Caught in the Crossfire: Unravelling the complex interplay of exploitation and agency in children associated with Boko Haram

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Abstract

This paper investigates the experiences of children associated with Boko Haram in Northeast Nigeria. The central argument posits that, within highly coercive environments, exploitation and agency are mutually constitutive. While acknowledging the prevalent exploitation of these children, it is crucial to recognise how such exploitation is intimately connected to their agency. As economic, social, and political pressures mount, children may perceive participation in Boko Haram (and self-exploitation) as the only viable means to achieve various goals—from protecting their families and communities to seeking self-significance. Consequently, exploitation—whether orchestrated by group leaders or members—may be consciously embraced by children as a means to create new horizons of possibilities. Simultaneously, by engaging in Boko Haram's activities, children reproduce a system aimed to their own exploitation and vilification. Neglecting the complexities inherent in children's associations with Boko Haram has potential implications for their reintegration and community healing processes.

Keywords: Boko Haram, agency, children, violence, exploitation

Introduction

Boko Haram has increasingly dominated media headlines over the past decade, particularly for its widespread recruitment and exploitation of children through forceful tactics. The group's notorious 2014 abduction of the Chibok girls was a flashpoint moment, eliciting fervent international outrage and cementing its reputation as a 'globally acknowledged terrorist organization'.[1] Estimates suggest that between 2009 and 2016, Boko Haram enlisted approximately 8,000 children in Northeast Nigeria.[2] From 2017 to 2019, the United Nations (UN) confirmed that Boko Haram had recruited and utilised 1,385 children.[3] Nevertheless, the actual figures are likely to be significantly higher given the limitations in available data.

Modern Islamist extremism in Northeast Nigeria traces its roots to the Maitatsine movement of the 1980s, led by Muhammadu Marwa.[4] Its anti-Western ethos inspired Mohammed Yusuf to establish Boko Haram in 2002. After years of escalating clashes with state forces, Yusuf's 2009 arrest and subsequent death in custody marked a turning point.[5] The surviving members retreated, re-emerging under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau to wage an extended campaign against the Nigerian State, using a mix of financial incentives, intimidation, and force for recruitment.[6]

In response to this rising violence, the Nigerian government outlawed Boko Haram as a terrorist organisation in 2013,[7] with the UN following suit a year

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[1]   E Okereke, 'From Obscurity to Global Visibility: Periscoping Abubakar Shekau', *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, vol. 6, issue 10, 2014, pp. 17–22.

[2]   United Nations Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Nigeria* (S/2017/304), 10 April 2017, paras. 29 and 30.

[3]   United Nations Security Council, *Children and Armed Conflict in Nigeria: Report of the Secretary-General* (S/2020/652), 6 July 2020, para. 22.

[4]   W O Iyekekpolo, 'Boko Haram: Understanding the Context', *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 37, issue 12, 2016, pp. 2211–2228, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2016.117 7453; J Tochukwu Omenma, I M Abada and Z Onyinyechi Omenma, 'Boko Haram Insurgency: A Decade of Dynamic Evolution and Struggle for a Caliphate', *Security Journal*, vol. 33, issue 3, 2020, pp. 376–400, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41284-020-00233-7; A Walker, *What Is Boko Haram?*, vol. 17, United States Institute of Peace, Washington, DC, 2012.

[5]   Walker, 2012.

[6]   *Ibid.*

[7]   V Comolli, *Boko Haram: Nigeria's Islamist Insurgency*, Oxford University Press, 2015; A Walker, *'Eat the Heart of the Infidel': The harrowing of Nigeria and the rise of Boko Haram*, Oxford University Press, 2018.

later.[8] In 2015, Shekau aligned the group with the Islamic State, renaming it the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP).[9] However, a leadership dispute in 2016 led to a split, resulting in two factions: ISWAP, led by Abu Musab al-Barnawi, and Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'Awati wal-Jihad (JAS), led by Shekau. A third faction, Bakura, appeared in 2019.[10] Throughout these changes, the extensive recruitment and use of child soldiers by these factions (hereafter referred to as 'Boko Haram') remained a constant.

This paper delves into the harrowing experiences of children entangled with Boko Haram in Northeast Nigeria. In scrutinising this distressing landscape, it underlines a fundamental aspect of their everyday life: exploitation and agency, far from being opposing facets of these children's lives, are instead deeply intertwined in their war-affected reality.[11]

A closer examination reveals the intersecting societal, economic, and political forces that propel these children towards Boko Haram as a viable path for survival and fulfilment of their objectives in a war-torn zone. To many of them, association with Boko Haram and the exploitation it involves appears the sole feasible path towards certain objectives—from family protection to the creation of self-worth. While the choice of this path may seem to imbue them with agency, it also, paradoxically, further entrenches them in a system inherently built for their exploitation.

This paper argues that victimhood and agency are not separate, antithetical states, but rather mutual dimensions that shape both children's experience and the very existence of the group. This insight challenges the overly simplistic binary portrayal of children associated with armed groups as mere victims or perpetrators, calling for a deeper understanding of their complex realities that transcends conventional categorisations. This complex premise calls for an improved conceptual framework capable of transcending rigid classifications.

Following the introduction, this paper moves sequentially through a literature review and development of a conceptual framework, before detailing the research

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8   United Nations, 'Security Council Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee Adds Boko Haram to Its Sanctions List', 22 May 2014, retrieved 15 March 2024, https://press.un.org/en/2014/sc11410.doc.htm.

