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Silence on the Lambs: The Abducted Chibok Schoolgirls in Nigeria and the Challenge to UNSCR 1325

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SUMMARY

This policy brief analyses the abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls in Nigeria by Boko Haram and explores how the kidnapping represents some of the challenges with operationalising United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325. It recommends the strengthening of the implementation of the resolution in internal conflicts with the participation of women, as learned from the Chibok case.

Introduction¹

In 2000, the United Nations Security Council passed resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on women, peace and security. This was a landmark event as the resolution recognised the special protection needs of women and girls during and after conflict and women's critical role in preventing, mitigating and ending conflict. Although efforts have been made to operationalise the resolution including follow-up resolutions² and national plans of actions, there are still major gaps in its implementation 14 years on. This policy brief will use an example from a troop contributing country (TCC), Nigeria, to demonstrate the opportunities for and challenges to implementing three of the four pillars of UNSCR 1325: participation, prevention and protection. UNSCR 1325 advocates for an increase in women's representation and

participation in conflict prevention, peacekeeping, peacemaking and governance, including at decision-making levels.³ It also provides mechanisms for the prevention of abuses to the human rights of women and girls as provided for in international legal instruments.⁴ Furthermore, the resolution calls for the protection of women and girls according to obligations within international legal instruments.⁵ The policy brief will conclude by providing recommendations for implementing the resolution during internal conflicts.

Nigeria is currently embroiled in a conflict with Jama'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-da'wa wal-Jihad (popularly known as 'Boko Haram'), which has been designated a terrorist organisation by the United States, Nigeria and the UN. Translated as 'Western education is forbidden', Boko Haram's campaign extends beyond education to include socio-economic inequalities and politics.

¹ The title was adapted from Thomas Harris's novel and the movie, *The Silence of the Lambs*, to emphasize the plight of the Chibok schoolgirls as pawns in the Nigerian crises.

² UNSCRs 1820(2008), 1888(2009), 1889(2009), 1960(2010) 2106(2013) and 2122(2013)

³ See paragraphs 1 to 4

⁴ See paragraphs 5, 9 and 17

⁵ See paragraphs 1, 9 and 11

The actual date of the organisation's establishment is debatable as some trace its origins from other religious-based uprisings in Nigerian history. Nonetheless, 2002 stands out in a number of texts as the year the current grouping was formed. Its first leader, Mohammad Yusuf, was killed in 2009 in inexplicable circumstances in police custody. No one was ever prosecuted for his death and since then there has been an upsurge in violence by the militant group marked by killings, bombings and kidnappings, especially in northern Nigeria.

Boko Haram's overall objective is to establish an "extremist Islamic State with a strict adherence to their own version of Sharia (Islamic law), which includes forbidding western education, particularly to females".⁶ It blames western education and modernization for the "bad governance and acute corruption of political elites"⁷ in Nigeria. Therefore, while the group has attacked a variety of public spaces, schools are highly vulnerable as was witnessed in Chibok, Borno State, northern Nigeria.

The Abduction of the Chibok Schoolgirls

A secondary school in Chibok became a convening point for girls from other schools to take their final exams due to the closure of most schools in the state out of fear of Boko Haram attacks. However, on April 14 2014, the 276 girls being housed at the school were kidnapped by the insurgents, though 57 managed to escape.

Participation of Women in Peace and Security

In the initial stages, the Nigerian government did not believe the abduction had taken place. So, it took the efforts of a lawyer, Ibrahim M Abdullahi, and his friends to raise awareness of the incident

by sending out the message *#BringBackOurGirls*.⁸ This grew into a global campaign which spread to the streets of Nigeria with demonstrations led by women's organisations. Nigerian government officials and the First Lady accused protestors of trying to discredit the government.⁹ The First Lady went further to request the detention of two of their leaders.¹⁰ This contravened the actions of the United States First Lady, Michelle Obama, and many others, who joined the global online campaign for the release of the girls. Street demonstrations were reportedly banned at one point; but this was denied by a police commissioner.¹¹ Members of the international community sent solidarity messages and pledges of support to the Nigerian government. Over two weeks after the incident, the Nigerian President, Goodluck Jonathan, finally confirmed the seizure of the girls.

