

BOOK REVIEW

Hilary Matfess. *Women and the War on Boko Haram: Wives, Weapons, Witnesses (African Arguments Series)*. London: Zed Books, 2017. 192 pp. Glossary and list of acronyms. Acknowledgments. Notes. References. Index. \$24.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-1-786991454.

Women and the War on Boko Haram by Hilary Matfess is, as the title suggests, a book about women's role in and relationship to Boko Haram. This book is the result of desk research and dozens of interviews—with women who had been involved with Boko Haram, vigilantes, politicians, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—conducted in Northern Nigeria between 2015 and 2017. The impressive field research presented in this book is sure to dislodge the view of women as mere victims of Boko Haram; rather, the stories Matfess has collected reveal a complex and nuanced reality of women's relationship to, opinion of, and agency toward Boko Haram that coax the reader to think more critically about this complex issue.

When Boko Haram kidnapped school girls from Chibok in 2014, it birthed a worldwide movement, commonly referred to as #BringBackOurGirls. This movement helped fuel the idea of women as victims of Boko Haram who needed saving from the international community and from the Nigerian state. While the intentions behind this movement are noble, the stereotyping of women as victims of Boko Haram is problematic. As Matfess shows in this book, there are in fact a number of ways that women participate in the group. Many women are abducted, like the Chibok Girls; often these women are given the choice to marry into the insurgency or die. However, as Matfess reveals, sometimes they are freed.

But readers who have, to date, thought that abductions were the primary way women join the group will be surprised to learn that many women join the group of their own accord. Some women join because they agree with the ideology espoused by the group and willingly convert in accordance with their personal beliefs. Others join as a way to escape the oppression of women that is wrought by the state itself. Matfess presents several first-hand interviews with women who willingly joined Boko Haram through marriage to insurgents because they determined that they would have better lives as members of Boko Haram than they would have living under the Nigerian State. This is perhaps one of the most surprising and thought-provoking findings in the book and one that should surely lead to further research.

With this research, Matfess provides much-needed contributions to at least two bodies of knowledge. First, the book contributes to our current understanding of Boko Haram, a violent extremist group that began in Northern Nigeria and expanded into the Lake Chad Basin region encompassing Chad, Cameroon, and Nigeria. Extant literature on Boko Haram focuses primarily on the group's history and on its ideology, tactics, and strategies; such narratives are primarily told through a security lens, where men are the central agents of the story. Women, if they are mentioned at all, are too often portrayed as agentless victims through overly-simplistic narratives. This book advances our understanding of Boko Haram by providing far more nuance about the roles and views of women regarding the group. By including women in the narrative of Boko Haram, Matfess reveals new insights into Boko Haram's organizational structure, the nature of its ideology, and—perhaps most importantly—how it recruits new members. For scholars and practitioners of deradicalization and counterterrorism, these insights are valuable contributions.

Second, the book contributes to broader bodies of research in areas that remain comparatively understudied: the role of women in war, terrorist organizations, and peacebuilding. By opening the aperture on Boko Haram to explore the complexities of women's involvement, Matfess earns a seat amongst scholars such as Aili Mari Tripp, Mia Bloom, and Anne Speckhard, who have spent their careers carefully laying the theoretical foundations of women in war through hundreds and hundreds of case studies of female insurgents, soldiers, and terrorists. Matfess also spends considerable time establishing a case for bringing women into the peace process in Northern Nigeria, concluding that the fate of Nigeria is tied to the fate of Nigerian women.

While this book is a valuable contribution to the aforementioned areas of study, Matfess misses an opportunity to advance the practice of qualitative research in dangerous areas, especially as—at least in the field of Political Science—scholars endeavor to improve qualitative methodologies (see the American Political Science Association's *Qualitative Transparency Deliberations [QTD]*). While Matfess outlines the types of interviews she conducted in the introduction of the book, more should be done to explain the interview process, including how interviewees were identified and selected, the interview questions, and how the data were analyzed. This kind of methodological explanation is common in quantitative research because it fosters replicability, an important tenet of research. It also provides reviewers with more information upon which to evaluate the soundness of the data, analysis, and conclusions. This would also provide a valuable road map for future scholars who wish to conduct research in difficult areas.

I also wondered about the ethical considerations and the safeguards that were put in place to ensure protection of the interviewees. Matfess uses pseudonyms when referring to her interviewees in the book, as per standard practice, but I wondered whether this research was approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB) and what other precautions she took

while she was interviewing. This is not meant to be disparaging, but only to highlight the need to advance all of our research practices in the field, especially when we are researching such sensitive subject matter with vulnerable populations.

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doi:10.1017/asr.2018.98

For more reading on this subject, see:

- Berger, Iris. 2014. "African Women's Movements in the Twentieth Century: A Hidden History." *African Studies Review* 57 (3): 1–19. doi:10.1017/asr.2014.89.
- Mama, Amina. 1998. "Khaki in the Family: Gender Discourses and Militarism in Nigeria." *African Studies Review* 41 (2): 1–18. doi:10.2307/524824.
- Niger-Thomas, Margaret. 2001. "Women and the Arts of Smuggling." *African Studies Review* 44 (2): 43–70. doi:10.2307/525574.