

## Report

# Boko Haram's use of Female Suicide Bombing in Nigeria

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Female suicide bomber kills ten in Nigeria's Damaturu [AFP]

## Abstract

This report analyses the evolving trend of Boko Haram's female suicide bombing operations in Nigeria, highlighting why and how they are being recruited. It noted that of the 17 attempted and actual female suicide bombing missions, 15 detonated successfully while 2 were aborted or arrested. It contends that government's priority efforts at countering female suicide bombings should focus on leveraging women in counter violent extremism interventions, gender-sensitive recruitment and training amongst security agencies, neutralisation of recruitment channels and effective destruction of sanctuaries used for radicalisation.

## Introduction

In the last one year, Nigeria has witnessed increasing feminisation of terror by Boko Haram in two paradoxical ways - involving young girls as both the victims and vanguards of terror. As victims of terror, in the form of abductees, their fate has received the greatest international condemnation. The group has abducted at least 500 women and girls in north-eastern Nigeria since 2009. However, the abduction of 276 teenage girls from Chibok in April 2014 by the group -has been the largest single incident so far, triggering an international campaign to 'Bring back our Girls'.

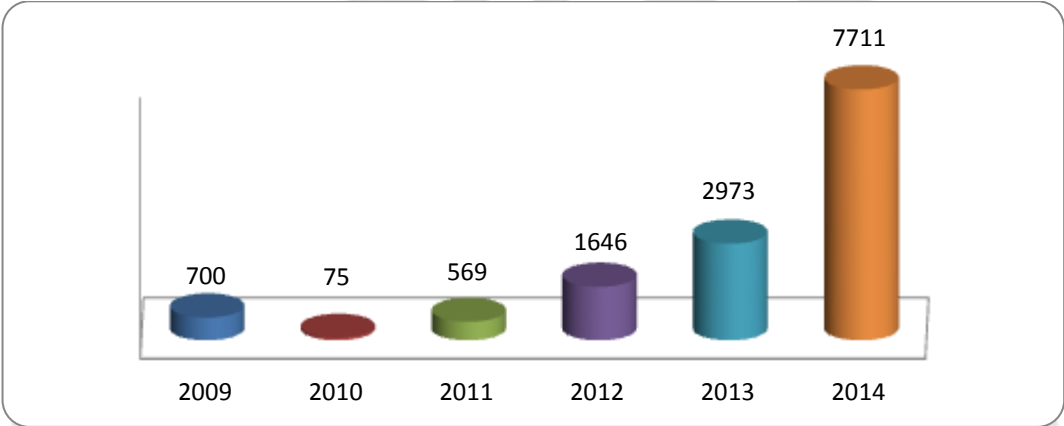
As vanguards of terror, Boko Haram has graduated from using young girls as couriers of arms, foodstuff and money as well as recruiters to increasing deployment of them as suicide bombers. It is against this backdrop that this article reflects on the evolving

trend of female suicide bombing in Nigeria, highlighting why and how they are being recruited.

### An Overview of Boko Haram

Boko Haram was created in 2002 in Maiduguri, Borno State, by Islamist cleric Mohammed Yusuf. Although widely referred to as the Boko Haram ('Western education is forbidden'), it prefers to be called by its original name Jama'atu Ahlissunnah Lidda'awati wal Jihad, meaning a "People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad". Its ideology is based on extreme Islamic teaching which rejects most Western ideas and institutions as un-Islamic. The group seeks to impose Sharia, or Islamic law, in Nigeria. (1) Since stepping up its activities in 2009, Boko Haram has killed over 13,000 people (see figure 1) and as many as 1.5 million displaced by the insurgency.

Figure 1: Fatalities in Boko Haram Attacks in Nigeria, 2009 - 2014



Source: <http://www.irinnews.org/report/101000/boko-haram-and-nigeria-s-elections>

The group has employed diverse violent tactics such as assassinations, ambush, drive-by shootings, and suicide bombings, among others in its attacks against security agents, religious and traditional rulers, worship centres, schools, traders and lately all non-members of the group. (2) Most of its attacks in recent months concentrated in the group's remote north-eastern stronghold – Adamawa, Borno and Yobe States. In addition, the group has claimed responsibility for several attacks in Bauchi, Gombe, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Kogi, Niger and Plateau states, as well as in Lagos and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja. The use of suicide bombings has remained a key element of its violent campaign.

