MEAC Findings Report 13

The Relationship Between Victimization and Receptivity to Returning Boko Haram Associates

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MANAGING EXITS
FROM ARMED CONFLICT

CONTENTS

KEY FINDINGS

- Victimization of respondents, their family members, and their communities is widespread in and around Maiduguri. For example, 82 per cent of respondent communities were attacked and 20 per cent of those interviewed were beaten, tortured, or shot.

- While Boko Haram was the primary perpetrator of every type of violence examined in this report, it was not the only one.

- Contrary to expectations, there is generally no significant relationship between community or family victimization and respondents' willingness to accept former Boko Haram associates back into their communities. However, knowing about sexual violence in one's community, having a family member who was abducted, or personally having been beaten, tortured, or shot is related to lower levels of acceptance of former Boko Haram members.

- Victimization is more strongly related to emotions, principally anger and fear towards former Boko Haram associates.

Background

About MEAC

How and why do individuals exit armed groups, and how do they do so sustainably, without falling back into conflict cycles?

These questions are at the core of UNU-CPR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) initiative. MEAC is a multi-year, multi-partner collaboration that aims to develop a unified, rigorous approach to examining how and why individuals exit armed conflict and evaluating the efficacy of interventions meant to support their transition to civilian life. MEAC seeks to inform evidence-based programme design and implementation in real time to improve efficacy. At the strategic level, the cross-programme, cross-agency lessons that will emerge from the growing MEAC evidence base will support more effective conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts. MEAC is supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Switzerland's Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), Irish Aid, and the UN Development Programme (UNDP), and is being run in partnership with the UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO), UNICEF, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the World Bank.

About this Series

The MEAC findings report series seeks to put evidence about conflict transitions and related programming into the hands of policymakers and practitioners in real time. The reports present short overviews of findings (or emerging findings) across a wide range of thematic areas and include analyses on their political or practical implications for the UN and its partners.

About this Report

This report is based on data collected from December 2020 to March 2021, as part of a phone survey with a representative sample of 2,963 community members from key locations in and around the Maiduguri metropolitan area in Borno State, Nigeria. It presents data about individual victimization and exposure to violence, and how this relates to a respondent's willingness to accept former Boko Haram associates who return to their communities. This findings report examines exposure to violence and various degrees of victimization – personal, familial, and community-level. Victimization refers to being subjected to conflict-related harm (physical violence, sexual violence, coercion, threats, and property damage). This data may be useful to UN and NGO partners working in the region to bolster their reintegration programming, as well as efforts to support the communities who receive former Boko Haram associates. These insights are unique as this data is collected in ongoing conflict, while reintegration is actively occurring and communities in and around Maiduguri are receiving those who exit Boko Haram and other armed groups. The report ends with an examination of key policy and programmatic implications of these findings.

The Effects of Conflict Violence

Overview

Between December 2020 and March 2021, UNU-CPR and one of its implementing partners in Nigeria – Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) – conducted a phone survey with 2,963 people representative of the population from Maiduguri Metropolitan Council (MMC), Jere, and Konduga.[1] Respondents were asked a set of questions about their own experiences with the conflict, as well as the experiences of their fellow community and family members. The survey also included a series of questions designed to measure differences in people's willingness to receive different types of former Boko Haram associates into their community and to ascertain whether receptivity is influenced by various programmatic interventions. One set of these questions focused on a generic "man" or "woman" who are coming out of Boko Haram, while other questions provided a more detailed fictional profile of a repentant former affiliate, and varied his/her gender ("Usman" or "Fatima") and age (12- or 28-years old). In the specific scenario, interviewers either provided no additional information, or detailed that he/she had either been cleared by the government after completing a reorientation (reintegration) programme, or that he/she expressed a willingness to publicly apologize and ask the community for forgiveness. This report explores the relationship between an individual's exposure to conflict-related violence and their willingness to accept former Boko Haram associates back into their community, emotional responses to those exiting the group, and punishment preferences for them. The report starts with a section that includes descriptive findings on the exposure of high levels of violence and victimization in the region, and will then analyse how experiences with conflict-related violence relate to emotions such as anger and fear, as well as receptivity to returning former Boko Haram associates.