9   Omenna *et al.*

10   *Ibid.*

11   For a similar analysis on the intricate interplay of exploitation and agency among children in different conflict zones, see M Hurtado, Á Iranzo Dosdad and W Rodríguez, 'Labor Markets in Contexts of War: Recruitment and Trafficking of Child Soldiers in Colombia', *Colombia Internacional*, issue 114, 2023, pp. 65–91, https://doi.org/10.7440/colombiaint114.2023.03.

methodology. It then explores the multifaceted pressures that draw children into Boko Haram and delves into the complexities of their lived experiences within the group, shedding light on the dialectics of exploitation and agency. The final ethnographic section focuses on the obstacles faced during reintegration, highlighting the enduring impact of their experiences with Boko Haram. The conclusion synthesises the findings and implications, reinforcing the central argument and suggesting potential pathways for effective interventions and healing.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Historically, the academic exploration of child soldiering was surprisingly scant, often overshadowed by the work of think tanks and civil society entities.[12] Recently, however, the academic panorama has broadened, enveloping a wide range of disciplines, all of which have contributed to a deeper understanding of children in armed conflict.[13]

Various narratives attempt to unravel why children affiliate with armed groups. A prominent one portrays child soldiers as victims of forced recruitment, especially compared to adults. While this rings true in some cases, contemporary academia is slowly embracing a narrative that acknowledges children's agency.[14] Approaching child recruitment in settings of economic stagnation and high unemployment

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[12]   R Haer, 'Children and Armed Conflict: Looking at the Future and Learning from the Past', *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 40, issue 1, 2019, pp. 74–91, https://doi.org/10.108 0/01436597.2018.1552131.

[13]   V Achvarina and S F Reich, 'No Place to Hide: Refugees, Displaced Persons, and the Recruitment of Child Soldiers', *International Security*, vol. 31, issue 1, 2006, pp. 127–164, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2006.31.1.127; B Beber and C Blattman, 'The Logic of Child Soldiering and Coercion', *International Organization*, vol. 67, issue 1, 2013, pp. 65–104, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818312000409; M A Drumbl, *Reimagining Child Soldiers in International Law and Policy*, Oxford University Press, 2012; S Gates and S Reich, *Child Soldiers in the Age of Fractured States*, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, 2010; A Honwana, *Child Soldiers in Africa*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2011; D M Rosen, *Armies of the Young: Child Soldiers in War and Terrorism*, Rutgers University Press, London, 2005; M G Wessells, *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection*, Harvard University Press, Harvard, 2006.

[14]   J Hart, 'Saving Children: What Role for Anthropology?', *Anthropology Today*, vol. 22, issue 1, 2006, pp. 5–8, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8322.2006.00410.x; N Herrera and D Porch, '"Like Going to a Fiesta"—the Role of Female Fighters in Colombia's FARC–EP', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 19, issue 4, 2008, pp. 609–634, https://doi. org/10.1080/09592310802462547; O Kaplan and E Nussio, 'Explaining Recidivism of Ex-Combatants in Colombia', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 62, issue 1, 2018, pp. 64–93, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002716644326; Wessells.

by considering the local community's perspective, a growing body of empirical literature has shed light on the complex and frequently unexpected ways in which teenagers and young adults are lured into criminal and armed groups, including terrorist organisations.[15] More than just a desperate attempt to escape poverty, hunger, and bleak future prospects,[16] their active participation in these groups reflects a complex interplay of motivations. In particular, recent research has broadened its scope beyond negative emotions like anger, hatred, and revenge, to consider the role of positive sentiments and motivations in the decision to join such groups. This includes the formation of emotional bonds and attachments to the group, the mobilisation around a common cause or ideology, and the fulfilment of fundamental needs, especially among adolescents.[17] Additionally, these groups can offer a sense of belonging and social recognition, strengthening the recruits' identification with their cause.[18] Scholars have also challenged the idea that young people have fewer choices than adults in similar conditions.[19] According to Singer, about two-thirds of child soldiers enlist voluntarily[20]—an assertion backed by empirical surveys in East Asia and Africa.[21]

This paradigm shift has refined our comprehension of how the self-determination of these young individuals can dramatically reshape their reality and identity within the oppressive circumstances and constrained choices they face. Yet,

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[15] S O'Neil and K Van Broeckhoven (eds.), *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict*, United Nations University, New York, 2018; UNODC, *Targeted by Terrorists: Child Recruitment, Exploitation and Reintegration in Indonesia, Iraq and Nigeria*, UNODC, Vienna, 2024.

[16] L Dumas *et al.*, *Wounded Childhood*, ILO/IPEC, Geneva, 2003; F Merz, 'United Nations Development Programme: Journey to Extremism in Africa. New York 2017', *SIRIUS – Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen*, vol. 2, issue 2, 2018, pp. 202–203, https://doi.org/10.1515/sirius-2018-2020. More recent studies, however, have dismissed a strong causal relationship between economic marginalisation and the phenomenon. See, for example, O'Neil and Van Broeckhoven.

[17] M Aubrey *et al.*, *Why Young Syrians Choose to Fight: Vulnerability and Resilience to Recruitment by Violent Extremist Groups in Syria*, International Alert, London, 2016; M J Gilligan, P Khadka, and C Samii, 'Intrinsic Social Incentives in State and Non-State Armed Groups', *American Political Science Review*, 2022, pp. 1–20, https://doi.org/10.1017/S000305542200020X; O'Neil and Van Broeckhoven.

[18] E Berman and D D Laitin, 'Religion, Terrorism and Public Goods: Testing the Club Model', *Journal of Public Economics*, vol. 92, issue 10–11, 2008, pp. 1942–1967, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2008.03.007.

[19] Wessells.

[20] P W Singer, *Children at War*, University of California Press, 2006.

