

Women as Instruments

Boko Haram abducted girls to enslave them. It also used them as suicide bombers. Scholarly literature treats these as separate programmes. They are not.

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Three weeks after the Chibok abduction, Abubakar Shekau appeared on camera to claim responsibility. He said, in that video, *“I am the one who captured all those girls, and I will sell all of them. Allah instructed me to sell them. I will carry out his instructions. Slavery is allowed in my religion, and I shall capture people and make them slaves.”*

This statement has been quoted often in the years since, almost always as evidence of monstrosity, which it is. What has not been treated as sufficiently is a theological argument. The doctrine Shekau was invoking has a precise jurisprudential name: *sabi*, the taking of war captives, a category codified within classical Islamic laws of *jihad*. Its most systematic articulation came from the 11th-century Abbasid jurist al-Mawardi, whose *al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyya* established the legal framework governing the treatment of non-Muslim captives taken in a lawful war. Later jurists, including the 12th-century Hanbali scholar Ibn Qudama, elaborated its conditions and restrictions. *Sabi* was not a fringe position; it was mainstream classical jurisprudence. What made Shekau's application of it illegitimate, as virtually every contemporary Islamic scholar who examined it concluded, was that almost none of the conditions the classical jurists required were met.

Shekau was, beyond asserting the right to take these girls, grounding that assertion in three specific theological claims: that the girls had been captured in a lawful war; that, as war captives, they were theologically permissible subjects of enslavement; and that his authority to act on this derived not from personal will but from divine command. *“Allah instructed me.”*

The same theological structure that authorised the Chibok abductions authorised the female suicide bombing programme. Existing literature analyses the bombing programme through the lens of tactical efficiency and the abduction programme through the lens of gender-based violence and jurisprudence, as if these were separate policies implemented by the same perpetrators. They are not two policies; they are two operational expressions of one theological position: that girls and women under the movement's control are instruments deployable as the mission requires, and owed nothing — not freedom, not recognition, not even the theological acknowledgement of personhood that Islamic tradition calls martyrdom. The scholarly literature on Boko Haram's use of women and girls has generated serious and important work in two distinct areas. The first area examines the female suicide bombing programme: its tactical evolution, statistical profile, and operational logic. The most comprehensive available analysis identifies five distinct waves of female suicide terrorism between 2014 and 2018. [A 2019 study using longitudinal data across seven years found that more than half of all suicide bombers in the dataset were](#)

women and girls, including more than sixty incidents involving bombers under the age of 15. The second area examines the abduction, enslavement, and forced marriage programme. The most thorough academic analysis of its theological foundations treats the Chibok kidnappings as an expression of classical Islamic doctrine on war captives described as the “afterlife of slavery,” the continued existence of theological frameworks that justify enslavement even in a world that has formally abolished the practice.

The assumption that these are separable phenomena linked by common perpetrators and victims but otherwise distinct produces a specific and consequential puzzle that the tactical literature identifies but cannot resolve. A 2025 study by researchers working on Boko Haram's female bomber programme found that female attackers did not experience the tactical advantages typically associated with female suicide bombers (higher casualty rates, lower probability of interception) that are usually offered as explanations for why armed movements deploy women. What the data showed instead was a programme that underperformed on both counts: female attackers produced lower fatality rates than male bombers — a consequence, Ryckman and Henshaw argue, of their being deployed as unwilling and undertrained operatives — and their publicity benefit was self-cancelling, as sustained media attention eroded the assumption of innocence that had made women harder to intercept in the first place. If the programme was not primarily a calculation of tactical efficiency, the study asks, what drove it? The answer, this essay argues, lies in the theological coherence of Shekau's framework, a coherence that the existing literature's separation of abduction and bombing obscures. Shekau's theological claims about female captives draw on a tradition in classical Islamic jurisprudence that permits the enslavement of non-Muslim women captured in a lawful war. This tradition has been extensively analysed by contemporary Islamic scholars, virtually all of whom have condemned Boko Haram's application of it to the Chibok abductions as illegitimate on multiple grounds.

