



# **“I Will Never Go Back to School”**

**The Impact of Attacks on Education  
for Nigerian Women and Girls**

**SUMMARY**



Global Coalition to **Protect**  
Education from Attack





## Global Coalition to **Protect** **Education from Attack**

This report is published by the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA), which was formed in 2010 by organizations working in the fields of education in emergencies and conflict affected contexts, higher education, protection, and international human rights and humanitarian law that were concerned about ongoing attacks on educational institutions, their students, and staff in countries affected by conflict and insecurity. GCPEA is a coalition that includes United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations. GCPEA is a project of the Tides Center, a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization.

This report is the result of independent research conducted by GCPEA. It is independent of the individual members of the Coalition and does not necessarily reflect the views of the member organizations.

This report was written by Holly Cartner, gender project consultant for GCPEA, and was reviewed and supported by GCPEA staff, including Amy Kapit, Anjali Manivannan, Diya Nijhowne, Gisela Schmidt-Martin and Chris Sfetsios, as well as members of GCPEA's Gender Working Group, including Heather Barr, Amanda Braga, Rebecca Eapen, Nora Fyles, Sana Jelassi, Caroline Keenan, Serge Kouassi Koume, Sigbjorn Ljung, Maleiha Malik, Juliette Myers, Garnett Russell, Margaret Sinclair, Emilie Rees Smith, and Chris Talbot. The report, or segments of it, were also reviewed by Anietie Ewang, Nigeria researcher for Human Rights Watch, and Bede Sheppard, deputy director of Human Rights Watch's Children's Rights Division.

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September, 2018

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Global Coalition to **Protect**  
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Students who were abducted in February 2018 from their school in Dapchi, Nigeria, and spent a month in captivity.

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Hauwa M., a 16-year-old student in 2014 when Boko Haram attacked the Federal Government College in Buni Yadi, reported:

“ [After the attack], I went home. I was too afraid and decided not to go back. I told my parents I would never go back to school. They were also too afraid.... Before [the attack], I was so passionate to study and achieve my dream [of being a lawyer]. But now, this experience completely demoralized me.... I told my father that I will never go back because of Boko Haram threats and what I saw that night. I cannot go back to face the same thing again. ”





# Summary

The Government of Nigeria has been embroiled since 2009 in an armed conflict with the Islamist insurgency group Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'Awati Wal-Jihad, popularly known as Boko Haram. Boko Haram has committed serious acts of violence. It has killed an estimated 20,000 and displaced over 2.2 million in the wider Lake Chad region.<sup>2</sup>

Thousands of girls and young women have been abducted, including from their schools. Boko Haram has also abducted boys and men and forced many to become fighters. Many have never returned from captivity. Those who have returned report suffering abuse. Although the security situation has gradually improved since the peak of the conflict in 2013-15, Boko Haram continues to carry out attacks causing serious loss of life, including increasingly by using child and female suicide bombers. The group reportedly caused 967 fatalities in 2017, a six percent increase over the previous year.<sup>3</sup>

A key component of Boko Haram's ideology is hostility toward secular education, and it has gained notoriety for its repeated attacks on schools and universities, as well as teachers, administrators, and students, wreaking havoc on an already fragile education system. Boko Haram has killed an estimated 2,295 teachers, and over 19,000 teachers have been displaced by the conflict. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimates that more than 1,400 schools have been destroyed, damaged, or looted primarily in the northeast, and more than 600,000 children have lost access to education.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to attacking education generally, Boko Haram has targeted female students. What is more, the impact of attacks on education on women and girls is often different from that on boys and men. For these reasons, this paper is examining the specific impact on females. Boko Haram gained international notoriety in 2014, when it abducted 276 girls from their school in the town of Chibok. Four years later, more than 100 of the "Chibok girls" remain in captivity. Chibok is, unfortunately, only one such case. GCPEA estimates that approximately 600 women and girls have been abducted from their schools. Some of these women and girls reported that Boko Haram had forced them to convert to Islam and subjected them to forced "marriage,"<sup>5</sup> and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Others reported being held in prison-like conditions, where they were repeatedly raped. Some ultimately became pregnant as a result of rape. Some victims, especially those who refused to convert to Islam or "marry" a fighter, also reported being forced to work long hours for the wives and families of insurgents and being threatened and beaten when they were too exhausted to continue. Some girls and women were forced to participate in or aid Boko Haram attacks.