[21] Dumas *et al.*; K Emmons *et al.*, *Adult Wars, Child Soldiers: Voices of Children Involved in Armed Conflict in the East Asia and Pacific Region*, UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, Bangkok, 2002.

contemporary scholarship also advises circumspection when interpreting this as clear-cut 'voluntariness' in child affiliation with armed factions, recommending a more nuanced stance that avoids dichotomising between forced and voluntary recruitment.[22] As the Graça Machel report eloquently put it over 20 years ago, 'while many children are forced to join armed forces or groups, others may present themselves for service. It is misleading, however, to consider this "voluntary." Rather than exercising free choice, these children are responding more often to a variety of pressures—economic, cultural, social, and political.'[23]

Countering the simplistic binary representation of children associated with violent groups as either 'criminal perpetrators' or 'passive victims', recent research endeavours have strived for a more sophisticated appreciation of children's agency. These studies challenge the traditional dichotomic view of voluntariness and coercion, suggesting a more nuanced conceptual framework that views coercion and agency as existing along a continuum.[24] In this continuum, experiences vary dramatically—from one extreme, characterised by abduction, to the other, defined by voluntary association. In between these extremes lie a range of experiences that encompass threats to family leading to enlistment, joining to fulfil basic needs, living under the control of the group, or aligning due to familial ties. Such a continuum-based perspective seeks to illuminate how beyond the stereotypical notions of 'absolute coercion' and 'absolute voluntariness', elements of coercion and voluntary decisions are often intertwined in a complex manner. It underscores how coercion can coexist with, and inevitably shape, children's choices, thus enhancing our understanding of their involvement in such precarious situations.

While conceding that such an analysis provides a healthy corrective to overly simplistic models, I would nevertheless argue that its application to the study of child association with groups operating in a highly violent and militarised context is problematic, as it anchors agency in a liberal understanding of freedom.[25] This understanding posits agency as the capacity of the individual to act unencumbered by the weight of structure, e.g. custom, state, or society. Since children interacting with armed groups in war settings generally live in a condition of extreme dependence, their agency—framed in this theoretical tradition as the residual freedom under structural constraints—would basically be nonexistent. This conclusion, however, would inevitably disregard the empirical

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[22] J C Andvig and S Gates, 'Recruiting Children for Armed Conflict', in J C Andvig and S Gates (eds.), *Child soldiers in the age of fractured states*, vol. 77, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, 2010, p. 92; O'Neil and Van Broeckhoven; UNODC, 2024.

[23] G Machel, *The Impact of War on Children: A Review of Progress Since the 1996 United Nations Report on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*, ERIC, 2001.

[24] O'Neil and Van Broeckhoven.

[25] I Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1969; C Taylor, *What's Wrong with Negative Liberty*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985.

findings of many studies that have shown how children can exert agency—even if it takes place in situations characterised by severe exploitation and a restricted range of options—and, most importantly, establish a problematic hierarchy of victimisation between those who are overtly coerced and those who join because of subtler forms of coercion.

Consider, for a moment, the life circumstances of many adolescents and young people associated with Boko Haram in Northeast Nigeria. Their need to survive, within the context of severe societal and economic pressures, often leaves them with no other choice but to participate in the very organisation that instigates fear and devastation in their communities.[26] These young individuals navigate a paradoxical existence, finding a semblance of control within a context of extreme subjugation. If we view their involvement in Boko Haram's activities primarily as evidence of their lack of agency, we risk oversimplifying the complex dynamics between them and their 'oppressors'. Such a view neglects to consider how the specific conditions of their subordination allow them to alter their life paths and assume active roles within the militant group.[27] Conversely, if we label these adolescents as cunning (criminal) agents who deftly manoeuvre around structural constraints by joining Boko Haram, we overlook how their actions contribute to perpetuating the specific conditions that enable their own exploitation and the horrific abuses that they endure. The lives of these young individuals associated with Boko Haram underscore the intricate interplay between coercion, agency, and exploitation.

In sum, how do we conceive of agency and voluntariness in a context where submission to certain forms of authority and enduring severe forms of exploitation are conditions for prompting meaningful social change?

This question cannot be answered as long as we remain within conventional conceptualisations of agency. My contention here is that considerable theoretical progress can be achieved by reversing conventional standpoints and embedding the idea of voluntariness within more sophisticated theories of agency. The main challenge is to conceptualise how children exert agency and prompt social change under broader structural constraints.

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[26]   Compare with H E Vigh, 'Social Death and Violent Life Chances', in C Christiansen *et al.* (eds.), *Navigating Youth, Generating Adulthood: Social Becoming in an African Context*, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2006.

[27]   L Achilli, '"Protection" on My Own Terms: Human Smuggling and Unaccompanied Syrian Minors', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 49, issue 13, 2023, pp. 3289–3307, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2085083.

A systematic theorisation of children's interactions with armed groups would require an analytical shift away from the liberal concept of individual autonomy. A substantial, sophisticated literature on the agency–structure nexus has been evolving in the social sciences—anthropology,[28] literary theory,[29] feminist studies,[30] and social psychology.[31] Its authors warn against romanticising resistance by misattributing it to forms of agency that cannot be reduced only to conscious or unconscious moments of opposition to domination. Central to this scholarship is Foucault's work on 'subjectification'.[32] Foucault conceived power as a force that permeates life and produces desire, objects, relations, and discourse. In this context, the subject does not precede power but is produced by the very forces that form the condition of its possibility. This is what Judith Butler defines as the paradox of subjectification: the process through which the subject is produced as a self-conscious identity by the same forces that lead to its subordination.[33] Such theory of the subject inevitably also informs a specific understanding of 'agency' as located within structures of power. In other words, when the subject actively fashions itself, it does so through practices that are imposed upon itself by the society and social groups in which it lives. In doing so, this approach does not deny the capacity of the subject to act freely but situates this capacity within historically produced structures of power.