The grounds are significant because they illuminate exactly how far Shekau's position departs from the tradition it claimed to embody. Many of the girls taken at Chibok were Muslims, and classical jurisprudence does not permit the enslavement of Muslims. The “war” Shekau invoked was based on his takfiri belief that the Nigerian state and Muslim citizens who cooperate with it are apostates, a position that the global community of Islamic scholars has rejected as a perversion of the tradition. And classical jurisprudence regarding war captives contains no provision whatsoever for their use as suicide bombers.

None of this troubled Shekau, and understanding why it did not is essential to understanding the coherence of his position. He was not misapplying a tradition he believed in. He was asserting a theological framework in which the question of legitimate application did not arise in the usual way, because the girls' own standing — their capacity to object, their rights within the tradition, their status as persons whose treatment is regulated by law — was what he was, in effect, denying.

The core theological claim, present in both the abduction and bombing programme, is about ontological status: what kind of *being* a girl or woman under the movement's control is. Shekau's answer, articulated through his actions and confirmed by the specific theological recognition he withheld, was that she was an instrument. Not a person who could be enslaved, because enslaving a person, even under the classical tradition, involves acknowledging the person's prior free status and the legal transaction that extinguishes it. An instrument has no prior status to acknowledge; it is simply used.

To be an instrument, in this specific theological and biopolitical sense, is to occupy a condition in which the body exists without the recognition of personhood. Feminist scholars of conflict have developed frameworks of "weaponised femininity," demonstrating how gender norms are actively repurposed to produce tactical and symbolic effects. Shekau's innovation was to give this weaponisation a fully articulated theological warrant, rendering the exception not a departure from Islamic tradition but its authentic expression—a claim that required, and still requires, sustained theoretical dismantling. The concept of weaponised femininity captures what is at stake here more precisely than the biopolitical abstraction of bare life: it is not merely that women's bodies are used as weapons, but that their gendered social vulnerability—the assumption of their non-violence, their perceived innocence, their cultural positioning as dependents—is itself the mechanism through which violence is enabled. Shekau did not simply deploy women; he weaponised the very social facts of their femininity.

In Islamic theology, martyrdom is a statement about a person: specifically, a statement that the person who died was a moral agent who chose, before God, to sacrifice their life in His cause. To be recognised as a martyr is to be recognised as someone with moral standing, religious agency, and divine worth. The Arabic term for martyr, *shahid*, means "witness," someone who by their death, gives testimony to God. Shekau praised his male fighters as martyrs. He eulogised them by name in his videos. He described their courage. He celebrated their entry into paradise. He performed, for his male dead, the full ritual of religious acknowledgement. Al-Nawawi, whose work on Islamic ethics remains authoritative across Sunni traditions, had elaborated the conditions under which *shahada* is recognised: the person must have died in a lawful *jihad*, must have acted from sincere intention, and must be acknowledged as having exercised moral agency in choosing death over surrender. The acknowledgement of agency is what Shekau systematically withheld from his female bombers.

He did none of this for female suicide bombers. Not one of the hundreds of women and girls deployed as bombers during his leadership was named in a martyrdom video. Not one was praised for courage. Not one was celebrated as having entered paradise. They were deployed. This is not an oversight. In Shekau's own theological vocabulary, it is impossible to overlook the theological significance of an individual who chose to die in God's cause. What the silence communicates is that no such choice was, in his framework, available to these women and girls. They were not individuals who chose; they were instruments that were used. God's will was enacted through their bodies. It did not extend to their personhood because, within Shekau's framework, they had no personhood.

This framework, however, confronts an unresolved ambiguity: the documented cases of women who approached Boko Haram voluntarily, who participated in operations without overt physical coercion, or who expressed ideological commitment to the movement's goals. These are not merely exceptions; they are challenges to the binary logic of coercion versus autonomy that the instrumentalisation framework implicitly maintains. Some women joined for material survival, finding in the movement a source of food and protection that the state had denied them. Some sought status within a hierarchical structure that, however brutally, offered them a role. Some had been born into captivity and knew no other social reality. And some, however difficult it is to acknowledge, absorbed Shekau's theology sufficiently to act upon it as their own.

