

Healing the young women harmed by Boko Haram

Unlike the Chibok schoolgirls for whom the #BringBackOurGirls campaign rallied, thousands of others garnered no headlines when they were abducted. All too often no one welcomes them home.

by [Leslie Roberts](#) in the [April 24, 2019](#) issue

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Fatima came close to killing her own son. Along the edge of the 18-year-old's headscarf are scars running down the left side of her face and neck—scars from escaping Boko Haram militants in northeastern Nigeria.

“I did not like the boy in any way,” she said softly of her son, Mohammed. “I didn’t want to have eye contact or even see the child. I tried to murder him, to poison him. God must have intervened, because people wouldn’t have been powerful enough to stop me.”

Fatima (whose last name was withheld for her safety) told of her ordeal while sitting in a tent in Bakassi Camp for Internally Displaced Persons in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State and the birthplace of Boko Haram. When someone fetches Mohammed, now four years old, from school, Fatima’s face opens into a broad smile. She laughs as she swings him over her shoulder and tickles him, and he giggles with delight.

“I don’t want anything to come between us,” she said through an interpreter, Patience Shikson, a clinical psychologist.

Fatima is one of the small number of success stories in the efforts to help the girls and young women who were abducted by Boko Haram heal and rejoin their families and communities in northeastern Nigeria.

This is not the story behind #BringBackOurGirls—the hundreds of Nigerian schoolgirls from Chibok whose kidnapping by Boko Haram sparked an international

social media campaign to rescue them. (Many of the Chibok girls have been freed, but about 100 remain in captivity.) It is the story of the thousands of others and their children born of sexual violence, whose abduction did not garner headlines and whom all too often no one welcomes home.

The mothers are often shunned by their husbands or parents and forced to live in isolation in the camps that have mushroomed around Maiduguri. On top of the stigma for survivors of sexual violence, many people fear that the “Boko Haram wives,” as they are derisively called, have been radicalized. These fears are compounded by Boko Haram’s practice of using girls as young as ten as suicide bombers.

People have suffered tremendously at the hands of Boko Haram, said Cindy Chungong, country manager for Nigeria for International Alert, one of a handful of nonprofits that are working to reintegrate survivors into communities. Many witnessed their family members and neighbors slaughtered, their cattle stolen, their crops and livelihoods destroyed.

Still, “it is absolutely traumatizing for those girls and women [to be rejected], especially if they have been raped and are having difficulty accepting the child,” Chungong said. “It is just heartbreaking.”

Their suffering is part of the collective nightmare that has gripped northeastern Nigeria for a decade now, in which virtually everyone has been affected.

“The depth and breadth of trauma cannot be underestimated at an individual or community level,” said Feargal O’Connell, who heads the Nigeria program of the nonprofit International Rescue Committee. For the girls and women who have returned from Boko Haram, it is “trauma layered upon trauma.”

Borno State, where Fatima was born, is a parched swath of the Sahel in the northeasternmost corner of Nigeria. Abutting Lake Chad on one side, it shares borders with Niger and Cameroon, which the insurgents cross freely, terrorizing the population on each side. It is a world apart from the carefully planned streets of the country’s capital, Abuja, or the sprawling, chaotic port city of Lagos some 760 miles away in the relatively prosperous, largely Christian south.

The north’s mostly Muslim population has been long ignored by their government and is desperately poor, with abysmal health conditions and high illiteracy. With no

jobs and few prospects, young men are easy prey for extremist groups such as Boko Haram, one of the deadliest terrorist groups on the planet, which espouses a twisted version of Shari'a law.

"There were incredible levels of deprivation in northeastern Nigeria before the crisis," O'Connell said. "That is the root cause."

Boko Haram emerged as a force in 2009. At first, its attacks were small and sporadic, targeting mainly police and the military. But soon the militants pillaged and burned schools, clinics, and entire villages. The insurgency has claimed nearly 30,000 lives, according to some estimates, displaced 2 million people, and left 7.7 million in need of humanitarian assistance. And there is no end in sight: despite government claims to the contrary, atrocities have intensified in the past few months and, with the recent murder of two aid workers, some humanitarian groups have suspended operations in parts of Borno.

During the three years she was held by Boko Haram, Fatima agreed to marry a militant. She was terrified. She tried to escape three times. On the fourth attempt, the insurgents tied her and another girl up, dragged them behind motorcycles, and left them for dead.

After she regained consciousness, she struggled to carry her baby to a nearby village, where people cared for them. Fatima does not know whether the other girl survived.

The Nigerian military sent Fatima to a transit center in Maiduguri. Then she was transferred to Bakassi Camp, where people from her village have been relocated. The camps are organized by place of origin—entire villages have been transplanted. Once there, Fatima was especially branded by her scars: "People would become irritated just looking at me."

Her family refused any contact, some people called her a demon, and other mothers would not let their children play with Mohammed.

A small nonprofit, the Neem Foundation, stepped in. The group is unusual in that it tries to foster reconciliation by offering intensive, one-on-one psychological counseling for children and young adults such as Fatima.

Community leaders are the entry point into the programs, said Emmanuel Bosah, who runs Neem's rehabilitation and reintegration program. They know every child who returns from the forest and the troubles they face. Neem and other groups rely heavily on these respected elders and religious leaders, whom they train to help heal the psychological wounds. The leaders tell community members that the children born in captivity had no say in how they came into the world, and what's important is how people raise them.

"Religious leaders use a lot of imagery about forgiveness and putting yourself in the shoes of another person," said Chungong of International Alert. "This is both Christian and Muslim, because we have displaced people of both faiths."

Initially, Fatima rebuffed Neem's overtures. But one day she came on her own and then agreed to join a peer support group.

"These are essentially safe spaces where women and girls who have returned from Boko Haram can come and talk to others who had similar experiences," Chungong said. "Before, they used to feel so traumatized and so stigmatized that they just kept everything they were feeling to themselves."

Gradually, the nonprofits bring into the group other young women who were not associated with Boko Haram but who have also seen horrors and may well have suffered sexual violence.

"They get to hear, sometimes for the first time, what other women went through and realize they are just as much victims of the conflict as they are," Chungong said.

The groups also work with families. Not everyone who goes to these sessions is transformed. In fact, most aren't. "But over time, we hear some positive results," Chungong said.

Fatima now visits freely with her family, eats with them, and sometimes spends the night. But because the family is crowded into one small shelter, she resides separately with Mohammed. Other children now play with him.

She dreams of being a doctor or a nurse, but she has had no education and is not comfortable attending the basic classes the United Nations offers to young children who have never gone to school. She takes Mohammed to school each day, paying for his education largely by selling half of her food rations.

Fatima is still being treated for depression but is sleeping better now.

“She’s a very strong woman and a resilient lady,” Shikson said. “She has been through hell and survived it.”

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Healing the young women harmed by Boko Haram.”