



UNIDIR

MANAGING EXITS
FROM ARMED CONFLICT

MEAC FINDINGS REPORT 39

Survival and Struggle: The Experience of Women and Girls With and After Boko Haram

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December 2024

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This Findings 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.

Citation: Chitra Nagarajan, Francesca Batault, Siobhan O’Neil, and Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu “Survival and Struggle: The Experience of Women and Girls With and After Boko Haram” *Findings Report 39*, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.37559/MEAC/24/10>

Key Findings

- International attention has focused on gender-based violence committed by Boko Haram, but the constraints imposed upon, and the violence faced by women and girls did not begin - or end after their time - with Boko Haram. In the region, women and girls face extreme challenges outside of Boko Haram, including gender-based violence, isolation, and restrictive gender norms that limit their relationship “choices,” their ability to earn livelihoods and meet the basic needs of themselves and their children.
- Women and girls experienced forced marriages – sometimes multiple – while with Boko Haram. Young girls, women who were already married and widows were not excluded. The legacy of these forced marriages often hindered the transition to civilian life after exiting their group. In the absence of clear legal procedures, women and girls encountered difficulties in separating from the ‘husbands’ they were forced to marry. In Chad, where such separations were possible, the economic realities facing women post-exit meant that many could not afford to separate from these ‘husbands’ even if they wanted and could do so legally. Many also feared separation from their children as a result.
- Women and girls faced specific barriers to escaping Boko Haram. Due to their enforced isolation in the group, they were hyper-visible in public spaces, making fleeing all the more difficult. Women and girls were also less likely to leave without their children, who slowed them down and required support in often dangerous conditions, presenting another deterrence to exiting the group.
- Women and girls faced specific barriers to their reintegration. As they were not seen as threats, many of them bypassed reintegration support. Even when they received support, it was often focused on immediate basic needs there was little investment in preparing them for life back in the community. There were few livelihood opportunities specifically for women and girls, which contributed to many remaining dependent on others, including the husbands they were forced to marry.
- In some cases, reintegration was further hindered by language differences, especially for women and girls who exited into situations of displacement. In Cameroon and Chad, ongoing insecurity has meant that many former associates were unable to return home and settle into communities where they did not speak the same language, or dialect, as other community members. Women and girls were disproportionately affected by these language barriers, impacting their ability to socialize, migrate, make a living, and communicate their peaceful intentions.

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. The MEAC project benefits from generous support by the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO); Global Affairs Canada (GAC); the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA); and the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs; UNICEF; and is run in partnership with the International Organization for Migration (IOM); the UN Development Programme (UNDP); UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO); the World Bank; and United Nations University Centre for Policy Research (UNU-CPR).

About This Series

The MEAC findings report series seeks to put evidence about conflict transitions and related programming 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 of their political or practical implications for the United Nations and its partners.

About This Report

This report aims to provide much-needed nuance to the experiences of women and girls associated with the armed groups commonly referred to as "Boko Haram," in the Lake Chad Basin region. All too often women and girls who have been associated with these groups have bypassed support or received assistance not tailored to their particular needs and experiences. The goal of this publication - which draws on original qualitative and survey research in Cameroon, Chad, and Nigeria - is to inform prevention and reintegration programming in the region to ensure it is gender- and age-sensitive, fit for purpose, and ultimately, more effective.

Introduction

In 2014, after the mass abduction of girls from the Government Girls Secondary School in Chibok, Nigerian activists drew attention to the phenomenon of abductions of women and girls in northeast Nigeria, calling to #BringBackOurGirls.¹ This campaign drew global attention to gendered violence in the conflict, with the governments of the region and their partners making commitments to protect women and girls, including after they returned from their captors.² Since those promises, there has been a focus on encouraging defections from Boko Haram's groups – Jama'atu Ahl al-Sunna li-I-Da'wa wa-I-Jihad (JAS) and Islamic State West African Province (ISWAP)³ – and providing support through disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration-like (DDR) programmes. However, as explored in this report, a decade on from #BringBackOurGirls, policy and practice still do not adequately address local gender dynamics. Worse, these exit programmes – and the response more broadly – sometimes perpetuate patriarchal relations and can reinforce victimization, notably with respect to forced marriages in the context of forced recruitment into Boko Haram, instead of supporting the agency of women and girls already resisting them. This report highlights how women and girls in Cameroon, Chad, and Nigeria experience and navigate association with Boko Haram and examines whether the policies and programmes that purport to support them upon exit align with their needs and aspirations, as well as human rights principles. The report starts by outlining the research methodology and providing a brief overview of the context. It then presents research findings, looking at experiences during association with Boko Haram immediately after exit, and afterwards as women and girls attempt to reintegrate into communities. It concludes by examining the implications of these findings and providing recommendations for making support more gender-sensitive and transformative.⁴

¹ Joe Parkinson and Drew Hinshaw, *Bring Back Our Girls: The Untold Story of the Global Search for Nigeria's Missing Schoolgirls*, (New York: Harper, 2021).

² Ibid.

³ The authors recognize that Boko Haram is sometimes considered a derogatory name for the group, falsely presumes there is one cohesive group and is not the name used by the different groups itself. However, recognizing that the name Boko Haram is often used by local populations as an umbrella name – although this varies by geography and interaction – this report will use Boko Haram to encompass both groups. While both Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād (JAS) and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) were initially one and the same group under the umbrella name 'Boko Haram' and led by Abubakar Shekau, over time, key divisions emerged between Shekau and key critics including Mamman Nur and Habib Yusuf which saw the group splinter into two groups with different leadership structure and aims. For more on the split, see Vincent Foucher, "[Boko Haram: Mapping an Evolving Armed Constellation](#)," MEAC, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2024. In this report, when reference is made to a specific group, this will be clearly indicated, and the names Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād (JAS) and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) will be used.

⁴ In this report, the authors employ the terms "women" or "girls" and "men" or "boys" to discuss gender roles, social issues, and personal experiences. These terms more accurately reflect social gender than "female" and "male", which reflect biological sex. As we are concerned with social issues, gender roles, and personal experiences, gender is the more relevant category for our research. We acknowledge that gender identity is a multifaceted social and cultural construct that exists along a spectrum, and we aspire to consider gender identity and expression beyond the binary whenever feasible. However, due to cultural sensitivity around asking a person their gender in this context, it is not possible to ask respondents directly about their gender identity. Instead, enumerators were asked to make

Methodology

This report is primarily based on qualitative data collected between February and October 2024. These include:

- 89 interviews (41 women and 48 men) conducted in Igawa Mémé, Maroua, Meri, Mémé, Mora, and Zamaï in Cameroon's Far North region in March and October 2024;
- 94 interviews (43 women and 69 men) conducted in Bol, Kaya, Kindjiria, Kousseri 1, Magar, Melea, and Yakoua in Chad's Lac Region as well as the capital N'Djamena in February and September 2024;
- 20 focus groups (involving 45 women and girls and 44 men and boys) in Maiduguri in Nigeria's Borno State in April and May 2024. At the time of interviewing, respondents were living in Maiduguri, the Konduga IDP camp, the Bama IDP camp as well as neighbouring communities.

Respondents included those who had once been affiliated with either or both JAS and ISWAP, commonly known as Boko Haram, and community members who had never been associated, as well as government officials and people working on reintegration for NGOs and United Nations agencies. The research took place in a mix of locations where people who had exited Boko Haram were located (e.g., rural, more urban, mono-ethnic, mono-religious, and ethnically and religiously diverse). Participant recruitment aimed to draw a combination of people previously associated with Boko Haram with different experiences of entry, exit, and displacement, and from different ethnic backgrounds. Other community research participants comprised people of different ethnicities, religions, and displacement experiences and included a community leader from each location. The team also aimed for diversity in age and gender.⁵ Interviews were conducted in Arabic, English, French, Fulfulde, Hausa, Kanembu, Kanuri, and Mafa. After data collection, interview transcripts were analysed and coded to identify and analyse common themes, including in ways to capture gender and social exclusion as areas of focus.⁶ All of the qualitative and quantitative research components confirmed to MEAC's ethical research protocols.

an assumption about a respondent's gender based on visual, audio, and social identity indicators. While the inclusion of an additional third answer option could more accurately reflect gender identities beyond the binary, this is only possible when gender identity is self-reported. Although we recognize that self-identified data on gender would be preferable, the practical limitations imposed by the need to conduct culturally sensitive, and thus ethical, research necessitate this trade-off. Ultimately, our intent is not to oversimplify the complexities of gender but rather to present an analysis grounded in the information available to us and consistent with the limitations imposed by the data collection process.

⁵ Although government, NGO and United Nations participants were mostly men, community respondents reflected gender parity.

⁶ The researchers used NVivo software for coding transcripts.

This report also draws from the baseline of a large-scale, multi-year MEAC panel survey on the experiences of those associated with armed groups and the perspectives of unaffiliated community members across the Lake Chad Basin region:⁷

- A phone survey conducted between April and June 2024 with 3,632 respondents from Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe States in the North East of Nigeria, including 2,230 (1,144 women and girls and 1,086 men and boys) people unaffiliated with armed groups, 905 (304 women and girls and 601 men and boys) former associates of JAS or ISWAP who were largely part of the mass exits⁸ and 508 (17 women and girls and 491 men and boys) former and current affiliates of community security actors such as the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF).
- An in-person survey conducted in April 2024 with 517 respondents in the Far North and North Regions of Cameroon, including 305 (116 women and girls and 189 men and boys) people unaffiliated with armed groups, 187 (79 women and girls and 108 men and boys) former associates of JAS or ISWAP and 25 men and boy former and current affiliates of community security actors such as the Comités de Vigilance (COVIS).
- An in-person survey conducted in April 2024 with 387 respondents in the Lac Region of Chad, including 221 (99 women and girls and 122 men and boys) respondents unaffiliated with armed groups, 159 (57 women and 102 men) former associates of JAS or ISWAP and nine men and boy former and current affiliates of community security actors such as the COVIS.

Research limitations included security considerations that narrowed the range of communities to which the research team could travel. Many of the targeted areas were isolated and experienced continuing insecurity which made access logistically challenging. In Chad, researchers could not interview some potential research participants from islands in Lake Chad who spoke a different form of Buduma to that on the mainland spoken by team members. This was particularly unfortunate given the relatively lower access to knowledge and resources and linked social exclusion that people from these islands face and the need for these perspectives to inform analysis, policy, and programming. In Cameroon, although interviews were

⁷ The data points presented throughout this report reference a specific sub-sample of individuals who reported only being affiliated to one of the Boko Haram groups (or did not know which group they were associated with). It does not include respondents who reported association with multiple Boko Haram groups. Such a sub-sample was chosen to allow for comparability across the different survey questions, and as few respondents reported multiple associations.

⁸ The mass exits refer to the exit of some 160,000 people associated with or living in Boko Haram-controlled territory following the death of JAS leader Abubakar Shekau in May 2021. Daily Nigerian, "[Over 160,000 Boko Haram insurgents surrender to Nigerian troops – Zulum](#)," 28 November 2023.

conducted with people who had spent time at the Meri transit centre, at the time of the field research, the centre itself was largely closed to outsiders. In Nigeria, the security situation did not allow the team to travel to the locations of the research participants, and instead, participants were brought to Maiduguri for focus groups.