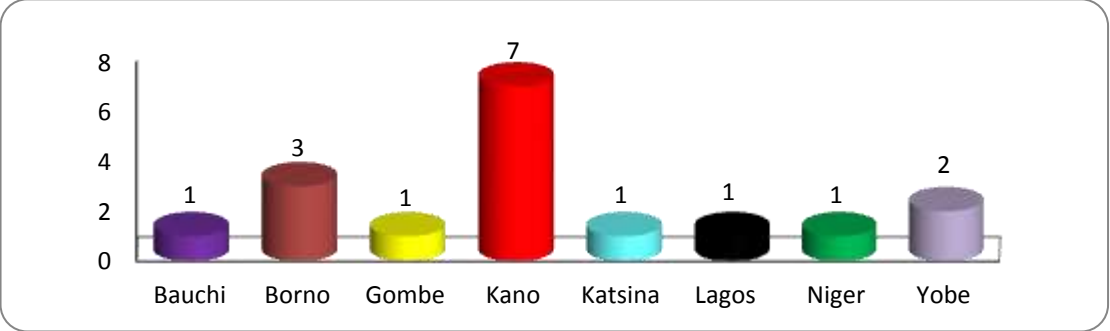
### Boko Haram's Use of Female Suicide Bombings

The Boko Haram dramatically changed the landscape of internal security in Nigeria when it mounted the first ever suicide bombing in Nigeria, at the Police Headquarters in the

Federal Capital city, Abuja on 16 June 2011. (3) The 35-year-old male operative, Mohammed Manga, detonated his explosive-laden car, killing more than 5 persons and destroying several cars. Boko Haram has carried out several of such attacks, involving the fitting of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) on common means of transportation in Nigeria – vehicles, motorcycles and tricycles – or strapped at the body of the suicide operatives. The sect has relied mainly on vehicle borne improvised explosive device (VBIED), motorcycle borne improvised explosive device (MBIED), Tricycle (popularly known as Keke NAPEP) borne improvised explosive device (TBIED) and body borne improvised explosive device (BBIED).

On 8 June 2014, however, Boko Haram dispatched the first female suicide attacker to the 301 Battalion barracks of Nigerian Army in Gombe, Gombe State. The girl detonated the explosive concealed in her hijab, killing herself and a soldier. The attack was followed by the June 25 bombing at an energy depot in Lagos which was also executed by a female attacker. As of 20 January 2015, there have been a total of 15 female suicide bombings in Nigeria. (4) In terms of mode, 14 were BBIED and only one was VBIED. Of the 17 attempted and actual female suicide bombing attackers, 15 detonated their explosives while 2 were arrested. A girl was caught in July 2014 in Katsina with bombs strapped to her body Kano recorded the highest number (7 cases) followed by Borno and Yobe States (see Figure 2). Of the 7 incidents in Kano, 6 successfully detonated while one deserted out of fear after seeing two of her colleagues blow themselves up in Kano in December 2014. The sect may have target Kano because of its strategic nature. Kano is the economic hub of the North, thus mounting such attacks will help in choking the economic nerve of the northern economy. It also has the highest population in Nigeria, suggesting that it hosts several soft targets that could be easily hit with high success rate in terms of death toll and destruction.

