



The Use of Women as Suicide Bombers by Boko Haram in Nigeria

Oghuvbu Ejiroghene Augustine¹

Abstract: The study examines the current events of suicide bombings in Nigeria; an incident that is foreign to the nation. Boko Haram growing level of using women and young girls as suicide bombers raises curiosity among scholars of strategic and security studies. Women's status as weaker sex appears to have vanished in light of the reality of incorporating a gender perspective into all phases of terrorist groups' lethal actions. Why has it become more profitable for terrorist organizations to utilize women to assist or carry out their operations? While this has become problematic and has generated questions about the strategic reasons of women's activities as suicide bombers, it is becoming very clear that the relationship between women and terrorism cannot be ignored. This study therefore, examines the concept of suicide bombing, women as pawn and why women are been used to carry out suicide bombing by Boko Haram. The consequences under Municipal and universal laws are also examined. The study therefore, recommends that women and other young people should be well educated about the risks of being used by Boko Haram to combat the state and thereby endangering the lives and properties of innocent citizens.

Keywords: Boko Haram; Terrorism; Women; Suicide Bombing; Nigeria

1. Introduction

Since 2009, the activities of Boko Haram have taken a different dimension and has introduced female suicide bombers, many of whom are young women. This have brought a level of sophistication to suicide bombings in Nigeria. This has become a

¹ Covenant University, Department of Political Science and International Relations, College of Leadership Development Studies, Nigeria, Address: Km. 10 Idiroko Road, Canaan Land, Ota, Ogun State, Corresponding author: augustine4best@yahoo.com.

new war strategy adopted by Boko Haram in Nigeria since 2011 (Archibong, 2020, p. 11). Before suicide bombing found its way into Nigeria in 2011, it was only seen in the Middle East, with countries like Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Turkey making headlines as perpetrators or victims of international terrorism (Bloom & Hillary, 2016, p. 108). Women have been crucial and a key influence in Boko Haram's success, and this cannot be overstated.

Women have launched bombs in the past and continue to be a terrific and discreet method to cause damage. Young women, on the other hand, have been affected by the Boko Haram insurgency in many ways. These young women have lost the lives of husbands who are breadwinners, fathers and brothers to the menace of Boko Haram insurgence. They've also had to bear sexual violence, economic hardship, internal displacement, and socio-economic ostracism (Archibong, 2020). Although, Women utilized as suicide bombers by the sect remain problematic, men continue to dominate the spectrum of suicide terrorism (Omilusi, 2015, p. 60). Women are seen as life's defenders and givers, rather than life takers. They are frequently portrayed as victims of societal violence, as mothers or widows, or as passive supporters. Women represent the keepers of tradition, as well as maternity and life. How can she then contradict that? (Omilusi, 2015, p. 60).

Ironically, while this remains a puzzle, Zedalis (2004) an expert on counter terrorism offers six predictions about the use of female suicide bombers in the future: Terrorists will continue to utilize Islamic converts who can blend in with Westerners as a first line of defence. Secondly, future attacks will entail several targets as well as sequential and simultaneous bombs. Thirdly, suicide bombers targeting high-value targets will continue to be a priority for female suicide bombers. Fourth, the internet will continue to be a valuable resource for women and young girls seeking employment. Fifth, in terrorist groups, women will increasingly have crucial positions. Finally, terrorist groups will start using pregnant young ladies to carry out suicide operations. According to Alvanou (2006, p. 95), "the uneven status of women in society owing to social oppression and economic dependent on males and the state, particularly in the setting where female suicide terrorism happens, must be examined." It is also critical to highlight Zedalis' (2004), reflective evaluation of some of the prognostications made between the times she published the article in 2004 and now that female terrorism has emerged. It is on this note therefore, the study seeks to fill a gap in knowledge by investigating the reasons why Boko Haram insurgency use women and young girls as suicide bombers in Nigeria.

