

**Deradicalization and Social Integration of Defected Boko Haram Militants In Nigeria:  
A Review of The Yellow Ribbon Initiative**

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**Abstract**

*In a bid to curb the activities of the Boko Haram insurgents in Nigeria, the government, in 2015, set up amnesty programs for low-risk Boko Haram defectors. Since then, thousands of Boko Haram members have defected. However, effective social integration of these defected members remains a challenge in the North-East region of Nigeria. The deradicalization and social integration program is in three main program streams – the prison program; the Operation Safe Corridor (OSC) and the Yellow Ribbon Initiative (YRI). The prison program is targeted at convicted Boko Haram members, while the OSC is targeted at low-risk Boko Haram members. The YRI, which is the focus of this presentation, is targeted at women and children associated with Boko Haram. It has been asserted that the YRI has reintegrated thousands of women and children, but the veracity of this claim remains a challenge due to the lack of transparency and accountability of the program. This presentation investigates the level of involvement of the children claimed to have been reintegrated into the society under the YRI. The presentation further investigates the reception of these children into the society, as well as the extent to which their rights are protected. Using a socio-legal method, the legal and institutional frameworks of the YRI were examined. The effectiveness of the YRI was measured by interviewing relevant government, NGOs, INGOs and other stakeholders involved in the YRI program. The presentation will make recommendations based on the findings of this research.*

**Keywords: Boko Haram, Nigeria, Deradicalization, Yellow Ribbon Initiative, Social Integration.**

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## **I. Introduction**

The Hausa word ‘Boko Haram’ translates to ‘western education is forbidden’ and this is the term used by a militant Islamist movement which emerged from the northeast Nigeria around 2002.<sup>1</sup> The movement condemned the system of governance in Nigeria and calls for the application of Sharia and aims at imposing religious ideology on Nigeria. Techniques adopted by the group include violent attacks, leading to mass displacement and destruction of properties, abduction, and human shield, amongst others. The activities of the movement extended beyond the shores of Nigeria in 2012, when the insurgents carried out attacks in Cameroon and Chad and by 2014, the insurgents have established presence in Niger with continuous violent attacks across the Lake Chad region.<sup>2</sup> This was possible with the specialization of the members of the groups to travel wide on a daily basis through road corridors, undetected.<sup>3</sup>

The activities of the Boko Haram group attracted the attention and condemnation of the international community in 2014, when the group broke into a secondary school with boarding facilities and abducted over 200 schoolgirls.<sup>4</sup> It however, appeared that the attention drawn by the abducted schoolgirls and the support thereof, awakened the group on the strength of children and importance of education across the globe. The following years therefore witnessed incessant abduction of more school children, killing of thousands of teachers and destruction of thousands of schools across the northern regions of Nigeria, especially in the northeast which is the hub of the insurgents.<sup>5</sup> While there has been attention on the series of abduction and kidnapping by the group involving girls, little attention has been drawn to the abduction of thousands of boys ranging from 5-15 years old who are forced to carry arms and engage in violent attacks.<sup>6</sup> Thus, while the international community, philanthropist and several stakeholders rose to intervene in supporting the Nigerian government in securing the release of the first set of abducted girls and subsequent similar abductions, interventions for the boys that have been forced to carry arms and engage in series of activities for the group against their wishes did not receive as much attention, thereby creating a gendered approach to protecting children against the ills of the group.

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<sup>1</sup> S Weeraratne, ‘Theorizing the Expansion of the Boko Haram Insurgency in Nigeria’ (2017) 29 *Terrorism and Political Violence* 610.

<sup>2</sup> DB Skillicorn, *et al*, ‘The Diffusion and Permeability of Political Violence in North and West Africa’ (2021) 33 *Terrorism and Political Violence* 1032; Hilary Matfess, ‘Matfess, H. "No Home Field Advantage: The Expansion of Boko Haram’s Activity Outside of Nigeria in 2019.’

<sup>3</sup> RP Curiel, O Walther and N O’Clery, ‘Uncovering the Internal Structure of Boko Haram through Its Mobility Patterns’ (2020) 5 *Applied Network Science* 28.

<sup>4</sup> CK Onah, ‘Remembering the Dead: Testimonial and the Politics of Memory in the Representation of Boko Haram Terrorism’ (2022) 17 *Postcolonial Text* 1. Narratives.

<sup>5</sup> P Obaji, ‘Boko Haram Won’t Stop Targeting Schools in Nigeria’ [2021] *Foreign Policy* <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/23/boko-haram-nigeria-kidnappings-school-children/>> accessed 10 November 2022.

<sup>6</sup> D Hinshaw and J Parkinson, ‘The 10,000 Kidnapped Boys of Boko Haram’ [2016] *The Wall Street Journal* <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-kidnapped-boys-of-boko-haram-1471013062>> accessed 13 November 2022.