This does not dissolve the reality of instrumentalisation; it reveals that instrumentality and agency operate not as opposites but along a continuum of constraint, survival, and belief. Shekau's denial of personhood was a political-theological project, not a sociological description of every woman's lived experience. The literature must hold this tension rather than resolve it prematurely, recognising that the same bodies that were deployed as instruments were also, in ways the doctrine could not fully contain, sites of negotiation, adaptation, and, in the rare cases of escape, reclamation. A differentiated typology of participation would acknowledge this continuum: women who joined for material survival, those who sought status within the movement, those whose religious convictions aligned with Shekau's theology, and those who were simply born into captivity and knew no other social reality. Scholars working on and from the region have documented precisely this complexity, showing how women in the insurgency are [simultaneously victims and perpetrators, their roles defying the categories that external observers have imposed](#). The work of scholars such as [Husseina Ahmed, whose research examines northern Nigerian women's agency in and beyond the Boko Haram conflict](#), has begun to map this terrain, demonstrating that the question is not whether women exercised agency but how that agency was structured, constrained, and sometimes complicit with the very forces that sought to instrumentalise them.

Once the theological framework is properly understood, several features of the bombing programme that the tactical literature cannot explain become legible. The 2025 research finding that Boko Haram's female bombers did not produce the tactical advantages typically associated with female attackers is, within the framework of tactical efficiency, a profound puzzle. Armed movements are supposed to be rational actors who discontinue strategies that don't work. Why did the female bomber programme continue, and indeed intensify, after the tactical rationale had diminished?

The theological framework answers this directly. The programme was not primarily a calculation of tactical efficiency. It was a theological initiative with tactical dimensions. The decision to deploy female bombers was grounded not in screening probabilities but in a theological position about the permissible use of female bodies under the movement's control. Tactical considerations shaped how the programme was implemented. They did not determine whether it was implemented or when to stop. Research on the bombing programme's targeting patterns established an asymmetry: female bombers were disproportionately used against civilian targets like markets, mosques, refugee camps, and gatherings of internally displaced persons, while male bombers were more often directed at government, police, and military targets. The tactical explanation for this is the screening differential: female bombers exploited the assumption that women were less likely to be threats, and that assumption was most operative in civilian contexts. That explanation is incomplete. The targets that female bombers disproportionately struck were not only tactically soft, they were specifically the social spaces central to women's community life in Northern Nigeria: markets where women trade and build social networks, mosques where they pray, refugee camps where displaced women congregate and maintain the bonds of community. The programme used female bodies to destroy female spaces.

The use of girls as young as seven as suicide bombers is a demographic fact that the tactical literature handles with difficulty. [Longitudinal analysis of Boko Haram's bombings found that more than half the bombers were women and girls, some as young as seven, with more than sixty incidents involving a bomber under the age of fifteen](#). There is no tactical efficiency argument that explains why a seven-year-old is preferable to a woman. The theological framework explains it without difficulty. Shekau's position

on female instrumentality did not contain an age restriction. If a girl's body is an instrument for the movement's divine mission, her age does not alter her status as an instrument. A seven-year-old can be strapped with explosives and sent into a market for the same theological reason that an adult woman can: both are instruments through which God's will is to be enacted. This is not a mitigation of the horror. It is the horror precisely described: a theological system that strips girls of any autonomy and reduces them entirely to their operational utility.

The empirical link between the abduction and bombing programmes is not merely theoretical. Amnesty International has documented that once abducted, [most girls were forcibly married and used as "wives," including being made to serve in sexual slavery and domestic servitude](#) — and that, in earlier periods of the conflict, the same population of captured girls and young women was [also used as suicide bombers on a large scale, the majority of Boko Haram's bombers between mid-2014 and 2019 being female](#). The temporal pattern is striking: as researchers at West Point documented, it was [through the global response to the Chibok abductions that the insurgents "learned the potent symbolic value of young female bodies"](#) — and female bombings surged in the same period. The girls taken at Chibok were not merely victims of one policy and then, separately, victims of another; they were the feedstock for a single theological project of instrumentalisation. Amnesty's own survivor testimony bears this out: one young woman abducted from a wedding described being [taught to "shoot guns... use bombs and how to attack a village," and then sent "to operations"](#) — the sequence of abduction, forced training, and deployment compressed into a single captivity. Their bodies were consumed sequentially by the movement's operational requirements.