Findings

From the onset of the insurgency in the North East of Nigeria in 2009, people in Borno State have been exposed to conflict-related violence in various ways. As of 2020, an estimated 35,000 deaths had been directly attributed to the conflict, and another 314,000 was indirectly linked to it.[2] Conflict violence has "led to massive internal displacement", driving more than 1.8 million Nigerians from their homes in Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe.[3] In the North East, conflict dynamics are further fueled by – and, in turn, exacerbate – existing hardships, including poverty, lack of governance institutions and social services, and food insecurity.[4]

This report examines levels of exposure to conflict-related violence and how victimization relates to emotional responses to former Boko Haram associates and receptivity to their return. The report

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[1] This research was conducted in partnership with several researchers, spearheaded by Dr Rebecca Littman, University of Illinois at Chicago, in partnership with Dr Zoe Marks, Harvard Kennedy School, and conducted and facilitated on the ground principally by Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), with support from Mobukar Consultancy. More information on MEAC partners and donors is available on https://cpr.unu.edu/research/projects/meac.html#outline.

[2] Taylor Hanna, David K. Bohl, Mickey Rafa, and Jonathan D. Moyer, *Assessing the Impact of Conflict on Development in North-East Nigeria* (Abuja: UNDP, 2021).

[3] Ibid.

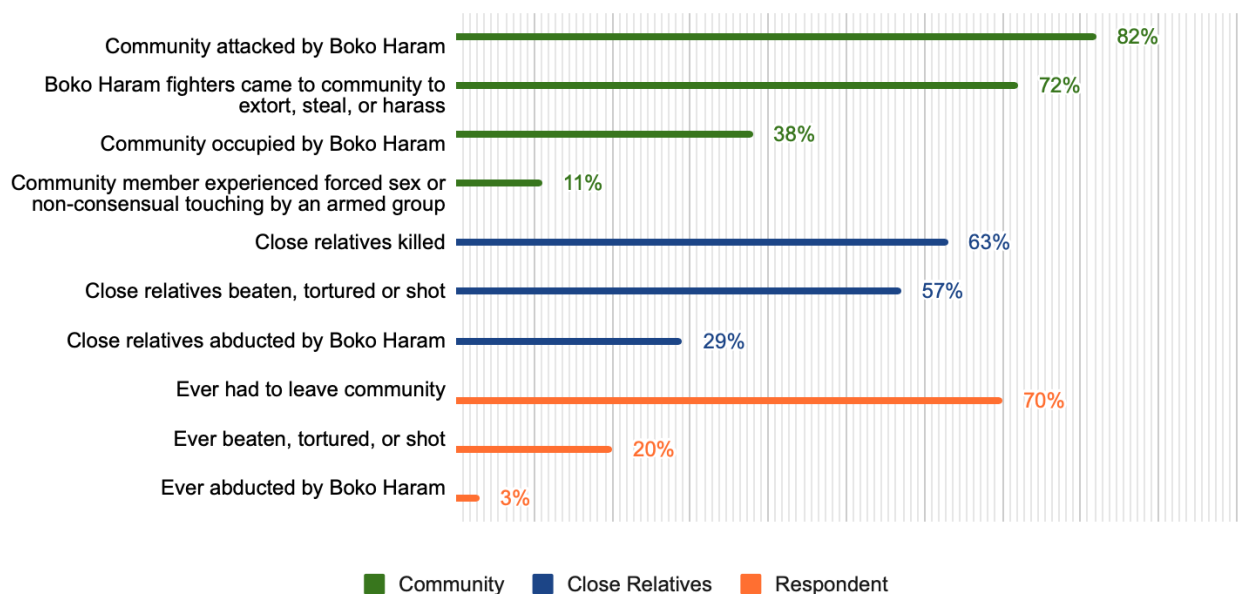[4] UNU-CPR has published several findings reports that examine these linkages, including: Jessica Caus, "Climate-driven Recruitment into Armed Groups in Nigeria," *MEAC Findings Report* 1 (New York: United Nations University, 2021); Kato Van Broeckhoven, Siobhan O'Neil, and Mohammed Bukar, "Social and Economic Life in and around Maiduguri," *MEAC Findings Report* 4 (New York: United Nations University, 2021).

draws on surveys where respondents were asked if they were ever hurt or injured because of the conflict, if they were ever abducted, if they were ever displaced by the conflict, and if they had ever witnessed conflict-related violence such as attacks. In addition, respondents were asked similar questions about their family and communities.