2. Conceptual Clarification: Suicide Bombing

According to Tambiah (2005, p. 249), “in a conflict, there are three aspects in which women are casualties. To begin with, women are victims of injury, death or rape. Second, women are separated from their homeland. Finally, and in a manner that is special, women are victims of suicide attacks that use them as a weapon of war. This is a psychological, social, and financial loss, and they are frequently used as a weapon of war in suicide attacks.” The word “suicide bombing” has been used since at least 1940. The concept was stated in a New York Times report in reference to German tactics. On April 15, 1947, The Times of London described a new pilotless radio operated rocketed missile as “planned originally as a countermeasure to Japanese suicide bombers: it is now a powerful tool for defence or offense (Mai, 2011, p. 21; Laura & Canon, 2011, p. 4).”

Bawa (2017, p. 82), conceptualized suicide bombing as a “deadly, politically motivated act carried out in a conscious state by a person who blows himself up beside a specified target.” The attacker's death must be intentional and certain in order for the attack to be effective.” According to Altran (2003, p. 1537), is a “technique that involves attacks on military objectives that are impervious via typical insurgency techniques, the killing of notable leaders (who would typically not be available by any other means), and the attack of huge numbers of civilians.” Although, a suicide strike is meant to kill a single person, it is more commonly used as a psychological warfare weapon to affect a broader public audience. The major targets are those forced to watch the incident, not those who were killed or injured in it.”

Islamist refer to the deed as a shahid (martyrdom operation), and the suicide bomber as an istihad (martyrdom operation) (translated as martyr). The word refers to anyone who died to demonstrate his faith in God. For instance, those who die while fighting jihad bis saif, is used by the Palestinian authority, among others, to describe suicide bombers (Ward, 2018). Suicide bombing is described by Bawa (2017, p. 83), as an “operational strategy in which the mere conduct of the assault is conditional on the perpetrator's death.” The terrorist understands that if she or he does not kill herself or himself, the planned attack will not be carried out (Bawa, 2017). Similarly, Romaniuk (2017), avers that suicide bombing are often motivated politically and are carried out by children, men and women. For Romaniuk (2017), suicide bombing is referred to as sacrifice bombings sometimes attempt to murder as many people as possible, or inflict massive property harm, or both. People who carry out suicide

bombings believe that they will die as a result of their actions. Therefore, sacrifice their lives for a cause of “greater good.” Bukay (2006, p. 145), on the other hand, claims that “religious views lead to suicide bombings. He believes that there is a strong religious basis for suicide attacks in Islam, and that understanding why suicide attacks occur requires this foundation in Nigeria.”

However, for this study a suicide bomber would mean a person (or individuals) who deliberately and purposefully causes their own death by blowing themselves up along with their chosen target in a politically motivated violent attack (Bawa, 2017).

3. Historical Perspective of Suicide Bombing

Suicide bombing has evolved into a favoured weapon, with 17 terrorists’ groups using it in 14 nations all over the globe (Zedalis, 2004). Between 2000 and 2005, the rate of suicide attacks grew from an average of less than five a year in the 1980s to 180 each year. These attacks have targeted a variety of military and civilian targets around the world have been hit including Sri Lanka. Since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Israel has been invaded, as has Pakistan, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Nigeria. Suicide bombings are a very old method of attack, according to tradition. In ancient times, the Jewish Sicairis and the Islamic Hashishiyun were both notorious for similar raids. In the Malabao Coast in south-western India, Atjeh in northern Sumatra, and Mindanao and Sulu in the southern Philippines, suicide operations were deployed in the 18th century. In their war against western colonialism and imperial control, Muslims carried out suicide bombings in these locations (Victoroff, 2005, Merari & Friedland, 1985). During World War II, Japanese kamikaze pilots carried out a similar organized, scheduled, and tenacious crusade of suicide assaults against United States military personnel. 11 Between July 1944 and August 1945, and at least 375 US naval vessels were sunk by Japanese aircraft, killing 12,300 servicemen and injuring another 36,400 (McCurry, 2015).

April 1983 was a watershed moment in the modern history of suicide bombing, in Lebanon, suicide terror attacks began on this day. Hezbollah, a minor and previously obscure organization, carried out a series of suicide bombings aimed at western target. The first attack was against the American embassy in Beirut in October 1983, followed by assaults against the headquarters of the US Marine Corps and the French Multinational Force. The final two were carried out at the same time, resulting in 300 deaths and hundreds of injuries. This attack influenced terrorist organizations as

diverse as Hamas, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, and al-Qaeda (Schweitzer, 2003, p. 83).