As I transition into the empirical dimension of the paper, this theoretical underpinning guides my analysis. The ensuing section presents my empirical findings, examining how this approach plays outs in children's interactions with Boko Haram. These findings will illuminate the complexities of these interactions, offering a more detailed and nuanced understanding of the subject's agency within highly violent and militarised contexts.

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[28] J Laidlaw, 'Agency and Responsibility: Perhaps You Can Have Too Much of a Good Thing', in M Lambek (ed.), *Ordinary Ethics: Anthropology, Language, and Action*, Fordham University Press, 2010, pp. 143–164; S Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2011; A Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2013.

[29] J Derrida, *Signature Event Context*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1988.

[30] J Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, New York, 1990.

[31] E J Lawler, C Ridgeway and B Markovsky, 'Structural Social Psychology and the Micro-Macro Problem', *Sociological Theory*, vol. 11, issue 3, 1993, pp. 268–290, https://doi.org/10.2307/201971.

[32] M Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, Vintage, 1980.

[33] Butler.

Methodology

The recruitment of subjects for this study was facilitated by gatekeepers, primarily humanitarian workers and individuals I met during prior field research in the region.[34] Leveraging these contacts, I connected with 29 former child members of Boko Haram (15 boys and 14 girls) and 9 adults who had previously been linked with the group, all of whom served in various capacities covering multiple tasks, not confined to a single role. The former child associates were primarily aged 13–17 at the time of their recruitment and drawn into Boko Haram to perform a variety of functions, whether combat, operational, or support roles. Upon completion of each interview, research participants' social networks acted as referral sources for additional participants. This snowball sampling method allowed me to expand my pool of participants and capture a broader range of experiences and narratives.

I adhered to the globally accepted interpretation of 'child' following Article 1 of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC), which encompasses all individuals below the age of eighteen, regardless of their maturity level. However, I was mindful of the often substantial divergences between this international definition of childhood and local or community-based understandings.[35] Thus, during the data collection and analysis phases, I considered these different perspectives, recognising the complexities and ambiguities inherent in these definitions. Among my research participants, these 'children' were markedly different from pre-adolescent children. Unlike their younger counterparts who largely rely on adults, these teenagers were viewed by their communities as capable of making informed, independent decisions, such as getting married, entering the job market, and even joining armed forces.

To track the experiences of these Nigerian minors, I employed a multi-sited research methodology with the help of three research assistants. Data collection was carried out intermittently throughout 2023 with the help of research assistants in several locations, including Nigeria's capital, Abuja, and the States of Borno, Adamawe, and Yobe. This approach was chosen in recognition of the fact that traditional single-site fieldwork often falls short in capturing the multifaceted nature of participants' experiences. Through this method, I could conduct in-depth qualitative research within selected communities in these areas, furthering our understanding of participants' lived experiences.

My interviewees comprised a diverse mix of individuals in terms of age, gender, roles within Boko Haram, and duration of association with the group. This diversity was crucial in enabling me to capture a wide range of experiences and

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[34] UNODC, 2024.

[35] I Hashim and D D Thorsen, *Child Migration in Africa*, Zed Books, London, 2011.

narratives. The majority of the interviewees were accessed in youth facilities and accommodation centres run by non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Each interview spanned between 30 minutes and 2 hours, with the average duration being around an hour, allowing me to gather a wealth of detail in each interaction. To ensure the comfort and safety of the participants, all interviews were conducted in the presence of specialised staff from these organisations.

In addition, I conducted 39 semi-structured interviews, each typically lasting about 50 minutes, with key informants. These informants included law enforcement officials and practitioners from international NGOs, international organisations (IOs, e.g., UN agencies), and civil society organisations. These individuals played an instrumental role in shedding light on the socio-political context and the intricacies of the reintegration process for former child associates of Boko Haram. The information gleaned from these conversations provided invaluable insights and a broader understanding of the issues at hand.

To supplement the data gathered from these interviews and discussions, I also conducted a comprehensive review of relevant literature and policy documents. This review helped to provide additional context for the data analysis process. The combination of diverse perspectives and varied data sources allowed me to explore the complexities of this social phenomenon from multiple angles, fostering a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

Engaging with conflict or violence-affected children as research participants raises serious concerns about the likelihoods of re-traumatising them, increasing their vulnerability vis-à-vis security actors, and exposing them to stigma and discrimination in local communities. To address these issues, during research activities we collected both 'simple data' and 'sensitive data'—the latter being data whose processing could entail greater risk to the research participant, requiring a greater level of protection by researchers. However, as these two categories of data are often blended in the field, we treated all data as if they were sensitive. As such, data collection, storage, and sharing were conducted preserving the anonymity of interviewees and taking various precautions to ensure their safety as well as the safety of the members of the research team.

Procedures were put in place for the immediate referral of any cases requiring urgent attention. When necessary, especially in the case of individuals previously associated with Boko Haram, interviews were conducted with the assistance of relevant IOs and NGOs. To ensure clear communication, interpreters were used during the interviews as needed, allowing for meaningful consultation with research participants who were not fluent in the languages spoken by the interviewers.

Detailed risk assessments were carried out for the selected research sites and secure, confidential locations were identified for conducting interviews. This risk was further mitigated by the inclusion of research assistants who had substantial experience in these research sites. In a few instances, when the security situation deteriorated, web-based interviews were conducted. If at any point there were concerns about safety, confidentiality, potential re-traumatisation, or other ethical safeguards, the interview was cancelled or postponed until those concerns were resolved.

