Understanding Receptivity to Returning Former Boko Haram Associates Through a Gender Lens

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MAY 2023
KEY FINDINGS

- Acceptance rates of former associates of Boko Haram are high in and around Maiduguri. However, civilian women and girls report being generally less willing to accept prospective returnees than civilian men and boys. This pattern holds regardless of the gender of the returning former Boko Haram associate.

- Women and girls’ lower hypothetical acceptance may be due to a gendered information gap in Borno state, where they have less access to information in the public sphere.

- Given equivalent information about prospective repentant returnees, the gender gap in community members’ willingness to accept returnees closes, and men and boys, and women and girls respondents become equally likely – greater than 80 per cent – to accept former Boko Haram associates, regardless of the returnee’s gender.

- Women and girls also perceive higher levels of threat from former Boko Haram associates, and they express being more angry and fearful of returnees.

This Report, and the research that supported it, were undertaken as part of UNIDIR’s Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) project. MEAC is a multi-donor, multi-partner initiative to develop a unified, rigorous approach to examining how and why individuals exit armed conflict and evaluating the efficacy of interventions meant to support their transitions. While the Findings Report benefited from feedback from MEAC’s donors and institutional partners, it does not necessarily represent their official policies or positions.

Background

About MEAC

How and why do individuals exit armed groups, and how do they do so sustainably, without falling back into conflict cycles? These questions are at the core of UNIDIR’s Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) initiative. MEAC is a multi-year, multi-partner collaboration that aims to develop a unified, rigorous approach to examining how and why individuals exit armed conflict and evaluating the efficacy of interventions meant to support their transition to civilian life. MEAC seeks to inform evidence-based programme design and implementation in real time to improve efficacy. At the strategic level, the cross-programme, cross-agency lessons that will emerge from the growing MEAC evidence base will support more effective conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts. In 2022, when the research featured in this report was undertaken, the MEAC project and accompanying case studies benefited from support by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Switzerland’s Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA); the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO); the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs; the UN Development Programme (UNDP); and the International Organization for Migration (IOM); and was run in partnership with the United Nations University Centre for Policy Research (UNU-CPR); the Secretariat of the Regional Strategy for Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience; UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO); UNICEF; and the World Bank.

About this Series

The MEAC findings report series seeks to put evidence about conflict prevention, conflict transitions, and related interventions into the hands of policymakers and practitioners in real time. The reports present short overviews of findings (or emerging findings) across a wide range of thematic areas and include analyses on their political or practical implications for the UN and its partners.

About this Report

This report is based on data collected from December 2020 to March 2021, as part of a phone survey with a representative sample of 2,963 community members from key locations in and around the Maiduguri metropolitan area in Borno State, Nigeria. It examines the evidence around how gender impacts the social acceptance of ex-combatants and individuals suspected of association with Boko Haram. This data may be useful to governments, UN, and NGO partners working in the region to bolster their community outreach and messaging around reintegration programmes. The data

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1 The phone survey was administered in the Maiduguri Metropolitan Council (MMC), Jere, and Konduga. This research was conducted in partnership with several researchers, spearheaded by Dr Rebecca Littman, University of Illinois at Chicago, in partnership with Dr Zoe Marks, Harvard Kennedy School, and conducted and facilitated on the ground principally by Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), with support from Mobukar Consultancy.
presented herein are unique in that they were collected in an ongoing conflict context, while reintegration is actively ongoing and communities in and around are receiving ex-associates of Boko Haram and other armed groups. The report ends with an examination of key policy and programmatic implications of these findings.

Gendered Responses to Former Boko Haram Associates

Overview

Gender norms and expectations have a significant impact on daily life in the North East of Nigeria. Conservative social norms are widely supported. Women and girls often need to secure permission from their fathers, husbands, and other men in their lives to go out of their homes. As a result, women and girls are less likely than men and boys to work outside the home, enjoy economic independence, or hold public office and leadership positions. The highly gendered nature of society also means that men and boys are, overall, more connected to local and religious leaders and enjoy greater freedom of movement in the public sphere, while women and girls are more likely to be consigned to the domestic sphere, behind closed doors, raising a family and maintaining a household. The access to different spheres impacts how women and men engage with society, and how they receive information about the conflict.