It also appears that Boko Haram has used abducted girls as suicide bombers. The United Nations (UN) reported that during 2017, "115 children – 38 boys and 77 girls – had been used as human bombs. That number was six times higher than in 2016."<sup>6</sup> Although difficult to verify, those knowledgeable about the Boko Haram insurgency and Nigeria's counterterrorism efforts believe that many of its child suicide bombers were abducted.<sup>7</sup>

Although the security situation has improved significantly since the peak of the conflict, and the government has repeatedly claimed that it has defeated Boko Haram, the group continues to carry out attacks, including attacks on schools and abductions. As this report was being drafted, Boko Haram abducted 111 girls from the Government Girls Science and Technical College in Dapchi (Yobe state) on February 19, 2018, an attack reminiscent of the 2014 Chibok abductions. According to eyewitnesses interviewed by GCPEA, five girls were crushed to death during the abduction and transport to Boko Haram's camp and were buried in a shallow grave along the way. Boko Haram returned all but one of the remaining Dapchi girls about a month later, on March 21, 2018, reportedly after negotiations with the Nigerian government. Girls who survived the abduction reported that one girl – Leah Sharibu – was not returned because she had refused to convert to Islam and Boko Haram was targeting non-Muslim girls.

In addition to the abuses committed against female students and teachers as an immediate result of an attack on schools and/or while held in captivity, the suffering and impact does not end once they are rescued or escape. Instead, girls and young women continue to experience a wide range of harmful repercussions long after the immediate attack. Attacks on education create a ripple effect, setting in motion a range of negative impacts such as loss of education, early marriage, early pregnancy, and stigma associated with sexual violence and children born from rape, all of which can dramatically affect female students' futures. These harms often exacerbate and are exacerbated by pre-existing forms of gender discrimination and harmful practices that negatively affect girls and women.

Boko Haram's targeted attacks on schools and the abduction of school girls, has been harmful for female students' access to education. Many of the female students interviewed by GCPEA reported that they had been forced to suspend their education after their school was attacked or permanently dropped out of school because of the attacks. Poverty has been the single greatest obstacle to education in northeastern Nigeria, and parents' ability to pay for school expenses has been further impeded by the conflict. In addition to economic factors, many female students interviewed by GCPEA reported that they and/or their parents had been too afraid for them to return to school. Many schools were also closed for significant periods due to insecurity, or because the school had been destroyed or seriously damaged during the attacks.

At the peak of the conflict, Boko Haram also used schools for various military purposes, including to hold and execute captives, and as barracks for insurgents. This further contributed to parents' and students' fears about the safety of sending their children, and especially their daughters, back to school after the insurgents had departed.



Nigerian government forces and pro-government militia have also used schools for military purposes. As of May 2017, a UN agency reported that Nigerian government forces were using 17 schools for military purposes.<sup>8</sup> While the government stated that the presence of security forces near schools was for the protection of the schools and students, the presence of armed forces in or near a school can make it a target of retaliatory attacks, increasing the risks to children and teachers, as well as the likelihood that education will be disrupted. The presence of such forces also increases the risk of sexual violence against female students and teachers.

While this report documents numerous abuses that female students and teachers have suffered during an attack on their schools and/or as a direct consequence of such an attack, there are also numerous risks for teenage girls who are not in school, including early marriage, early pregnancy, and lost opportunities for personal autonomy, employment, and economic independence. While these risks are not limited to girls who have survived attacks on education, girls who attended school prior to an attack are more vulnerable to such risks than they were before the attack.