The Pull of Boko Haram: Economic, social, and political pressures

The journeys of children into and out of Boko Haram are multifaceted, varied, and not strictly linear. Nonetheless, considerable evidence points to Boko Haram's reliance on more forceful recruitment methods such as child abduction and physical threats.[36] Children across the country's Northeast have been taken captive through means such as kidnapping, drugging, and threats, reflecting an evolving recruitment strategy that has become increasingly coercive amidst the escalating conflict with the Nigerian government.[37]

Although distinguishing between agency and coercion in children's entry into Boko Haram is challenging, it is critical to understand why some children may see joining the group as a necessary response to pressing needs, even when under extreme pressure. Analysing a child's choice to join Boko Haram requires a comprehensive understanding of the precarious, unstable, and vulnerable conditions wrought by the insurgency in Northeast Nigeria.[38] This unrest not only fosters socio-economic instability but often results in the loss of adult

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[36] H Matfess, G Blair and C Hazlett, 'Beset on All Sides: Children and the Landscape of Conflict in North East Nigeria', in O'Neil and Van Broeckhoven; Z Marks, F Y Ajimi Badu and R Littman, *Understanding Receptivity to Returning Former Boko Haram Associates Through a Gender Lens*, Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) Findings Report 30, United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR), 2023; Merz.

[37] D E Agbiboa, 'Peace at Daggers Drawn? Boko Haram and the State of Emergency in Nigeria', in L Zucca (ed.), *Religious Rights*, Routledge, New York, 2017, pp. 415–441.

[38] O Evans and I Kelikume, 'The Impact of Poverty, Unemployment, Inequality, Corruption and Poor Governance on Niger Delta Militancy, Boko Haram Terrorism and Fulani Herdsmen Attacks in Nigeria', *International Journal of Management, Economics and Social Sciences (IJMESS)*, vol. 8, issue 2, 2019, pp. 58–80, https://doi.org/10.32327/IJMESS/8.2.2019.5.

providers, leaving children as the primary earners for their families.[39] In many instances, the entire family depends on income from child labour due to their parents' incapacitation or death. Association with Boko Haram assures (in the eyes of children) the fulfilment of fundamental necessities such as food, shelter, and protection, addressing children's immediate requirements for survival. This offering of basic needs is especially enticing to children and families impoverished by the region's persistent conflict, who grapple to obtain these essentials.[40]

It is important to clarify, however, that this discourse does not aim to depict Boko Haram as a commendable or even appealing organisation with which to be associated. It has been recorded that the group resorts to deceptive strategies to ensnare and compulsorily conscript children into their ranks.[41] The reality of this is made clear through the accounts of many of my research participants. Consider, for example, the account of a young man from Yobe who joined Boko Haram when he was in his mid-teens in order to fend for his family. His words provide valuable insight into the life of children caught in the conflict:

> *I'm from a small village [in Yobe]. I used to help my father in the fields, go to school sometimes when we could afford it. I was about fourteen when everything changed. We heard the gunfire first, then the screaming. My father told us to hide and then he never came back. It was just me, my mother, my younger brothers, and my little sister. I became the head of the family overnight. No food, no money, no work. The fields were destroyed, our home was half collapsed. We were alone. And every day, I walked to the nearest town, asking for work. But there were too many like me. Too many mouths, not enough food. Then Boko Haram came. They were men with guns, they said they would protect us from the soldiers, from the government. I didn't want to...it wasn't a real choice, you know? I was just a kid. But my mother and my brothers were looking at me. So I joined.*

The pressures driving young people towards Boko Haram are not exclusive to boys. Equally, young girls in the region are grappling with the same stark realities. In many instances, they also find themselves assuming the role of providers for their families, becoming drawn into the group under the same guise of survival and protection. A girl from a village near Maiduguri, Borno State, recalled how joining Boko Haram was the only way to secure basic needs:

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[39]   *Ibid.*

[40]   See also Matfess *et al.*; UNODC, 2024.

[41]   Matfess *et al.*

> *I joined when I was 15 years old [three years ago]. I joined because we did not have anything else. We were starving, barely surviving on scraps, so we joined. Both my parents had been brutally killed, leaving me with my older sister as my only family. The boyfriend of my sister was the one who convinced me to become a part of this group. It was the only way forward.*

Yet, while most research participants recalled near constant hunger and a shortage of basic commodities of any sort, some did report that they still had more food, money, and material goods than before joining the group. Several cases highlight the profound influence of social recognition in children's decision to associate with the group. To illustrate, testimonies from key informants recount narratives of girls wedded to Boko Haram commanders, who were held in high esteem and enjoyed a higher social status compared to the majority in the group. Consider the example of Daniia, who was in her mid-teens when she joined the group. She confirmed that, acting as a role model, she encouraged other younger girls to join the group:

> *Many people helped me when I was in the bush,[42] including my sister-in-law. My husband was an amir [commander], I had servants too. […] Due to my preaching, many [including young girls] joined the group voluntarily.*

Significantly, the sense of security obtained extends beyond physical protection and also delves into the societal realm. An insightful statement from a key informant in a Nigerian research institution articulates this concept clearly:

> *Rewards aren't solely material…. Adventure, camaraderie, and power hold significant sway in these youngsters' decision to associate with Boko Haram. Boko Haram provides these marginalised children a prospect for societal elevation…. These children, often perceived as outcasts, join the ranks of Boko Haram to enhance their social standing.*

Their inclusion in the group serves a dual purpose: it ensures material gain while also elevating their societal status. Moreover, as they struggle to afford marriage and other adulthood initiation rites, these teenagers and young adults are perceived as perpetual children by their contemporaries, with scarce prospects for future advancement.[43] The entry into Boko Haram emerges for some as a beacon of

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[42] In Nigerian slang, the term 'bush' often refers to rural or undeveloped areas. In discussions related to the insurgency in the Northeast and groups like Boko Haram, 'in the bush' generally means areas outside of urban centres that are controlled by or are hideouts for insurgent groups.