As with daily life in Borno state, the Boko Haram conflict shows gendered patterns. Men and boys are more likely to join armed groups, including the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), Yan Gora, and other community security providers. State security forces are also overwhelmingly male and have been fighting against a male-dominated combatant corps of Boko Haram and related insurgents. Across all these armed groups, women and girls are more likely to be relegated to support functions than to have frontline combat or command roles. Women and girls have been abducted by Boko Haram and its factions at very high rates, where they have been forced into domestic or private roles, subjected to rape and forced marriage, and pressured to undertake care work and support roles in Boko Haram bases (e.g., cooking and collecting firewood). Women/girls Boko Haram fighters are reported to be a rarity, but the group is notorious for using girls and women as suicide bombers. In community security groups, such as the CJTF and Yan Gora, girls and women are often assigned to tasks such as intelligence gathering at social events or screening and searching other women at checkpoints. As a result, people may experience the conflict differently due in part to their gendered identities and roles and divergent conflict-related experiences.

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Between December 2020 and March 2021, 1,658 women and girls respondents and 1,305 men and boys respondents participated in a phone survey designed to better understand conflict experiences and perceptions. Survey respondents were asked a series of questions about how they felt about the return of people formerly associated with Boko Haram, and whether and how they would engage with those individuals who are seeking to return to their communities. One set of these questions focused on a generic “man” or “woman” who is coming out of Boko Haram, while other questions provided a more detailed fictional profile of a repentant former associate and varied his/her gender (“Usman” or “Fatima”) and age (12 or 28 years old). In the specific scenario, interviewers either a. provided no additional information, or b. detailed that he/she had either been cleared by the government after completing a reorientation (reintegration) programme, or c. that he/she expressed a willingness to publicly apologize and to ask the community for forgiveness. This series of questions was designed to measure differences in people’s willingness to receive different profiles of former Boko Haram associates into their community and to ascertain whether receptivity is influenced by various programmatic interventions.

An analysis of the resulting survey data follows. It demonstrates that receptivity to returning former Boko Haram associates in and around Maiduguri is impacted by civilian respondents’ gender identity. An earlier report examined the impact of the hypothetical returning Boko Haram associate’s gender. Overall, MEAC’s study in Borno found that across returnee profiles - boy, girl, man, woman associates of Boko Haram - and a variety of types of social interactions, public receptivity to returning former associates is high and relatively stable. Yet, there is somewhat more concern about adult men coming out of Boko Haram and somewhat lower levels of support for engagement with them (especially for family marriage) than there is about women, girls, and boys who have left the group. These findings were consistent with popular assumptions around adult men’s heightened rates of involvement with the group. This report, while also focused on gender, examines the impact of the respondent’s gender identity on their willingness to accept former Boko Haram associates back into their community, their policy preferences for dealing with those exiting the group, and their emotional response to those returning. Recognizing that return and reintegration is a two-way street; it is important to consider the gender dynamics of acceptance and reconciliation not only with regard to those returning, but to those receiving them.

Findings
It is well established in conflict research that men and boys are more likely than women and girls to participate in conflict-related violence, and to be physically killed or injured during wartime. This report describes how gender also plays a role in shaping community members’ attitudes toward peace and reconciliation. Namely, although men have been more likely to fight and more likely to be killed in the Boko Haram conflict, they report being significantly more willing to accept former associates back into the community. Conversely, women, who represented the majority of the

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displaced population at the height of the conflict, are less likely to accept repentant returnees. These patterns hold regardless of the gender of the returning former associate of Boko Haram.

Civilian women and girls report being significantly less accepting of both male and female former associates of Boko Haram in communities receiving surrendered, demobilized, and/or otherwise repentant returnees. Figure 1 illustrates the size of the gender gap when community members are asked, “Would you be okay with a man [or woman] who had been with Boko Haram living in your community?” Female respondents are 14 and 13 percentage points less willing than male respondents to say they will accept returning male and female Boko Haram associates, respectively.

**Figure 1 – Gender Gap in Hypothetical Acceptance of Former Boko Haram Associates**

| Would you be okay with a woman who had been with Boko Haram living in your community? | Male respondents | Female respondents |
| Would you be okay with a man who had been with Boko Haram living in your community? | 78% | 65% |

75% | 61%

A key pillar of successful reintegration for individuals and families exiting armed groups - itself a stepping stone to sustainable peace - is community acceptance. The following sections examine more closely this observed community-level gender gap in acceptance of former Boko Haram associates to understand why women might be less likely to welcome such returnees. This has important implications for perceptions of safety and security, and societal wellbeing for both community members and returning associates alike.