Many survivors also report suffering mental and physical health problems because of the abuses they have suffered. Some described continuing to endure bleeding and other serious gynecological problems as a result of rape. Many of the students, as well as some of the teachers, described recurring nightmares, anxiety, being easily frightened, an inability to focus, and other signs commonly associated with trauma. Their traumatic experiences often have an impact on their ability to pursue their education and may also impede their ability to move on with their lives in other important ways.

Already before the conflict began, Nigeria had one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world with an estimated 62 percent of girls in northeastern Nigeria being married before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday and 23.5 percent before their 15<sup>th</sup> birthday.<sup>9</sup> Although there is little concrete data on changes in the prevalence of early marriage due to the conflict, representatives of both national and international NGOs, as well as academics, interviewed by GCPEA believe that there is a clear trend of increased early marriage. As noted above, the tendency to marry girls at an early age is further exacerbated by attacks on schools that may result in parents taking their daughters out of school or girls themselves refusing to continue with their education due to safety concerns. GCPEA's interviews with young women and teachers underscored that being out of school, even for relatively short periods, increases the risk of early marriage for girls. Once married, girls often find it difficult to continue with their education, including due to household responsibilities or opposition from their husbands. Early pregnancy is a further impediment to continuing to attend school, as well as increasing the risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), exposure to HIV, and a host of pregnancy-related complications.

As noted above, while attacks on education and military use of education institutions have had a devastating effect on all students and teachers in northeastern Nigeria, girls and women have often experienced different kinds of abuse, and the abuses committed against them may have different long-term consequences. This case study focuses on abuses most typically committed against female students in the context of attacks on education in Nigeria. This research is part





of a multi-country study on the impact of attacks on education on women and girls<sup>10</sup> The focus is not intended to suggest that girls and women suffer more than boys and men when schools are attacked. This research is intended to contribute to a better understanding of the long-term implications for girls and women and ultimately to inform better strategies for protecting girls and women, preventing abuse, and mitigating harm.

In a context such as Nigeria, in which a significant focus of the conflict is targeted at schools and the formal (government) education system, there is often little difference in Boko Haram's apparent motivation for abducting girls from a school campus and the abduction of school-age girls from their village. Regardless of where the abduction takes place, girls and young women are often asked whether they go to school, are identified or singled out because of their school uniform and/or school age and are lectured on the evils of western education. What is more, the impact on girls and young women of such abductions is often similar, because as one girl stated, "They made it clear to all us girls that we should stay at home and get married or face the wrath of Boko Haram."<sup>11</sup>

This report prioritizes cases of female students who experienced violations in the context of an attack on a school structure, or on the way to or from school. However, some interviews are included with victims of attacks that took place outside the context of a school campus if there appeared to be a link to the victim's status as a student.

The Nigerian government endorsed the Safe School Declaration in May 2015. The Nigerian government with the support of international donors and humanitarian organizations, as well as national and international NGOs, has also developed a number of initiatives and measures to rebuild schools and provide improved security for schools. It is unclear, however, how many schools have benefited from these measures to date. The Dapchi abduction is a grave reminder that girls and women remain vulnerable to attack in Nigerian schools. It also underscores that Nigerian security forces continue to struggle to provide adequate protection for schools in the northeast and to prevent the abduction of female students.

## Legal Obligations

The abuses by Boko Haram documented in this report violate a number of rights enshrined in international law. The rights to life, security of person and bodily integrity, and the prohibition against torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment are guaranteed by numerous international human rights treaties. Sexual violence, which may include rape, sexual slavery, and forced marriage and pregnancy, is recognized as a violation of these fundamental rights.

Nigeria is a state party to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and the two Additional Protocols of 1977, which set out the main obligations of international humanitarian law. International humanitarian law prohibits intentionally attacking or harming civilians or others who are not taking part in hostilities. It applies to non-state armed groups such as Boko Haram, as well as to Nigerian security forces, and is applicable during internal armed conflicts, such as the conflict in northeast Nigeria. Article 3 common to the Geneva Conventions of 1949 requires that all



civilians and persons *hors de combat* be protected from torture and cruel, inhuman, humiliating or degrading treatment. It also specifically requires that all civilians and persons *hors de combat* be protected from rape or other forms of sexual violence.