It is against this background that this paper examines the intervention aimed at the deradicalization of the defected members of the Boko Haram group with focus on children. While the focus of this paper is on the deradicalization and social integration program of the Nigerian government for the defected members, which is in three streams, the emphasis in this paper is on the Yellow Ribbon Initiative (YRI) which targets women and children who have been identified with the activities of the group. The paper is divided into nine sections with this introductory section being the first. The second section examines the legal framework for the protection of children in Nigeria, while the third section discusses the involvement of children in Boko Haram activities. In the fourth section, we traced the interventions that were taken to protect children from the activities of Boko Haram while section five analyses the deradicalization programs. Section six addresses the challenges of the Yellow Ribbon Initiative and chapter seven questions the extent to which deradicalization has actually occurred. We suggested the way forward in section eight and thereafter concluded the paper.

## **II. Legal Framework for Protection of Children in Nigeria**

Nigeria is a federation consisting of 36 states and a Federal Capital Territory. Nigeria operates a plural legal system with the English common law, Islamic law and customary laws operating and having binding effect, thereby leading to a competitive legal regime.<sup>7</sup> However, section 1(3) of the Nigerian constitution places the English law above principles of Islamic law and customary laws, by giving priority to the national law which is modelled after the English laws. Furthermore, where any principle of Islamic law or customary law conflicts with the principle of any existing law in Nigeria, such principle of the existing law shall prevail.<sup>8</sup> In terms of child protection, the Constitution which guarantees the fundamental rights of all persons in Nigeria is the bedrock of child protection in the country, though there is no specific reference to the rights of the child therein. Nigeria is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), which resulted in the enactment of the Child's Rights Act (CRA) in 2003 as a step towards domesticating the CRC and ACRWC as required by section 12 of the Nigerian Constitution.<sup>9</sup> However, due to the constitutional division of legislative powers in Nigeria, each state within the Nigerian federation has a choice to adopt/adapt the CRA to guarantee the rights and protection of the child in the state.<sup>10</sup> It is however surprising that the northeastern states that have been mostly affected by the activities of the Boko Haram insurgency are the same states that have put up resistance in domesticating the CRA by enacting a state version of the law.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> AA Oba, "Neither Fish Nor Fowl": Area Courts in the Ilorin Emirate in Northern Nigeria' (2008) 40 *The Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law* 69.

<sup>8</sup> AO Enabulele and B Bazuaye, 'Validity and Enforceability of Customary Law in Nigeria: Towards a Correct Delimitation of the Province of the Courts' (2019) 63 *Journal of African Law* 79.

<sup>9</sup> O Adelakun, 'Internally Displaced Children in Nigeria: A Rights-Based Situational Appraisal' in R Adeola (ed), *National Protection of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa* (Springer International Publishing 2021) <[http://link.springer.com/10.1007/978-3-030-66884-6\\_7](http://link.springer.com/10.1007/978-3-030-66884-6_7)> accessed 17 December 2022.

<sup>10</sup> OS Adelakun, 'Application of the Subsidiarity Principle in Intercountry Adoption in Nigeria: Lessons from South Africa' (2018) 5 *Journal of Comparative Law in Africa* 22.

<sup>11</sup> Adelakun, (note 9).

The main reasons for the resistance lie in religious and cultural incompatibility of the provisions of the CRA.<sup>12</sup> For instance, Jigawa state reduced the age for eligibility to marry to 13,<sup>13</sup> while Kwara state reduced the marriageable age to 15<sup>14</sup> as opposed to 18 years old as provided by section 21 of the CRA. Thus, the prohibition of child marriage by the CRA is seen as offensive to existing cultural and religious norms in some parts of Nigeria.<sup>15</sup> Apart from the prohibition of child marriage, the provision of child adoption is another factor for the resistance of the domestication of the CRA in some northern states on the strength of the argument that child adoption contravenes the principles of Islamic law.<sup>16</sup>

In view of the unrelenting advocacy work on the need to protect children by international non-governmental organizations, domestic non-governmental organizations, civil society organizations and other stakeholders, several states across Nigeria have domesticated the CRA with adaptations to meet the needs of their states. As at November 2022, 34 states have domesticated the CRA with only Kano and Zamfara outstanding in the race.<sup>17</sup> It may be a sign of relief to many that there is a legal framework for the protection of the rights and welfare of the child in Nigeria, but having the legal framework is different from the reality of the implementation of the law. Thus, while a robust child protective law exists in Nigeria, the realistic protection of the Nigerian child remains a mirage.