Contextual Overview of Gender Dynamics in the Region

Despite a rich history of women's involvement in governance, religious scholarship, and commerce in the region over the proceeding centuries,⁹ recent decades have seen the entrenchment of patriarchal gender norms. These have contributed to low levels of education, economic empowerment, and political representation for and by women and girls, and high levels of gender-based violence (GBV) against them, including early and forced marriage. The last fifteen years of violent conflict have caused further shifts in gender realities and saw all conflict parties committing profoundly gendered human rights and international humanitarian law violations. These violations affected people of all genders, broadly speaking, men and boys were more at risk of extrajudicial killing, arbitrary arrest, detention and made to fight, while women and girls were more often left behind to negotiate with combatants the safety and well-being of themselves, children, and elders, and disproportionately more likely to experience gender-based violence, including abductions and forced marriage by Boko Haram.¹⁰

⁹ In the Lake Chad Basin region, gender norms and women's influence have shifted over time. For example, Ya Magira Aisa Keli Ngermaramma ruled the Kanem-Bornu Empire in the sixteenth century for seven years, the stipulated term for rulers at the time, following which she served as adviser to her successor. Concurrently, the region also saw significant levels of conflict and slave raiding, with enslaved women and girls exchanged for horses and goods and given to supporters to incentivise allegiance. They became part of households as servants, concubines, and agricultural workers while men were either killed during raids or enslaved and recruited into domestic or military service. In the decades after the three countries of focus for this report became independent, particularly from the 1980s onwards, insecurity took the form of banditry, cattle rustling, kidnapping, and smuggling. Throughout the centuries, women played active roles in resisting raids, combating criminality, and protecting their communities. In the present day, women continue to exert agency even when others sought to limit it. See, for example, Hamsatu Zanna Laminu, *Scholars and Scholarship in the History of Borno* (Maiduguri: Open Press, 1993); T. El-Miskin, Y. Mukhtar, K. Mohammed, and A. G. Shettima, *Kanem-Borno: A Thousand Years of Heritage*, vol. 2 (Ibadan: Kraft Books, 2013); and Chitra Nagarajan, *The World Was in Our Hands: Voices from the Boko Haram Conflict*, (Abuja: Cassava Republic Press, 2024).

¹⁰ Amnesty International, "[Our Job Is to Shoot, Slaughter and Kill": Boko Haram's Reign of Terror in North-East Nigeria](#)," AFR 44/1360/2015, 2015; Amnesty International, "[Human Rights Under Fire: Attacks and Violations in Cameroon's Struggle with Boko Haram](#)," AFR 17/1991/2015, 2015; International Crisis Group, "[Nigeria: Women and the Boko Haram Insurgency](#)," Africa Report 242, 2016; Amnesty International, "[Cameroon's Secret Torture Chambers: Human Rights Violations and War Crimes in the Fight Against Boko Haram](#)," AFR 17/6536/2017, 2017; Human Rights Watch, "[They Forced Us onto Trucks Like Animals": Cameroon's Mass Forced Return and Abuse of Nigerian Refugees](#)," (HRW, 2017); International Crisis Group, "[Fighting Boko Haram in Chad: Beyond Military Measures](#)," Africa Report 246, 2017; Charmaine Pereira, "[Beyond the Spectacular: Contextualising Gender Relations in the Wake of the Boko Haram Insurgency](#)," (2018) 17(2) *Meridians*, 246-268.

Gender realities, roles, and norms are essential to understanding how women and girls became associated with armed groups, their experiences with them, their exit, and their lives immediately after exit and later as they resettled in communities. Each of these topics will now be examined in turn.

Association with Boko Haram

Women and girls became associated with Boko Haram for many of the same reasons as men and boys. These explanations fell across a spectrum that included abduction and forced recruitment, with women and girls forcibly taken along with the rest of their community. As a young woman in Chad explained, “I was 11 years old... My husband was one of them [but] when he married me, he was not a member. He married me and then one month later, they took all of us by force.”¹¹ Across the Lake Chad Basin, Boko Haram specifically targeted women and girls for abduction,¹² with the abductions from Chibok that brought this issue into the global limelight being only one of many such cases.¹³ Alternatively for some women and girls, their husbands gave them little option but to go to the bush and join Boko Haram.¹⁴ A few women and girls described not knowing their husband’s association prior to marriage, being tricked by them, or having few economic alternatives if they stayed behind.¹⁵ In addition to forced recruitment, people of all ages and genders were persuaded to join these groups by financial and religious arguments, the desire for a better life, and fears of military violence and forced recruitment into community militias.¹⁶

Age and gender – particularly with regard to age hierarchies and gender inequality – also played important roles in women’s and girl’s associations. Gender power dynamics in their communities drove association. For example, some women and girls chose to join Boko

¹¹MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited Boko Haram (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 16 February 2024).

¹²MEAC, Interviews with three men and one woman who exited Boko Haram (Far North Region, Cameroon, March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited Boko Haram (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 16 February 2024); MEAC Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 29 April 2024)

¹³Amnesty International, [“Our Job Is to Shoot, Slaughter and Kill”: Boko Haram’s Reign of Terror in North-East Nigeria](#), AFR 44/1360/2015, 2015

¹⁴MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited Boko Haram (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 3 October 2024); MEAC, Interviews with three women who exited Boko Haram (Lac Region, Chad, February 2024).

¹⁵MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited Boko Haram (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 17 February 2024).

¹⁶MEAC, Interview with a woman NGO representative (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 March 2024); MEAC, Interviews with a woman and a man who exited Boko Haram (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 10 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited Boko Haram (Yakoua, Lac Region, Chad, 15 February 2024); MEAC Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 27 April 2024)

Haram to escape marriages into which they were forced by their families.¹⁷ As a community leader explained, “Some girls, during these forced marriages, say I do not like this [prospective] husband, but the parents force them to marry him. When they go to the bush and meet the man that they love, they stay [there] with their [new] husbands and children.”¹⁸ Other research showed that women and girls joined these groups to have access to religious education and the critical significance denied to them by mainstream society.¹⁹

Concurrently, women played key roles in safeguarding girls from armed group association and violence. In some cases, fighters asked parents to marry their daughters or gave them a bride price to do so, actions that lent a veneer of choice and legitimacy to a coercive proposal. However, despite the credible and ever-present threat of violence, some parents refused these marriages. Given many men in some communities had left before they were taken over by Boko Haram, women’s family members tended to be more likely to have these interactions with fighters.²⁰ Some women left communities with girls to avoid these forced marriages.²¹ If unable to escape, they hid them in the house and concealed their whereabouts from the fighters searching homes for young women and girls.²² One young woman in Nigeria shared, “Since we knew that [the fighters] would forcefully marry us, our parents used to hide us. Some parents buried their daughters and put some containers and other kitchen utensils on them.... because they search the entire house, looking for young girls.”²³ If unable to prevent abduction, some family members insisted on accompanying girls.²⁴ Other research showed that women also hid men to prevent them from being killed, helped them to escape, or followed abducted children, husbands, or other relatives into the bush to try to rescue and bring them back home.²⁵

¹⁷MEAC, Interview with a woman NGO representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 October 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man community member (Melea, Lac Region, Chad, 13 February 2024).

¹⁸MEAC, Interview with a man community member (Melea, Lac Region, Chad, 13 February 2024).

¹⁹Chitra Nagarajan, “[‘We Were Changing the World’: Radicalisation and Empowerment among Young People Associated with Armed Opposition Groups in Northeast Nigeria.](#)” (Abuja: Equal Access International, 2018); International Crisis Group, ‘[Returning from the Land of Jihad: The Fate of Women Associated with Boko Haram,](#)’ *Africa Report No 275*, (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2019).

²⁰MEAC, Interviews with a woman who exited Boko Haram and a woman community member (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 March 2024).

²¹MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited Boko Haram (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 10 March 2024); MEAC Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 28 April 2024).

²²MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited Boko Haram (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 March 2024); MEAC Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 28 April 2024).

²³MEAC Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 28 April 2024).

²⁴MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 8 March 2024).

²⁵Chitra Nagarajan, *The World Was in Our Hands: Voices from the Boko Haram Conflict*, (Abuja: Cassava Republic Press, 2024).

“They came to abduct this girl who was like a daughter and me. When they took [her], I refused to let her go and they put a knife to my throat over here and that is how they took her [but I insisted on going with them] ... When arriving [in the bush], their leader asked, “why have you brought this old woman” and they explained that “we came to take the daughter and they would not be separated.” I said that “she is not my daughter, but she was given to me to look after, and I cannot let her go so it’s better that you take both of us” I cried and said [that] I would not return without this girl. After, they took nine motorbikes and said they would return me home with my child. I was afraid that while taking us, they would kill me, so I refused to go. They said, “as you are crying, stay for some days, lie down and sleep” ... During the two to three first days, I noticed that when they do prayer, nothing can disturb them, and they will not interrupt their prayer to run after people or kill people... I knew the route, so I ran [with my girl].”

– Woman formerly associated with Boko Haram (Igawa Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, October 2024)

While some actors involved in supporting exits from Boko Haram were aware of this range of women and girls’ involvement with them, their interventions often did not fully reflect this complexity. Women and girls exiting Boko Haram – compared to men and boys – were largely viewed as passive victims and not seen as a threat. As such, women and girls often would bypass reintegration programming and be returned directly to communities. For example, the screening processes by the military and government tended to focus on men and did not ask women and girls how they came to be associated with Boko Haram, or their experiences while with the group.²⁶ Most women and girls who exited Boko Haram alone said the military asked them a handful of questions on first contact before they were moved to an appropriate community.²⁷ While some NGO interventions tried to look across reasons for association in their work, government facilities largely did not provide support tailored to women’s and girls’ different experiences of entry into armed groups.²⁸ Moreover, these gendered dynamics around entry into Boko Haram also affected women’s and girls’ experiences in them, as discussed below.

²⁶Amnesty International, “[Help Us Build Our Lives”: Girl Survivors of Boko Haram and Military Abuses in North-East Nigeria](#),” AFR 44/7883/2024, 2024.

²⁷MEAC Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 October 2024) and MEAC Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Igawa Mémé Far North Region, Cameroon, 8 October 2024).

²⁸MEAC, Interview with a woman NGO representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 October 2024).

Life with Boko Haram

Both men and boys and women and girls faced strict gender-specific expectations once they had come to live with Boko Haram. In some ways, these were unique to the group (e.g., stricter guidelines on how to dress), and in other ways, they intensified the already existing gender roles from the broader society in the North East (e.g., women and girls were expected to take primary responsibility for the household and childcare tasks). Both JAS and ISWAP had rigid ideas about women's and men's place in society, which largely saw women relegated to inferior status and confined to reproductive activities. Despite this similar view, women and girls associated with JAS reportedly had more freedom of movement, for example, to collect and sell firewood to support their children.²⁹ In contrast, in ISWAP, men were expected to meet all their family's needs. They spent their days in religious study, engaging in fishing, farming, and pastoralist livelihoods, and going on military operations. Women and girls were blocked from engaging in livelihoods and were largely confined to their homes. They therefore relied on their husbands for food, other necessities, and information.³⁰ However, these injunctions were not always absolute with some older women (above 50 years) reportedly granted more freedom of movement and tasked with looking for firewood and water.³¹

While there were some trends within and across the groups, women's and girl's experiences and freedoms were not homogenous. While isolation remained a characteristic of their time with Boko Haram, the daily realities of women and girls were linked to several key factors, such as the specific preferences and ranks of their husbands, fathers and commanders and how much they were trusted by the group.³² Some women and girls were able to engage in home-based livelihoods such as making clothes or food for sale.³³ The status of their husband also defined the treatment (and privileges) received by certain women and girls. One young woman who was married to a high-level commander recalled, "Even if someone was older than me, even if people were older than me, if something bad happened to them, my husband used to bring them to me, and I would take care of them, and nobody had the right to take them without the consent of my husband."³⁴ Other research also showed that

²⁹MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited Boko Haram (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 8 March 2024).