**Information and Social Norms of Acceptance**

When asking respondents if they would be okay with a general “woman” or “man” who had been with Boko Haram living in their community, female respondents were significantly less willing than men to accept returning Boko Haram associates in theory (Figure 1, above). However, when given additional details about a hypothetical returnee (such as a name and age), female respondents became equally willing to accept former associates, regardless of the returnee’s gender. This suggests that access to information may be an important mediator for closing the gender gap in community acceptance. When survey respondents were given a survey vignette that gave more details about a fictional repentant associate called “Usman” or “Fatima,” women and girls respondents became as willing to accept returnees as male respondents. In other words, with more information, women and girls were no less likely than men and boys to report being willing to accept either Usman or Fatima into the community.
Given that women operate in different spheres than men do, they tend to have different access to information than men in Borno State. For instance, women and girls respondents were significantly less likely to report knowledge of the government reintegration program “Operation Safe Corridor” and of the existence of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) faction of Boko Haram.\(^4\) Being less present in the public sphere, it is likely that women and girls have less information about returnees than men and boys do. Because women’s views and opinions are usually considered less important and less meaningful, they tend to be not inclined - and are often actively discouraged - to participate in conversations that could be informative. If information is a key mediator of attitudes toward acceptance, detailed gender-equitable access to information may close the apparent gender gap in general support for former affiliates to return to local communities. Implications of information and threat perception are discussed below.

Somewhat surprisingly, despite being less open to returnees generally, women are more likely than men to think that others in their community are ready to welcome hypothetical returnees “Usman” or “Fatima.” Approximately 88 and 89 per cent of women and girls think others in their community would be okay with Usman and Fatima, respectively, living in the community, compared to 83 and 87 per cent of male respondents. A similar trend applies to more women than men, also thinking their Bulama, a local traditional leader, would welcome Fatima and Usman back into the community.\(^5\) Notably, women expect their communities would accept these hypothetical returnees at close to the actual rate of reported acceptance of “Usman” and “Fatima.” Conversely, men’s estimates of their communities’ acceptance are closer to the low-information acceptance levels revealed in the question about a generic male or female associate. In this survey, men are slightly more pessimistic about public attitudes of accepting Boko Haram returnees generally, whereas women/girls respondents give a more optimistic assessment of public attitudes toward returnees.

Despite thinking Usman and Fatima would be accepted by others at higher rates than male respondents, the majority of women (58 per cent) also say they would support the community’s decision if others did not want Usman or Fatima to return (compared to 25 and 39 per cent of men, respectively). Women and girls, therefore, indicate a much greater willingness than men and boys to go along with exclusionary practices in their communities, should others in the community not allow Usman/Fatima to return. Similarly, while the vast majority – over 80 per cent – of both male and female respondents say they would not participate if others in the community started to beat or insult “Usman” or “Fatima,” women were still twice as likely as men to say they would join in.\(^6\) This indicates that women are more likely than men to join in with exclusionary attitudes and practices in their community. This suggests that women may play a significant linchpin role in acceptance in local communities because of their personal relationships and attention to shifting social norms and

\(^4\) Overall, only 14 per cent of female respondents had heard of Operation Safe Corridor, compared to 29 per cent of men. When asked if respondents had heard of the ISWAP faction of Boko Haram, 3 per cent of female respondents said they had heard of the faction, compared to 15 per cent of men.

\(^5\) 88 and 91 per cent of female respondents say that they think their Bulama would welcome Usman and Fatima back, compared to 84 per cent of male respondents (both for Usman and Fatima).

\(^6\) When asked if they would join in if people in their community start to beat Fatima or Usman (fictional repentant Boko Haram returnees), 16 per cent of girls and women said yes, compared to 8 per cent of boys and men. Similarly, when asked if they would join in if people in their community would start to insult Fatima or Usman, 14 per cent of girls and women said yes, compared to 7 per cent of boys and men.
expectations. This willingness to exclude former associates may not just be driven by a tendency to conform to the demands of others and community norms but may also reflect a greater sense of anger and fear towards returnees, and higher perceptions of threat amongst women and girls.

**Threat Perception, Anger, and Fear Toward Former Boko Haram Associates**

Although access to more information helps to shift women’s willingness to accept hypothetical returnees back into the community, as described above, other gender gaps persist. Our survey data indicate psychological and emotional patterns that correspond with gender and may play a role in people’s willingness to accept former associates of Boko Haram. For example, there is a gender gap in expressed anger and fear. As seen in Figure 2, women are significantly more likely than men to report feeling angry toward former associates of Boko Haram and to report feeling afraid of them. This gender gap holds for women’s emotions toward both men and women returning from Boko Haram.