### **III. Involvement of Children in Boko Haram Activities**

In recruiting its members, the Boko Haram group preys on poverty to target unemployed youths and the *Almajiris*. '*Almajiri*' is a popular term in Nigeria used to describe street children in the Northern part of Nigeria.<sup>18</sup> In the real sense of the word, *Almajiri* connotes an immigrant in search of religious knowledge.<sup>19</sup> In the northern part of Nigeria, several parents drop their male children at a very tender age (some as early as age 2) for Islamic clerics for Islamic education and most often, without any means of support or sustenance.<sup>20</sup> Due to the lack of funding to sustain the children, the clerics send the children out to fend for themselves, while they learn in the early mornings and late evenings. The major part of the day is spent roaming the street

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<sup>12</sup> D Ogunniyi, 'The Challenge of Domesticating Children's Rights Treaties in Nigeria and Alternative Legal Avenues for Protecting Children' (2018) 62 *Journal of African Law* 447.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Adedokun (n 10).

<sup>15</sup> TS Braimah, 'Child Marriage in Northern Nigeria: Section 61 of Part I of the 1999 Constitution and the Protection Children against Child Marriage' (2014) 14 *African Human Rights Law Journal* 474.

<sup>16</sup> Ogunniyi (n 13).

<sup>17</sup> Jo Agbakwuru, 'Child Rights Act Now Domesticated in 34 States — FG' [2022] *Vanguard* <<https://www.vanguardngr.com/2022/11/child-rights-act-now-domesticated-in-34-states-fg/>> accessed 28 November 2022.

<sup>18</sup> FO Oviasogie, 'State Failure, Terrorism and Global Security: An Appraisal of the Boko Haram Insurgency in Northern Nigeria' (2013) 2 *Journal of Sustainable Society* 20.

<sup>19</sup> AM Teke, M Khalid and NA Katami, 'Problems and Prospects of Almajiri Integration Programme in North West Geo-Political Zone, Nigeria' (2022) 10 *International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies* 14.

<sup>20</sup> SD Edinyang, MR Bassey and DE Ushie, 'Almajiri System of Education and the Emergence of Religious Extremists in Nigeria' (2020) 10 *Journal of Educational and Social Research* 103.

in a bid to get a means of livelihood and beg for alms to ‘deliver’ fees to their clerics,<sup>21</sup> which exposes the children to the vulnerabilities of street life such as killings, kidnapping, rituals, street fights, diseases and starvation.<sup>22</sup> In the long run, the children end up missing out on moral and formal education, as well as the Islamic education that they were sent to acquire in the first place.<sup>23</sup> Thus, it has been said that the clerics saddled with the responsibility of protecting the children are the forerunners of those exploiting the children in their care.<sup>24</sup> It is therefore not surprising that many of the *Almajiri* children get involved in social vices such as drug usage and crime. Above all, the *Almajiri* children grow up without family care and lack the comprehension of growth and development in a family setting and most importantly, lack the structure for value system. With the vulnerable lifestyle of the *Almajiri* children, they become easy prey for recruitment into Boko Haram on the promise of free food and financial gains.<sup>25</sup>

Apart from targeting the *Almajiris*, the group took advantage of the high rate of poverty and unemployment to recruit youths and children, using religious ideologies to radicalize their members and new recruits.<sup>26</sup> In order to radicalize its recruits and members, leaders of the Boko Haram group often preach to establish the promise of martyr as a result of the members’ involvement in *jihad*.<sup>27</sup> The group was reported to have promised interest free loans, monthly salary, free wives to its recruits and members and money to families of recruits as well as financial benefits to families of their martyrs.<sup>28</sup> Apart from enticing street children, women and youths with financial gains and promise of martyrdom, Boko Haram relies heavily on forceful conscription of children into the group by attacking their towns and abducting or kidnapping the children of the towns and thereafter, forcing them to carry out assigned activities.<sup>29</sup> The boys are trained in arms and assigned to commanders for specific attacks.<sup>30</sup> The boys who are perceived to be slow in learning the art of combat are deployed to carry out lesser roles such as being human bombs, carrying out duties for commanders, cheerleading at battlefields and other ‘lesser roles’ as may be assigned.<sup>31</sup> The girls are assigned domestic roles and often given out to commandants as wives.<sup>32</sup> In addition, girls have been reported to have been used as

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<sup>21</sup> UU Okonkwo, ‘Islam and Human Dignity: The Plights of Almajiri Street Children during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria’ (2022) 9 *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 2139796.

<sup>22</sup> Teke, Khalid and Katami (n 19).

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>24</sup> U Okonkwo (n 21).

<sup>25</sup> K Adebajo, ‘ISWAP Shares 20,000 Naira Per Household In New Recruitment Drive’ (*HumAngle*, 27 April 2021) <<https://humanglemedia.com/iswap-shares-20000-naira-per-household-in-new-recruitment-drive/>>.

<sup>26</sup> J Omenma, C Hendricks and N Ajaebili, ‘Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram: Recruitment Strategies’ [2020] *Peace and Conflict Studies* <<https://nsuworks.nova.edu/pcs/vol27/iss1/2/>> accessed 1 April 2023.o

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>28</sup> Kassim, ‘Boko Haram’s Internal Civil War: Stealth Takfir and Jihad as Recipes for Schism’, *Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines: Analyses of Africa’s Enduring Insurgency* (2018).