³⁰Almost all respondents who had exited armed groups discussed these dynamics. For example: MEAC, Interviews with four men and two women who exited Boko Haram (Far North Region, Cameroon, March and October 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman NGO representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024); MEAC, Interviews with six women and two men who exited Boko Haram (Lac Region, Chad, February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man government official (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 18 February 2024).

³¹MEAC, Interview with a man who exited Boko Haram (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 10 March 2024).

³²MEAC, Interview with a man who exited Boko Haram (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 17 February 2024).

³³MEAC, Interview with a man who exited Boko Haram (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 17 February 2024).

³⁴MEAC Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 29 April 2024).

wives of commanders had more power and influence, access to resources, and their material needs met, showing the nuances within women's and girl's experiences with Boko Haram.³⁵

Regardless of their status, the majority of women and girls were compelled to be married once they were with Boko Haram. In MEAC's 2024 survey in Cameroon and Nigeria, 38 and 43 per cent of women and girls who were with Boko Haram respectively had married someone while in the group.³⁶ There were some cases where young women joined these groups specifically in order to marry the men of their choice or were happy to marry group members once they had joined. The age of marriage depended on commanders, with some girls as young as five years old reportedly married while others faced pressure to marry closer to puberty (e.g., as a young woman in Nigeria who was forcibly married candidly explained, "I hadn't even started developing breasts at that time [of my marriage]."³⁷ Some women and girl respondents were taken and married by force. Others had tried to remain unmarried but there was often a time limit on this refusal, with the threat of execution of the girl, and/or her parents, or the community used to force compliance. For example, a Nigerian respondent whose community had been captured by JAS explained, "There was a message that was sent that, in three days, all the girls should be married off. If not, we [JAS] will start killing people."³⁸

JAS and ISWAP took different approaches to arranging marriages. Both JAS and ISWAP used marriage to enforce a strict separation of gender roles, prohibit contact between people of different genders, restrict women's behaviour, and incentivise recruitment or reward for good service.³⁹ ISWAP often presented women and girls with a number of potential husbands and gave them time to select one.⁴⁰ This illusion of agency led some men respondents to assert that these marriages were not forced as women and girls had 'selected' the man they liked amongst those presented to them.⁴¹

³⁵Chitra Nagarajan, '[Gendered Dimensions of Disengagement, Disassociation, Reintegration and Reconciliation: Chad](#),' (IOM, 2022); Chitra Nagarajan, '[Gendered Dimensions of Disengagement, Disassociation, Reintegration and Reconciliation: The Niger](#),' (IOM, 2022).

³⁶ Due to the small number of respondents from Chad, summary statistics are not considered reliable and are thus not interpreted in the analysis. MEAC, *Nigeria Baseline Survey* (Borno Adamawa and Yobe States, the North East of Nigeria, April 2024 June 2024); and *Cameroon Baseline Survey* (North and Far North of Cameroon), April 2024), UNIDIR, Geneva.

³⁷MEAC Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 29 April 2024).

³⁸MEAC Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 30 April 2024).

³⁹MEAC, Interviews with a man United Nations representative and a man who exited Boko Haram (Far North Region, Cameroon, March 2024).

⁴⁰MEAC, Interview with a man who exited Boko Haram (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 10 March 2024); MEAC Interview with a woman who exited Boko Haram (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 4 October 2024); MEAC, Interviews with a woman who exited Boko Haram and a woman NGO representative (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 17 February 2024); Nigeria focus group discussion #8, respondent #4, description, month 2024, in language.

⁴¹MEAC, Interview with a man who exited Boko Haram (Kindjiria, Lac Region, Chad, 14 February 2024).

“They said they would give me the choice between two or three men. They brought one and I didn’t want to stay with him, so they brought another and we spoke together, and I decided on that one. If I had said no, they would have brought another one for me to choose. When they come and you choose, it is good, but if you refuse, they will give you a man. Even if you don’t want. That is why you have to choose.”

– Woman formerly associated with Boko Haram (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, February 2024)

Many women and girls experienced multiple forced marriages while with JAS and ISWAP. Women and girls often had to remarry after the death of their husbands or after a divorce, regardless of their wishes.⁴² This requirement was also the case for women and girls who had joined with their husbands or married men of their choice. Although their first marriage may have been voluntary, subsequent ones were not always so. Only older women were not always required to remarry after the death of their husbands.⁴³ This was not irregular given many men were killed in battle or died from other ailments not easily. MEAC’s Nigeria survey found that 28 per cent of women and girls who got married while with Boko Haram had had two or more husbands while they were with the group.⁴⁴ Many women and girls tried to make the best of their situation and accepted another husband. As explained by a young woman in Nigeria: “There is no one that will take care of you, so it’s best for you to like them and he will help you. It’s better for you to like him.”⁴⁵

Women and girls were subjected to enforced seclusion, with movement outside of religious study restricted and contact between genders outside marriage banned. While young girls had more freedom, more control was exerted over them as they grew closer to what was considered marriageable age⁴⁶ and women said they had experienced extreme isolation in the bush.⁴⁷ Mandatory religious education was one of the few moments of social interaction afforded to women and girls. Men engaged in surveillance of women and girls restricted their

⁴²MEAC, Interview with a woman NGO representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024); MEAC Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 29 April 2024).

⁴³MEAC, Interview with a man who exited an armed group (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 10 March 2024).

⁴⁴Due to the small number of respondents from Chad and Cameroon, summary statistics are not considered reliable and are thus not interpreted in the analysis. MEAC, *Nigeria Baseline Survey* (Borno Adamawa and Yobe States, the North East of Nigeria, April 2024 June 2024), UNIDIR, Geneva.

⁴⁵MEAC Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 29 April 2024).

⁴⁶MEAC, Interviews with a man and a woman who exited Boko Haram (Lac Region, Chad, February 2024).

⁴⁷MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited an armed group (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 March 2024); MEAC, Interviews with six women and one man who exited Boko Haram (Lac Region, Chad, February 2024); MEAC Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 27 April 2024).

movement and threatened them with serious repercussions if found outside.⁴⁸ According to one respondent in Chad, “Every woman is married and living with her husband, and you cannot move out [to conduct activities]. When you move out, they kill you. For that reason, no woman can move.”⁴⁹ Some women and girls talked about leaving their homes at night with their husbands’ permission, for example, to visit neighbours if men were not present in these homes, Others reported spending time together surreptitiously when the men were away.⁵⁰ However, women’s friendships attracted suspicion: “A woman [who had spent time with Boko Haram] told me that they could not communicate with each other as the men were afraid of what they would discuss and that they would escape together.”⁵¹ A number of women and girls likened their forced seclusion to imprisonment, which was extremely difficult for them and has had lasting psychological impacts.⁵² As a young woman in Chad, who had been abducted along with her husband and stayed in the bush from the ages of 11 to 16 years, said, “We [women and girls] were not moving, we were all the time at home so it was very difficult for us... We were thinking about how we had left the village for the bush. We were worrying all the time about what was happening to our relatives and our village.”⁵³

This restricted movement exacerbated women’s and girls’ food and physical insecurity and made it harder to escape it. Women and girls’ well-being depended on their husbands’ ability and willingness to provide for them. Some husbands were described as either neglectful of or unable to meet this responsibility, especially as increased military pressure and intra-group conflict affected their access to food, farmlands, and other necessities.⁵⁴ Women and girls also shared their experiences of physical insecurity, of being left behind in camps to face the brunt of military bombings while men engaged in combat operations, worrying about the fate of their relatives elsewhere, and hiding when the groups were fighting each other.⁵⁵ Some women felt trapped: “Living with them was something else. There was hunger and there's no way for you to escape and if they catch you, they will kill you and [sic] if you stayed back, there was hunger. We have suffered a lot.”⁵⁶

⁴⁸MEAC, Interviews with three men and one woman who exited Boko Haram (Far North Region, Cameroon, March 2024); MEAC, Interviews with a woman who exited Boko Haram and a man government official (Lac Region, Chad, February 2024).

⁴⁹MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited Boko Haram (Kaya, Lac Region, Chad, 15 February 2024).

⁵⁰MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited an armed group (Kindjiria, Lac Region, Chad, 14 February 2024); MEAC Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 26 April 2024).

⁵¹MEAC, Interview with a woman NGO representative (Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 March 2024).

⁵²MEAC, Interviews with three women who exited Boko Haram (Lac Region, Chad, February 2024).

⁵³MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited Boko Haram (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 16 February 2024).

⁵⁴MEAC, Interviews with three women and a man who exited Boko Haram (Lac Region, Chad, February 2024); MEAC Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 27 April 2024).

⁵⁵MEAC, Interviews with four women who exited Boko Haram (Lac Region, Chad, February 2024); MEAC Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 27 April 2024).

⁵⁶MEAC Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 29 April 2024).

Some men perpetrated physical and sexual violence against their wives and sexually enslaved those who did not convert to Islam. According to a women’s rights activist in Cameroon, “Those who are not converted are like objects. It’s considered that they don’t have souls.”⁵⁷ While being Muslim (either originally or through conversion) meant women and girls were not subjected to gang rape, they experienced other forms of violence, enabled by their isolation, lack of support structures, and gender dynamics in the bush. Women and girls were beaten for expressing their unhappiness with forced marriages or for not bringing out food as men desired.⁵⁸ For those who joined with their husbands, some reported their behaviour became more violent once they were in the bush. A woman who had been married for two years to a man of her choice before she and her husband joined Boko Haram said, “I saw that he changed. He wasn’t like the man that I knew in the village. His behaviour was not the same as before... When I was with my family, he did not attack me for two years but, when we were there, I was with nobody, and he started to cause problems. It was only there that the violence started.”⁵⁹ Some ISWAP commanders did take action to separate couples in cases of domestic violence, although doing so was more difficult when the men concerned were of higher rank.⁶⁰ This highlights how the norms around the use of violence within the home and the lack of protection for women and girls were a dangerous combination for those living under the Boko Haram groups

However, some women also played important roles in facilitating recruitment into and supporting the cause of the Boko Haram groups. NGO respondents shared how women were influential in shaping the attitudes of family members towards Boko Haram, that they had been active in recruitment, supplied food, hidden fighters, transported weapons, cleaned, and prepared guns, made bombs and explosive devices, and issued punishments, such as killing women who refused to be married.⁶¹ Alternatively, women were also key in pushing back. Women undertook efforts to undermine the group, for example by persuading others to leave them.⁶² NGO respondents criticized the fact that women were often viewed as only passive victims and that doing so occluded the full reality of women’s and girls’ work in support of and against Boko Haram.⁶³ Public discourse, policy-making, and programmatic action largely saw them as victims alone and did not acknowledge a fuller spectrum of their involvement. Nevertheless, the vast majority of women and girls who exited Boko Haram had ultimately

⁵⁷MEAC, Interview with a woman NGO representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024).

⁵⁸MEAC, Interviews with three women who exited Boko Haram (Lac Region, Chad, February 2024).

⁵⁹MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited Boko Haram, (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 17 February 2024).

⁶⁰MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited Boko Haram (Melea, Lac Region, Chad, 13 February 2024); MEAC Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 29 April 2024).

⁶¹MEAC, Interviews with two women and one man NGO representatives (Far North Region, Cameroon, March 2024).

⁶²MEAC, Interviews with two women and one man NGO representatives (Far North Region, Cameroon, March 2024).

⁶³MEAC, Interviews with one woman and one man NGO representatives (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, March 2024).

been subjected to some form of gender-based violence while in the bush. That some of them had had better experiences or were implicated in committing violence themselves did not mean they were not also victims and survivors. Indeed, the restrictions and other violence to which they were subjected as well as their gendered caring responsibilities affected their ability to leave Boko Haram, as discussed next.

