

On 14 April 2014, Boko Haram seized more than 200 schoolgirls in the town of Chibok, southern Borno state. This became a global affair, with leading female civil society activists throughout Nigeria joining in the Bring Back Our Girls international campaign. The state's response was apathetic. It took three weeks for President Goodluck Jonathan to make a statement, and his wife, Patience, speculated that the abduction never happened.²³ This so fed into a mounting debate on Jonathan's performance that some of his allies claimed, without basis, that the abduction was a ploy by northern elites to weaken his government. Boko Haram said it would force the mostly Christian schoolgirls to convert, while trying to use them as bargaining chips.²⁴ They remain a major symbolic issue. Shekau's release of 21 Chibok girls in October 2016 after negotiations has been good news for President Buhari.

There have been many more kidnappings. In April 2015, a well-documented report estimated Boko Haram had taken more than 2,000 girls and young women, most unmarried, over the previous twelve months alone. But that figure is a mere indication. Boko Haram probably controlled a few hundred thousand women at the height of its insurgency, and abductions were many. The practice remained extensive well into the second half of 2015, when the movement further expanded its territorial control in Borno state.²⁵ Reports show that militants mostly killed men (civilian and military), but generally abducted women. In a video, Shekau told followers to kill men but "spare the old, women, the lunatic, and the repentant".²⁶

Beyond trying to free its own female detainees, Boko Haram's reasons for abducting women and girls are probably mixed. In some local contexts, its actions have ethnic underpinnings; since it recruits more in certain communities than others, the history of hostility between communities has occasionally become part of its jihadist struggle. That it first abducted women in mainly Christian communities and pressured them to convert suggests it sought to spread its version of Islam as well as punish local adversaries.²⁷ There are early reports of gang rape of Christian women, while Muslims were spared.²⁸

²³ "First Lady Labels Women Activists Terrorists, Orders Arrest", International Centre for Investigative Reporting, 5 May 2014.

²⁴ The Chibok girls were reportedly not forced to convert, but conversion under heavy pressure has been mentioned by other former captives. "Boko Haram did not rape, abuse freed Chibok girls – Source", Reuters, 9 November 2016.

²⁵ "Our Job is to Shoot, Slaughter and Kill": Boko Haram's Reign of Terror in North-East Nigeria", Amnesty International, April 2015. On more recent developments, see "Beyond Chibok: over 1.3 million children uprooted by Boko Haram", UNICEF, April 2016.

²⁶ Of course, women have been killed in attacks in large numbers. For instance, 59 Shuwa women trying to escape from Kirenowa in June 2014 were pursued and shot dead at the mosque in the next village, Ngalori. Crisis Group interview, Shuwa Arab women, Maiduguri, 14 August 2016. But the bulk of available narratives indicate the insurgents kill many more men. For instance, a survivor said there were only three women among the 43 killed during a February 2016 attack on Kache, a Shuwa Arab settlement in Marte LGA, Borno state. Most women but only five men escaped. Crisis Group interview, Maiduguri, 18 June 2016. See also the incidents detailed in "Our Job is to Shoot ...", op. cit., pp 37, 40-41, 43, 48. Available data on Boko Haram deaths (eg. www.cfr.org and www.crisis.acleddata.com) do not distinguish between male and female victims. "Boko Haram: Shekau claims responsibility for attack on Giwa Barracks, threatens to attack universities, Civilian-JTF", *Premium Times*, 24 March 2014.

²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, IDPs, Maiduguri, Yola and Jalingo, 14 June 2016. During the July 2009 uprising, Yusuf and his followers held Christians, including women, captive in their Markas (base) in Maiduguri and reportedly killed those who refused to convert. Galtimari, "Report", op. cit.; Crisis