**Figure 2 – Gender Gaps in Anger Towards and Fear of Boko Haram Affiliates**

These differences hold up in the vignette questions, where respondents were given the name (Usman or Fatima) and description of a hypothetical repentant person returning to the community. Female respondents reported feeling afraid of “Usman” (19 per cent) and feeling angry toward him (17 per cent) at rates nearly double those of male respondents (11 and 8 per cent, respectively). Female respondents were also more likely to express fear and anger toward “Fatima”: 18 per cent of female respondents reported feeling afraid of Fatima and 14 per cent indicated that they were angry toward her. Among their male counterparts, only 10 per cent felt afraid of Fatima and 9 per cent felt angry toward her.

Female respondents are significantly more likely to think that a hypothetical returnee - “Usman” or “Fatima” - will harm people in their community. Twenty-three and 25 per cent of female respondents
think that Usman and Fatima would harm people in their community in the future, respectively. For male respondents, this was roughly ten percentage points lower, only 14 and 17 per cent, respectively. Female respondents also think that Usman or Fatima poses a threat to the community at a higher rate than men and boys (35 and 38 per cent for female respondents, compared to 13 and 31 per cent for male respondents). And female respondents are significantly less likely than male ones to think that Usman or Fatima can change their way of thinking from what they learned in Boko Haram (about 69 per cent for women and 74 per cent for men). Conversely, men and boys are more likely than women and girls to think that Fatima/Usman can change their way of thinking from what they learned in Boko Haram. In turn, they are less angry and fearful toward returning group associates than women and girls.

Overall, the survey findings paint a picture of women perceiving a much greater threat from returning associates of Boko Haram. This belief that former Boko Haram associates pose a potential security or safety threat to the community - likely drives both the gender gap in emotions and in overall acceptance attitudes. Threat perception affects people’s fear of former associates returning from Boko Haram; and women, who report being more fearful, also have less access to information, as discussed above. Given more information - for instance, about “Fatima/Usman” - women’s acceptance rate rises to match that of male respondents. More research is needed to discover if information can also shift people’s fear, anger, and perceived threats.

Gendered Experiences of Conflict Participation

Although men and boys are mobilized into armed groups at much higher rates than women and girls, the latter still constitute a significant proportion of the armed group-affiliated population in Maiduguri and Borno State. When asked if they were ever with any armed group or security outfit – even if just for one day – roughly 19 percent of female and 38 percent of male respondents in our representative population sample reported having been associated at some point in the conflict. Of the smaller subset of respondents who reported having been with Boko Haram, a quarter were women (27 per cent). Comparatively fewer women reported mobilizing with community-level security actors, such as the CJTF (6 per cent of whom were women/girls) or Yan Gora (1 per cent of whom were women/girls). This suggests Boko Haram had significantly higher rates of women’s participation – often involuntary – than community-based security groups.

Policy and Programmatic Implications

As previous reports have demonstrated, community acceptance levels across Maiduguri are high for returning former associates of Boko Haram. This is true for men/boys and women/girls community member respondents, toward all returnees (men, women, boys, and girls alike).

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7 Data on weapons carrying likely hints at different degrees of mobilization as well. In another MEAC survey run between September and December 2022 in the North East of Nigeria, 3 per cent of female respondents indicated carrying some sort of weapon to protect themselves, compared to 25 per cent of male respondents.

However, this study also demonstrates a notable gender gap in women and girls’ overall willingness to accept returning Boko Haram associates compared to civilian men and boys’ attitudes. With less access to information and less power in public life, women are more reluctant than men to welcome returnees generally.

When women and girls have access to more detailed information about returnees, they become as accepting as men and boys, even though women still report higher levels of anger and fear. Women’s anger and fear levels correspond with them perceiving a greater likelihood that Boko Haram associates might cause harm after their return. In line with this, women are more likely than men to be willing to go along with community decisions to exclude former Boko Haram associates, even if those women themselves would be accepting.

This indicates a high potential for social norms and community patterns of information-sharing and beliefs about whose opinions matter to shape individual attitudes toward reintegration and returnee acceptance. Women and girls respondents perceive high rates of acceptance for former Boko Haram associates among community members and local leaders. While slightly fewer men and boys think their neighbours and Bulamas support having Boko Haram associates return to the community, they are still highly receptive to the prospect of community-level reintegration and are more likely than women and girls to say they would stand up to dissent, violence, or insults directed at returnees.