Exit from Boko Haram

Women and girls and men and boys chose to leave the bush for similar reasons. Some respondents were caught or decided to surrender to the military during their operations,⁶⁴ but a notable number of respondents had been wanting to leave for a long time and had made plans to escape irrespective of military encounters.⁶⁵ Across Cameroon, Chad and Nigeria, women and girls who exited Boko Haram reported escaping as their primary exit pathway (81 per cent, 27 per cent and 90 per cent, respectively).⁶⁶ People of both genders said they had been misled by false promises of religious adherence and good livelihoods, but in reality, there was little food, clothing, and other necessities in the bush and they were required to steal from others to sustain themselves.⁶⁷ Tensions and fighting between and within the Boko Haram groups further motivated some people to leave, including when Mamman Nur and Al-Barnawi took their followers to Lake Chad (2015-2016) and the death of Abubakar Shekau (2021), which increased concerns about being targeted by their, or the other group.⁶⁸ Moreover, messages, especially from the Borno State Government in Nigeria, that people leaving Boko Haram would not face physical violence or be taken to military detention calmed fears of security force reprisals to some extent.⁶⁹ While these messages may have helped to calm fears, it is important to note that there are notable gender differences in information access in the bush. For example, in Nigeria, 82 per cent of men and boys who exited Boko Haram reported hearing this message, yet only 52 per cent of women and girls and who left Boko Haram had heard the message. Forced isolation, lower literacy rates, and different levels of access to phones and radios made it more difficult for women and girls to access information while in the bush.

⁶⁴MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 March 2024); MEAC, Interviews with a woman and a man who exited Boko Haram (Far North Region, Cameroon, March 2024).

⁶⁵ MEAC, Focus Group Discussion with women formerly who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 27 April 2024)

⁶⁶MEAC, *Nigeria Baseline Survey* (Borno Adamawa and Yobe States, the North East of Nigeria, April 2024 to June 2024); *Cameroon Baseline Survey* (North and Far North of Cameroon), April 2024); and *Chad Baseline Survey* (Lac Region, April 2024), UNIDIR, Geneva.

⁶⁷MEAC, Interviews with a man who exited Boko Haram and a man community member (Far North Region, Cameroon, March 2024); MEAC, Interviews with two women and one man who exited Boko Haram (Lac Region, Chad, February 2024).

⁶⁸MEAC Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 26 April 2024).

⁶⁹MEAC Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 28 April 2024).

Women and girls faced specific barriers to and during escape but still persisted. Their presence outside their homes was largely prohibited so women and girls in public spaces were hyper-visible, making it all the more difficult to escape. They also had logistical challenges, such as not having boats to traverse Lake Chad and other water bodies. Unlike men, women and girls were less likely to leave without their children and it was difficult to escape with them in tow.⁷⁰ As a result, it was noticeable in Chad that many of the women and girls who had managed to escape were those without children while those with children had few options but to remain with Boko Haram.⁷¹ Some women and girls reported having tried to escape multiple times and been caught and beaten by Boko Haram before their final successful attempt.⁷² Those who did manage to escape often did so at night when they were less likely to be seen and apprehended, and when guards may be sleeping.⁷³

Many women and girls escaped Boko Haram without their husbands. Men sometimes preferred to escape alone as it was quicker and less risky, and they could do so during operations or other times when they were not with their families. Meanwhile, women and girls tended to leave with children, other women, and family members, with the responsibility for their care during escape falling on their shoulders.⁷⁴ One young woman in Nigeria explained “If something arises, they [the men] will be able to handle it alone unlike a woman. You will carry water, children, and other things and for men, they will just run and leave you with everything.”⁷⁵

Men and boys were at more risk of being killed if intercepted by their former group or the military than women and girls.⁷⁶ Yet, the threat posed to escaping women and girls was not insignificant; some respondents reported that if caught trying to escape, women and girls would be beaten.⁷⁷ Some also reported Boko Haram going insofar as taking their clothes away when

⁷⁰MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 10 March 2024); MEAC, Interviews with a man who exited Boko Haram and a woman NGO representative (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 17 February 2024).

⁷¹MEAC, Interview with a man community member (Melea, Lac Region, Chad, 13 February 2024).

⁷²MEAC, Interviews with a man community member and a woman who exited Boko Haram (Far North Region, Cameroon, March 2024).

⁷³MEAC, Interview with a man community member and a woman who exited Boko Haram (Far North Region, Cameroon, March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited Boko Haram (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 17 February 2024); MEAC Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 27 April 2024).

⁷⁴MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited Boko Haram (Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 March 2024); MEAC, Interviews with a woman who exited Boko Haram and a man community member (Lac Region, Chad, September 2024); MEAC, Focus group Discussions with women who exited Boko Haram (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 16 September 2024). MEAC Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 26 April 2024); MEAC Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 28 April 2024).

⁷⁵MEAC Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 27 April 2024).

⁷⁶MEAC, Interviews with a woman and a man who exited Boko Haram (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, October 2024); MEAC Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 25 April 2024).

⁷⁷MEAC, Interviews with a woman and a man who exited Boko Haram (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, October 2024) MEAC Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 27 April 2024).

caught, to scare them and others from escaping.⁷⁸ Despite these threats, women and girls sometimes left the bush first to test the ways for men and boys, and send back information to help them mitigate threats during their (future) exit. If the entire household wished to leave, women were often sent first to assess the situation and check for military reprisals before sending word that men were safe to come.⁷⁹ Some women and girls also left behind husbands who refused to leave or whom they wanted to escape.⁸⁰ These women and girls faced not only the threat of reprisals by the group, but also of the men they were fleeing from, many of whom had already perpetrated physical, sexual, and other violence against them. These women and girls made strategic choices that their futures outside Boko Haram would be better than their realities within it, which were sometimes not borne out.

Life Immediately After Exit

Exiting Boko Haram did not necessarily improve women's and girls' lives. Those exiting came back with or without men, or with plans for men to exit at a later date. Yet, regardless of their relationship status, all women and girls faced challenges upon exit, including physical insecurity, challenges covering their most basic needs, and restrictive gender norms. Given that Boko Haram attacked villages and targeted those who left them, who were seen as traitors, they were afraid.⁸¹ When asked what they believed would happen after they left Boko Haram, a considerable proportion of women and girls were afraid of being targeted by the group: 38 per cent in Cameroon and 17 per cent in Nigeria.⁸² Moreover, many continued to experience displacement and returned to communities experiencing ongoing insecurity, an economic and humanitarian crisis, and reduced aid. In addition, the areas where women and girls settled often promoted cultural norms that enforced patriarchal gender relations (even if to a lesser degree than in the bush), which made it difficult for them to support themselves and their children, and ultimately hindered their reintegration.

Government support seemed to be tailored towards men. According to a women's rights activist in Cameroon, the construction of the new DDR centre for families (excluding single women and girls), showed the extent to which support for people exiting Boko Haram was

⁷⁸This was confirmed in multiple focus groups in Maiduguri, with women and girls who exited Boko Haram, conducted in September 2022 and July 2023.

⁷⁹MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited Boko Haram (Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 March 2024); Cameroon respondent #82, man community member, speaking in a group discussion in Kanuri in October 2024.

⁸⁰MEAC, Interview with a man who exited Boko Haram (Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited Boko Haram (Kindjiria, Lac Region, Chad, 14 February 2024).

⁸¹MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Yakoua, Lac Region, Chad, 15 February 2024).

⁸²Due to the small number of respondents from Chad, summary statistics are not considered reliable and are thus not interpreted in the analysis. MEAC, *Nigeria Baseline Survey* (Borno Adamawa and Yobe States, the North East of Nigeria, April 2024 to June 2024); *Cameroon Baseline Survey* (North and Far North of Cameroon), April 2024; and *Chad Baseline Survey* (Lac Region, April 2024), UNIDIR, Geneva.

designed with men and their families in mind.⁸³ She noted that most government officials, including those at the centre, responsible for DDR, were men with little understanding of gender dynamics, with the few women who worked in this sector largely occupying administrative and other junior positions. She concluded by saying: “There is really gender-based discrimination in the process.”⁸⁴ The focus on men in DDR-like support is seen elsewhere in the region. In Nigeria for example, benefits at certain transit centres would be given to men first, who would distribute them further. While it remains unclear if such practices were a matter of policy or simply reflective of the personal preferences of the male officials responsible, this arrangement was ripe for exploitation. Unmarried or widowed women and girls would have to ask men and boy counterparts to arrange for their assistance on their behalf, often in exchange for a portion of the assistance they would receive.⁸⁵

Women and girls’ basic needs were somewhat – but not completely – met immediately on return. Respondents in Cameroon and Chad said levels of security and safety, ranked as one of their most important needs, had been sufficient, particularly while they had been housed in military camps for a transitional period before transfer to a community.⁸⁶ On arrival, the government, military, and humanitarian actors mobilized to provide food, shelter, water, clothing, household items such as mats, and healthcare.⁸⁷ Another need was sexual and reproductive health. Particularly knowledge about, and access to, family planning and STD testing and treatment was needed, given the number of times they had been married and remarried, but this was not always provided.⁸⁸ Support, however, varied by location, and there were gaps. In Cameroon, respondents said that the Meri transit centre did not provide the dignity and privacy that women and girls needed, and cases of early and forced marriages were believed to have occurred in the centre.⁸⁹ In Nigeria, many respondents continued to face high levels of insecurity, as the Boko Haram group continued to be active around IDP camps and towns where they had settled. Women and girls encountered Boko Haram when leaving IDP camps and fortress towns to farm or collect firewood. In addition, little tailored support for women’s and girl’s specific needs was reported by respondents in Nigeria. Those staying at the various transit centres resided there together with men and boys. The lack of safe spaces for women and children at those centres raised protection concerns, including sexual violence.

⁸³MEAC, Interview with a woman NGO representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 October 2024).

⁸⁴MEAC, Interview with a woman NGO representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 October 2024).

⁸⁵MEAC, MEAC, Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 15 July 2023).

⁸⁶MEAC, Interviews with three men who exited Boko Haram (Far North Region, Cameroon, March 2024).

⁸⁷MEAC, Interviews with two women who exited Boko Haram (Zamai, Far North Region, Cameroon, March 2024); MEAC, Interviews with two women who exited Boko Haram (Lac Region, Chad, February 2024).

⁸⁸MEAC, Interviews with a woman NGO representative and a man government official (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024).

⁸⁹MEAC, Interviews with two men and two women NGO representatives (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, March 2024); MEAC Interviews with a woman government official and a man who exited Boko Haram (Far North Region, Cameroon, March 2024).

Women and girls spent less time in government DDR facilities or bypassed them completely, especially if they exited alone, thereby availing less support despite their significant needs. They were more likely to arrive directly in communities in which they had lived before or where family members who had been displaced had settled.⁹⁰ While this circumvention of facilities had some positive consequences, such as quicker reunification with relatives and less exposure to human rights violations, they also received little to no government assistance as a result. This required women and girls to rely on relatives, neighbours, and others to share the little they had.⁹¹ Their basic needs were often not met, and they had little support to start livelihoods. Often, their only option was to get married in the hope that their new husband would provide for them.⁹² In Cameroon, this dynamic of direct returns also meant that women and girls had less time to adjust to the norms and social dynamics in these communities, which differed significantly from those in Boko Haram. Men who exited Boko Haram discussed how spending time in these facilities had positively changed their thinking due to NGO and government-facilitated discussions on community relations and expectations regarding behaviour, in contrast to some women who were more likely to consider returning to the bush as a result.⁹³ The lack of a transition period and of some sort of formalized exit not only affected these women’s mindset but also how others in the community saw them: “With women, they are brought straight back to the communities of origin. It’s very hard for them. The population know they were in the bush, and the population knows they did harm.”⁹⁴

The forced relationships to which women and girls had been subjected in the bush were often not seen as marriages in Cameroon and Chad. This was particularly the case if women and girls had escaped and returned to communities, or otherwise had been separated from the ‘husbands’ they were forced to marry in the bush.⁹⁵ As a man respondent in Cameroon said, “We don’t call them husbands as it was force... we see them as the fathers of these children [born to women while in the bush]. With us, we have the principles whether you are Christian, Muslim, traditionally that if you take [a girl or young woman] without the consent of the parents, it’s not a marriage.”⁹⁶ Yet, there was a significant disparity between countries in what this perspective meant when it came to government policy and practice and approaches by leaders

⁹⁰MEAC, Interview with a man community member (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 4 October 2024); MEAC Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 October 2024) and MEAC Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Igawa Mémé Far North Region, Cameroon, 8 October 2024).