<sup>29</sup> Omenma, Hendricks and Ajaebili (n 26).

<sup>30</sup> R O’Connor, TS Betancourt and NV Enelamah, ‘Safeguarding the Lives of Children Affected by Boko Haram: Application of the SAFE Model of Child Protection to a Rights-Based Situation Analysis’ (2021) 23 *Health and Human Rights* 27.

<sup>31</sup> M Samuel and O Ojewale, ‘Children on the Battlefield: ISWAP’s Latest Recruits’ <<https://issafrica.org/iss-today/children-on-the-battlefield-iswaps-latest-recruits>> .Accessed 10 March 2022.

<sup>32</sup> Omenma, Hendricks and Ajaebili (n 26).

fighters as well.<sup>33</sup> Where any person conscripted refuses to obey the assigned role by the commandant, such a person faces the wrath, which could be severe beating, rape, starvation, or in the extreme cases, execution. As at 2017, over 8,000 children have been reported to have been recruited by Boko Haram<sup>34</sup> but it is not impossible that the number surpasses what is reported. Thus, when children exit the confines of the insurgents, they face rejection in the society and are often stigmatized as being associated with Boko Haram. In fact, thousands of children have been reportedly detained by the military for involvement with Boko Haram and made to face harsh conditions of starvation, beatings and inhumane treatments, without any formal charge against them.<sup>35</sup> Some of these children spend as long as two years in detention without any rehabilitation program or any form of access to education.<sup>36</sup>

After securing their freedom, children associated with Boko Haram were further victimized by the society and their community, with the rejection and stigmatization worse for the girls that returned with offspring from the sexual violence that they suffered.<sup>37</sup> It is on this basis that it is important to measure the success of the social integration programs for children.

#### **IV. Interventions to Protect Children from the Activities of the Boko Haram Group**

The initial response of the Nigerian government to Boko Haram was to adopt a series of coercive approach, but after successive failures, there was an adoption of subtle non-coercive approach.<sup>38</sup> The first legislative step was in 2011 when the government enacted the Terrorism Prevention Act, which was later amended in 2013. This Act is aimed at prohibiting acts of terrorism and punishing those convicted of terrorism. Also, in 2014, the government adopted the National Security Strategy and the National Counter-terrorism Strategy aimed at curbing terrorism activities in Nigeria. The foci of these legislative and policy interventions are to deradicalize convicted terrorists and those awaiting trial as well as their supporters; adoption of a society centered approach to counter terrorism activities; enhance the capacity of the military and law enforcement agencies involved in counter terrorism; and to study and understand the root causes of terrorism and develop a response in line with international best

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<sup>33</sup> UN General Assembly, 'Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General' (United Nations 2020) A/74/845-S/2020/525 <<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N20/117/04/PDF/N2011704.pdf?OpenElement>>.

<sup>34</sup> O'Connor, Betancourt and Enelamah (n 30).

<sup>35</sup> J Becker, 'Nigeria Agrees to End Military Detention of Children: Pledges Swift Reintegration Support for Boko Haram Suspects' [2022] *Human Rights Watch* <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/10/03/nigeria-agrees-end-military-detention-children>>.

<sup>36</sup> Human Rights Watch, "'They Didn't Know If I Was Alive or Dead": Military Detention of Children for Suspected Boko Haram Involvement in Northeast Nigeria' (Human Rights Watch 2019).

<sup>37</sup> International Alert and UNICEF, "'Bad Blood": Perceptions of Children Born of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence and Women and Girls Associated with Boko Haram in Northeast Nigeria - Research Summary' (International Alert/UNICEF 2016).

<sup>38</sup> Freedom C Onuoha, Chikodiri Nwangwu and Michael I Ugwueze, 'Counterinsurgency Operations of the Nigerian Military and Boko Haram Insurgency: Expounding the Viscid Manacle' (2020) 33 *Security Journal* 401.

practices.<sup>39</sup> The strategies were amended in 2015 to focus on preventing Nigerians from joining terrorist groups; boost capacity of security actors; strategize on identifying early warning signs of radicalization and terrorism; mitigate terrorism attacks and provide a blueprint for implementation by the government.<sup>40</sup> In 2017, the National Framework and National Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism was adopted. It recognizes the role that women play in terrorism and aims to support female returnees with focus on socio-economic empowerment.

