

# When Workers Become **Targets**

NIGERIA







# The Road to Recovery Needs a Gender Focus

By Nkechi Odinukwe

Life in Nigeria's North-East region is gradually returning to normal, but at the peak of the Boko Haram insurgency, it was a living hell, according to workers, especially for women and young girls, who were seen by insurgents as pawns and weapons of war. The North-East experience is a clear reminder that every time conflict or war erupts, women and girls are disproportionately affected.<sup>1</sup> That is, while they experience the same trauma and danger as the rest of the population, they are also subjected to additional violence because they are women.

For many of us, violence or danger is an illusion; a distant reality when stories are far separated from our environment. But for most women of the North-East, violence is another word for reality. A lot has been said about Boko Haram and its reign of terror in some parts of northern Nigeria, but little has been written about the courage of working families of the region who risk their lives daily and defy danger to keep hope alive in a region struggling to overcome so much violence.

**When Workers Become Targets** is a special collection<sup>2</sup> of real-life experiences of workers, particularly women, in Borno State, North-East Nigeria, that allows us to critically reflect on how women are vulnerable to violence and oppression especially in places torn by insurgency and political instability. Stories provide an opportunity for people living in safe and secure work and family environments to spare a thought to the suffering that women caught in conflict-prone environments live every day while trying to carry out their reproductive and productive responsibilities.

These are the untold stories of bravery and courage of workers from sectors predominantly female and worst hit by the insurgency. Unions that suffered the greatest toll—like the Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT), National Association of Nigerian Nurses and Midwives (NANNM), Nigeria Civil Service Union (NCSU), Medical and Health Workers Union of Nigeria (MHWUN), Agriculture and Allied Employees Union (AAEUN) and Nigeria Union of Local Government Employees (NULGE) have quietly played a crucial role in the rehabilitation of people displaced by the insurgency. During the worst of the crisis, worker organizations and unions opened their offices to create temporary shelters for displaced families, feeding and providing basic support to workers, including the teachers' union building in Maiduguri. And unions never hesitated to hold government accountable by speaking out against the forced return of workers to unsafe areas.

<sup>1</sup> Women, Peace and Security, United Nations, 2002. See: <https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/files/womenpeaceandsecurity.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Stories were collected by Solidarity Center staff between 2016 and 2018.



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The Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT) alone has recorded over 546<sup>3</sup> deaths as a result of the crisis in Borno State, while the number of health workers who have died stands at 101.<sup>4</sup> This, however, has not discouraged organized labor leadership from continuing to organize and support members affected by the crisis.

**When Workers Become Targets** validates the fact that every human being has the power to change or shape their environment irrespective of how stark the situation may be. Food vendors, health care providers, teachers, housewives and working families in Nigeria's North-East all live in situations that might ordinarily render them powerless, yet they have managed to use the limited power at their disposal to build up rather than break down.

The stories shared in this report call for sober reflection regarding the situation of women and working families in North-East Nigeria and other parts of the world where conflict has made life unbearable for women. Government efforts at peace building are laudable. But it is critical that the federal, state and local governments and humanitarian bodies responding to the crisis do so with a gendered perspective in order to address the needs of women<sup>5</sup> carrying a disproportionate burden. A gendered analysis of the conflict's impact is needed to understand its depth and scope as well as design appropriate gendered responses. A clear example is the health needs of women in this region—so many women face a long road to physical and psychological recovery yet specialized trauma facilities and services are not accessible to many who need it.

*The Solidarity Center stands committed to the struggle for a world free from all forms of gender-based violence; a world where women will no longer remain pawns of war but are honored and respected for the value they add to the political economic and social status of every country. The Solidarity Center has been working with labor unions, informal worker associations and civil society organizations in North-East Nigeria since 2016, supporting their efforts to rebuild worker institutions and democratic structures destroyed as a result of the Boko Haram insurgency.*

3 Data as received from NUT, Borno State Chapter, July 2018.

4 Data as received from MHWUN, Borno State Chapter, July 2018.

5 It is estimated that about 54,911 widows have emerged and suddenly become heads of households as a result of the insurgency. See <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2017/10/52-311-borno-children-orphaned-boko-haram-insurgency-gov-shettima/>



# STORIES



**MY NAME IS ASMAU.** I am from Gwoza. I am a primary school teacher. I have seven children but lost one to the insurgency and am left with six children (one boy, five girls). I am a victim of Boko Haram. They killed my husband on August 5, 2014, with gun in my house.

Before now, Boko Haram used to kill men and spare women. So the men were always hiding themselves in the attic. That day, because of the heat, my husband was suffocating so he came down. Not long after, the Boko Haram terrorists entered and met him. We begged them, but they refused. He was killed right in front of my children and me. My female neighbors and I buried him because our men hid themselves so as not to be caught.

I now live in Maiduguri where I managed to rent a room because Gwoza is not settled yet. My mother also stays with me because she is displaced, too, so I care for 8 people (my mother, children and me) just in this one room.

For a year, my children couldn't go to school because we were just trying to get settled in Maiduguri. They resumed school after a year, though the school is very far from home, and they have to trek even in the midst of insecurity. We manage to survive; at times I will give them N10<sup>1</sup> or N20<sup>2</sup> (Nigerian naira) to manage for meal.