⁹¹MEAC, Interviews with three men and one woman who exited Boko Haram (Far North Region, Cameroon, March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman NGO representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 October 2024).

⁹²MEAC, Interview with a woman NGO representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 October 2024).

⁹³MEAC Focus Group Discussion with men who exited Boko Haram (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 16 September 2024).

⁹⁴MEAC, Interview with a man who exited Boko Haram (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 3 October 2024).

⁹⁵For ease of reading, the authors use the term ‘husbands’ to denote the men these women and girls were forced to marry while associated with Boko Haram. The authors use quotation marks around the word husband to recognise that these marriages occurred coercively and were not always considered legitimate by those involved and amongst communities and family members.

⁹⁶Interview with a man community member (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 4 October 2024).

and other influential people in the community. In Nigeria for example, these forced marriages appeared to be considered legitimate, and many women continued to be married to these individuals. MEAC's 2024 survey found that 85 per cent of women and girls interviewed in Nigeria who married someone while they were with Boko Haram were still married to this person after their exit.⁹⁷

In Chad, some women and girls who had exited Boko Haram were given the option to separate from their 'husbands'. When they were at the military barracks or immediately upon their arrival into communities, Chadian military, and government officials spoke with women and girls who had returned with their 'husbands'. Those married prior to their abduction were asked if they wished to return to the husbands with whom they had been living before their association or whether they preferred to stay with those to whom they had been forcibly married in the bush.

When they wanted out of their 'bush marriages', government and military officials then engaged with the men concerned to ask them to release the women or girls.⁹⁸ A man community leader characterised the conversation as follows, "If the woman was married by force in the bush and they come back together, in Baga Sola, everything is arranged. [They tell him] Before, you didn't have any wife. This wife is for another person. You don't need to create any problems. She will go to her parents for some time then go back to her husband."⁹⁹ These officials also talked with reluctant husbands to persuade them to accept abducted wives back.¹⁰⁰ Often, these separations needed to have taken place prior to the women and girls' transfer to the community, as leaders in insecure areas feared reprisals from Boko Haram for facilitating them.¹⁰¹

"It was the women who decided. They [the government officials] called us one by one in our group of women and asked us, "Who is your husband here? Was it by your consent or was it forced?" Some women said, "I was married with consent and want to stay with my husband." When others said it was by force and they wanted a separation, they separated them."

– Woman formerly associated with Boko Haram (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, February 2024)

⁹⁷ In Cameroon and Chad, only 23 women and girls (out of thirty who married while with Boko Haram) and seven women and girls (out of seven who married while with Boko Haram) were still married to the person they had married whilst with Boko Haram, respectively.

⁹⁸MEAC, Interviews with a woman who exited Boko Haram and a man government official (Lac Region, Chad, February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man community member (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 15 September 2024).

⁹⁹MEAC, Interview with a man community member (Melea, Lac Region, Chad, 13 February 2024).

¹⁰⁰MEAC, Interviews with a woman who exited Boko Haram and a man government official (Lac Region, Chad, February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man community member (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 15 September 2024).

¹⁰¹MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Yakoua, Lac Region, Chad, 15 February 2024).

In other, more secure, locations, such separations could be facilitated after arrival, with women and girls either returning to their husbands or parents.¹⁰² One Chadian official said that it was easier to end these forced marriages in Chad compared with neighbouring countries due to the clarity of Chadian law which required consent for marriage and as this law had been internalized by those involved.¹⁰³ Additionally, many men and boys in Chad had been forcibly recruited so it was perceived to be easier to engage on this matter than if they had joined out of conviction.¹⁰⁴

Yet, women and girls were not always wanting or able to pursue separations even in Chad where there was a clear process if doing so meant leaving their children behind. In

cases where married women and girls had been abducted and married in the bush, any children born of that forced relationship were considered to be those of her first husband under Islam if this first marriage had never been dissolved.¹⁰⁵ As a religious leader said, “The children belong to the first husband because he [the second man] forced the wife to go to the bush. Even if the wife gave birth to two to three children [with this second man] and came back, the children belong to the first husband.”¹⁰⁶ In many cases, these husbands had accepted these children into their households.¹⁰⁷ However, when they did not, the children went to their biological father.¹⁰⁸ It appears that women, regardless of opportunities to dissolve their forced marriages, were unable to retain sole custody of children (unless they exited alone). This reality forced women and girls to choose between freeing themselves from a forced relationship –one which could have been violent and isolating in the past – and staying in a marriage in order to be with their children. In some cases, women and girls had to decide between two sets of children: the children they had had with their first husband before being abducted and the ones to which they had given birth in the bush. These were difficult decisions which often had to be taken quickly when asked by officials.

In contrast, although actors in Cameroon and Nigeria knew that many women were forced into marriage while with Boko Haram, there were few proactive steps taken to address this matter upon exit. One government official in Cameroon stated, “We have not

heard complaints about forced marriages, but we know that there are forced marriages in the bush.”¹⁰⁹ According to a women’s rights activist in Cameroon, it was very difficult for these women and girls to ask for separations from the ‘husbands’ they were forced to marry, so

¹⁰²MEAC Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 16 September 2024).

¹⁰³MEAC, Interview with a man government official (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 18 February 2024).

¹⁰⁴MEAC, Interview with a man government official (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 18 February 2024).

¹⁰⁵MEAC, Interview with a man community member (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 15 September 2024); MEAC Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 16 September 2024).

¹⁰⁶MEAC, Interview with a man community member (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 15 September 2024).

¹⁰⁷MEAC, Interviews with a woman who exited Boko Haram and a man community member (Melea, Lac Region, Chad, 13 February 2024).

¹⁰⁸MEAC, Interview with a man government official (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 18 February 2024); MEAC Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 16 September 2024).

¹⁰⁹MEAC, Interview with a man government official (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 March 2024).

assuming that they would proactively do so was far from ideal.¹¹⁰ Further, women and girls who had left to join Boko Haram to marry boyfriends and fiancés, not completely understanding the nature of these groups, returned to find relations with families strained, further complicating potential efforts to leave their husbands.¹¹¹ In Nigeria, women and girls who exited Boko Haram alone would sometimes reside in transit centres or camps until their husbands also exited. These women and girls would then be reunited with their husbands by the authorities, often being moved to another centre or camp in the process. Despite this practice, it remains unclear if women and girls in Nigeria were given a choice when reuniting with the men with whom they had been forced into marriage. According to other research, screening processes did not attempt to identify victims of forced marriage, trafficking, and other violence, and some women and girls were reunited with the men from the bush who had subjected them to years of sexual violence.¹¹² The aforementioned study also found at least two instances where young women who exited Boko Haram were ordered by sharia courts to pay money to the men who had forced them into marriage while in the bush for leaving these ‘marriages.’¹¹³

“[In 2014 and 2015] there were girls who decided to join their boyfriend or fiancé as to marry with Boko Haram was a kind of liberty of choice... It’s also the lack of information about what is really in Boko Haram... The joy did not last, and they were quickly disenchanted. When they left and came back, the family was not happy, and they were required to stay with the husbands they had chosen. There are double challenges – they are detached from their family and in a complicated situation as their in-laws consider them as Boko Haram [and] are afraid of their sons. For the girls who left to join Boko Haram, when they come back with their partner, their challenges are enormous.”

– Woman NGO representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, March 2024)

After exit, the prospects of returning to one’s first husband were mixed. Some women and girls who were married prior to their abduction returned to live with their first husbands, while others came home only to be rejected by them. Many spent a transitional period with their parents before returning to their marital homes. Respondents said this period was to allow husbands time to assess their attitudes and behaviour and whether they had changed by their time in the bush.¹¹⁴ Islam also required women and girls to observe an iddat

¹¹⁰MEAC, Interview with a woman NGO representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024).

¹¹¹MEAC, Interview with a woman NGO representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 October 2024).

¹¹²Amnesty International, “[Help Us Build Our Lives”: Girl Survivors of Boko Haram and Military Abuses in North-East Nigeria](#),” AFR 44/7883/2024, 2024.

¹¹³Amnesty International, “[Help Us Build Our Lives”: Girl Survivors of Boko Haram and Military Abuses in North-East Nigeria](#),” AFR 44/7883/2024, 2024.

¹¹⁴MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Kousseri 1, Lac Region, Chad, 11 September 2024).

period of three lunar months if divorced and four lunar months and 10 days if widowed to remove any doubt as to the paternity of children born. In many cases, these first husbands accepted their wives back and were reunited with them.¹¹⁵ In others, they rejected their wives, either because they had been with another man or as they perceived them as not having sufficiently resisted these forced marriages. Another key reason for rejection was fear of being targeted by Boko Haram, as had already happened near Ngomirom and on the islands in Chad, where the husbands of women and girls returning from the bush who had accepted them back had been killed by Boko Haram.¹¹⁶

Due to these dynamics as well as gendered socio-economic realities, the ‘choice’ women, and girls were given was often not a real one. Some women and girls noted that while they had been asked what they wanted to happen by officials, they felt they had no option but to stay in their forced marriages given the likely rejection by their original husbands or the loss of their children. As one woman working for a Chadian NGO said, “The military intervenes in forced marriages if you don’t have children. If you have children, it’s not possible to abandon your children so the women stay in these marriages.”¹¹⁷

“On my return, my husband said, I am afraid to stay with you who has come back from the bush so find another man, so we got separated. He said he was scared as they would come to do bad to him.” – Woman formerly associated with Boko Haram (Melea, Lac Region, Chad, February 2024)

The reality of having to look after children is a common one for women and girls exiting Boko Haram. MEAC’s 2024 survey found that in Cameroon and Nigeria, approximately 52 per cent of women and girls who were associated with Boko Haram had at least one child whilst with the group (and this number excludes any children they might have already had before ending up with Boko Haram)¹¹⁸. In Chad, given economic realities and women’s and girls’ difficulties in sustaining livelihoods, one respondent told officials that she wanted to stay with her husband from the bush due to concerns about not being able to look after herself and her children if alone.¹¹⁹ She was not alone, many women and girls who exited Boko Haram felt they needed a husband to be able to ensure economic survival.¹²⁰ As one respondent said, “One doesn’t even

¹¹⁵MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited Boko Haram (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 3 October 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man community member (Melea, Lac Region, Chad, 13 February 2024).

¹¹⁶MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited an armed group (Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 March 2024); MEAC, Interviews with a woman who exited Boko Haram and a man government official (Lac Region, Chad, February 2024).

¹¹⁷MEAC, Interview with a woman NGO representative (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 17 February 2024).

¹¹⁸MEAC, *Nigeria Baseline Survey* (Borno Adamawa and Yobe States, the North East of Nigeria, April 2024 to June 2024); and *Cameroon Baseline Survey* (North and Far North of Cameroon), April 2024), UNIDIR, Geneva.

¹¹⁹MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited Boko Haram (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 17 February 2024).

