



Bringing Back Chibok Girls Only Start of Nigeria's Challenge

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More than **two million people** have fled their homes throughout northeast Nigeria since 2009, largely as a result of Boko Haram raids on their communities. The **majority of the able-bodied displaced population** are women and girls. Female-headed households have also become more common, as the males are being killed by violence. In light of **renewed advocacy** for the more than 270 girls abducted from the town of Chibok two years ago, it must be recognized that the task at hand is much larger than rescuing this one group. Boko Haram is holding many more women and girls captive, and those who escape or are rescued lack adequate humanitarian assistance, and are often subjected to sexual abuse and face significant obstacles to re-entering society.

Boko Haram has engaged in mass abductions of women and girls for many years. These captives are subject to systemic rape within the confines of forced marriages, and are often deployed as suicide bombers. Despite the scope and scale of the Boko

Haram crisis, which has claimed **more than 30,000 lives** and destabilized communities in Chad, Cameroon, and Niger (in addition to Nigeria), the women and girls I spoke with on a recent research trip told me the Nigerian government and international community have provided little support to those who have managed to flee the group's violence.

“We do not feel safe here,” one woman told me. This was not because of the threat from Boko Haram, but because “there is no food and bad housing.” Many others expressed a desire to return home when their communities were safe, but were resigned to remaining in internally displaced persons (IDPs) camps in the city of Maiduguri as the military attempts to put down the insurgency.

The lack of a long-term plan to care for the needs of these displaced people—especially one that attends to the needs of women and girls—looms as a threat to the ability of the northeast region to recover from the crisis. It also effectively punishes a local population that has demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of sub-Saharan Africa's most lethal insurgency and the greatest threat to Nigeria since it returned to democracy in 1999.

The crisis has placed a clear strain on the limited resources of the Nigerian government and international humanitarian system. Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State, houses a disproportionate number of the displaced. Nearly all the schools in the city **have been converted** into shelter for the displaced, which has compounded the challenges caused by the Western education-opposing Boko Haram. The swelling ranks of beggars on Maiduguri's streets underlines the need for employment-generating programs, improved health services, education, and general humanitarian support.

The numbers of the Chibok girls merely hints at the scale of Boko Haram's abductions. Amnesty International estimates that **more than 2,000 women** have been taken in recent years. Nearly all of those I spoke to in Maiduguri described being abducted in sweeping round-ups as the extremists overran towns. Women taken as wives are typically in their early teens. One of these individuals, Amina, said the group prefer young girls because they are naïve and easier to control. The defining

characteristic of these marriages is sustained sexual abuse and rape.

One common requirement of a Boko Haram wife is that she attend “Koranic education.” Miriam, who was held by Boko Haram for five months before escaping to Madina, was subjected to such indoctrination. She recalls that, “they preached to us that our [previous] husbands are infidels. They said ‘your men are not good at preaching...you should come be with us.’ They preach this nonsense every day, three times a day. All they want to do is have the women believe in what they say so that we will marry them.”

Within some Boko Haram cells, the marriage ceremony is formalized to the point that the chosen wife must complete a certain level of Koranic education, public ceremonies are conducted, and dowries of about 1,500 *naira* are even given to the bride, though Miriam was quick to note that “there is never anything consensual about it.”

Despite consistent calls for the Nigerian government to “Bring Back Our Girls,” in line with the popular campaign around the Chibok abductees, and the Nigerian military’s claims to have freed thousands of people from Boko Haram in recent months, the women I spoke with had escaped from the brutality and psychological abuse all on their own. They typically left at night when their captors left camp to attack villages. Others, such as 20-year-old Fatiah, were bolder; she told me that she tried to kill her Boko Haram husband. “He began to trust me,” she recalled. “He gave me some batteries. I squeezed them to put some of their juice in his drink so that he would die and I could escape, but he would not take the drink.” Fatiah eventually exploited a rivalry between her husband and another member of Boko Haram to flee. Not all those who attempted to escape were as successful; those caught were killed immediately and an untold number may have died from the harsh conditions en route to resettlement areas.

For those who have made it out, the future remains uncertain. IDPs living in camps enjoy only a limited supply of food, health services, and, in some instances, counseling provided by the government and its international partners. An aid worker who focuses on psychological care told me that women face stigma and rejection by

their host communities and many of their families will not take them back if they attempt to return. And, though most official camps boast some educational resources that should help in making the transition to a new life, their quality is generally poor.

On condition of anonymity, camp employees also reported that the Nigerian government's claims to be providing three meals a day to IDPs are inaccurate. The displaced often don't receive any cooked meals and are not provided with firewood, pots, salt, or any means of earning money to purchase these things, which would help to improve their rations of uncooked grains. Meanwhile, the threat of sexual violence from Nigerian military and anti-Boko Haram vigilantes remains ever-present. "Women are leaving the camps to live in host communities or are risking their lives, returning to places even the police won't go" to escape the attacks, according to an official from Nigeria's National Emergency Management Agency.

Those living outside of the formal camps lack even the meager assistance offered within. Though the Borno State and federal government's humanitarian agencies are aware of the large number of informal settlements throughout the region—in Maiduguri only about 18% of the IDP population live in formal camps—there has been nearly no attempt to provide these people with assistance. Several women living in these informal settlements spoke of the scarcity of food and the need to beg.

The Nigerian government's recent announcements of programs for the **rehabilitation of defected fighters**—including providing emotional support, counseling, and deradicalization—as well as reintegration of the vigilantes targeting the group, is a small step in the right direction for tackling Boko Haram. However, programs to address the future of the victims of the insurgency, particularly women and girls, are also clearly needed to help create a more stable future. The campaign to bring back the Chibok girls is well-intentioned, but it barely scratches the surface in terms of addressing the complex humanitarian, social, economic, psychological, and other needs of the displaced.

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