## The New Face of Boko Haram’s Terror: Teen Girls

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Nigeria is facing a rise in female teenage suicide bombers at the service of terror group Boko Haram.

Residents of northern Nigeria are more on edge than ever. On top of a year of unprecedented terror at the hands of Boko Haram, an increasing number of young girls are donning explosive devices and blowing themselves up in public places—all in the name of the terror group, known for its egregious crimes against Nigeria’s women.

On Wednesday, two young female suicide bombers detonated in a crowded market in Kano State. The police commissioner told a local [news site](http://abusidiqu.com/two-female-bombers-killed-4-traders-kano-market/?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter" \t "_blank) that the terrorists donned hijabs and attempted to go into a bank, but were stopped. They then entered a busy textile market, and went into the public bathrooms, after which two blasts shook the area, injuring seven and killing six, including the bombers. Witnesses [said](http://news.yahoo.com/blast-busy-textile-market-nigerias-kano-city-traders-150039524.html" \t "_blank) the girls were in their late teens and had been accompanied by a man who left soon after the blast. That same day a 13-year-old girl was arrested with explosives hidden under her hijab after walking into a medical clinic.

Over the past eight months, there has been a disturbing spike in female suicide bombers and a rising body count to match. More than a dozen attacks have been carried out by women—with some attacks claiming up to [78 victims](http://www.cnn.com/2014/11/27/world/africa/nigeria-female-suicide-bombers/" \t "_blank). This is a relatively new development: Boko Haram’s [first female suicide bomber](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-28657085" \t "_blank) was a middle-aged woman who rode a motorcycle into military barracks and blew herself up at a checkpoint this June.

Since rising to power over the past five years, Boko Haram has killed [more than](http://www.connectsaisafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Social_Violence_Summary_Web3.pdf" \t "_blank)6,000 Nigerians. But now, the group has grown bolder and bloodier. The body count has doubled in the past two years thanks to brutal abductions, bombings, and militant raids on schools and law enforcement posts. Along with this violent growth, Boko Haram has increasingly targeted women. Now, there’s a twist: Females are being put into the action as perpetrators. Could these young women wrapped in explosives be some of the 300 schoolgirls kidnapped by the group last April?

June saw four female bomber attacks. The next month, three women thought to be “female recruiters” were taken into custody. According to a military spokesperson, Boko Haram had [built](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-28657085" \t "_blank) a “female wing” in its command structure. Not long after, a [10-year-old girl](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/nigerian-forces-find-girl-wearing-bomb-after-stopping-two-suspected-boko-haram-members-9639277.html" \t "_blank) wearing a suicide belt was arrested. And during a one-week period the next month four different female suicide bombings shook various regions of Nigeria.

Law enforcement cracked down, and after 16 women were arrested at a terrorist training camp in August there was a lapse in violence. But it sparked back up again throughout November and December.

Last week, when police detained a woman attempting to attack the University of Maiduguri, in the Boko Haram stronghold, they say she gave harrowing testimony: Boko Haram had deployed more than 50 women throughout the city with [the goal](https://news.vice.com/article/boko-haram-plans-to-massacre-100000-nigerians-with-female-suicide-bombers" \t "_blank) of killing 100,000 people by the year’s end. While this number is completely unfeasible, female terrorists have an upper hand of being unsuspecting and largely unquestioned: a long hijab can conceal explosives and strict standards of morality make it difficult for law enforcement officers to search female suspects.

The use of these women and girls—most believed to be between 15 and 18—began not long after 300 girls were kidnapped from the Chibok school. The corresponding time frame and the age has prompted widespread theories that Boko Haram enlisted the kidnapped girls, many of whom were Christian, in its jihad. To fuel this speculation, the alleged bomber in a July attack at a university in Kano bore a [surprising resemblance](http://abusidiqu.com/photo-analysis-reveals-kano-female-suicide-bomber-may-one-abducted-chibok-girls/" \t "_blank) to one of the missing schoolgirls (it [doesn’t appear](http://blogs.cfr.org/campbell/2014/08/06/nigerias-chibok-school-girls-as-suicide-bombers/" \t "_blank) that DNA testing has been done on the bomber).