The LTTE, a Tamil separatist faction in Sri Lanka, was one of the parties that preceded Hezbollah, also outnumbering it in terms of executions and incidents. It carried out 168 suicide terror strikes in Sri Lanka and India between July 1987 and February 2000, killing or injuring thousands of innocent civilians. The LTTE has focused its attacks on the highest levels of Sri Lankan and Indian political and military leadership. In their civil war with the Sri Lankan government since 1991, the LTTE has used female suicide operatives. It is the only group to have murdered two heads of government, Rajiv Gandhi, the former Indian Prime Minister, and Prendesa Kumaratunga, the President of Sri Lanka (Ibanez, 2014). Around 30 suicide terror attacks were carried out in Israel by Hamas (Harkat-el-Mukawma el Islamiya, or the Islamic Resistance Movement) and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), killing over 120 people and injuring hundreds more. Hezbollah also influenced and aided Hamas and the PIJ. From the early 1980s, the PIJ leadership retained strong relations with Iran and Hezbollah. After Israel moved a few hundred agents to Lebanon in 1992, where they built significant contacts with Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, Hamas' alliance with Hezbollah gained traction. In Lebanon, both parties learned how to commit suicide (Olaniyan, 2017).

The Kurdistan Workers' Party is another faction that has previously employed suicide terror strikes (PKK). There has been a total of 21 attempted suicide attacks carried out by the PKK. Its suicide operation began on June 30, 1996, with comparatively few casualties: 19 people were killed and 138 were injured. The PKK turned to suicide bombing in the face of heavy military defeats in south-east Turkey, which had a negative impact on its members' morale. Since the organization's military operations had decreased between 1994 and 1996, it was looking for a way to counteract this pattern and raise the morale of its fighters (Pape, 2005). As a result, suicide missions were selected to illustrate a martyr's burial. For a long time, such attacks were used as a form of retaliation, demonstrating a supreme determination to risk everything, including one's own (Olaniyan, 2017). Women also played a significant part in the militant activities of some of the most well-known suicide bombing organisations. Among the terrorist groups that have made their participation of women known are the Syrian Socialist National Party (SSNP/PRS), the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), Chechen rebels, Al-Aqsa martyrs, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), PKK,

Chechen insurgents, Al-Aqsa martyrs, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and Hamas (Atran, 2003, p. 1537).

Suicide bombings are carried out for effect, and the more drastic the effect, the more powerful the post, so certain organisations might be interested in hiring women. Suicide bombing has become increasingly popular among rebel groups, not only because it outperforms conventional guerrilla tactics, but also because it attracts a lot of media interest, particularly when carried out by women and young people (Zedalis, 2004, p. 3). Despite the fact that women made up only 15% of suicide bombers in organizations that use women, in comparison to 4 percent of male attackers, they were responsible for 65 percent of assassinations. 18 and 20 percent of women who conducted suicide attacks did so with the purpose of assassinating a single individual (Zedalis, 2004, p. 3). The motivations for using female suicide bombers vary significantly. Women are generally only involved in conflict in groups like Hamas, the Tamil Tigers, or the PKK out of desperation or as a last resort. For example, Hamas used its first male suicide bomber in 1993, but it did not use its first female suicide bomber until 2002 (Kassim, 2008, p. 205). This shift was caused by the growing difficulty male suicide bombers were having reaching their intended targets. Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, Hamas' spiritual leader, emphatically rejected the use of women in his battle, calling it a major development of our fight because men face more challenges, contrary to women who can efficiently meet the goals." Women are like the reserve army; we call on them when we need them." ISIS has now been desperate for suicide bombers, and has begun training an all-female bomber battalion in Syria (Pape, 2005).

