeria, and its meaning for the research questions in this study.

*Data Analysis and Interpretation: Part 1*

**Table 1:** Analysis of situation reports released by the UNHCR, 2017 to 2019

| Node      | UNHCR1       | Cov<br>(per cent) | UNHCR2       | Cov<br>(per cent) | UNHCR3       | Cov<br>(per cent) |
|-----------|--------------|-------------------|--------------|-------------------|--------------|-------------------|
|           | Ref<br>Coded |                   | Ref<br>Coded |                   | Ref<br>Coded |                   |
| Education | 2            | 10.44             | 0            | 0                 | 1            | 6.82              |
| Food      | 3            | 15.52             | 2            | 5.0               | 1            | 6.82              |
| Health    | 1            | 5.87              | 1            | 2.92              | 0            | 0                 |
| NFIs      | 3            | 14.75             | 3            | 9.49              | 2            | 12.57             |
| Poverty   | 1            | 1.24              | 0            | 0                 | 0            | 0                 |
| SGBV      | 1            | 3.12              | 4            | 11.19             | 1            | 6.82              |
| Shelter   | 4            | 18.50             | 3            | 8.56              | 1            | 5.75              |

Source: Author’s own.

**Table 2:** Analysis of situation reports released by the IOM, NEMA and UNOCHA, 2017 to 2019

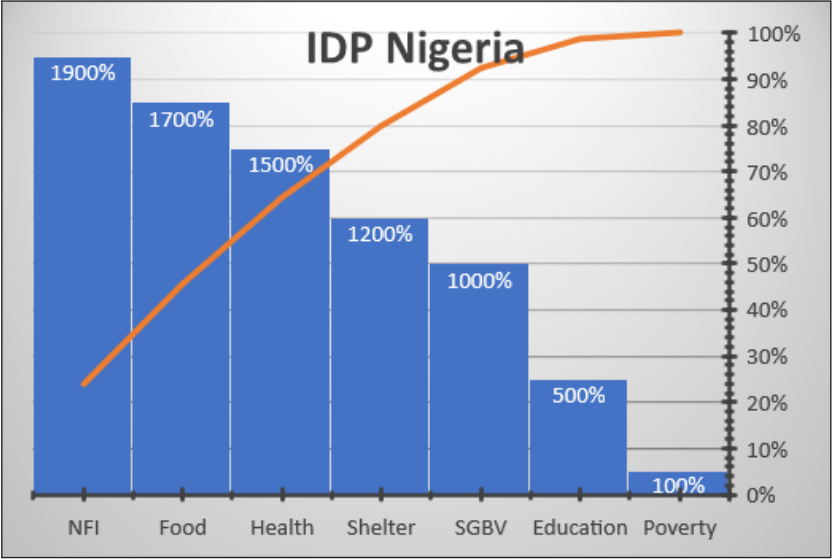
| Node      | IOM1         | Cov<br>(per cent) | IOM2         | Cov<br>(per cent) | NEMA         | Cov<br>(per cent) | UNOCHA       | Cov<br>(per cent) |
|-----------|--------------|-------------------|--------------|-------------------|--------------|-------------------|--------------|-------------------|
|           | Ref<br>Coded |                   | Ref<br>Coded |                   | Ref<br>Coded |                   | Ref<br>Coded |                   |
| Education | 0            | 0                 | 1            | 25.88             | 0            | 0                 | 4            | 4.13              |
| Food      | 1            | 24.58             | 0            | 0                 | 4            | 54.44             | 6            | 4.76              |
| Health    | 0            | 0                 | 3            | 86.05             | 3            | 35.97             | 7            | 6.49              |
| NFIs      | 2            | 95.67             | 0            | 0                 | 1            | 7.08              | 8            | 7.40              |
| Poverty   | 0            | 0                 | 0            | 0                 | 0            | 0                 | 0            | 0                 |
| SGBV      | 0            | 0                 | 2            | 42.96             | 0            | 0                 | 2            | 1.80              |
| Shelter   | 2            | 47.63             | 1            | 10.12             | 1            | 7.08              | 11           | 9.97              |

Source: Author’s own.