¹²⁰MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited Boko Haram (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 17 February 2024); MEAC, Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 26 April 2024).

have enough to provide for ourselves and our children. Even now with a husband, it is difficult. So how will it be without a husband?”¹²¹ Further, a few women and girls who had been married while with Boko Haram were not interested in separation, not out of economic necessity but rather because they genuinely liked their husbands, describing them in a positive light as having looked after them and helped them escape.¹²² Others had more pragmatic reasoning when asked to choose between husbands: “I will go for anyone among them who I spend a longer time with and have more children with. It doesn't matter who the man is.”¹²³

Despite widespread condemnation of abductions by Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin region, reintegration programming did not fully respond to exiting women’s and girl’s needs. The priority in DDR-like programming was, and continues to be, men who are seen as security threats who could remobilize. The time in reintegration facilities was focused on ensuring that defectors no longer posed a threat and had the connections and some economic prospects to build a civilian life separate from their former armed group. In some cases, the longer period of time that they spent in such facilities also meant that they received more support, and their basic needs were met for a longer period than those who bypassed support after exit. However, prolonged stays in centers also meant an inability to meaningfully restart livelihoods and, especially for women and girls, prolonged exposure to potential protection concerns including sexual and gender-based violence. This emphasis on men also translated into inaction when it came to resolving forced marriages and giving women and girls real choices, not limited by economic considerations, or wanting to remain with their children. Such a lack of options was particularly the case in Cameroon and Nigeria where more men exiting Boko Haram had been involved in violence. This lack of support to women and girls upon exit continued to have consequences for them long into their reintegration journeys.

Life in Communities

Communities displayed a range of responses towards women and girls, including acceptance, sympathy and understanding, as well as some levels of fear, stigma, and rejection. Survey data showed high levels of acceptance of former associates by community members across all three countries. Amongst respondents who knew of former Boko Haram associates who had returned to their community, between 94 and 96 per cent across

¹²¹MEAC, Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 26 April 2024).

¹²²MEAC, Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 26 April 2024); MEAC, Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 29 April 2024).

¹²³MEAC, Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 26 April 2024).

Cameroon, Chad and Nigeria reported they welcomed them back into their communities.¹²⁴ These high levels of acceptance are further evidenced by former associates of Boko Haram themselves reporting feeling accepted by their communities upon their return. Indeed, between 90 and 98 per cent of women and girls formerly associated with Boko Haram across the three countries reported feeling ‘fully accepted’ or ‘mostly accepted’ by their communities.¹²⁵ Despite the overarching high levels of acceptance, nuances do emerge. In interviews, respondents in Cameroon shared their fear and unease about returning women and girls. In focus groups in Nigeria, women and girls who left Boko Haram discussed not necessarily feeling stigmatized themselves, but the stigmatization of their children by other children.¹²⁶ The varying responses and stories highlight the nuance of acceptance and stigma, and the importance of considering the contextual differences, as well as the outcomes of different research methodologies.¹²⁷ Moreover, community attitudes could change over time.¹²⁸ Women and girls generally tended to be seen as victims and less culpable in atrocities than men and boys.¹²⁹ However, in Chad, some women were reported as finding it difficult to accept women exiting Boko Haram as the 2015 person-borne IED attack in Baga Sola, which had been carried out by women, was still fresh in their minds.¹³⁰

Once back in their – or another community –, there was little support to help women and girls establish livelihoods and thus many remained dependent on husbands, families, neighbours, and humanitarian actors. Women and girls in Cameroon, Chad, and Nigeria spoke of their struggles with access to land and resources to set up livelihoods, unpredictability

¹²⁴MEAC, *Nigeria Baseline Survey* (Borno Adamawa and Yobe States, the North East of Nigeria, April 2024 to June 2024); *Cameroon Baseline Survey* (North and Far North of Cameroon), April 2024); and *Chad Baseline Survey* (Lac Region, April 2024), UNIDIR, Geneva.

¹²⁵MEAC, *Nigeria Baseline Survey* (Borno Adamawa and Yobe States, the North East of Nigeria, April 2024 to June 2024); *Cameroon Baseline Survey* (North and Far North of Cameroon), April 2024); and *Chad Baseline Survey* (Lac Region, April 2024), UNIDIR, Geneva.

¹²⁶MEAC, Interview with a man government official (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024); MEAC, Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 28 April 2024); MEAC, Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 26 April 2024).

¹²⁷ A range of questions were asked of survey respondents to gauge acceptance at the family and community level, as well as self-reported acceptance. For example, “How accepted do you feel in your community?”; and “Did you welcome them back into the community?” [If knowing anyone in the community who was with Boko Haram and returned to the community]. Previous research by MEAC highlights the complexity of understanding community acceptance, and the relevance of considering gender when examining specific nuances. See Zoe Marks, Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, and Rebecca Littman, “[Understanding Receptivity to Former Boko Haram Associates Through a Gender Lens](#),” Findings Report 30, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2023.

¹²⁸MEAC, Interviews with a woman government official and a man who exited Boko Haram (Far North Region, Cameroon, March 2024); MEAC, Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 27 April 2024).

¹²⁹MEAC, Interviews with two women community members and one woman government official (Far North Region, Cameroon, March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 18 February 2024).

¹³⁰ Also sometimes referred to as a “suicide bombing,” which is often a misnomer given the level of agency the assailants had in the attack. MEAC, Interview with a man community member (Kousseri 1, Lac Region, Chad, 11 September 2024).

in rainfall that hindered farming, as well as inflation and the high cost of living.¹³¹ Across all three countries, women and girls formerly associated with Boko Haram struggled more with accessing food. When asked if they had had sufficient food to eat over the last week, 13 per cent of adult women formerly associated with Boko Haram in Nigeria said ‘yes,’ compared to 16 per cent of adult men who were formerly associated.¹³² Women and girls were also less able to travel in search of work or get jobs as day labourers.¹³³ NGO respondents shared that these women and girls, depending on their location and whether their family members helped them, lacked clothing, shelter, and access to education for their children.¹³⁴ Young women who had had no access to education, had been abducted or married at a young age, and spent years with the groups had few skills or work experience and particularly struggled to meet their needs.¹³⁵ In Cameroon, NGOs said many women and girls in communities did not come forward to receive assistance, despite their needs, as they feared potential arrest and other repercussions.¹³⁶ Some women and girls who had exited Boko Haram, particularly if they were displaced, were said to turn in desperation to exchange sex for food, money, and other necessities to feed themselves and their families.¹³⁷ In Cameroon and Nigeria in particular, some women and girls had returned to the bush due to economic difficulties, and some were considering returning to Boko Haram if their situation continued.¹³⁸ As explained by a young woman in Nigeria “If there is no aid and if the difficulties continue I might consider going back.”¹³⁹ Factors making it more likely for them to stay out of Boko Haram including the presence of parents and other family members, high levels of acceptance, sustainable livelihoods, and community solidarity.¹⁴⁰

Despite livelihood difficulties, the responsibility for providing for their families fell on women’s and girl’s shoulders if their husbands could not work. In Cameroon and Chad, men who exited Boko Haram were at higher risk of being killed by former comrades, who saw

¹³¹MEAC, Interviews with two women who exited Boko Haram (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 4 October 2024); MEAC Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 October 2024).

MEAC, Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 27 April 2024).

¹³² The Managing Exits from Armed Conflict project (MEAC), *Nigeria Baseline Survey* (Borno Adamawa and Yobe States, the North East of Nigeria, April 2024 to June 2024) UNIDIR, Geneva.

¹³³MEAC, Interviews with two women and one man who exited Boko Haram (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 4 October 2024).

¹³⁴MEAC, Interview with a woman NGO representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman NGO representative (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 17 February 2024).

¹³⁵MEAC, Interview with a man government official (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 18 February 2024).

¹³⁶MEAC, Interview with a woman NGO representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Chad, 7 March 2024).

¹³⁷MEAC Focus Group Discussion with men community members (Igawa Mémé Far North Region, Cameroon, 8 October 2024); MEAC Focus Group Discussion with men who exited Boko Haram (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 October 2024).

¹³⁸MEAC, Focus Group Discussion with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 29 April 2024).

¹³⁹ MEAC, Focus group Discussions with women formerly associated with Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 29 April 2024).

¹⁴⁰MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 March 2024); MEAC, Focus Group Discussions with women who exited Boko Haram (Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria, 26 April 2024).

them as traitors, so they could not work in insecure areas.¹⁴¹ As a result, despite the potential for abduction, rape, and other violence, some women and girls who were formerly associated with Boko Haram farmed and collected firewood to provide for their families. For example, a woman respondent in Cameroon shared that she had recently come across a woman lying in the fields who had been raped by six men while harvesting maize.¹⁴² This lack of safe livelihoods was particularly stark for displaced people who often were blocked from leaving IDP camps, and lacked access to land, social networks, and resources to engage in livelihoods in secure areas.

Another challenge to economic reintegration was the lack of government identity cards.

As Boko Haram punished those found with these documents, seeing them as signs of government or split allegiances, many people had buried, burned, or otherwise destroyed them prior to the capture of their area or the decision to join.¹⁴³ Regardless of association, many people, particularly in rural areas where there is little state presence, never had these identity cards. There were some government efforts in Cameroon, Chad, and Nigeria to issue these documents, but they had not reached all respondents, affecting their freedom of movement, access to loans, ability to register for school, and ability to migrate for work.¹⁴⁴ Some respondents had tried to get documentation, but doing so required money and contacts, which women and girls often did not have. According to a woman government official in Cameroon, granting identity cards to people without birth certificates was challenging and resolving such cases required a higher level of authority.¹⁴⁵

Barriers to economic and social reintegration included language differences for some internally displaced women and girls. In Cameroon and Chad, many women, and girls originally from the border areas and the islands of Lake Chad could not return home due to high levels of insecurity. As a result, they exited into a situation of displacement, settling in areas where they did not speak the same language or dialect as their neighbours. These communication difficulties disproportionately affected women and girls who had fewer chances to migrate elsewhere and did not mix with other community members.¹⁴⁶ They therefore resorted to gestures to try to make themselves understood.¹⁴⁷ As well as hindering economic and social life, this inability to communicate was particularly problematic when communities

¹⁴¹MEAC, Interviews with two women and one man who exited Boko Haram (Lac Region, Chad, February 2024).

¹⁴²MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited Boko Haram (Igawa Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 October 2024). The UNIDIR team connected this survivor to medical and psychosocial care.

¹⁴³MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited Boko Haram (Zamaï, Far North Region, Cameroon, 10 March 2024).

¹⁴⁴MEAC, Interviews with two men and one woman government officials (Far North Region, Cameroon, March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman NGO representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024).

¹⁴⁵MEAC, Interview with a woman government official (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024).

¹⁴⁶MEAC, Interview with a man government official (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024).

¹⁴⁷MEAC, Interview with a man community member (Méri, Far North Region, Cameroon, 6 March 2024); MEAC, Interviews with a man and a woman government official (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024).

had security concerns about those who had settled amongst them and the latter had an even harder time conveying that they were not a threat.

The time that women and girls had spent in enforced seclusion while in the bush also affected their social lives. While women expressed pleasure in their freedom, some struggled to adjust to life after enforced seclusion.¹⁴⁸ A Cameroon government official also said, “It’s difficult for women to go out and even to speak. If you notice, they do not speak. It’s been two years since we worked [in the Meri transit centre] and they speak very little... The women are used to being locked up and not going out and it’s difficult for them.”¹⁴⁹ In Chad too, a woman working for an NGO said, “Once you are imprisoned like that, it’s difficult to get the courage to mix with others.”¹⁵⁰ However, with sensitization, time, trust, and support from families and communities, this dynamic could change.¹⁵¹

“When we were in the bush, sometimes, we were even sick because there is no movement. We felt like a prisoner. When we came out, the first thing was that we were very happy. Very glad. Our health also became good. We were moving our legs... I was feeling better. I became very happy... There is freedom here. Freedom of movement, freedom of doing everything but over there, you are like a person who is sick and mad.”