4. Boko Haram: An Overview

Boko Haram began as a group of late Mohammed Yusuf's Islamic seminary students who were considered to be socially isolated, deprived, and unemployed. In 1992, the sect withdrew from society and formed a camp in Kannamma village, Yobe State, which they dubbed "Kannamma." In January 1994, ahalulsunnahwaljamahijirah and/or the Nigerian "Taliban" conducted multiple assaults on divisional police stations and became very active since 2002 (Anyebe, 2016, p. 55; Bawa, 2017, p. 85). When the police harassed Boko Haram, they were driven into open war with the government in 2009 after sect members defied a regulation requiring motorcyclists to wear helmets: Yusuf was captured and killed in police custody shortly after. The sect are against Western education, Western influence and Nigeria should establish

a religious state with Sharia rule as the paramount law. Yusufiyya subsequently evolved into Jama'atul Ahalul Sunna Waljama'a Lidda a' wati Wal Jihadi (JASWAL JIHAD), embracing the most severe and sophisticated doctrines from hijirah, with a substantial number of adherents surrendering themselves to fate and willing to die in organized assaults. Subsequently, after becoming violent since 2009, the sect has taken the lives of over 13,000 and over 1 million people have been displaced by Boko Haram. (Knop, 2007, p. 402; Anyebe, 2016, p. 57).

Blum cited in Bintube (2015) Boko Haram has been variably depicted as a hydra-headed monster that inflicts misery, with each assault on Nigerian society's structure resulting in what Blum, as referenced by Bintube in his evaluation of the recurrent bombings, "involuntary suicide." Boko Haram has been violently protested by the Nigerian government. If the military repression grew more intense, they became more violent and aggressive, resorted to increasingly drastic measures such as vandalizing schools, killing foreigners, kidnapping, shooting students, and teachers at random (Mia, 2011, p. 25). Nigerians have witnessed the indiscriminate devastation of human lives and property, particularly in the northern states of Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa, where Islam is the predominant religion. Indeed, Boko Haram's attempts to barbarize and terrify Nigerians have grown in recent years, generally unchecked, and many analysts feel that the world's most populous black nation might be wiped out owing to the massiveness of daily security risks, notwithstanding the Buhari administration's efforts to dramatically reduce them. It took the Jonathan administration three years to get a fair understanding of the Boko Haram insurgency (Mia, 2011, p. 25). According to Igbonovia & Edobor-Igbonovia (2013), words do not fit behaviour in the Nigerian national sense, as shown by the lamentations: The current administration under Buhari seems to have given up on the country's instability. For many months now, barely a day goes by in Nigeria without a bombing or shooting crash. Typically, lives are lost and precious property is ruined as a result of all of this. The federal government doesn't seem to have a solution to the security issues. The government has been rushing from pillar to post in an attempt to address the problems. However, rather than making any progress, the threat continues to rear its ugly head (Igbonovia & Edobor-Igbonovia 2013) cited in Anyebe (2016, p. 56).

5. Instrumentality: Women and Girls as Boko Haram Pawns

As old members are killed or captured by security forces, Boko Haram has shifted its strategy to using underage girls and women as suicide bombers, this strategy of Boko Haram changed dramatically in 2013. In reaction to the Nigerian government's subsequent tactics, Boko Haram carried out a string of kidnappings, one of which included the instrumental use of women as one of the key features. Kidnapping is a new technique adopted by Boko Haram, and the first mention of it appeared in Boko Haram statements in January 2012 (Associated Press, 2012). On June 8, 2014, this changed when a middle-aged lady apparently committed suicide at the Gombe military camp. Women have been used tactically in combat in the history of Islamist aggression. It is an independence movement such as the Algerian opposition against the French, and it is not a recent phenomenon. In a situation where women were originally ordered to smuggle weapons, female members of the resistance later became enthusiastic volunteers for those activities after realizing the critical role they could play (Zenn & Pearson, 2014, p. 48).

Women made up a major part of the fighting forces in Zimbabwe during the armed struggle between African nationalists and the white minority regime. Similarly, the Mozambique National Resistance Movement (RENAMO) and the FRELIMO government army had a large number of female members. FRELIMO began recruiting girls in 1975, and some were forced into action (Bawa, 2017, p. 87). Girls from rural communities were primarily conscripted or abducted during RENAMO. Girls served as soldiers, informants, domestic servants, medics, and, in RENAMO, captor-husbands' wives. Women were abused in these situations both for their possessions and as "assets" themselves. When they were kidnapped, they were sexually exploited, raped, and coerced into marriage because their worth was reproductive and productive. Insurgents kidnapping women and girls is almost everyday news in north-eastern Nigeria. Few victims have survived to tell their stories, many really haven't. The hardships endured by certain women and girls at the hands of Boko Haram have been left to be imagination (Zenn & Pearson, 2014, p. 47; Bawa, 2017, p. 87).