These questions are direct and sensitive. Prior robust survey efforts in the region have used similar questions, but because this survey was conducted by phone, additional measures were taken to mitigate risk and prevent doing harm. The questions were extensively pilot tested to ensure they could be asked safely. For example, sexual violence is an extremely sensitive topic and there were concerns about the impact of asking respondents over the phone about their experience (both for the respondent's wellbeing and for the quality of the data collected). As a result, the MEAC research team decided to pose this particular question indirectly, asking, "Do you personally know anyone in your community who experienced forced sex or non-consensual touching or something similar – by an armed group, like Boko Haram or Yan Gora?" As with all questions, respondents could always refuse to answer the question. The goal was to capture both personal and other known instances of sexual violence in the community without re-traumatizing victims. To achieve these goals, the survey was also designed to measure anxiety levels before and after sensitive questions (there is no increase in anxiety as a result of the survey) and provides referral information for psychological support to all respondents.

Almost everyone in the region has been exposed to conflict-related violence. Most people in and around Maiduguri have been victimized in one way or another during the course of the conflict. In Figure 1, the green bars show community experiences, the orange bars reflect familial experiences, and the blue bars represent personal experiences of respondents. The data show that 82 per cent of respondents said their communities were attacked by Boko Haram. Most respondents (72 per cent) said Boko Haram fighters had come to their community to extort, steal or harass people.

Figure 1 – Victimization and Exposure to Violence

Category	Percentage
Community attacked by Boko Haram	82%
Boko Haram fighters came to community to extort, steal, or harass	72%
Community occupied by Boko Haram	38%
Community member experienced forced sex or non-consensual touching by an armed group	11%
Close relatives killed	63%
Close relatives beaten, tortured or shot	57%
Close relatives abducted by Boko Haram	29%
Ever had to leave community	70%
Ever beaten, tortured, or shot	20%
Ever abducted by Boko Haram	3%

Legend: ■ Community ■ Close Relatives ■ Respondent

More personally, there are strikingly high rates of familial victimization. Over 57 per cent of respondents had close relatives who were beaten, tortured, or shot as a result of the conflict, and 63 per cent had a close relative(s) killed. With regard to personal victimization, almost 70 percent said they had to flee their community at some point as a result of the conflict, and almost half of those respondents indicated that they had not returned to their community. 20 per cent of those interviewed said they themselves had been beaten, tortured, or shot during the conflict. Almost 3 per cent of respondents said they had been abducted by Boko Haram.

Boko Haram appears to be responsible for most – but not all – of the conflict-related violence against the civilian population in and around Maiduguri. In addition to asking whether respondents, and their close relatives, had experienced violence, the survey also asked who the perpetrators were. Recognizing that many respondents have been victimized more than once, respondents could select more than one perpetrator for this question. Of those who said that their close relatives were beaten, tortured, or shot, 88 per cent indicated that this violence was committed by Boko Haram, while 15 per cent said the military was responsible. A small number of respondents said that the police or the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) were responsible (just under 1 per cent each) for physical violence against their close relative(s). Of those respondents who had close relatives who were killed as a result of the conflict, 94 per cent said Boko Haram were responsible, whereas 8 per cent said the military, and less than 1 per cent listed other actors such as the CJTF or the police.

Interestingly, when asked about whether they were personally victimized as a result of the conflict, a larger percentage of respondents appeared to have been victimized by the military. While most violence was attributed to Boko Haram (71 per cent), 32 per cent of those who said they were beaten, tortured, or shot said the military perpetrated these violent acts. This may be explained by the fact that the respondents are all located in and around Maiduguri, whereas their close relatives may be located in other areas with less of a military presence. With the concentration of Nigerian military personnel in Maiduguri (and other cities and large towns, particularly after the launch of the "super camp" strategy),[5] the population there may be in more regular contact and in closer proximity to the military than their relatives who may live outside the area. Again, only a small number of respondents blamed the attacks against them on the CJTF, Yan Gora, and/or the police.