This policy brief argues that women who took charge of the campaign sought to fulfil the vision of UNSCR 1325 to increase women's representation "at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management and resolution of conflict".¹² They highlighted and placed the case of schoolgirls in a remote area of Nigeria on the global

⁸ Butter, S., 2014. *Lena Dunham wants to #BringBackOurGirls: How a Hashtag Stated a Global Protest for the Kidnapped Nigerian Students*. [Online] Available at: <http://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/london-life/lena-dunham-wants-to-bringbackourgirls-how-a-hashtag-started-a-global-protest-for-the-kidnapped-nigerian-students-9337994.html> [Accessed 18 September 2014].

⁹ Hassan, M. B., 2014. Boko Haram Insurgency and the Spate of Insecurity in Nigeria: Manifestation of Governance Crisis. *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*, IV(18), p. 14.

¹⁰ The Economist, 2014. *Kidnappings in Nigeria: A Clueless Government*. [Online] Available at: <http://www.economist/node/21601839> [Accessed 5 September 2014].

¹¹ Ford, D., 2014. *Nigeria Backtracks on Ban on Protests for Kidnapped Girls in Capital*. [Online] Available at: <http://www.cnn.com/2014/06/03/world/africa/nigeria-protest-ban/index.html> [Accessed 12 September 2014].

¹² Paragraph 1

⁶ Giroux, J. & Gilpin, R., 2014. #NigeriaOnTheEdge. *Policy Perspectives*, II(2), p.2.

⁷ Aning, K. & Aubyn, F., 2012. Confronting the Boko Haram Challenge to the Nigeria State. *Stability Operations*, VIII(1), p. 24.

Silence on the Lambs: The Abducted Chibok Schoolgirls in Nigeria and the Challenge to UNSCR 1325

agenda for peace and security. The resolution places the responsibility to “ensure” women’s meaningful participation in such spaces, on governments. But in Nigeria, actions that sought to seek the Chibok girls release were interpreted in the context of the ongoing political impasse between the North-South presidential rotation and counter-accusations of using Boko Haram for political gain.¹³

Prevention of Violence against Girls

Following the President’s confirmation of the abduction, the Nigerian government and security services began providing details on the girls. But there was one problem about the actual number of schoolgirls abducted which kept changing. It ranged from 100 to almost 300, with similar confusion regarding the escapees. In May 2014, a police commissioner explained the confusion as due to the convening of girls from different schools.¹⁴ The official numbers were only confirmed in June 2014 by a Presidential Fact-Finding Commission; almost two months after the abduction.¹⁵ Under UNSCR 1325, there is a reporting requirement by the Secretary-General to the Security Council on the status of women and girls in “peacekeeping and political missions”, amongst other things. This would require data

collection on violations of human rights.¹⁶ The Chibok case shows that if extra care is not taken in this exercise, even tracking registered persons such as schoolgirls and exam candidates can prove difficult. And, while there is a global movement focusing on the Chibok schoolgirls, it is believed there are other girls being held by Boko Haram.

A May 5 2014 Boko Haram video highlighted another problem which extends beyond the crises: the exploitation of children as brides. In this video, its leader, Abubakar Shekau, threatened to sell the girls as well as “marry off a woman at the age of 12” (a nine year-old was described as a girl, however).¹⁷ His definition of a woman goes against international law, which considers anyone below the age of 18 a child. However, the plight of girls being ‘sold’ or exchanged for bride prices is not limited to Boko Haram but is practised among different ethnicities in some TCCs. UNSCR 1325 requests that international law on women and girls rights be respected by all parties to a conflict.¹⁸ However, the state party has a greater obligation as it is responsible for upholding these rights in peacetime as well. The UN inferred Boko Haram’s obligation to respect the rights of the girls as it responded to the threat to sell them with a warning that Boko Haram would be committing war crimes.