**Figure 2: Actual and Attempted Female Suicide Incidents, June 2014 - 11 January 2015**

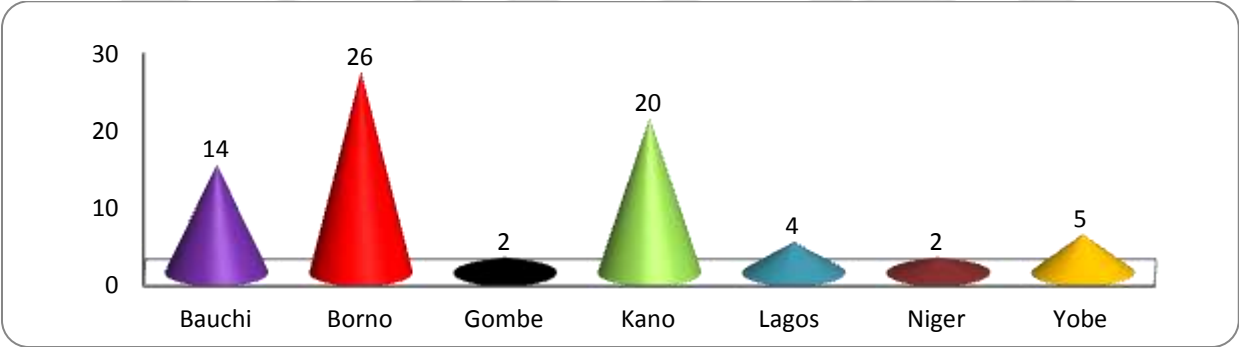


Source: Authors' compilation

Most of the attacks took place in northern Nigeria. Apart from the blast in Lagos, no other incident of female suicide bombing has occurred in the South. Boko Haram leader, Abubakah Shekau claimed responsibility for the attack in Lagos, possibly to pass out the message that the group has the capacity to strike further south. However, the inability of the group to mount more of such attacks suggests some strategic limitations, especially in having willing recruits and safe havens to couple such devices without being detected.

Some of the attacks were successful while others can be regarded as partially successful or unsuccessful considering that the attackers did not reach the main target or killed fewer than 3 persons. It is often difficult to arrive at the exact figure of people killed in suicide bombings in Nigeria due to varying media and security accounts on fatalities. In view of this, our compilation reveals that conservative estimates of 73 people, including the suicide bombers, were killed in female suicide bombings in Nigeria. Borno was worst hit with 26 fatalities in 3 successful attacks (see figure 3). The impact of the 3 blasts in Borno had more fatal effects than the 6 blasts that occurred in Kano while the only blast in Bauchi killed 14 people. This difference in fatality rate in relation to number of incidents is partly a function of the quality and quantity of explosives used in each attack and the ability of the bomber to penetrate deep into the centre of a high capacity venue.

**Figure 3: Death Toll from Female Suicide Bombings in Nigeria, June 2014 - 11 January 2015**



Source: Authors' compilation

In terms of targets of attacks and their strategic importance, markets topped the hit list, witnessing 8 attacks and 1 who deserted the operation. Markets are known to have a large gathering of people, making it an attractive high capacity venue for the insurgents to record huge fatalities with each successful attack. Also, the female suicide bombers would easily blend in a market setting without arousing much suspicion. Schools came next with 3 incidents while barrack, filling station, bank and gas plant recorded 1 attack each. Except the barrack blast, all others could be considered as soft targets.

The recent increase in the use of teenage girls for suicide bombings has raised three interrelated questions: Why are they being used? How are they being recruited? Are these attacks willful or coerced suicide operations?



## Why and How are Women are being used

The motive for the use of female suicide bombers by Boko Haram is not far-fetched. First, security agents and indeed Nigerians have become well accustomed to the use of male suicide bombers. Thus, strange men or boys attract much suspicion or attention from people. In contrast, women and girls do not attract such suspicion and can easily gain access to places without raising attention. In addition, the use of hijab, as expected of a Muslim woman, becomes a good means of hiding and conveying explosives. The females who carried out the suicide bombings in the north reportedly wore hijabs. This becomes more challenging as Islamic religion forbids a man to frisk a woman. In addition, most security or control posts in the north-east are manned by male security, military or 'civilian JTF' operatives. More so, news of female suicide bombers is often sensational and attracts coverage better than their male counterparts as a result of the element of surprise and shock it provides. Each successful attack will therefore project the group as one that should be feared.