Sexual violence is harder to measure in survey work in the North East because of the sensitivity of the subject and the over the phone format. 11 per cent of respondents said they knew someone in their community who had experienced forced sex or non-consensual touching or something similar by an armed group. Most respondents (63 per cent) said that Boko Haram was the perpetrator, while 18 per cent said that the military was responsible. A lower percentage identified the CJTF (6 per cent), Yan Gora (4 per cent), and the police (4 per cent) as being responsible. Even though the question asked about sexual violence by armed groups, some respondents identified youth in the community (13 per cent), other community members (8 per cent), and/or people from other communities (7 per cent) as the perpetrators of sexual violence.

These numbers likely represent a significant underreporting of conflict-related sexual violence. There are indications the rates are much higher. For example, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) found that in 1999 alone, there were 1,666 reported incidents of Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) in Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe States.[6] While wider in its geographic scope than the MEAC survey, the MEAC survey is not necessarily timebound (although it does reference armed

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[5] Jacob Zenn, "The Humanitarian Dilemma Around the Military's "Super Camp" Strategy in Nigeria," *Council of Foreign Relations*, 5 September 2019.
[6] UNHCR, UNHCR 2019 Annual Report: Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, North-East Nigeria (Maiduguri: UNHCR, 2020).

groups, which suggest the last ten years). Given the stigma related to reporting such incidents, it is likely that UNHCR's data does not fully measure the scale of SGBV in the region.

The data from the MEAC survey suggest that violence related to the insurgency is widely and deeply felt by the population in and around Maiduguri. Research from other settings has shown that criminal victimization can lead to increased support for "iron-fist or strong-arm measures to reduce crime, such as allowing State repression."[7] Applied to the insurgency in the North East of Nigeria, it might be assumed that those who are victimized are more likely to oppose the reintegration of former Boko Haram associates. The next section of the report explores how different types of victimization – to community, relatives, or oneself – are related to emotional responses to former Boko Haram associates and receptivity to their return to the community.

Impact of Victimization on Acceptance

As explored in previous findings reports, levels of acceptance of former Boko Haram associates were generally high in and around Maiduguri when the survey was conducted. Indeed, when presented with various vague hypothetical and more detailed scenarios of former Boko Haram associates who wanted to return to the community – receptivity to their return ranged from 69 to 86 per cent.[8] While support is relatively high, it varies, at times, depending on the former affiliate in question, and the respondent's own personal experience and characteristics. With regard to the latter, how does community, familial, and personal victimization relate to an individual's willingness to accept back former Boko Haram associates?

Contrary to expectations, the data show that there is generally no significant relationship between community or family victimization and respondents' willingness to accept former Boko Haram associates back into their communities. These trends held across responses to different profiles: the generic woman who had been with Boko Haram, the generic man who had been with the group, and the combined, more specific profiles of Usman and Fatima.

The exception to this general trend is knowing someone in the community who was sexually victimized by an armed group, which is associated with lower levels of acceptance. Additionally, personal experiences with victimization are negatively associated with willingness to accept. Those who have personally been beaten, tortured, or shot as a result of the conflict are less willing to accept former Boko Haram members into their communities, as are those who were abducted into Boko Haram.

Interestingly, respondents who indicated that they knew someone from their community who had joined Boko Haram and returned (24 per cent) were slightly less likely to say that they would accept former associates back. Similarly, those who had heard of former associates who had returned and had been a problem in the community were less likely to be accepting (15 percentage point difference). Conversely, there were some indications that those who had heard positive stories about former associates who were good community members (38 per cent) were more willing to accept some former associates back (10 percentage point difference).[9]

[7] Giancarlo Visconti, "Policy Preferences after Crime Victimization: Panel and Survey Evidence from Latin America," *British Journal of Political Science* 50, 4 (2019).

[8] Rebecca Littman, Siobhan O'Neil, Kato Van Broeckhoven, Mohammed Bukar, and Zoe Marks, "Community Acceptance of Former Boko Haram Affiliates," *MEAC Findings Report* 7 (New York: United Nations University, 2021).

[9] The results related to anger and fear were only statistically significant for half the profiles (man, woman, Usman/Fatima).

Impact of Victimization on Emotions

Even though victimization did not seem to have a big impact on respondents' willingness to tolerate people who leave Boko Haram moving back into their communities (with some specific exceptions), it does seem to have a more significant impact on their emotions, principally anger and fear. The survey asked respondents whether they felt angry towards former Boko Haram associates and whether they felt afraid of them.