Protection of Girls from Violence

Due to the international concern over the Chibok schoolgirls, certain countries¹⁹ have provided military advisors as well as intelligence and surveillance support. Nevertheless, with all this support, the girls remain in Boko Haram’s custody. However, the foreign intervention highlighted the sophisticated material and human logistics required for the protection of a relatively small number of girls. Therefore, while it is the primary responsibility of a state to protect its women and

¹³ Adibe, J., 2014. Explaining the Emergence of Boko Haram. In: *The Africa Growth Initiative Working Paper 17: Impact of Conflict and Political Instability on Agricultural Investments in Mali and Nigeria*. Washington, DC: Brookings, p.33; Hassan, M. B., 2014. op.cit., pp. 12-13.

¹⁴ AlJazeera, 2014. *Number of Missing Nigerian Schoolgirls Rises*. [Online] Available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2014/05/deadly-bomb-attack-nigerian-capital-201452132527440523.html> [Accessed 12 September 2014].

¹⁵ Hassan, M. B., 2014. op. cit. p.15. The author’s source was the *Daily Trust* of 25 June 2014 page 16. The online version of the newspaper published on 20 June 2014 puts the date of the submission of the Presidential Fact-Finding Committee’s report as 19 June 2014.

Wakili, I., 2014. *Chibok: Presidential Panel submits Report*. [Online] Available at: <http://www.dailytrust.com.ng/daily/editor-s-picks/27645-chibok-presidential-panel-submits-report-2> [Accessed 19 November 2014].

¹⁶ Paragraph 17 and proposed indicator 2

¹⁷ The Economist op. cit. and other sources highlight he was requesting the release of his fighters.

¹⁸ Paragraph 9

¹⁹ These include but may not be limited to China, France, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Silence on the Lambs: The Abducted Chibok Schoolgirls in Nigeria and the Challenge to UNSCR 1325

girls and thus, address any internal challenges including corruption, and shortfalls in training and in the maintenance of equipment, as is being observed in Nigeria,²⁰ international collaboration is also needed to effectively implement UNSCR 1325.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In October 2014, the Nigerian government announced it had reached a truce with the insurgents and a deal to free the Chibok schoolgirls.²¹ There was some doubt over the government's claim and even more so as Boko Haram's attacks continued. The insurgents eventually denied the government's statement.²²

So, while the Chibok schoolgirls remain in captivity, the campaign for their release continues and Boko Haram pushes forward with its Islamic State-building agenda by securing more territory in northern Nigeria. Thus, the physical safety and human rights of more women and girls are at stake. The following are recommendations for Nigeria and other states to consider from the Chibok case to effectively implement UNSCR 1325 during internal conflicts:

- Promote and prioritise women's rights in state law and practice with the support of women's rights activists. These would strengthen the response to violations to women's and girls' rights;

- Recruit women into the security sector and review policies to allow for their promotion and access to combat positions to enhance protection of women and girls;
- Increase sensitisation and training of male security personnel on their responsibilities under UNSCR 1325 and complimentary resolutions and laws;
- Integrate UNSCRs on women, peace and security into anti-terrorism strategies to provide options on protecting and involving women in policy development and implementation;
- Utilise social media in promoting peace and security to counter insurgent messages;
- Position people as the continent's most valuable resource; and
- Make prosecution of crimes against women and girls non-negotiable in peace agreements with the support of women mediators.

²⁰ Gruenbaum, O., 2014. Commonwealth Update. *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, CIII(3), p. 286 on corruption citing Bergstresser; Hassan, M. B., 2014. op.cit.

²¹ BBC News, 2014. *Can Nigeria-Boko Haram Deal Free the Chibok Girls?* [Online] Available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-29667078>. [Accessed 27 October 2014]

²² BBC News, 2014. *Nigeria's Boko Haram renames seized town in Adamawa State.* [Online] Available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-29921047>. [Accessed 6 November 2014]

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