– Woman formerly associated with Boko Haram (Kaya, Lac Region, Chad, February 2024)

In some cases, reintegration was hindered by husbands who exerted control and continued to enforce the narrow gender norms of the bush on their wives post-exit. Levels of gender inequality continued to be high in communities where those who exited Boko Haram had settled. However, unlike in the bush where men had been required to fight and earn livelihoods while women and girls stayed at home to look after the household and studied the Qur’an, people of all genders could, in practice, now engage in livelihood activities (although many women and girls continued to refrain from and/or were not allowed to do so due to cultural gender norms). However, while some men easily adjusted to new gender norms,¹⁵² others who had returned from the bush did not yet internalize this shift.¹⁵³ The view that husbands took

¹⁴⁸MEAC, Interviews with a man government official and a woman community member (Far North Region, Cameroon, March 2024); MEAC, Interviews with two women who exited Boko Haram and one woman NGO representative (Lac Region, Chad, February 2024).

¹⁴⁹MEAC, Interview with a woman government official (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024).

¹⁵⁰MEAC, Interview with a woman NGO representative (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 17 February 2024).

¹⁵¹MEAC, Interview with a woman government official (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman NGO representative (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 17 February 2024).

¹⁵²MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited Boko Haram (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 16 February 2024).

¹⁵³MEAC, Interview with a man government official (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man who exited Boko Haram (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 17 February 2024).

depended on the level to which they had internalized the gender norms of Boko Haram; men who had been forcibly recruited appeared not to continue placing such restrictions on their wives after exit.¹⁵⁴ According to a government official in Cameroon, “Women are not allowed to do anything but stay at home and look after the children. There are some men who are reticent – they will say there is no problem [with women going out] but when they come back, they don’t allow it.”¹⁵⁵ In some cases, women and girls were carrying out hidden income-generating activities at home when their husbands were elsewhere. Others did not engage in livelihoods at all as they were not allowed to do so.¹⁵⁶ Some respondents felt the lack of women and gender perspectives among government officials working on DDR, including in the Meri centre, contributed to insufficient attention and few resources paid to shifting these dynamics amongst those exiting Boko Haram.¹⁵⁷

“[In the bush,] women didn’t do anything apart from Qur’an training. This is all they were doing. Apart from this, they were always at home [as] even Allah said women should be at home. In Bol, it’s not like this [but] women should not go outside whatever [the circumstances].”

– Man formerly associated with Boko Haram (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, February 2024)

Men and boys benefited from better social networks than women and girls, which could help facilitate the former’s reintegration progress. Household and childcare responsibilities gave women and girls less time to socialize. For those who continued to adhere to gender separation or had yet to adjust to the socialization norms of their new community, they often restricted their social circle to relatives and neighbours who lived close by, as they had done in the group. As one respondent in Chad said: “The men go to the mosque, and they eat with the other men, and they are able to help each other that way but the women have to look after the children so they cannot do that. I think that the men ex associates have better social support than the women because of this.”¹⁵⁸

The continued control over their mobility affected women’s independence, household incomes, how they were viewed by recipient communities, and thus their social and economic reintegration. Women neighbours in Cameroon shared that exiting women were different from others in the community, that: “...They go out rarely and when they go out, it’s to

¹⁵⁴MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited Boko Haram (Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 March 2024).

¹⁵⁵MEAC, Interview with a man government official (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024).

¹⁵⁶MEAC, Interviews with a woman and a man community member (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 4 October 2024).

¹⁵⁷MEAC, Interview with a woman NGO representative (Maroua, Far North Region, 9 October 2024).

¹⁵⁸MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 16 February 2024).

cut the wood, sell, go to the millet grinding machines, and that's all."¹⁵⁹ For these women and girls, there was little socializing.¹⁶⁰ Some exiting men and boys could also struggle to adjust to community norms, finding it difficult to interact with women and girls after their return.¹⁶¹ A woman NGO respondent in Cameroon said, "Even to look women in the eye, it is difficult [for these men]. In contrast, the men of the community do not have a problem. They can look at and speak with women."¹⁶² Few programmatic interventions existed to shift these attitudes and gender norms among former associates, as a result, progress was slow, incomplete, and required more sustained efforts and resources.¹⁶³

In addition to any coercion used to control their social interactions, some exiting women and girls were subjected to other forms of gender-based violence, particularly domestic violence and early and forced marriage for those who were single. A woman in Cameroon talked about women and girls who exited Boko Haram being scared of their husbands.¹⁶⁴ A number of government, NGO, and United Nations respondents in Cameroon reported that there were several cases of early and forced marriage in the Meri transit camp that continued in more hidden ways despite sensitization work done to mitigate it.¹⁶⁵ While domestic violence in the group was linked to the near absolute power men had over their wives, and the lack of norms, legal frameworks and resources post-exit, respondents cited tensions linked to exiting men's inability to provide for their families (and their past experiences of violence) as sometimes contributing to violence.¹⁶⁶ This manifested as emotional, physical, and sexual violence, and the denial of resources including food and linked to earning livelihoods.¹⁶⁷

In addition, women and girls who had married in the bush (forcibly or otherwise) sometimes returned not to their own areas of origin but to their husbands' communities after returning. Their own families and friends lived elsewhere, either in their natal villages or in localities to which they had been displaced, so they were constrained in being able to support

¹⁵⁹MAEC, Interview with a woman community member (Méri, Far North Region, Cameroon, 6 March 2024). Confirmed by other respondents, including MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 March 2024).

¹⁶⁰MEAC, Interview a woman community member (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 4 October 2024).

¹⁶¹MEAC, Interviews with a woman community member and a woman NGO representative (Far North Region, Cameroon, March 2024).

¹⁶²MEAC, Interview with a woman NGO representative (Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 March 2024).

¹⁶³MEAC, Interviews with a man government official and a woman community member (Far North Region, Cameroon, March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman NGO representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 October 2024).

¹⁶⁴MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited Boko Haram (Kindjiria, Lac Region, Chad, 14 February 2024).

¹⁶⁵MEAC, Interviews with two men and a woman government official (Far North Region, Cameroon, March 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man United Nations representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, March 2024); MEAC, Interviews with three women NGO representatives (Far North Region, Cameroon, March 2024).

¹⁶⁶MEAC, Interviews with a woman community member, a woman NGO representative, and a woman government official (Far North Region, Cameroon, March 2024); MEAC, Interviews with a man and a woman who exited Boko Haram (Far North Region, Cameroon, March and October 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited Boko Haram (Bol, Lac Region, Chad, 17 February 2024).

¹⁶⁷MEAC, Interviews with a woman NGO representative and a woman government official (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024).

exiting women and girls, including when it came to navigating the latter's new realities post-exit, their marriages, and any potential intimate partner violence. While parents may have met their husbands, they did not know the men's families or the communities in which their daughters were now living, a significant difference compared to the usual situation where such knowledge and bonds could mitigate potential mistreatment. A woman in Cameroon whose daughter had chosen to join JAS, married in the bush, and then left the group with her husband discussed how she felt unable to visit her and try to separate the couple due to lack of funds. She recognized that even if the financial barrier was overcome: "If you say, thank you, you've come back, I will take my daughter, that won't work. The man himself may return to the bush or come with his brothers in the bush to kill you and recover his wife."¹⁶⁸

In some instances, the Boko Haram husbands whom women and girls had escaped tried to reclaim them or threatened them. The danger emanated from both their 'husbands' and other group members.¹⁶⁹ A man community leader recounted: "A man from the bush married a wife by force and they both came back together. The woman went to her parents' home, and he stayed at [his] home. Later, he said that since I married this woman by force, she will be my wife. The parents said, no, no, no, no, our daughter has her own husband, and he is there so you don't need to create any problems. Go away and leave her [alone]."¹⁷⁰ In other cases, women and girls who had escaped Boko Haram received threatening telephone calls from the men they had left behind in the bush.¹⁷¹ A friend of one of these women said: "They are here but their husband who took them by force, they call. Even if they changed their [telephone] numbers, they called them to say, you have fled, and I will come to take you back... Every day, they call to say they are coming to take them."¹⁷² As a result of such telephone calls, some women and girls were asked by their community leader to move to towns with military presence where there was the lesser likelihood of attacks.¹⁷³

While many women and girls were able to marry (or remarry) after their return, others were unable to do so due to these threats and stigmatization. Respondents shared many cases, including their own, where women and girls had gotten remarried after exiting Boko Haram, considering their previous forced marriages to be invalid and believing themselves to be single.¹⁷⁴ However, some women and girls living in areas attacked by Boko Haram found

¹⁶⁸MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited Boko Haram (Igawa Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 October 2024).

¹⁶⁹MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited Boko Haram (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 3 October 2024).

¹⁷⁰MEAC, Interview with a man community member (Melea, Lac Region, Chad, 13 February 2024).

¹⁷¹MEAC, Interviews with a woman who exited Boko Haram, a woman community member, and a man government official (Lac Region, Chad, February 2024).

¹⁷²MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Yakoua, Lac Region, Chad, 15 February 2024).

¹⁷³MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited Boko Haram and a woman community member (Lac Region, Chad, February 2024).

¹⁷⁴MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited Boko Haram (Yakoua, Lac Region, Chad, 15 February 2024); MEAC, Interview with a man community member (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 4 October 2024).

marriage difficult as prospective husbands worried about being targeted by their ‘husbands’ as had already happened to others.¹⁷⁵ Other women and girls faced difficulties reuniting with their first husbands and in-laws due to their previous association: “With my in-laws, we didn’t understand each other and my husband also started to have their attitude... I had come out of the bush, so they said I was Boko Haram. They insulted me and I did not have a good understanding with my husband so [the marriage] did not work.”¹⁷⁶ Alternatively, men did not want to marry women and girls with children¹⁷⁷ or eventually rejected the children they had brought into the marriage after the marriage had been finalized. As explained by a woman in Cameroon who separated from her husband: “He said I cannot live with a daughter of the bush [my daughter], a girl that was brought from the bush... We [my husband and I] are [now] separated.”¹⁷⁸

Marriages between those formerly associated with Boko Haram and other community members – when they did occur – were seen as an indicator of reintegration progress.

Assured that those men and boys who had formerly been associated with Boko Haram had passed through military and government processes to be certified as low risk, and observing them over time,¹⁷⁹ communities noticed their positive behaviour and, in some cases, suggested prospective wives (with their consent) to them. In other cases, formerly associated men approached divorced or widowed directly, or unmarried women and girls via guardians.¹⁸⁰ Intermarriage was seen as a positive “factor that unifies the world.”¹⁸¹ However, in some areas, it was more likely for formerly associated men to enter such marriages as their exiting women counterparts tended to already be married to formerly associated men, and at younger ages than the community norm. Moreover, unease persisted in some communities, hindering such marriages, particularly in Cameroon.¹⁸² In Chad meanwhile, people who had returned years ago had since married their neighbours,¹⁸³ but the community still appeared to still be assessing the newest wave of returnees before such marriages for them could be considered.¹⁸⁴

¹⁷⁵MEAC, Interviews with a woman and a man community member (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 4 October 2024); MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Yakoua, Lac Region, Chad, 15 February 2024); MEAC Focus Group Discussion with women community members (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 5 October 2024)

¹⁷⁶MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited an armed group (Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 March 2024).

¹⁷⁷MEAC, Interviews with two women who exited Boko Haram (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 4 October 2024).