In 2013, some youths brought themselves together in Maiduguri to form a local vigilante group called the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), with the aim of driving the insurgents away from their towns and to protect their people. The collective efforts of several vigilante groups, the police and the military in 2015 restricted the activities of the Boko Haram group and were cut off from supplies, which resulted in hundreds of conscripted members of the group being liberated.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, disagreement among members of the group also resulted in some members of the group surrendering themselves to the military.<sup>42</sup> The mass surrender of Boko Haram insurgents and the return/release of forcefully conscripted members therefore led to the need to ensure the disarmament, demobilisation, reintegration and reconciliation of these members, hence the deradicalization and integration programs. Around 2015, several women and children were rescued while several others escaped but there was no program put in place to cater for the returnees. When the returnees were reported to have suffered inhumane treatment in the hands of the military, the Borno State government gave in to international pressure and established the Safe House Program aimed at deradicalizing the returnees and empowering them, however, this program was criticized for getting priority above the internally displaced persons.<sup>43</sup> Unfortunately, the program failed because over 75% of the beneficiaries had returned back to Boko Haram by 2018, and the program was dissolved with the remaining beneficiaries sent to their families and IDP camps.<sup>44</sup> Also, the Bulumkutum Transit Center was established in 2016 with the aim of providing deradicalization and livelihood support to women who return for up to three months, but the Center soon became overcrowded with women, men and children, as a result of which most programs were shortened and further returnees were turned back.<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately, the society also turned their

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<sup>39</sup> Premium Times, 'Boko Haram: Nigeria Rolls-Out Soft Approach to CounterterrorismCounterterrorism' *Premium Times* (20 March 2014) <<https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/157111-boko-haram-nigeria-rolls-soft-approach-counterterrorismcounterterrorism.html>>.

<sup>40</sup> S Botha, 'The Women and Girls Associated with Boko Haram: How Has the Nigerian Government Responded?' (2021) 28 *South African Journal of International Affairs* 263.

<sup>41</sup> A Bulama Bukarti and R Bryson, 'Dealing With Boko Haram Defectors in the Lake Chad Basin: Lessons From Nigeria' (Tony Blair Institute for Global Change 2019) <<https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/dealing-boko-haram-defectors-lake-chad-basin-lessons-nigeria>>.

<sup>42</sup> SB Owonikoko, "'Take Them to Government House or Aso Rock": Community Receptivity to Reintegration of Operation Safe Corridor's Deradicalised Ex-Boko Haram Members in Northeastern Nigeria' (2022) 8 *Cogent Social Sciences* 2015884.

<sup>43</sup> International Crisis Group, 'Returning from the Land of Jihad: The Fate of Women Associated with Boko Haram' (International Crisis Group 2019) 275 <[https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2009338/275-returning-from-the-land-of-jihad\\_0.pdf](https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2009338/275-returning-from-the-land-of-jihad_0.pdf)>.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Botha (n 40).

backs on the returnees and did not want to associate with them, due to the roles that they had allegedly played in the conflict.<sup>46</sup> Also, several communities that were directly affected by the activities of the insurgents believed that billions of naira was spent on the deradicalization, empowerment and reintegration of the ex-Boko Haram members, while those that have suffered the direct consequences have been neglected by the government.<sup>47</sup> Some host community members interviewed were of the opinion that it is wrong to leave IDPs in camps for over a decade, while the returnees who contributed to putting them in the IDP camps get free money, training, housing and everything that they need to make life easy for them. Thus, the interventions on the part of the government were not sustainable and most were shut down, while the society also turned their backs on the returnees, thereby leaving them with the trauma of rejection. It is therefore not surprising that some children, especially street and homeless children, voluntarily rejoined Boko Haram since they believed that the group could offer them what the government failed to offer them – shelter, clothing, food and security.

## **V. Deradicalization and Social Integration Programs**

Deradicalization is the strategy adopted and process used to engage an individual or a set of people to achieve a change in the extreme and radical internal value and beliefs of the target person or group, and to ensure that such person or group embrace the mainstream values.<sup>48</sup> According to Horgan and Braddock, deradicalization is ‘the social and psychological process whereby an individual’s commitment to, and involvement in, violent radicalisation is reduced to the extent that they are no longer at risk of involvement and engagement in violent activity’.<sup>49</sup> Where deradicalization is achieved, the target individual abandons the radical group, refuses to sympathize with them and stops offering any form of support for them.<sup>50</sup>

The Nigerian government embarked on several initiatives to deradicalize insurgents that left the group in order to ensure their rehabilitation and social integration. The deradicalization program which was embarked upon since 2015, has recorded successes and has had its own challenges. In this section, we briefly discuss the prison program and operation safe corridor program while we critically analyze the YRI, which is the crux of this paper.

### ***a. Prison Program***

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<sup>46</sup> INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP (N 43).

<sup>47</sup> Owonikoko (n 42).

<sup>48</sup> A Rabasa *Et al*, *Deradicalizing Islamist Extremists* (RAND Corporation 2010); Didarul Islam, ‘De-Radicalisation of Terrorists: Theoretical Analysis and Case Studies’ (2019) 11 *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 6.