The social consequences of Shekau's theological innovation extended far beyond the immediate victims of the bombings and the abductions. They restructured the basic conditions of social life in affected communities in ways that persist long after the last explosion. The hijab, the Islamic head covering worn by Muslim women across Northern Nigeria as an expression of religious identity and, implicitly, as a marker of civilian non-combatant status, was transformed by the female bomber programme into a concealment device associated with lethal threat. Hundreds of attacks were carried out by women hiding explosives beneath the garment. The response was predictable and, from the perspective of any individual security checkpoint officer, entirely rational: women in hijabs began to be treated as potential threats. Muslim women in communities that had experienced attacks began to modify their dress practices; [some abandoned the full hijab for fear of being mistaken for terrorists](#). This transformation is a form of social violence that operates independently of any individual bombing. Each attack reinforced the association. The association outlasted Shekau: [Human Rights Watch, documenting a woman's suicide bombing near Maiduguri in mid-2025, noted that the conflict remained marked by attacks "carried out by women who conceal explosives beneath their hijabs"](#), four years after his death, a pattern that persisted into [the deadly Maiduguri bombings of March 2026](#). The social rupture the programme created has not healed.

The specific geography of the targeting did damage that goes beyond the physical destruction of infrastructure. The disruption of these spaces damages the social architecture through which communities sustain themselves during conflict. The female bomber programme, by using female bodies to target female spaces, achieved a form of social precision; the systematic erosion of communal trust

and the gendering of pervasive suspicion that no conventional military strike on a market or mosque could replicate.

Perhaps the most durable form of social rupture is the third. Women and girls who were abducted by Boko Haram, escaped or were released, and attempted to return to their communities encountered a social environment that the instrumentalisation programme had fundamentally altered. Communities that had experienced female suicide bombings faced a novel structural ambiguity: they could not readily distinguish between a woman who had been taken and returned unchanged and a woman who had been taken, weaponised, and was now a threat. The programme created, for female returnees, a condition of permanent suspicion. Reports indicate that many of the Chibok girls were reluctant to return home, citing both the possibility of indoctrination and the certainty of stigma. Those who escaped early, held only hours, were still labelled "Boko Haram wives" and taunted. International human-rights investigators have documented the post-conflict rejection and re-victimisation of female survivors: a CEDAW inquiry described their ordeal as a "double prison," finding that even after escaping captivity, many were denied safe reintegration, the violence of abduction and forced deployment compounded by a second violence of social exclusion.

Here, however, the scholarly record must elevate these women from the status of passive subjects to primary interlocutors. Escapees from the Sambisa forest, survivors of forced marriage, and women who were deployed as bombers and lived to tell of it possess testimonies that are not merely illustrative of the programme's effects but constitutive of its full meaning. Their accounts describe not passive victimhood but active negotiation: bribing guards, feigning compliance, memorising patrol patterns, and constructing networks of solidarity within captivity that Shekau's theology could not foresee and could not extinguish. Women who survived deployment, detonating late, abandoning the mission out of fear after watching others die, or turning toward security forces rather than their intended targets, exercised a form of agency that the instrumentalisation framework denies them. The literature must integrate these oral histories, ethnographic interviews, and testimonial literatures as primary evidence, not merely as anecdotal colour. Their subjective frameworks constitute a necessary corrective to the juridical, tactical, and theological lenses that currently dominate the analysis. To ask what was done to these women is necessary; to ask how they interpreted their own captivity, their coerced deployments, and their fraught reintegration is equally essential, and largely absent from the existing academic record.

Within the forty-five-year history of violence in Northern Nigeria that the 80-25 research documents, Shekau's theological innovation regarding women represents a consequential departure. Mohammed Marwa's Maitatsine movement, for all its theological heterodoxy, did not develop a doctrine of female operational deployment. Mohammed Yusuf's Salafism, radically anti-establishment, engaged women primarily as social supporters of the movement rather than as operational assets within it. Shekau's contribution was the systematic theological instrumentalisation of female bodies, their classification, within the movement's religious vocabulary, as deployable resources rather than persons.