Regarding how they are recruited into suicide operations, five key channels are conceivable. First, it is likely that the girls being used are children or widows of Boko Haram fighters who have been brainwashed or radicalised into undertaking a mission not only for martyrdom but also as revenge against the 'infidels' whom they have been made to believe are responsible for the death of their loved ones. Second, it is possible that the female bombers are women or girls recruited by Boko Haram operatives, especially through their female scouts. In June 2014, for instance, troops arrested three suspected female Boko Haram members - Hafsat Usman Bako, Zainab Idris and Aisha Abubakar - who have been secretly recruiting girls for the terrorist group. Those recruited were often transferred to Boko Haram camps or handed over to trainers. In August 2014, security operations also arrested one Ibrahim Ibrahim in Kano State, suspected to be the master trainer of Boko Haram female suicide bombers. (5) He was arrested alongside 16 girls who were reportedly being trained for suicide missions. Third, it is equally likely that any of the bombings may have been carried out by one of the abducted Chibok girls, deceived or coerced into such mission. If so, it has been suggested by Oby Ezekwesili that DNA tests will help to reveal the true identity of the bombers. (6) Fourth, Boko Haram may also be using children (orphans) whose parents they killed in their countless attacks on communities in northern Nigeria or who they abducted during raid on communities within and outside Nigeria. Fifth, it is possible that Boko Haram may be sourcing such children from cartels involved in human trafficking, without such cartels knowing the purpose for which the children were bought. Any or all of these channels may be the conduit of recruitment for suicide operation. Unravelling the true identity of some of these bombers will be a bit difficult given the absence of reliable identification system in Nigeria.

Whether the girls were recruited from within Boko Haram fold, lured by their operatives, abducted from communities within and outside Nigeria or sourced from human trafficking syndicates, a major concern persists over whether the suicide operations are being carried out by girls brainwashed to wilfully undertake those missions or coerced into it. This raises question on whether these attacks were proxy-bombings, in which case the 'bombers' are actually unaware of the nature of the object they are carrying. If so, it questions the very traditional meaning of suicide terrorism, which treats such missions as being carried out by self-aware individual in pursuit of martyrdom. (7) With the escalation of female suicide bombing, Zen has posited that "internal videos from Boko Haram camps have shown girls as young as seven among the militants. These girls may also have been psychologically or physically coerced into carrying out the attacks, while the remote detonation of the explosives also suggests the girls did not know they were being used as suicide bombers or the masterminds did not trust they would have sufficient courage to carry out the attacks". (8)

While it is possible that the Boko Haram may be selecting those that are too uneducated or naive to recognise that they are actually carrying explosives, the confession of a suspected female suicide bomber, Zaharau Babangida, indicates that the girls are also being coerced. The 13 years old suicide bomber arrested in December 2014 in Kano narrated how she was conscripted by her biological father and transferred to one of Boko Haram's radicalisation camps in Bauchi forest. She revealed that the ideologue was trying to brainwash or intimidate them into undertaking such missions. According to her, "I was not moved by the soul searching preaching of bounties in the heaven and it was at this point, their leader resorted to threat and intimidation to obtain my consent. We were shown a deep hole where the leader of the group threatened to bury us alive at a point if any of us refused to play along, and at another time he picked a big gun and threatened to shoot anyone who fails to obey his command". (9)

Although it may be difficult to exactly arrive at how the girls are recruited, Steve has observed correctly that meticulous post-blast information and analysis at the scene of such events will help reveal whether these attacks were actually suicide devices or proxy-bombings. (10) This is essentially because the more that is known about how the devices are operated the better for developing countermeasures. For example, if the devices are indeed suicide operated then the defences will be built on awareness, recognition and training security forces in immediate actions and rules of engagement. If they are remote controlled by wireless or other transmitted energy, then there are electronic countermeasures that could be deployed at vulnerable and key targets. (11)

However, if they are on a timer then the effective response will leverage mainly on early detection, detention and safe defusing procedures.

## Conclusion

The use of suicide terrorism is a tactic that the Boko Haram will not drop any time soon. Whether Boko Haram's use of female suicide bombers is an act of desperation or a show of strength remains a subject of serious debate. (12) One thing that is certain is that the group will continue to explore new tactics as well as combine them with old ones in its violent campaign against both soft and hard targets in Nigeria. As Nigeria prepares for general elections in February 2015, the group may deploy (female) suicide bombers targeting political rallies, polling stations or high profile election-related facilities. The new tactic of female suicide bombing therefore calls for heightened vigilance from members of the public and concerted efforts from the government. Government's priority efforts should focus on leveraging women in counter violent extremism interventions, scaling up of gender-sensitive recruitment and training amongst the security agencies, neutralisation of Boko Haram's recruitment channels and effective identification and destruction of sanctuaries used for radicalisation.

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## Endnotes

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