It’s not impossible that after more than 240 days in captivity some of the Chibok girls could be indoctrinated by their kidnappers enough to carry out such attacks, but there’s no physical evidence to tie the two together. Boko Haram is also comprised of wives, sisters and daughters of the fighters, along with other kidnapped girls taken from schools before and after the #TakeBackOurGirls campaign took the world by storm.

In November, elusive Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau released [a video](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/nigeria/11203099/The-Chibok-girls-are-never-being-freed-says-Boko-Haram-leader.html" \t "_blank) gloating that he’d married off the Chibok schoolgirls to fighters. According to Elizabeth Pearson, a member of the Nigerian Security Network and a Kings College doctoral student in gender and radicalization, if the students were the suicide bombers in question, that connection would have been highlighted in the video. The bombings were also widely spread across the country, including in the relatively peaceful southern city of Lagos, so the logistics of moving girls widely would have been difficult to get away with. Instead, and perhaps more disturbingly, Pearson suspects Boko Haram—which has so far been active mostly in the north—has successfully set up terror cells across the country and is now distracting government military attention from the northern campaign.

So, if not the Chibok girls, who are the women Boko Haram has started using? Female members have been involved in the carnage for the past two years, but never in such an active role. In 2013, a few were [found](http://warontherocks.com/2014/03/boko-haram-and-the-kidnapping-of-women/" \t "_blank) smuggling weapons to the group. Since then various reports have trickled out about women in the notoriously sealed group. One young girl who escaped abducted described a senior member’s wife slitting someone’s throat.

But in general, Boko Haram’s women are thought to have occupied a more traditional space —as a support system for their husbands and families. In terror groups, women can play vital roles. Mothers serve as indoctrinators of extremist dogma, and wives are leaned upon heavily to support their jihadi husbands.

“If you believe in what they stand for, it’s equally possible for women to be involved in Boko Haram—but to be involved in fighting? It’s less possible because of the gender ideology of Boko Haram where the men are fighters,” says Pearson.

Across the globe over the past few decades, women proven themselves as effective martyrs for a cause. From Afghanistan to Russia to Sudan, thousands have been killed by female suicide bombers. Some of them are widows seeking to continue their husbands’ missions or avenge their deaths, some are independent believers, and others are coerced into action.

“There’s a perception that women are weaker, women are the gentler sex, even though we’ve seen time and time again women at the frontline of activities,” Mia Bloom, a security studies professor at the University of Massachusetts in Lowell, told Vice about the fairer sex’s [increased involvement](https://news.vice.com/article/international-arrests-show-women-are-playing-an-active-role-in-al-shabaab" \t "_blank) in active fighting. “A lot of these terror groups are using this stereotype to their advantage. The women are an ideal kind of stealth weapon.”

The rise of Boko Haram’s jihadi women have shades of the notorious Chechen “Black Widows,” who reportedly made up a third of the republic’s suicide bombers, and the women of al-Shabaab who have [killed scores of people](http://sabahionline.com/en_GB/articles/hoa/articles/features/2012/04/06/feature-01" \t "_blank). A female suicide bomber with Sri Lanka’s Tamil Tigers managed to [kill](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/may/21/newsid_2504000/2504739.stm" \t "_blank) India’s former prime minister in 1991.

“Since 1985, terrorism's so-called invisible women have accounted for a quarter of fatal attacks in Iraq, Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, Chechnya, Sri Lanka, Morocco and Palestine,” a Los Angeles Times [article](http://articles.latimes.com/2012/apr/04/opinion/la-oe-cunningham-women-jihadists-20120404" \t "_blank) asserted in 2012.

Three years ago, al Qaeda made its goal of recruiting women very clear: it[launched](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/alqaida-glossy-advises-women-to-cover-up-and-marry-a-martyr-2240992.html" \t "_blank) *Al Shamikha*, or “Majestic Woman,” a glossy ladies’ lifestyle magazine.

“Because women constitute half of the population—and one might even say that they are the population since they give birth to the next generation—the enemies of Islam are bent on preventing the Muslim woman from knowing the truth about her religion and her role, since they know all too well what would happen if women entered the field of jihad,” the magazine wrote.

Boko Haram and other terror groups track each other’s tactics closely and Boko Haram is known to have [ties](http://www.cfr.org/nigeria/boko-haram/p25739" \t "_blank) to al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda sects in the Maghreb and Arabian Peninsula, all of which are thought to be providing them with material support.