*Findings from Tables 1 and 2*

NFIs had the highest reference, coded at 19 times, with a coverage of 146.96 per cent in the total overall reports coded. The second highest was Health, reference coded at 15 points with a total coverage of 137.3 per cent cumulative for all reports. Third was the need for Food, reference coded 17 times in all reports with a total coverage of 111.08 per cent. Shelter came fourth, reference coded at 12 points and a total coverage across reports of 107.61 per cent. SGBV was fifth, reference coded at 10 points with a total coverage in all reports of 65.89 per cent. Education was sixth, with a total





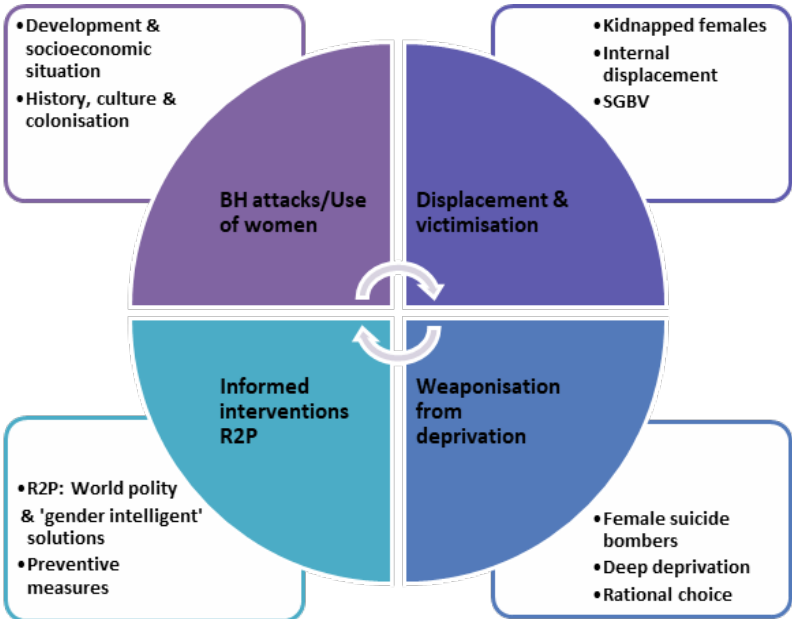
**Figure 4:** Pareto Chart of IDP deprivation

*Source:* Author’s own.

***Data Analysis and Interpretation: Part 2***

The findings from this study were informed by multiple sources: literature, analysis of qualitative and quantitative data from previous research, and reports from relevant international organisations and NGOs active in north-eastern Nigeria. In the operationalisation of deprivation and selection of the keywords for analysis, I relied on the indices deployed by the UN, IOM and other NGOs in administering humanitarian aid in Nigeria. I conceptualise aid as material help in various forms given to IDPs.

Although available data on the state of IDPs in Nigeria is not complete due to poor documentation, some reports are available. Organisations such as the UNHCR, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), International Organisation for Immigration (IOM), National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) and United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) have been able to put together relevant data on displaced persons. The reports used for analysis cover states affected by the ongoing Boko Haram insurgency in the north-eastern parts of Nigeria.



**Figure 5:** Weaponised and Displaced Women in Mass Atrocities and the RtoP  
*Source:* Author's own.

**Discussion of Findings**

A critical need for IDPs, especially women in Nigeria, is the restoration of dignity (picture a girl/woman without any sanitary pads for her period, or people without toilet facilities). Emergency shelter, help for malnutrition, SGBV and NFIs like blankets and beds are the equivalent of lifesavers to these individuals.

**Significance**

The importance of this preliminary study lies in the fact that it has disaggregated the issues affecting IDPs in Nigeria and through empirical research has been able to arrange these issues in hierarchical order. The findings directly answer the first research question: What does existing knowledge tell us about possible future trends in the ‘weaponisation’ of women and mass atrocities? Seeing the availability of non-food items as a priority before food and education reflects a very gendered dimension to this crisis. The threat of sexual and gender-based violence, which results from the lack of necessities, creates fertile ground for recruiting, trading

and abusing women and girls. It also makes women and girls more likely to participate in terrorism when the promise of a better life is dangled before them. Women who have already experienced multiple traumas, from terrorist attacks, eviction from their home, the loss of loved ones and loss of income, should not face additional threats of gendered violence. In this case, the lack of sanitary pads and a protective environment given the gendered dynamics could lead to the quest for alternatives to meet these needs. Those alternatives may not be safe or productive for these women.

The findings from the study align with other parts of the UN norms that call for ‘immediate, life-saving assistance, to meet the critical dignity needs’ of millions of people. Based on the specific needs and situation of IDP women in north-eastern Nigeria highlighted in this study, context-specific R2P mechanisms can be implemented. This relates to the second and third research questions I set out to investigate: What tools in R2P can be used by state and international actors to stall or halt the current tide? and How can capacity-building and mediation be deployed within the current skewed gender context? The limitations that may affect this study include the fact that the content analysis will have to be more robust. However, theoretical underpinnings and the literature reviewed helped to give the study a measure of triangulation and reliability.