[43] See also Matfess *et al.*; N Punton *et al.*, *Child recruitment in the Lake Chad Basin*, MEAC Findings Report 22, UNIDIR, 2022.

hope, offering them an opportunity to exercise agency and gain some control over their fate.

The relationship between exploitation and agency is best exemplified in the context of economic destitution, social marginalisation, and perceived injustices. These challenging circumstances have inadvertently created an environment ripe for exploitation by groups such as Boko Haram. Interestingly, they also provide a source of agency for children, who perceive affiliation with these groups as a means to ascend socially. As a religious leader involved in arranging and executing deradicalisation initiatives and programmes to deter violent extremism in Damaturu said:

> *If you don't know where to go, you joined Boko Haram…. Being an [internally displaced person] is not appealing—many had not been outside of Yobe before [and feared the unknown], so in the choice between [being an] IDP and insurgent, many picked insurgent.*[44]

Inextricably linked, a profound sense of alienation, and at times a desire for retribution against the Nigerian government, has been identified as another critical driver of association. Scholarly discourse is increasingly recognising that recruitment is often rooted in political, societal, and economic grievances.[45] Since the conflict erupted in 2009, state security forces have arrested and detained countless children without charges, pushing the targeted communities towards narratives that delegitimise the government.[46] The case of Abdu, a young man who joined Boko Haram in his late teens, underscores these dynamics. After fleeing Boko Haram's activities in Maiduguri, Abdu and his family settled in a nearby village. Here, he started a small business but soon found Boko Haram's members frequenting his shop. Fearing for his son, Abdu's father moved them again to a nearby village. However, Abdu was captured by the military on suspicion of association with the group. He escaped only to be recaptured, tortured, and imprisoned. When Boko Haram attacked the military barracks where he was detained, Abdu seized the opportunity to escape, choosing to join the group to avoid being imprisoned again:

> *I managed to escape once, but they recaptured and beat me. After only two days back at the barracks, Boko Haram attacked. I escaped during the chaos and joined them, not because I agreed with their cause, but because I was angry at the government. Their unfair treatment and false accusations against me had pushed me towards Boko Haram.*

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[44] Cited in Matfess *et al.*

[45] Matfess *et al.*; UNODC, 2024.

[46] UNODC, 2024.

In this sense, feelings of injustice and revenge are directly associated with prosocial motivations, such as friendship or even love and care.[47] Association is often driven by children's attempt to protect their family members, friends, or society as a whole. Some research participants also referred to their experience in the group as being part of something bigger and to have found value in serving a cause higher than themselves. As one boy from Borno State, who was in his mid-teens when he was recruited by Boko Haram, remarked:

> *I joined the group because I was convinced by a friend. I told him that I wanted to be fighting for a good cause. He then took me to the bush, and I joined Boko Haram.*

Inside the Group: Navigating exploitation and exercising agency

Within Boko Haram, the roles assigned to children vary, with some differentiations along gender lines. Boys are often tasked with instruction, armament assembly, espionage, courier work, porter duties, and combat, and occasionally, they are used as human shields. Some also serve in roles akin to local law enforcement or engage in cattle raiding and food theft for camp provision. Girls are typically assigned domestic tasks, including cooking, water and firewood collection, cleaning, and farming. More extreme instances also involve their exploitation as sex slaves or their use in suicide bombing attacks.

Despite these gendered role delineations, data indicate an overlap in tasks performed by boys and girls within the group. However, irrespective of their assigned roles, children within Boko Haram experience intense trauma. Exposure to high levels of violence and various forms of physical and psychological abuse is commonplace. Insufficient access to basic necessities, such as shelter, food, clean water, and proper sanitation, exacerbates their hardships. Notably, many have witnessed or been involved in violent acts, including the harm or killing of familiar individuals, leading to profound psychological implications.[48]

However, children within Boko Haram are not merely victims of extreme violence; they also participate in its enactment. The execution of violent acts plays a critical role in gaining social status within the group. Consistently, research participants agreed that advancement in the organisation's hierarchy was strongly tied to the

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[47] R Krystalli and P Schulz, 'Taking Love and Care Seriously: An Emergent Research Agenda for Remaking Worlds in the Wake of Violence', *International Studies Review*, vol. 24, issue 1, 2022, pp. 1-25, https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viac003.

[48] Matfess *et al.*

individuals' involvement in violence; a principle succinctly summarised by one respondent as, 'you grow in rank as you do the damage'. Interestingly, some key informants also posit that this system, with its perverse meritocratic tendencies, could act as a draw for socially disadvantaged boys to join Boko Haram. The potential for advancement within the group's hierarchy, irrespective of one's socioeconomic background, might be perceived as a levelling mechanism, presenting an opportunity for social mobility.

The analysis aligns with the testimonies of individuals who were previously involved with Boko Haram. Ibrahim, a young man from the Adamawa State who joined the group when he was still in his mid-teens, provides insight into the organisation's structure and the internal progression of child recruits. The boy recounts how, after an initial period of assimilation, the children are evaluated: those demonstrating aptitude for handling weapons are moulded into fighters, while the remainder undertake miscellaneous duties and errands. Some children manage to ascend the hierarchical ladder, even to the level of 'amir', often by performing drastic actions like killing their own parents. Ibrahim recalls:

> This is the path to becoming an amir. Once you become one, you gain access to things that were beyond your grasp before. My amir, for instance, had wives, cars, money, even houses!