Pursuant to international humanitarian law, individuals who commit, order or are otherwise implicated in rape and other forms of sexual violence may be responsible for war crimes. Such crimes carried out as part of a widespread or systematic attack against a civilian population are responsible for crimes against humanity. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (the Rome Statute), to which Nigeria is a party, includes rape, sexual slavery, forced pregnancy and other forms of sexual violence within its mandate. War crimes and crimes against humanity can be prosecuted in domestic courts or by the ICC.

Nigeria has ratified the core international human rights treaties that set out relevant standards for the protection of persons on its territory, including specific provisions related to the rights of women and girls. Pursuant to these instruments, the Nigerian government has an obligation to adopt effective measures to prevent, investigate, prosecute, and punish serious human rights abuses. This obligation extends to protecting women and girls from abduction, sexual and gender-based violence, torture and other ill-treatment. The Nigerian government has a duty to investigate and prosecute serious human rights abuses, whether committed by an agent of the state or a non-state armed group, such as Boko Haram.

International law defines a child as anyone under 18 years of age. Early or child marriage violates a number of human rights principles, and numerous international human rights bodies have recommended that states raise the minimum age for marriage to 18 years for both men and women. They have also made clear that child marriage is a form of gender-based violence; because child marriage disproportionately affects girls, it also violates human rights instruments that guarantee non-discrimination. Nigeria's Child Rights Act of 2003 sets the minimum age of marriage at 18 years. However, the law must be adopted by each state's parliament to have legal effect. Currently, the law has not been adopted by any of the three states most affected by the conflict. The Nigerian government launched The National Strategic Plan to End Child Marriage in Nigeria 2016-2021 in November 2016, which seeks to end child marriage in Nigeria by 2030.

The right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health is enshrined in various international treaties. Violence against women, including sexual violence, has been recognized as violating the right to health. Numerous international bodies have noted that early marriage can have serious negative consequences for girls' health, including early and frequent pregnancies, high maternal mortality rates, a heightened risk of sexually transmitted infections, and a higher rate of pregnancy-related complications, including obstetric fistula. The Nigerian government has an obligation to ensure that those who have ongoing health problems because of such violence have access to care and support necessary for them to fully enjoy this right.

Education is a basic right enshrined in numerous international treaties ratified by Nigeria. The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, for example, has called on State Parties to the Charter to take the measures necessary to ensure the achievement of the right to education, including by providing special measures to ensure equal access to education for girls. Attacks on



education, as well as the use of schools for military purposes, can violate the right to an education. The Government of Nigeria has a responsibility to protect schools and ensure that they are safe for students and teachers. It must also take all possible measures to mitigate the harm caused by attacks on schools, including the harm caused by abductions of female students and teachers, forced marriage, rape, and other sexual violence committed by Boko Haram insurgents.

## Priority Recommendations

### To the Nigerian Authorities

The Government of Nigeria has a responsibility to protect schools and ensure that they are safe for students and teachers. The following recommendations draw on GCPEA's previous recommendations regarding the protection of education, while adding recommendations specific to the current context in Nigeria.<sup>12</sup> GCPEA calls on the government of Nigeria and other stakeholders to take the following steps as a matter of urgency:

- **Policy development and dissemination.** GCPEA calls on the government, as well as military and police forces, to develop targeted and sustained measures to prevent abductions and sexual violence against female students and teachers, including by giving a standing order to security forces to respond immediately to calls for help and protection when an attack is imminent or underway at a school;
- **Risk analysis for each school in sensitive areas.** GCPEA calls on the government to conduct a thorough risk analysis for each school that is currently open to students, prioritizing schools located in remote areas with female students. It should develop clear and transparent criteria for determining when schools should be closed due to insecurity and when it is appropriate to reopen. It should consult students, teachers, school administrators, and local communities in the risk assessment as well as in developing protection measures;
- **Minimizing disruption of education.** GCPEA calls on the government to take all appropriate measures to ensure that there is as little disruption as possible to students' education, including by considering whether students can be safely relocated to schools in more secure areas when their schools must be closed due to insecurity and/or by ensuring that they have alternative means of accessing education; and
- **Independent review of security gaps.** GCPEA also calls on the government, with the support of international donors, to review the security gaps that led to past attacks on schools, including by conducting transparent and independent investigations into large-scale abductions such as in Damasak and Dapchi. The government should publicize the findings of these investigations, as well as those of the investigative committee on the 2014 Chibok abductions, and make public the steps it is taking to address any security gaps identified in the investigations and its strategies to improve protection measures and prevent such abductions.





## To Boko Haram

GCPEA also makes recommendations to Boko Haram leaders regarding the gross and serious violations perpetrated by its combatants:

- **Cease attacks.** As a matter of utmost urgency, GCPEA calls on the leadership of Boko Haram to cease all attacks on education, including attacks on schools, students, and teachers;
- **Halt abductions and release those in captivity.** The leadership of Boko Haram should immediately halt the abduction of female students and teachers and release all who are still in captivity;
- **Prevent sexual and gender-based violence.** Boko Haram commanders should take all steps necessary to prevent SGBV by its combatants, including by halting all forced marriages and forced conversions of women and girls, in accordance with international standards; and
- **Comply with international law.** The Boko Haram leadership should take all measures necessary to ensure that its combatants strictly comply with international humanitarian law and the principles of international human rights law.

## To the International Community

The United Nations, the World Bank, the European Union, and a number of governments, as well as numerous international humanitarian actors, are already actively engaged in providing support and programming to respond to many of the issues raised in this report. However, the needs of victims of the conflict in northeastern Nigeria, and especially the multiple needs of women and girl survivors of attacks on education, far exceed current resources. GCPEA therefore calls on the international community to privately and publicly urge the Government of Nigeria and its relevant ministries to adopt the recommendations included in this report and to take the following priority steps:

- **Advocate for comprehensive and sustained measures to protect education from attack.** International actors should intensify advocacy with the Nigerian government to prioritize security of schools, including the urgent assessment of security risks for each school that is currently open to students, prioritizing schools located in remote areas with female students, and other measures recommended in this report;
- **Provide financial support for enhanced protection measures.** International donors should expand funding for enhanced security measures for at-risk schools, including physical barriers, emergency communications systems, systematic early warning systems, the development of comprehensive school-based safety and security plans, and programs to provide security training for educators, among other measures recommended in this report;



- **Advocate for independent investigation of past attacks.** The international community should strongly urge the government to conduct transparent and independent investigations into large-scale abductions such as in Damasak and Dapchi in order to identify security gaps that may have contributed to the attacks, to publicize the findings of these investigations, as well as those of the investigative committee on the 2014 Chibok abductions, and to incorporate lessons learned into future protection measures and strategies to prevent such abductions; and
- **Support efforts to minimize disruption of learning.** International donors should expand their support for efforts to minimize conflict-related disruptions to education by targeting additional funding for the development and provision of alternative means of accessing education, including non-formal and accelerated learning opportunities and alternative delivery of education, in the absence of formal ones, as well as the establishment of more safe spaces for girls that provide such non-formal and accelerated learning. International actors should continue to encourage and support efforts to mainstream students from these non-formal programs into formal schools as soon as possible.



Aerial view of the Government Girls Secondary School Chibok taken on March 5, 2015.