<sup>49</sup> J Horgan and K Braddock, ‘Rehabilitating the Terrorists?: Challenges in Assessing the Effectiveness of De-Radicalization Programs’ (2010) 22 *Terrorism and Political Violence* 267.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid*.



The prison deradicalization program which commenced in 2014 targeted fighters of Boko Haram who have been convicted or who were awaiting trial.<sup>51</sup> Rather than run the program simultaneously across prisons, the prison deradicalization program started at Kuje prison as a pilot. For the program, a separate building in the prison was renovated to accommodate the deradicalization needs of the convicted ex-combatants and those awaiting trial at the prison.<sup>52</sup> An integrated management approach was adopted for the prison program with reliance on the prison officers and selected members of the Nigerian Police Force to deliver the program. The officers in charge of the implementation of the program were trained to effectively deliver and to assess its impact on the beneficiary prisoners. During the implementation of the program, the beneficiary prisoners were separated from the other inmates and were not allowed to mix with them to prevent the possibility of radicalizing the other inmates. Many of the personnel selected for the implementation were religious clerics who were screened by the government. At the initial stage, several of the prisoners targeted for the prison deradicalization program refused to participate in the program. Prisoners were trained in vocational skills in addition to studying to read and write and discussion of the alternative interpretation of religious texts.<sup>53</sup>

#### ***b. Open Safe Corridor***

The focus of the Open Safe Corridor (OSC) program is on the low-risk insurgents that were conscripted and ideologically indoctrinated into the group. The OSC program encourages low-risk insurgents to repent and return to designated locations to undergo screening process for the eligibility for ideology deradicalization and social integration. The OSC program kicked off in 2016 at Gombe state and since inception, over 2,000 members of Boko Haram have repented and defected through the OSC program.<sup>54</sup> The first stage towards deradicalization under this program is to establish contact with the military, either by surrender or capture by the military. Such members are thereafter screened to determine if the member is a low-risk member and not wanted by the government.<sup>55</sup> The low risk repentant or captured members are sent to the OSC camp, while the high-risk members are prosecuted and after serving their term or upon release or acquittal, sent to the OSC camp.<sup>56</sup> Once the ex-militant arrives at the OSC camp, they go through orientation to understand why they are at the camp and what the processes are. The ex-militants are then divided into smaller groups where they are engaged by various stakeholders including religious clerics in order to earn their trust.<sup>57</sup> It is after these have been done that the deradicalization and rehabilitation process of the ex-militants occur simultaneously with the target of purging the ex-militants of their radical ideologies and the

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<sup>51</sup> Owonikoko (n 42).

<sup>52</sup> A Barkindo and S Bryans, 'De-Radicalising Prisoners in Nigeria: Developing a Basic Prison Based de-Radicalisation Programme' (2016) 7 *Journal of Deradicalization* 1.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> AO Mmakwe, 'De-Radicalization and Reintegration of Nigerian Repentant Terrorists in Restorative Justice: Issues and Challenges,' (2022) 9 *Nnmidi azikwe University Journal of COmmercial and Property Law* 35.

<sup>55</sup> Owonikoko (n 42).

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*

need to be better members of the society.<sup>58</sup> Interaction with three ex-militants who have passed through the OSC and undergoing livelihood training program revealed that they were ready to purge themselves of the ‘sins’ they had committed, but they claim that they doubted it if they could go back to the towns that they lived in before they joined the insurgents for fear of stigmatization and revenge from members of the communities.<sup>59</sup>

In the deradicalization process, the key areas targeted are religious ideology, political grievance and trauma that might accompany exit from the group.<sup>60</sup> Islamic clerics use Quranic texts to explain the ideology of Islam by focusing on the aspects that have been relied on to brainwash the ex-militants. For the political grievance, several livelihood projects such as cap making, farming and other vocational trainings were embarked on. This is to tackle poverty which may push the repentant militants to join the group. The reintegration part of the OSC program is to ensure that the reformed ex-combatants are readmitted and reintegrated into their communities.<sup>61</sup> Several international and national agencies support this aspect by preparing the community members to readmit the repentant Boko Haram members back into the society.<sup>62</sup> This is done through explaining the reformation of the ex-militants that have taken place, and the need of the communities to forgive the ex-militants and reintegrate them back into the communities. In communities that accept the repentant ex-combatants, development projects were implemented for them, while the ex-combatants were informed of rejection in cases where the communities refuse to accept the ex-combatants back. Contrary to the design of the program as explained above, it was discovered that the community members were not often consulted before returning the repentant Boko Haram members to the communities.<sup>63</sup> Many communities admit that several development and vocational projects were implemented for them, but they denied ever consenting to the return of the ex-combatant. Many claim that it is difficult and that they are forced to relive the violence that they experienced every time they see the returned ex-combatants. Some ascribe to the fact that they live in fear of what these returnees may do and they do not feel safe around them. Thus, while thousands of the ex-Boko Haram combatants have been deradicalized, the same cannot be said in terms of the social reintegration and reconciliation of the former fighters.