Generally, respondents who experienced family, community, and personal violence were angrier at and more afraid of former Boko Haram associates. Those who had close relatives who were abducted, and those who were abducted themselves, were also more angry and more afraid, as were those who personally knew someone in their community who experienced sexual violence at the hands of armed groups. These trends generally hold when respondents are asked about a generic profile versus a specific one (Usman/Fatima), or when they are asked about a former female or male affiliate.

Having experience with or hearing about people who have returned from Boko Haram is also associated with greater anger towards and fear of former affiliates. People who know either a relative or community member who has returned from Boko Haram report higher levels of both emotions, as do people who have heard of a former affiliate who has returned and been a problem in the community.

Impact of Victimization on Forgiveness

Like with willingness to accept former Boko Haram affiliates, a similar relationship seems to exist between victimization and a respondent's willingness to forgive former affiliates. Levels of community and family victimization are not significantly associated with willingness to forgive, although those whose communities were occupied by Boko Haram are less willing to forgive former associates. Being personally victimized or abducted during the conflict, however, is associated with less willingness to forgive former associates, as is knowing someone in the community who was sexually victimized by an armed group.

Additionally, those who had a relative abducted are less willing to forgive, as are those who personally know someone who has returned from Boko Haram (either a family member or a community member). Hearing of someone who has returned and been a problem in the community is associated with less willingness to forgive, whereas hearing of someone who has returned and been a good community member is associated with a greater willingness to forgive.

Impact of Victimization on Desire for Punishment

Overall victimization is not generally related to a desire for punishment. Neither community, familial, nor personal victimization during the conflict are associated with a higher desire to punish Usman or Fatima. There were three exceptions. Those who were personally abducted were more likely to want punishment for former Boko Haram associates. Likewise, respondents who know about a community member who has returned from Boko Haram, and those who heard about a former associate who has returned and been a problem in the community, were more likely to want punishment.

Policy and Programmatic Implications

The data analysis provided in this report highlights three policy and programmatic implications. First, this report highlights how certain types of victimization – particularly abduction and sexual violence – may make reintegration of former Boko Haram associates more difficult and will need to be addressed by practitioners preparing communities to receive those exiting the group. Second, while Boko Haram was the primary perpetrator of every type of violence examined in this report, it was not the only one. To effectively address the legacies of conflict violence, policymakers and practitioners should ensure they do not focus only on Boko Haram violence and fail to address the widespread violence perpetrated by other conflict actors. Third, this report – like several that preceded it – highlights the importance of a thoughtful communications campaign to mitigate community fears and frustrations and encourage receptivity to reintegration.

It is positive for peacebuilding efforts in Nigeria that community and familial victimization is not generally driving lower acceptance rates for former Boko Haram associates. Conflict victimization of communities and families is so widespread in the North East of the country that, if it was associated with lower levels of receptivity to accept former Boko Haram members back, there might be an even greater challenge to reintegration in the region. That said, there are some specific types of violence that are indeed associated with less willingness to accept former group associates back into the community. Knowing about sexual violence that was perpetrated, personally being victimized, and having been abducted make people less likely to accept former Boko Haram affiliates back into their community. For practitioners working with communities – and specific populations – in the North East of Nigeria that have been impacted by sexual violence and abduction, it is useful to anticipate and address the enhanced fear, anger, and reticence to reintegration that may accompany such victimization experiences.

The data on personal victimization and sexual violence is a reminder that conflict violence is not perpetrated solely by Boko Haram. Nearly a third of all those who were themselves beaten, shot, or tortured during the conflict said it was at the hands of the military. Of all the types of violence, the CJTF is implicated more often in instances of sexual violence than in other types of violence. While this brief is focused on the relationship between conflict violence largely at the hands of Boko Haram and the public's receptivity and emotional response to former Boko Haram associates, it is important not to lose sight of how victimization by other parties to the conflict could impact reconciliation prospects.

The analysis detailed herein again highlights the importance of communications in reintegration. The data show that knowing about former associates who had returned to the community and been a problem was associated with less willingness to accept those exiting Boko Haram. But encouragingly, exposure to positive reintegration stories is associated with more willingness to forgive and accept former affiliates, and sometimes also to lower levels of anger and fear. This finding reinforces the importance of communicating stories about positive reintegration experiences. Such a campaign could help prevent possible reprisals against former associates.