### **Future Trends of the Weaponisation of Women in Mass Atrocities**

Future trends in the weaponisation and victimisation of women by violent extremist groups in north-east Nigeria will be informed by the fragmentation of these groups in the area. In the past, a faction broke away from Boko Haram, and was led by Abu Musab al-Barnawi at the time of the study. The original group was still led by Abubakar Shekau. The al-Barnawi faction, commonly called Islamic State West Africa (ISWA), holds divergent doctrines on modes of attack and women’s participation. According to Matfess (2019), variations in Boko Haram’s levels and pattern of violence may be associated with intra-insurgent dynamics, seasons and political incentives. From Matfess’s study, al-Barnawi’s faction accounts for just 9 per cent of the attacks attributed to Boko Haram from 2016. But the context is that, from 2014 to 2019, Boko Haram carried out more than 2,800 attacks with over 31,000 fatalities. This places the group among one of the most lethal in the world, and on a trajectory of increased atrocity threats.

Women recruited by Boko Haram may play the role of suicide bombers. Some participate in the group against their will, while others commit to it because they are aligned with the group’s ideology. From my research and

interviews with women who have experienced Boko Haram, the preaching of imams and other religious scholars influences women against extremist ideology as offered by Boko Haram. It offers them hope and a positive approach to learning and navigating the future. It is important to address the weaponisation of women using atrocity prevention frameworks that will cater for the direct and structural aspects that may lead to the event of mass atrocities. Recognising the loss and deprivation in the lived experience of IDPs, proposals that offer structural prevention for intervention will be relevant for the future (Jacobs 2020). This is designed to address long-term issues that are associated with latent atrocity crimes. Because structural prevention addresses social justice and human rights, it directly offers this group of people recourse.

The Africa–European Union joint strategy between 2007 and 2015 has been a strategic platform with results for capacity-building and atrocity prevention in the region. This comprehensive peace and security partnership focused on the full operationalisation of the African Peace and Security Architecture (EU 2017). The ECOWAS ECOWARN early warning and response system collaborates with civil society organisations and covers a spectrum of risk factors related to atrocity crimes, human rights violations, conflict and instability.

Boko Haram's extreme Salafi-jihadi ideology uses women as suicide bombers and to breed future suicide bombers (Bryson and Bukarti 2018). Targeting women with capacity-building that is gender-intelligent and designed to address the push and pull factors of terrorism is important.

The International Criminal Court (ICC) may not offer much by way of contributing to capacity-building, but can lead by example and signal the criminal accountability of individuals involved in atrocity crimes. Its work with agencies to support states with weak judicial systems to prosecute atrocity crimes and draw attention to critical situations that require global attention is significant (Weerdesteijn and Hola 2020). Mediation can be facilitated by religious members of the military involved in peace operations, who can also be an integral part of capacity-building. Studies have shown the part that military chaplains can play as peace-builders. It has been advocated that they act as liaisons with local religious leaders. Military chaplains and responsible religious leaders can play a stabilising role between the armed and local populations. An example is the intervention between the US military and local citizens in Operation Iraqi (Arnold 2020).

## Conclusion

The result of this study corroborates similar research on the nature of victimhood and agency of women affected by Boko Haram, and the implications for mass violence and atrocity prevention. It adds to previous research on this subject by showing that a country with a large number of IDPs, particularly women, has a high likelihood of producing recruits for terrorist groups and increasing violence. Nigeria is an example, with the critical level of deprivation experienced by IDPs and the current high rate of suicide terrorism mainly perpetrated by women in the country. The study successfully tested seven areas of need, which were operationalised to account for the deprivation in IDPs and indicate poverty and lack. They are education, food/nutrition, health, non-food items, SGBV, shelter and poverty. From the findings, the acute presence of these needs indicates deprivation that informs an association between IDPs and potential recruitment by violent extremist groups.

The expectation is that IDPs may, first, present potential recruits for Boko Haram if the group presents better economic alternatives. Second, an increase in IDP numbers and a reduction in the impact of humanitarian aid with worsening living conditions for them may lead to grievances and support for Boko Haram. Third, the IDP numbers and needs creates the potential to make the regions a challenge to govern, which will aid the activity of insurgents.

A critical component of the R2P framework for protection is the early warning measure taken to stem a crisis when it is still imminent. The case of the Boko Haram crises in Nigeria has been so described by the R2P monitor (May 2019) and has been backed by this study. The UN, in considering the second pillar of the R2P, can pursue capacity-building in the region. The government of Nigeria is making an effort that does not seem adequate for the escalating problems that face women in north-eastern Nigeria. Priority should be given to the following: socioeconomic initiatives; strengthening police, military and other security initiatives in the area; investing in durable infrastructure for elevating the care for women; the implementation of programmes that address the poverty-inducing desertification and drought in the region as a result of climate change; and capacity-building for strengthening governance and its mechanisms.

To conclude, as noted by the UN (2010):

It is often said, with some justification, that early warning does not always produce early action. But it is also true that early action is highly unlikely without early warning. It is critical, moreover, that early action also is well-informed action. The United Nations needs world-class early warning and assessment capacities, as called for by the 2005 World Summit Outcome, to ensure that it is not left with a choice between doing nothing or taking ill-informed action.

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