### ***c. Yellow Ribbon Initiative***

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<sup>58</sup> MI Ugwueze, EC Ngwu and FC Onuoha, ‘Operation Safe Corridor Programme and Reintegration of Ex-Boko Haram Fighters in Nigeria’ (2022) 57 *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 1229.

<sup>59</sup> F Akum, R Hoinathy and M Samuel, ‘Managing the Journey out of Violent Extremism in the Lake Chad Basin. Institute for Security Studies’ (Institute for Security Studies 2021) *West Africa Report* 32.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Ugwueze, Ngwu and Onuoha (n 58).

<sup>62</sup> BUKARTI AND BRYSON (N 41).

<sup>63</sup> TJ Ike, *Et al.*, ‘Rethinking Reintegration in Nigeria: Community Perceptions of Former Boko Haram Combatants’ (2021) 42 *Third World Quarterly* 661.

Many women and children that were associated with Boko Haram were reported to have faced hardship and inhumane treatment. For the women and girls, they served in multiple roles such as being used as human bombs, recruitment agents, spies, wives, reproductive agents, laborers, and sex slaves.<sup>64</sup> The boys were trained in arms and made to carry out violent attacks.<sup>65</sup> The women and children associated with Boko Haram can be classified into those whose husbands were involved in Boko Haram activities and secondly, those that were conscripted into the group. Wives and children of Boko Haram members were arrested by the military in a bid to get their husbands/fathers to surrender, but the military action further intensified the violent activities of the group, while the wives and children faced rejection and stigma in the society.<sup>66</sup> On the part of the women and children that returned either through rescue or escape, they were kept at the military barracks at the early stage due to lack of preparedness on the part of the military.<sup>67</sup> These women were reported to have suffered further abuse and inhumane treatments at the hands of the military personnel.<sup>68</sup>

The Yellow Ribbon Initiative (YRB) is a deradicalization intervention of the Neem Foundation, a non-governmental organization which focuses on the deradicalization of former women and children members of Boko Haram group for a one-year duration. The Foundation recognizes the role that women and children play in the insurgency and focuses on enabling the former members to heal and live a normal life in their former communities.<sup>69</sup> The strategies to enable women and children lie mostly in sustainable livelihood training, education, sensitization, mental health and psychosocial support, and empowerment. In so doing, the program focuses on measuring the vulnerability, needs, cognitive capacity, recidivism, risk and remorse.<sup>70</sup> By collaborating with the government, Neem Foundation has access to the military, and this eases the handing over of the returnees. Upon the return of most women and children, they are profiled by the military and transferred to the appropriate camp, where they are allocated spaces based on their community or origin.<sup>71</sup> Apart from supporting the returnees to deradicalize, Neem Foundation also works towards identifying early signs of radicalization by conducting frequent training to members of at-risk communities to understand signs of radicalization. Through this, interest groups in the communities were formed and they communicate with each other to identify unusual behavior in the community.<sup>72</sup> To also support children that returned, the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) and other UN agencies stepped in under various projects to support in the education and psychosocial support of the children. It has however

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<sup>64</sup> Botha (n 41).

<sup>65</sup> Samuel and Ojewale (n 31).

<sup>66</sup> Botha (n 41).

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP (N 44).

<sup>69</sup> T Lyon, 'De-Radicalising the Women of Boko-Haram' (2023) 10 *Pax et Bellum* <<https://journals.uu.se/pax-et-bellum/article/view/167>> accessed 3 April 2023.

<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> LeRoberts, 'Healing a Generation Wounded by Boko Haram' [2019] *Christian Science Monitor* <<https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Africa/2019/0208/Healing-a-generation-wounded-by-Boko-Haram>>.

<sup>72</sup> Neem Foundation, 'Case 7: Finding a New Sense of Purpose through Psychosocial Therapy' (*The Yellow Ribbon Initiative*) <<https://icanpeacework.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Neem-Foundation-Nigeria-Case-Invisible-Women-Rehabilitation-Reintegration.pdf>>.

been noted that the reliance on humanitarian aid for survival has brought shame to the parents of these children, especially mothers that are also returnees, and this increases the chances of embracing recidivism.<sup>73</sup>

## **VI. Challenges of the Yellow Ribbon Initiative**

The major challenge of the YRI is that, just like the prison radicalization and the OSC, the programs were not products of policy formulations. As a result, implementers of the program merely relied on instincts and what they deemed fit for the success of the programs. Also, since the supposed gendered approach to counter terrorism policy in 2017, the focus has shifted from deradicalization of returnees to deradicalization and economic empowerment of women and girls, at the detriment of economic empowerment of men and boys that were also returnees. Three of the boys interviewed in a ‘feed and read’ program, an initiative of the American University of Nigeria, aimed at providing education for street children claimed that the government only focus on providing ‘free’ money to women and girls, neglecting them (the boys) and that this makes them feel sad and tempted to take to acts that will make them get the attention of the government. This is a reality of the possibility of recidivism on the part of the boys.