UN programmes and policies can take these insights on board immediately in several key ways. The first and most important action is to recognize that acceptance rates are quite high in the North East and that women and girls perceive their communities to be already accepting of the principle of returnees. Gender-equitable communications campaigns – and perhaps gender-specific information and/or gender-sensitive dissemination strategies – are critical to ensuring safety and buy-in amongst communities receiving former members of Boko Haram. Giving men, women, boys, and girls equal access to more detailed information about returnees as a group, specifically about their repentance and any programming they have undergone to prepare for civilian life, will likely significantly improve levels of receptiveness.

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9 The MEAC project ran a follow-up phone survey that contained a number of the same questions with 3,259 respondents between September and December 2022 in and around Maiduguri, as well as new locations in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe States. The goal of the survey was to better understand conflict perceptions and acceptance in other locations in the North East of Nigeria, as well as analyse whether and how community acceptance of Boko Haram returnees has changed over the past two years. This seemed particularly timely given the ongoing mass exits from Boko Haram that started in 2021, potentially impacting community perceptions. The new survey data is yet to be fully analysed, but early reviews appear to confirm two trends that are relevant to this report. First, levels of hypothetical acceptance have increased significantly. For example, when the first survey was conducted in 2020-2021, 67 and 70 per cent of respondents said they would be okay with a man who had been with Boko Haram and a woman who had been with Boko Haram, respectively, living in their community. Two years later, this increased to 82 and 85 per cent, respectively. Second, the gender gap holds when it comes to acceptance, with female respondents being less likely than male respondents to hypothetically accept former Boko Haram associates. The same question illustrates this trend. In 2022, 82 per cent of female respondents reported being okay with a woman who was with Boko Haram living in their community, compared to 89 per cent of male respondents. Similarly, only 79 per cent of female respondents would be okay with a man who was with Boko Haram living in their community, compared to 86 per cent of male respondents.
Gender-specific communications outreach may require meeting with women in more private or social domains, given their lower levels of engagement in public life in Borno State. Here, the information should be equivalent to any given to men in the community, ideally in conversation with local leaders, whom women highly respect overall despite having less access to them than men do. These outreach efforts can also focus on safety and security precautions to directly address women’s fears of former associates. This could also include providing additional information about the different exit pathways and government reintegration programmes in place (including Operation Safe Corridor). Assuring women that Boko Haram returnees pose minimal threat will strengthen community acceptance more broadly and empower women to be part of the vanguard for reintegration.

Finally, recognizing the distinctly gendered roles that women and men have played during the conflict can help tailor programming to their respective strengths and vulnerabilities in social contexts. Men and boys are more likely to be physically victimized and mobilized for violence, while women and girls have been more likely to experience displacement and sexual violence, especially among abductees. These experiences may condition attitudes toward reintegration, but they do not determine it—as evidenced by the high rates of acceptance possible among both men/boys and women/girls toward male and female returnees and analyses that most types of victimization are not correlated with willingness to accept back former Boko Haram Associates.10

Women and girls who have been with armed groups need and deserve special attention, given that their experiences are less congruent with gender roles and expectations in Borno society. Conversely, while men and boys are more likely to have been mobilized for violence, the majority have not participated in violence. This underscores the importance of avoiding gender stereotypes and absolutes in any program design or policy conception. Women and girls cannot be assumed to be peaceful and pacifistic. And men and boys should not be assumed to be agitators of violence. Indeed, in Borno State, men have strong attitudes of acceptance and reintegration for peacebuilding.

Ultimately, this research shows that it is not just the substance of programming meant to ease the reintegration of former armed group associates back into civilian society that matters, but also how these transitions are communicated to the public, particularly to women and girls. Meeting all community members where they are, with increased access to information and awareness of collective willingness for peacebuilding, will be a powerful tool for conflict transformation.

10 Contrary to expectations, there is generally no significant relationship between community or family victimization and respondents’ willingness to accept former Boko Haram associates back into their communities. However, knowing about sexual violence in one’s community, having a family member who was abducted, or personally having been beaten, tortured, or shot is related to lower levels of acceptance of former Boko Haram members. See Rebecca Littman, Siobhan O’Neill, Kato Van Broeckhoven, and Mohammed Bukar, “The Relationship Between Victimization and Receptivity to Returning Boko Haram Associates,” MEAC Findings Report 13 (New York: United Nations University, 2021).