But it’s unclear what prompted this recent change in how Boko Haram utilizes its women and how it reflects on the militia. Some analysts believe it’s simply cashing in on the women-as-bombers strategy, but others say it’s a sign of desperation and that perhaps the group is running low on young male fighters—terror groups begin using female insurgents 13.5 years into a campaign, [on average](http://warontherocks.com/2014/10/nigerias-female-suicide-bombers-a-show-of-strength/" \t "_blank). Others note that the first female attack came around the same time that the government refused to negotiate a hostage swap with the terrorist organization, so this new reign of violence may be reprisal.

Pearson says she doesn't believe the use of suicide bombers is a last resort in Boko Haram’s case, but she does think the group is struggling with recruitment. Unfortunately, that hasn’t slowed it down and Pearson thinks Boko Haram is flexing its muscles and seeking media attention. “I think it’s a sign of just how ambitious they’ve become,” she says. “This has been a good year for them.”

Pearson believes the arsenal of women willing to strap on explosives is likely a mix of volunteers and those coerced to partake. They may be brainwashed, threatened, or even lured by monetary gain—Boko Haram’s first suicide bomber in 2011[apparently](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-28657085" \t "_blank) made $24,870 in the operation, which he bequeathed to his four children. There have been reports in the Middle East of militants raping women, convincing them they have nothing left to live for, and then setting them up as be terrorists. In a distorted system of honor, women—and men—who are assaulted are told the only way to restore their honor is by embarking on jihad.

According to Naureen Chowdhury Fink, head of research and analysis at the Global Center on Cooperative Security, there has been a promising increase in would-be suicide bombers’ arrests recently, but without more female law enforcement agents, the gender divide works in favor of female terrorists. Fink stresses the need for Nigeria to train and deploy women into more prominent law enforcement roles.

She also believes preventive measures for counterterrorism should be implemented with gender in mind, and religious leaders and female advocates should be deployed in educational programs. “Women are not only peacemakers,” Fink says. “Women do volunteer and women are victims—you have to think in nuanced kind of way.”

Other countries have implemented de-radicalization [programs](http://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/NCF_RB_LS_policybrief_1320.pdf" \t "_blank) geared toward Muslim women and encouraging moderation: in Singapore, *ustazas* are women’s religious scholars, and in Indonesia, *pesantren*, are Islamic boarding schools for women and Muslim girls.

Similar efforts are taking hold in Nigeria. Though women have struggled with representation in the political sphere, the country’s women’s ministry is working on programs that promote education and peace as an alternative to terrorism.

“A lot of women aren’t even literate in their own religion. Someone comes to you and says, ‘Your religion needs you to do this’—it’s pretty authoritative,” Fink says. “You’re already a second-class citizen, you’re already restrained by cultural norms whether you’re in Afghanistan or northern Nigeria. In some ways, joining these groups in jihad may seem like a liberating experience.”

Interestingly, in a region where Boko Haram has already declared a caliphate, this uptick in bombings has impacted an adherence to strict Sharia law. According to local news [reports](http://abusidiqu.com/boko-haram-got-teenage-girls-suicide-missions-motivation-bombers/" \t "_blank), Muslim clerics are concerned to find that women who used to wear full hijabs are preferring a lighter covering so as not to be mistaken for a bomber.

Political tensions are underlying every move in Nigeria, where, in February, the next presidential candidates will be nominated. Current leader Goodluck Jonathan has been widely panned for his inability to control Boko Haram’s violence, and though he has a confident hold on power, there are threats to his future role.

This distrust in the government can ultimately strengthen Boko Haram. “We [in the West] see a distinction between the government and a terror group, but a lot of people living in places where state is predatory or corrupt, they may not see much of a difference,” Fink says.

And eight months on, anger lingers over the ineffective attempts to rescue the missing schoolgirls. Prominent activist Obiageli Ezekwesili [complained](http://youtu.be/0uSqpINbvqc" \t "_blank) on TV earlier this week that the forgotten young women are enjoying renewed attention only because of this recent wave of violence.

“Some of the people who link the Chibok girls abduction to the growing number of female suicide bombers are not speaking [out] now on the basis of vulnerable girls—it’s ‘Oh, they actually might be a source of danger to us,’” she said.