These are important accomplishments, particularly for young boys who typically lack the money and the property even to cover the cost of wedding. Yet, as we have seen, it is not merely these tangible rewards that draw individuals to Boko Haram. Beyond the material, the group satisfies deeper, more intangible prosocial needs. Significantly, its ability to meet both material and social needs does not contradict the central role that violence plays within the group. Research has shown that the perpetration of violence can act as a unifying force, reinforcing community-centred values and internalising certain behaviours.[49] Within the group dynamics, two aspects stand out: social norms and dehumanisation. In such militant groups, violent behaviour becomes normalised and condoned, prompting members—especially children—to perceive it as a standard group behaviour. Yet, despite the glorification of violence in media, historical and psychological studies suggest a natural human aversion to causing harm.[50] Dehumanisation of the 'enemy' allows individuals to overcome this inherent reluctance.[51]

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[49]   M B Brewer, 'The Psychology of Prejudice: Ingroup love and outgroup hate?', *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 55, issue 3, 1999, pp. 429–444, https://doi.org/10.1111/0022-4537.00126; N Ellemers, 'The Group Self', *Science*, vol. 336, issue 6083, 2012, pp. 848–852, https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1220987.

[50]   D Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, Open Road Media, 2014.

[51]   S Malešević, *The Sociology of War and Violence*, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

In Boko Haram, children often rejoice in the injuries inflicted and ridicule victims in a twisted form of jest, making violent acts more palatable. This 'us vs. them' mindset dehumanises the victims, painting them as sub-human 'enemies'. A former child soldier abducted by Boko Haram in his pre-teens shared a chilling account:

> *They kept telling us, again and again, about the wickedness of the government, how it brought suffering to us, the faithful Muslims. We soaked up their words, until our minds were filled with the certainty that the government was the enemy, that it was our holy responsibility to wage jihad. The security forces, the police, they were animals, in our eyes, creatures that needed to be killed. […] The stories we were told, the teachings we absorbed, they helped us push past our fears. So, each time we heard of them causing harm to one of ours, this was the proof that we needed that they were bad. […] We found amusement in the suffering of our enemies. We laughed and cheered at their pain, at their death. In our minds, they weren't just our enemies, they were less than human.*

Through these acts of violence, children are subtly inducted into the group, their shared traumatic experiences forging strong bonds that become difficult to break. Interviews with children reveal this dualistic experience of violence and camaraderie. A young woman, abducted at the age of 14, recalled:

> *The atrocities I was made to commit were so bad, but [within that horror] I found a family. We were all pulled together by circumstance.*

This narrative underscores the paradoxical role of violence within the group, serving as a bonding mechanism despite its repugnance. These shared traumatic experiences deepen bonds of friendship and enhance the sense of belonging, offering an unusual form of social support for these children. Corroborating this, an expert from the Nigerian security forces noted a distinct change in the children's attitude once separated from the group:

> *Children speak also positively about their time, some even in enthusiastic terms. I overheard once one kid boasting about his deeds, showing off in front of other kids. This very kid looked very repentant and submissive when I interrogated him in the centre. Then, a few months after, I see him in his village, drunk, boasting about what he has done and how many people he killed in front of other kids.*

In sum, the atrocities these children experience and inflict lend them a peculiar social status within Boko Haram, contributing to both the acquisition of social status and the sense of community they yearn for.

Breaking Free, Returning Home: The complexities of children's disengagement from Boko Haram

All the above notwithstanding, the allure of Boko Haram was for many children short-lived, especially against the background of the severe hardships and violence endured during association.

It is indeed paramount to acknowledge that social relations in Boko Haram were not always and exclusively cathartic among group members but were often also very hostile and the cause of much suffering and harm. The ambivalent experiences of children associated with Boko Haram underscore their role in reconstructing a social world amid violence and exploitation. Yet, alarmingly, it also propels their own exploitation and vilification. It is a troubling reality that these children, while victims of the group's violence, become active participants in the cycle of abuse. This perpetuation stems not merely from coercive indoctrination or survival needs in a normalised brutal environment, but also, paradoxically, from their own agency. Several women recounted how they were treated as objects to be shared, as their husbands or leaders would make them available for a day to satisfy the sexual desires of other group members, including the young ones. In the raw words of an ex-member, she confessed:

> Sometimes they would pass us around, like a thing, not a person. Even the small ones, the children, they made them do things. It was wrong, all wrong.

This consideration—that within environments marked by extreme coercion, exploitation and agency are intertwined—is vital. While the rampant exploitation of these children is undeniable, it is key to acknowledge how their exploitation is intrinsically tied to the exercise of their own agency. However, the experience and performance of violence not only reinforce the association with the group but also accumulate rapidly, leading to a tipping point that prompts disengagement from the group. Remarkably, even children who entered voluntarily and forged social bonds within Boko Haram might be as determined to disengage as those who were abducted. Umar, for example, left twice—first from JAS, and then from ISWAP:

> I joined Boko Haram with a friend. [Then] we left the group of Shekau [JAS] because of what they were doing [i.e., the atrocities committed]; we then joined ISWAP. But we realised that they were not any different from Boko Haram [JAS]. […] We heard that the government was asking fighters to surrender and that nothing [bad] would happen to them if they did. We seized the opportunity to escape and surrender.