¹⁷⁸MEAC, Interview with a woman who exited an armed group (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 3 October 2024).

¹⁷⁹MEAC, Interview with a man community member (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 4 October 2024).

¹⁸⁰MEAC, Interviews with two men community members (Kousseri 1, Lac Region, Chad, 11 September 2024).

¹⁸¹MEAC, Interviews with a man government official and a woman community member (Far North Region, Cameroon, March 2024).

¹⁸²MEAC, Interviews with two women and one man community members (Far North Region, Cameroon, March 2024).

¹⁸³MEAC, Interviews with two men community members (Magar, Lac Region, Chad, 15 September 2024); MEAC Focus Group Discussion with men who exited Boko Haram (Kousseri 1, Lac Region, Chad, 12 September 2024).

¹⁸⁴MEAC, Interview with a woman community member (Yakoua, Lac Region, Chad, 15 February 2024).

Marriage was also considered as a sign of community support and a way to prevent re-recruitment and return to the bush. The latter contributed to some marriages being arranged for exiting women without their full consent. A woman in Cameroon who had left her husband behind in the bush recounted how her father and the Lamido (traditional leader) of her community had discussed and agreed that: “It was better to find a husband for me so I wouldn’t return,” after which her father arranged her marriage to a man that he had selected.¹⁸⁵ Community members shared how people sought wives for their relatives who had returned from the bush so they would not go back but rather stay in the community:¹⁸⁶ “By giving [him] the wife, maybe he will stay here and not go back.”¹⁸⁷ While not inspired by external efforts, this general approach of strengthening personal ties – including through marriage – to prevent a return to violent groups has been used elsewhere.¹⁸⁸

Conscious of potential risks, some villages in Cameroon and Chad counselled people exiting Boko Haram and ensured that the men and boys did not hold the violent and gender-restrictive ideologies of the group before entering into new marriages. In some villages, the community evaluated whether the men who returned no longer had the ideology from the bush in an effort to ensure their daughters would be treated well and not kept in the house. Community members then followed up after marriage.¹⁸⁹ One man in Chad said: “The conditions of the bush and here are different. In the bush, they are chiefs, they are powerful men, and they do what they want. Here, it is not like the bush. They must follow the rules of this place... If he beats his wife, [the parents] will be taking their daughters and sack [taking] them away.”¹⁹⁰ He went on to ask: “If they are still continuing their behaviour of the bush, who can give them a wife? Nobody.”¹⁹¹ In a community in Cameroon, groups of older women and men counsel those who have exited Boko Haram: “They say to the people who want to get married, whether woman or man, that if you want to really marry, leave the mentality of the bush and forget what you have done and live here.”¹⁹² Given the violence to which women and girls associated with Boko Haram were subjected in the bush, and how this violence continued for some of them after exit, these concerns and community-driven interventions were

¹⁸⁵MEAC, Interview with a man who exited Boko Haram (Mémé, Far North Region, Cameroon, 9 March 2024).

¹⁸⁶MEAC, Interviews with two men community members (Kousseri 1, Lac Region, Chad, 11 September 2024).

¹⁸⁷MEAC, Interview with a man community member (Kousseri 1, Lac Region, Chad, 11 September 2024).

¹⁸⁸ Marriage has been promoted by Saudi Arabia as a means of promoting reintegration and preventing returns to armed groups. See for example, Johann Carlos Barcena, Kenneth Daines, and John Noh, [Combating Terrorism Through Prosecutions & Rehabilitation: Three Models Compared: A Report to the Bureau of Conflict & Stabilization Operations U.S. Department of State](#), Stanford Law School: Law & Policy Lab, June 2015, pp. 21-23 and International Peace Institute, [A new approach? Deradicalization Programs and Counterterrorism, June 2020, pp.20](#)

¹⁸⁹MEAC, Interview with a man community member (Mora, Far North Region, Cameroon, 4 October 2024); MEAC, Focus Group Discussion with men community members, (Igawa Mémé Far North Region, Cameroon, 8 October 2024).

¹⁹⁰MEAC, Focus Group Discussion with men community members, (Igawa Mémé Far North Region, Cameroon, 8 October 2024).

¹⁹¹MEAC, Focus Group Discussion with men community members, (Igawa Mémé Far North Region, Cameroon, 8 October 2024).

¹⁹² MEAC Focus Group Discussion with men community members (Igawa Mémé Far North Region, Cameroon, 8 October 2024).

understandable. However, it was unclear whether these efforts prior to and after marriage were undertaken in other villages and whether they consisted only of providing advice or counselling or also included actions to verify and address attitudes around gender and violence.

“There is one guy, an ex [associate], who came and asked the father of the girl. The father said I can’t refuse you, but you go and ask my daughter. If she agrees, there is no problem. If she disagrees, I can’t give her to you. The guy asked the girl and she accepted, and he went back to the father, and he said, “I give her to you, but you cannot move from this village, and you can’t beat her. If you do any bad thing, I will take back my daughter.” He accepted [these conditions] and they are now living in the village.”

– Man formerly associated with Boko Haram (Kouserri 1, Lac Region, Chad, September 2024)

Policy Implications

Women and girls who exited Boko Haram faced many challenges. Yet underfunded, men and boy-focused, and short-horizon DDR-like programmes placed little priority and resources on meeting their needs, meaning they remained un- or under-addressed, ultimately hindering their reintegration into civilian life. The multifaceted experiences of women and girls associated with Boko Haram were largely ignored throughout their exit and post-exit experiences. Efforts to promote defection and bolster reintegration had long overlooked or did not sufficiently cater to the needs of women and girls. Programming often disregarded women and girls exiting Boko Haram as they were viewed narrowly as victims, ignoring their contributions to the function and longevity of the groups and that some of them had been implicated in violence. When women and girls get support, the discussions about their unique needs are often reduced to a focus on medical care, but rarely meaningfully address the gender dimensions of food and physical insecurity, domestic violence, or forced marriage. Nor do they examine or seek to address the normative and social barriers – often residual from their association - that make it difficult for women and girls to restart their lives socially and economically. Indeed, while international attention tends to focus on gender-based violence perpetrated by Boko Haram in the region, for many formerly associated women and girls, hardship, and violence did not begin with or end after their time with the group. To ensure effective and protection-centred reintegration that meaningfully addresses this hardship and violence, these issues – and the others outlined in the report - need to be addressed.

In particular, women and girls' meaningful participation and gender perspectives in DDR policy and practice are missing. DDR-like programmes in the region rarely have meaningful opportunities for participants and beneficiaries to influence support. For example, in Cameroon, most of the relevant government agencies involved in DDR had few women staff, particularly in positions of leadership, and those working with people exiting armed groups needed to do more to take gender-sensitive and gender-transformative approaches.¹⁹³ Women in communities receiving returnees, and civil society more broadly, were often not involved in DDR-like programming or related decision-making.¹⁹⁴ As a result, efforts to address the conflict still do not meaningfully engage all those impacted and involved, and as such, fall short of helping build sustainable peace.

A more holistic raft of interventions that meets the needs of women and girls is needed. All three countries had seen some interventions focused on women and girls exiting Boko Haram, particularly GBV response services and mental health and psychosocial support, and in some places, interventions to counter stigma, foster community acceptance, and engage in livelihood assistance.¹⁹⁵ Respondents noted how women and girls had flourished with programmatic support in Cameroon and had become “independent, respected and reintegrated into the community”¹⁹⁶ but that needs were greater than current funding could cover, and major gaps persisted, particularly when it came to helping people of all genders deal with the violence in the bush, align with community gender norms and address trauma.¹⁹⁷

Policy and programmes need to do more to address women and girls' profoundly gendered experiences with Boko Haram and support them in their reintegration journeys. There are five main ways to do so:

- **Undertake ongoing in-depth action research and bridge evidence generation to practice.** While there is an emerging understanding of the experiences of women and girls exiting Boko Haram in the Lake Chad region, gaps continue to exist at two levels. Firstly, the complex and nuanced gendered experiences of people of all genders exiting Boko Haram need to be further understood (e.g., men's vulnerability), as this affects the effectiveness of interventions. Secondly, despite advocates and researchers raising the need to take gender-responsive and gender-transformative approaches, interventions

¹⁹³MEAC, Interviews with a man government official and a man NGO representative (Far North Region, Cameroon, March 2024).

¹⁹⁴MEAC, Interview with a man NGO representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 11 March 2024).

¹⁹⁵MEAC, Interviews with a man United Nations representative and a woman NGO representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, March 2024).

¹⁹⁶MEAC, Interview with a woman NGO representative (Maroua, Far North Region, Cameroon, 7 March 2024).

¹⁹⁷MEAC, Interviews with two men government officials and two women NGO representatives (Far North Region, Cameroon, March and October 2024); MEAC, Interviews with a man who exited Boko Haram and a woman NGO representative (Lac Region, Chad, February 2024).

supporting women and girls are underfunded and do not address many of their needs and realities. An investment in ongoing participatory and nuanced research is needed, linked directly to programme design. Related interventions need to be rigorously monitored and assessed to influence adaptation in real time.

- **Work to enhance the meaningful participation of women and girls both as programme participants and as representatives of communities receiving returnees and civil society more broadly.** This should include interventions to 1) Create DDR participant mechanisms with equal representation of women and girls and support to ensure their participation is meaningful to ensure the necessary feedback loop to further refine interventions is in place (which will help build the skills and confidence of the women and girls involved); 2) Work with community-based women associations to meet the needs of exiting women and girls; 3) Provide sustained, long-term, and flexible funding to women's organizations to meaningfully participate in all aspects of DDR-like processes and support returning women and girls and support them to strengthen their capacities and skills; and 4) Facilitate peer learning and exchange amongst women's organizations working on peacebuilding issues like DDR.
- **Run language classes for people exiting Boko Haram who are unlikely to be able to return to their communities, particularly women and girls, as they may need to move to, or already live in communities whose languages they do not speak.** Upon exit, some people spend time in camps or reintegration facilities before either returning to their villages or moving to IDP or refugee camps, if their home communities were unsafe. Language learning would be a valuable way to use their time there and better prepare them to reintegrate socially and economically. Having multilingual beneficiaries (including graduates of the programme) assist instruction would provide them with purpose and economic support as well as serve as role models that learning is possible. Such programming can be easily scaled and must be digestible and tailored to an audience that has received little formal schooling and remains largely illiterate.
- **Consider conflict-sensitive ways of giving women and girls real choices about whether to stay in marriages, learning from – and building further upon – the Chadian experience.** Interventions here could involve: 1) Government officials, community leaders, and community-based women associations engaging with the husbands and parents that women and girls left behind when they were abducted or went to the bush, to improve the chances that the returnees and their children will be accepted; 2) Wider socialisation by Islamic leaders and scholars – both men and women – on Islamic injunctions that children born to women and girls during separation from their husbands (including via abductions)

belong to these marriages and thus cannot be rejected; 3) Government officials exploring entry points with men exiting Boko Haram, including the involvement of former trusted comrades who exited previously, to build acceptance of potential separations from their 'wives'; and 4) Supporting women and girls to set up sustainable livelihoods to provide for themselves and their families, so they do not need to stay with 'husbands' out of concern that they and their children will starve.

- **Fund and prioritize interventions to address and shift gender norms of strict separation, enforced seclusion, and women's restrictions from undertaking livelihoods.** Doing so would involve: 1) Working with community leaders and community-based women associations to support individuals, couples, and families to engage in new forms of communications and relationship building and 2) Working with women and men Islamic leaders and scholars and community-based women associations to talk about women's rights and freedoms and norms of masculinity.

MANAGING EXITS FROM ARMED CONFLICT



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