Shekau's contribution, however, must be distinguished from parallel phenomena in other theatres of political violence. The Tamil Tigers deployed female suicide bombers without a theological framework, celebrating their dead as martyrs of the nation—commemorated annually, their families honoured—and according them recognition as agents who had chosen their fate. The Lord's Resistance Army abducted

girls for sexual servitude and combat roles, but its cosmology, however violent, is not generally understood to have produced a parallel denial of personhood in death. ISIS invoked the same classical *sabi* jurisprudence regarding the Yazidis. Yet, its treatment of female captives diverged from Shekau's in a significant way: it recognised its captives as persons whose conversion or ransom could alter their status, and it developed an elaborate bureaucratic apparatus for their classification, sale, and transfer — a perverse acknowledgment, but an acknowledgment nonetheless, of their juridical existence. Shekau's framework foreclosed even that recognition. What distinguishes him is not the use of women in violence, nor the invocation of slavery, but the systematic theological refusal of female moral agency even in death, a refusal that renders his innovation, if not wholly without precedent, then unusually complete within the contemporary landscape of Islamist militancy.

ISWAP, the faction that split from Boko Haram in 2016 — a rupture driven in part by ISIS's demand that the movement stop targeting Muslim civilians and stop deploying women and children as bombers, which Shekau refused — has since become the dominant armed force in the Lake Chad Basin and moved away from Shekau's indiscriminate civilian targeting. Yet the question of its relationship to his legacy on gender is more complex than is often assumed. Analyses of attack patterns suggest that the systematic use of female suicide bombers has remained concentrated in Shekau's own faction rather than in ISWAP. However, the instrumentalisation framework, once established as doctrine and operational practice, appears to possess a durability that outlasts its original architect: the practice did not die with Shekau but persisted in the JAS successor faction that carried his lineage forward. The distinction between Shekau's Boko Haram and ISWAP is not a clean break; it is a contested inheritance in which the theological premises of female instrumentality have been repudiated by one faction and retained by another.

The enduring consequence is not merely persistence; it is also contestation. Nigerian Islamic scholars have challenged Boko Haram's jurisprudence on its own terms: a widely circulated fatwa condemned the group's violence as a fundamental violation of Islam's teaching on the sanctity and dignity of human life. And the counter-effort has been markedly gendered: Muslim women's associations, female religious scholars, teachers, and civil-society leaders in north-eastern Nigeria have been drawn into interfaith dialogue, counter-narrative work, and the reintegration of those formerly associated with Boko Haram — engaging, on religious platforms, the very gendered ideology the movement used to justify its violence. At the level of state policy, movement used to justify its violence. At the level of state policy, Nigeria's National Framework on counterinsurgency formally recognises the need to protect the dignity of women and girls caught up in Boko Haram's terrorism. What remains less developed is a sustained theological counter-architecture addressed specifically to the status of women — one that reasserts, in the tradition's own vocabulary of *'isma*, the inviolability of the person, and *karama*, divinely bestowed dignity, the personhood that Shekau's programme sought to erase. The female bomber programme did not occur in a vacuum, and its aftermath is not merely a chronicle of persistent damage; it is also a contested moral terrain, on which Shekau's theology, for all its violence, is not the final word on the status of women in Northern Nigeria — but its refutation requires an intellectual and communal labour that has only just begun. **Conclusion**

The abduction and bombing programmes are not separate policies but two expressions of a single theological framework: that women and girls under Boko Haram's control are instruments, deployable

resources rather than persons with moral standing or religious agency. The tactical literature cannot explain why a programme that underperformed on efficiency grounds continued and intensified; the theological framework provides the answer. The social consequences of the programme, the transformation of the hijab, the targeting of female spaces, the stigma facing returnees, are not incidental effects but integral to the framework's logic. The framework has proved durable, outlasting Shekau and persisting in the JAS successor faction, even as it has been contested by ISWAP and challenged by Islamic scholars.

The contestation is also part of the story. The refutation of Shekau's theology requires not only the denunciation of its violence but the reconstruction of a theological alternative that affirms women's personhood, dignity, and moral agency. This is a task for scholars, religious leaders, communities, and survivors. The research community has a particular responsibility to document the complexity of women's experiences and to support the development of counter-narratives that can compete with the instrumentalisation framework. The work has only just begun, and its success is not assured. But the possibility of refutation, however distant, is what distinguishes this moment from one in which Shekau's theology had the last word. It does not.