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# Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Grassroots Researchers Association is a Maiduguri-based non-profit organization conducting empirical research and conflict analysis in northeast Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin region.
- <sup>2</sup> UNHCR, Nigeria Emergency, March 31, 2018, <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/nigeria-emergency.html> (accessed April 19, 2018). An estimated 1.7 million are internally displaced in Nigeria.
- <sup>3</sup> Mark Wilson, “Nigeria’s Boko Haram attacks in numbers - as lethal as ever,” January 25, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-42735414> (accessed April 19, 2018).
- <sup>4</sup> UNICEF, “Making Schools Safer and Students more Confident,” September 22, 2017, [https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/media\\_11644.html](https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/media_11644.html) (accessed October 15, 2017).
- <sup>5</sup> When interviewees speak of marriage that was neither consensual nor legal, this report puts the term in quotes to underscore that these are arrangements imposed against their will.
- <sup>6</sup> UNOG, Regular Press Briefing, “Attack against primary school in Nigeria,” December 1, 2017, [https://www.unog.ch/80256EDD006B9C2E/\(httpNewsByYear\\_en\)/F38A0371E488C9F3C12581E9005D3069?OpenDocument](https://www.unog.ch/80256EDD006B9C2E/(httpNewsByYear_en)/F38A0371E488C9F3C12581E9005D3069?OpenDocument) (accessed April 9, 2018).
- <sup>7</sup> See, for example, Jason Warner and Hilary Matfess, “Exploding Stereotypes: The Unexpected Operational and Demographic Characteristics of Boko Haram’s Suicide Bombers,” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, August 2017, p. 34, <https://ctc.usma.edu/report-exploding-stereotypes-the-unexpected-operational-and-demographic-characteristics-of-boko-harams-suicide-bombers/> (accessed November 1, 2017).
- <sup>8</sup> Information provided by a UN respondent via email, May 2017, as cited in Global Coalition for the Protection of Education from Attack, *Education under Attack 2018*, (New York: GCPEA, 2018), p. 181, <http://eua2018.protectingeducation.org/>.
- <sup>9</sup> World Bank Group, “Basic Profile of Child Marriage in Nigeria,” March 2016, p.3, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/24547/BasicprofileoofmarriageoioNigeria.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> (accessed March 9, 2018). See also UNFPA, *Child Marriage*, <https://www.unfpa.org/data/adolescent-youth/NG> (accessed April 2, 2018).
- <sup>10</sup> GCPEA defines attacks on education as any intentional threat or use of force—carried out for political, military, ideological, sectarian, ethnic, religious, or criminal reasons—against students, educators, and education institutions. Attacks on education may be perpetrated by State security forces, including armed forces, law enforcement, paramilitary, and militia forces acting on behalf of the state, as well as by non-state armed groups. Attacks on education include attacks on students of all ages, educators, including school teachers, academics, other education personnel, members of teacher unions, and education aid workers. Attacks on education also include attacks on education institutions: any site used for the purposes of education, including all levels of education and non-formal education facilities, and buildings dedicated to the work of ministries of education and other education administration. For more detail, see Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, <http://www.protectingeducation.org/what-attack-education>.
- <sup>11</sup> GCPEA interview with Zainab H. [not real name], Mubi, October 9, 2017.
- <sup>12</sup> Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, “Technical Guide: What Teachers and School Administrators Can Do to Protection Education from Attack,” April 2017, [http://www.protectingeducation.org/sites/default/files/documents/technical\\_guide\\_2017.pdf](http://www.protectingeducation.org/sites/default/files/documents/technical_guide_2017.pdf). See also “What Schools Can Do to Protect Education from Attack,” January 2016, [http://www.protectingeducation.org/sites/default/files/documents/what\\_schools.pdf](http://www.protectingeducation.org/sites/default/files/documents/what_schools.pdf); and “What Ministries Can Do to Protect Education from Attack,” December 2015, [http://www.protectingeducation.org/sites/default/files/documents/what\\_ministries.pdf](http://www.protectingeducation.org/sites/default/files/documents/what_ministries.pdf).





Front cover: A soldier from the 7th Division of the Nigerian Army stands amidst the ruins of the Government Girls' Secondary School in Chibok, in Borno State, northeastern Nigeria on March 25, 2016.

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