Furthermore, the lack of policy guidelines in the YRI has led to corrupt practices where the personnel in charge of implementing the deradicalization and empowerment projects divert the resources to their relatives and friends, who do not qualify as ‘returnees’ under the project. In one of the advocacy campaigns that we embarked on in the course of this research, one of the returnees confided in us through an interpreter that we should separate them according to age groups, and that we should hand over anything that we have for them to each person personally. When prompted on why she said that, the beneficiary claimed that when projects that involve deradicalization were being embarked on, it is always fused with empowerment projects in order to encourage the returnees to participate. She, however, claimed that their leaders always divert the empowerment materials unless when it is handed over to the beneficiaries directly. On the part of the children, it was discovered that the deradicalization project involves education of the children in both Islamic and formal education. However, the children were not integrated into the mainstream schools, but were rather taught in the camps where they lived. This raises the question of discrimination against the children and the quality of education that they receive. It may be justifiable to separate them from the mainstream schools to prevent the children from radicalizing other children, but the approach should have been to involve the education sector, so that the structure of education that the children receive is in line with the national curriculum.

Above all, the problem of the *Almajiri* system which makes recruitment of children and youths into terrorism easy has not been sustainably addressed. As long as the ideology of the *Almajiri* system of education persists in the northern part of Nigeria, the issue of child recruitment into

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<sup>73</sup> Botha (n 40).

radical groups cannot be completely prevented. While the Jonathan government tried to address this issue, there was resistance in embracing the merger of the Islamic form of education and the formal education for these children. The idea of providing a shelter for the *Almajiri* children, where they are catered for was opposed by many northern leaders on the basis that the President was not a Muslim. Thus, during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, all the states that hosted the institutions for the *Almajiri* children returned them to their various states.

## **VII. Has Deradicalization been Truly Achieved?**

In the face of social disintegration, the children that returned from Boko Haram captivity neither remained here nor there. In one of our interviews, a girl recounted how she was showered with love and gifts by the commandant that she was married off to, and said that when compared with her current lifestyle, “she regrets returning.” Unfortunately, this girl in question was further stigmatized by her fellow returnees, and in a focus group discussion, the girls recounted how she would ‘boss’ them around and use them as slaves while in the forest. Apart from the societal acceptance of the repentant members of Boko Haram, there continues to be a concern on whether deradicalization has truly taken place. It is therefore important to assess whether what has been achieved is mere disengagement and not deradicalization, since it is very difficult to change a person’s belief system and ideology.<sup>74</sup> While disengagement is the most important step towards deradicalization, there is no guarantee that disengagement will lead to deradicalization. In fact, several citizens of Nigeria, especially those that have suffered the direct consequences of the activities of the insurgents, hold the view that members of Boko Haram who claim to repent in their hundreds, only do so to benefit from government initiatives, and to get into the society as spies. Thus, the fear of recidivism is a constant reality for the survivors of the long-term violent conflict in the northeast.

## **VIII. Ways Forward**

Having identified religious perceptions, poverty, illiteracy and unemployment as the key factors that push children and youths to radicalization, it suffices that these problems must be addressed in a sustainable manner. While national and international NGOs have stepped in to contribute their quota, it is important for the government to take a stand and be at the forefront of this battle.

The nature of interventions which is mainly in form of humanitarian aid, without a specific policy structure has created ‘an entitlement mindset’ in the beneficiaries. Rather than stay empowered and rise above poverty, many beneficiaries participate in deradicalization programs for the sole purpose of benefitting from the empowerment opportunities that comes with the programs. Unfortunately, due to the constant free flow of humanitarian aid, many beneficiaries squander the resources invested in them, and keep looking to humanitarian aid for survival. In a project that we assessed, we realized that the women empowered sold off the

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<sup>74</sup> Horgan and Braddock (n 49).

machines that were bought for them, and used the proceeds to buy clothing and fashion ornaments. It therefore follows that, there is need to monitor the progress of these beneficiaries, especially the women that were empowered with the aim that they will in turn, provide a better life for their children.

## **IX. Conclusion**

This paper discusses the deradicalization program of the Nigerian government for the ex-Boko Haram members. While the focus was on the YRI, a background was given into the prison project and the OSC project. We realized that the Nigerian government was directly involved in the prison and OSC projects, while there was no direct involvement in the YRI project that involves women, children and youths. We also found out that, the short duration of the YRI project is not sufficient to achieve a sustainable deradicalization and rehabilitation of children involved in the Boko Haram activities. Therefore, a call is being made to the Nigerian government to take a sustainable stance on the quality of education offered to the children returnees from the insurgency group.