The fact that Boko Haram abducted 273 schoolgirls from Chibok just a few months before the first wave of female suicide bomb assaults is particularly disheartening. The fate of the Chibok girls caused widespread concern and suspicion in Nigeria, with many speculating that they were being used in suicide attacks. While there is no proof of this, it drew a lot of public interest. Since then, the number of women

who have committed suicide bombings has slowly risen (Wilson, 2007, p. 527). In Kano state, where the Boko haram insurgency has wreaked havoc, four female suicide bombers occurred within a week in July 2014. As the Nigerian military stepped up its attempts to retake territory held by Boko Haram in 2014, the militant group devised a new approach (Bawa, 2017). Systematic organized sexual harassment was perpetrated against 11 years old girls and women (Wilson, 2007, p. 527).

The motivation underpinning the sect's use of female suicide attacks was not entirely clear. Mia (2011, p. 21), asserted that unlike men "women will not be easily suspected by security agents, and therefore, are less likely to be searched, and may help camouflage their equipment, so using women to carry out these operations may be a way to maximize their effectiveness. Female suicide bombers are particularly risky in busy markets, transit centres, and religious sites, which are all frequent targets (Mia, 2011)." According to the testimonies of escapees, the bulk of the girls and women who are drafted into suicide operations are victims of kidnappings, forced labour and involvement in military operations were stated by some of the abducted women and girls (Bawa, 2017).

6. Reasons Boko Haram use Women and Girls

Turner (2016, p. 17), interprets the role of academics addressing the issue of what motivates a militant group to use female bombers. Turner claims that when it comes to attack, women are more stealthy and unexpected, and men are reluctant to search them when they are under attack. Women and children are not seen as adversaries, and as a result, defence forces are less suspicious of them. This was a fantastic strategy for wreaking havoc and widespread devastation. In the course of their rebellion, Boko Haram has successfully tested the tactic. Women also contribute to the number of operatives in these terrorist organizations, particularly in areas where there are many targets. According to Turner (2016, p. 16), scholars' strategy is that the effect of female suicide bombings is more psychological and draws more interest from society. The attackers also gain public coverage, which helps them expand their operations. "Given terrorist organizations' strategic desire to use female perpetrators and the persistence of attacks carried out by female bombers, the number of female suicide attacks is expected to rise (Turner, 2016)." The international outcry over the kidnappings, according to Meservey (2018) observes that alerting the world to the power of using females, especially girls in attacks, prompted the use of its heinous

new strategy. Campbell (2015), also backs up the argument that female suicide bombers were introduced mostly for operational purposes. They provide the militant organization with a tactical advantage. Women are adept at smuggling bombs without drawing attention to themselves. She is unafraid to move about in the midst of a crowd of civilians. The use of female suicide bombers as a fighting tactic arose primarily as a result of the Nigerian military's pressure on the sect (Plaza, Rivas-Nieto, & Rey-Garcia, 2017).

Propaganda is another reason why Boko Haram use female bombers in carrying out their attacks. Apart from emulating what happens in other war zones where rebel groups kidnap women for various reasons, Boko Haram's practice has aided the dissemination of its propaganda both domestically and internationally. It's possible that the group's international success has emboldened them to focus more heavily on female operatives (Bloom & Hilary, 2016, p. 108). They always make the news and draw worldwide interest. The attacks' media coverage and sensation help to raise Boko Haram's image as a group to be respected and taken seriously (Campbell, 2015).

Women and girls in Boko Haram camps can choose to leave the community and return home on occasions. Those who managed to flee experienced social pain and alienation (Bloom & Hilary, 2016). Such women are shunned, stigmatized, and deemed unsuitable for marriage. This might push them to become martyrs by carrying out suicide bombings. According to *The Economist* (2017), girls who surrender before detonating their explosives risk a lifetime of humiliation because their families and cultures are unable to accept them back.