Yet, the decision to disengage from Boko Haram does not always result in an actual exit from the group. In light of the intense violence and adverse conditions

to which children are subjected, it is to be expected that Boko Haram resorts to numerous forceful tactics to deter their departure. These tactics range from threatening the children's families to publicly executing those who attempt to flee.[52]

Most importantly, even successful disengagement and exit do not mark the end of challenges; the subsequent reintegration journey is riddled with obstacles. Many children face hardships stemming from stigma towards ex-combatants or community prejudices. Children who joined the group willingly face particularly severe discrimination, since local communities do not perceive their disengagement as a genuine act of repentance. This was the case for Sarah, who had a distressing reintegration experience:

> *When I got back to my hometown, I faced nothing but alienation. Even my own kin shunned me, holding me responsible for trailing a man into the forest. I felt like an outcast, utterly isolated. I found solace only with my uncle in a neighbouring settlement, who took me in. My mother, too, does not want me back. And the rest of my family, they still can't bring themselves to look my way.*

Gender also influences rehabilitation and reintegration experiences. Male children, often perceived as more active in their decision to join the group, bear the brunt of significant stigma and discrimination from local communities. Conversely, girls and young women may face indirect forms of discrimination related to their reproductive roles, stigmatised as the bearers of a 'terrorist's offspring'. Aisha's account reveals this intricate dynamic:

> *Since I was abducted from my home when I was a child, my parents accepted me back and they were shedding tears of joy to have me back alive. The community also received me without any problem. Yet, my child is sometimes called 'the child of Shekau.'*

What matters in this process of disengagement, however, are not the challenges children face to leave the group, but those they encounter once they have left. Prominent here is the ambivalent interplay of exploitation and agency that children experience while in the group. We should entertain the possibility that positive incentives and prosocial factors play a greater role in preventing a full disengagement, or favouring dynamics of recidivism, than is usually accounted for in the relevant literature.[53]

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[52] UNODC, 2024.

[53] Matfess *et al.*

Besides fulfilling a sense of belonging, Boko Haram offers children and youth the means to amplify their social and material standing. This process strikingly parallels Russian philosopher Bakhtin's concept of carnivals, which he viewed as ephemeral disruptions of social hierarchy and unique avenues for communication, unattainable within traditional societal structures.[54] Just as carnivals enable participants to momentarily rise above their typical social roles, Boko Haram provides children avenues to surmount the inherent social stasis of a patriarchal society. They construct faster routes to customary developmental milestones (such as marriage), or endow them with tokens and symbols of authority (like weapons), akin to the masks and costumes in a carnival that allow for different identities. The words of an officer of the Nigerian intelligence in Maiduguri, Borno, explains well the euphoria children experience in this process by reflecting on his own experience:

> *The time in Boko Haram transforms children. They do not perceive themselves as children, and in fact you can hardly call them children. […] They get changed with ideology, faith, fear, and empowerment. They turn your fear into power. You are given power, you are valued for the number of people you killed. It's as if they are drunk with the power that is given to them. Let me give you an example. I went through a military school. In my class 1, when I was 12, I was given a gun and trained to use weapons, along with other military activities. When I was in class 3, I was 15 years old and I already had a rank. This leadership training was already built. I eventually felt like a general when I was 18: people would stand up or sit down, just by snapping my fingers. This is the type of power I was given, and I enjoyed it. This is the feeling. This is what drives many of them and leads them to do what they are asked to do. They tell them 'kill this khafar [infidel]', they do it without any problem. They tell them this place is bad, that one is good. For them it's enough. They got trained into this way of thinking, they get empowered by this system, and they become different persons.*

Significantly, if the attraction of Boko Haram fades quickly for many children after their recruitment, it is not rare for children to consider re-joining the group, even after successfully leaving it. Just as a carnival's end often leads to a return to the status quo, a similar parallel can be drawn with the struggles children and youth encounter when they leave such groups. The possible loss of their status can dissuade them from leaving or make reintegration into civilian life difficult. Much like the phase after a carnival, children and youth who disengage frequently wrestle with feelings of worthlessness and powerlessness. This is particularly true when their new social and occupational roles among civilians fall short of the prestige—factual or aspired—they could hold within the group.

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54 M M Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1984.

Conclusion

This exploration into the intertwined realities of exploitation and agency in the lives of children associated with Boko Haram illuminates the complexities inherent in such associations. The confluence of economic, social, and political pressures, coupled with the coercive environment, pushes children to embrace exploitation—both in terms of exploiting and being exploited—as a perceived pathway towards attaining various goals. Simultaneously, their engagement in group activities reproduces a system inherently designed for their exploitation and vilification.

Considering these children solely as victims could result in policies that overlook their active participation in violence. Alternatively, perceiving them merely as offenders ignores the societal pressures that may have driven them towards violence. In contexts like Nigeria, some children may view affiliations with groups like Boko Haram as their only survival option or a means to attain material welfare and social status. This perspective can be seen as a coping mechanism or a rite of passage, demonstrating some degree of control over their lives.

The findings of my research point towards a profound and nuanced understanding of children's experiences within armed conflict environments, suggesting that victimhood and agency are not mutually exclusive but are instead mutually constitutive dimensions of children's lives. This perspective challenges the often overly simplistic binary discourse surrounding child soldiers—that of perpetrators or victims—and encourages a more nuanced understanding of their lived realities.

Understanding the intricate interplay between exploitation and individual agency is vital for designing reintegration strategies and community healing processes. Balanced reintegration programmes should, therefore, address both the victimhood and agency aspects, providing healing from children's traumatic past while empowering them towards a more hopeful future. This holistic understanding is crucial for effective reintegration and community reconciliation efforts.

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