Suicide bombers that are female are less suspicious and agile, and they can walk about easily (Plaza et al., 2017). For Meservey (2018), Women are usually regarded with less scepticism than men, and the Nigerian cultural norms prohibit a man from approaching a woman in the manner necessary to look for explosives. Women's clothing, which tends to hide their arms, is closely linked to the above. Meservey (2018) cited in Archibong (2020, p. 16), went on to say that "Nigerian women's clothes can also be used to hide an explosive device. Boko Haram has also started experimenting with male suicide bombers impersonating women." Boko Haram's other tactic is to use women and girls as suicide bombers in order to free up male members of the group for war (Archibong, 2020, p. 17). The increase in the use of female suicide bombers may be attributed to a shortage of male fighters.

9. Consequences under Municipal and Universal Laws

Boko Haram's recruiting of women and girls for violent activities is a direct breach both on international and Nigerian laws. The use of women as suicide bombers is a violation of the Geneva Conventions, which state that women must be treated with respect due to their gender (GCI, Art. 12; GCII, Art 12). During times of conflict, any violation of women's rights is a violation of human rights and humanitarian law (Sita, 2008). The UN and international organizations have issued a number of treaties, conferences, resolutions, directives, and recommendations that list women's rights. There are many human rights treaty clauses that deal with the defence of women from all kinds of abuse, including the following:

- The Covenant mandates gender equality in the enjoyment of all of its rights (ICCPR Article 3);
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966);
- The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (Archibong, 2020, p. 17); and
- The 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, which affirms that women and men have equal rights (Art. 3).

And of all the above international instruments Nigeria has ratified them. The conflicting sides have failed to recognize women's rights. As casualties or suspects, they have both been involved in the fighting. Many are forced to marry sect members and treated as sex slaves. This is one of the major reasons why the United States and foreign powers refused to send help to Nigeria in combatting insurgency (Amnesty International, 2018). Apart from the foreign laws mentioned above, which apply in Nigeria, domestic laws forbid these women from committing acts of violence and terrorism. To combat militant attacks, the Nigerian government passed the Anti-Terrorism Act in 2011, which was revised in 2013. In a mass prosecution, each of these women were charged with terrorism (BBC, 2018). Under foreign and National laws, Women's rights are violated by compelled enlistment or conscription as suicide bombers. A number of international conventions prohibit the recruitment of young girls and adolescents as human bombers aimed at protecting children, women rights and health. Children are protected from abuse by the Child Rights Act of 2003, which is a state law (Archibong, 2020). Children have been disproportionately affected by the rebellion. For factors related to the war, the Nigerian military has taken thousands

of children into detention. However, their current situation is unknown. Some are criminals, and others are unmistakably victims (Paguette, 2014). According to reports, the children are being treated in appalling circumstances. Children's interests are being abused by both parties of the war, whether as claimants or offenders. The military's long imprisonment of women and children has resulted in mental instability. The Geneva Agreements and supplementary provisions on how women and children are treated in combat zones must be followed by all parties to the conflict (BBC, 2018). This will enable foreign countries assist Nigeria in fighting terrorism.

10. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study highlighted stigmatization, propaganda and strategic purposes among other reasons Why Nigerian terrorists utilize female suicide bombers in carrying out their attacks. In Nigeria, women have played a central role in insurgencies, mostly as victims and, in rare cases, as perpetrators. Nonetheless, owing to a variety of crippling causes, their participation is usually not voluntary. They have faced a number of life-threatening attacks from Boko Haram supporters, military officials who are allegedly sexually harassing them as a result of their exile, and other people who take advantage of the unpleasant circumstance to cause them undue hardship. The deaths of their sons and husbands, whether as Boko Haram terrorists or as victims of bomb explosions and other atrocities have pushed them deeper into poverty, not to mention the catastrophic damages they face from military personnel, who in the name of combating Boko Haram, abduct and kill innocent civilians. Due to the challenges faced by women and young girls in Nigeria, the study recommends the following:

The government can assist with the reconstruction of areas most impacted by Boko Haram so that affected women can contribute to the lives of residents. Women and other young people should be well educated about the risks of being used to combat the state thereby endangering the properties and lives of innocent persons. To prevent more harassment of women, security forces should be supervised. Abusers should be held accountable for their actions. The government should intervene to rehabilitate those who surrender from Boko Haram or are rescued. They need a shift in mind-set and the desire to communicate to others in a more accepting way.

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