I am depressed and traumatized because of all I have passed through. I can't read well like before, can't remember things well as I sometimes forget my student's name. Sometimes when my children are sick, I have to go and buy single pills since that is what I can afford. I manage from my salary. I don't get any assistance from anybody, not even the NGOs.

I now teach in Bakassi IDP (internally displaced persons) camp since I am among those selected to teach there at times. I manage to rent a room, pay school fees and feed eight mouths with N30,000<sup>3</sup> salary. Since food is too expensive in Borno now because of the insurgency, we barely eat twice a day. I also look around for petty work (no matter how dirty it seems) for additional income.

I would appreciate help in the area of my children's schooling and feeding. My second daughter is very brilliant as she always takes the first position in her class and would need assistance to actually be what she ought to be.



**MY NAME IS MONDAY.** I am a mother of five. I lost one to insurgents and am now left with four. I work at Bama General Hospital as a nurse. My husband worked at Umar Ibn Ibrahim College of Science and Technology as a lecturer. My husband was schooling in Yola for his master's degree before his death. He was not aware of what was happening in Bama though I used to tell him on the phone that some people are killing others around here in Bama.

1 Less than 1 cent.

2 ibid

3 About \$83.

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"I asked for my last-born child, who I could not see. They replied that they (my husband and last born) have been burned to death. I fainted as I heard this."

When he came to visit one time, the children said they wanted us to go home with him because Bama wasn't livable any longer. My husband was preparing to see if we could actually return to our hometown (AskiraUba). so he traveled to there to prepare our village home for us. I learned that somebody called him on the phone from his school, I don't know who.

On Sunday, April 7, 2013, my husband returned from AskiraUba around 5 p.m. I was on night duty, so I left for work. One of my daughters called me around 11 p.m. that I should come home and bring soldiers. I asked where her daddy was; she replied by saying the house has been set on fire. My opinion was that everyone had come out. I tried going home that same night but was not allowed out of the hospital compound by the security guards. The guards said I might be killed since it was already late in the night.

In the morning, fellow nurses escorted me and, on our way, we met with soldiers. When they stopped, I saw my children with them and I asked for my last-born child, who I could not see. They replied that they (my husband and last born) have been burned to death. I fainted as I heard this.

It pained me a lot because we were the first set of people attacked at Bama. I had lived in Bama for several years. I had sacrificed myself to work for this community, without pay, to treat sick people, set drips and even deliver their babies. We felt we were at home, until we were proved wrong by the insurgents.

I have lost everything! Things are extremely difficult as we are starting life all over. We now live in Maiduguri though we are not used to the environment. The children's schooling and transportation are challenging. I developed high blood pressure because of all this. The funniest thing is that there is nobody to comfort or even ask after the children. I receive no consolation from anywhere except from colleagues who are union members (NANNM).

Two of my sisters are experiencing health issues due to the insurgency—they lost their legs. While I was staying with one of them who was admitted to the nursing home, the Governor came visiting. One of my superiors introduced me to him and explained my situation to him. His response was, "You are a nurse, that means you can take care of yourself," and that was all from him. My challenge now is my daughter's admission into the College of Midwifery. She has a very good (exam) result, and we applied but couldn't get admission.



**MY NAME IS MAIRO.** I live at Maigu, and I am a member of NUT, a teacher and a mother of four. My husband was a soldier. I lost my husband one year, eight months ago though the military has refused to pronounce him dead. It wouldn't pain me as much as this if I have the privilege to see my husband's body.

I grew up without a father and mother, it was my uncle who took care of me until I married. Recently, that same uncle was burned in a commercial vehicle on his way going somewhere by Boko Haram. Apart from my husband's salary/entitlement, there is no help from anywhere.





**MY NAME IS JOSEPHINA.**<sup>4</sup> I am a nurse and a member of the National Association of Nigerian Nurses and Midwives NANNM. One of the terrible experiences I witnessed was when relief materials were distributed to displaced persons. My house is near one of the IDPs camp, so we are neighbors. Before they could collect relief materials, they had to have a card given by the NGO and be on queue. Those that knew the officials there tried to find their way to be favored and attended to first.

Because of impatience on the part of displaced persons, there was struggling, and in the process of the struggle to get relief materials, a pregnant woman was pushed down and stampeded by other people. She was greatly injured and had a miscarriage on account of that. When the husband found out she had lost the pregnancy while trying to get food and other materials for her family, that eventually led to their divorce because the husband said it was without his consent. While that one was being attended to, another pregnant woman was stampeded, she collapsed and in the process lost her life... Both in a day that I witnessed.

That led me to interview some women because I wanted to find out how they get relief materials because some were complaining that the materials don't get to them. I found out that some were taken advantage of (sexually harassed) and some even paid to get what they are meant to be given for free. They dare not complain, and if they do they will be beaten by the civilian JTFs<sup>5</sup>.

To children, they have no food. The insurgents rendered them vulnerable as they have to move from house to house to beg for food. The young girls are therefore taken advantage of as they will not receive anything until they have slept with them. This leads to unwanted pregnancies and single parenthood. I have one of the girls in my house now. Some are exposed to sexually transmitted diseases, and that explains why there is a high rate of HIV in Borno State. In respect to ward aids, some aids come from government, but the larger percentage is from the NGOs. Whoever gives money gets materials, and there is also this sentiment in the distribution of the relief materials.

The union at the beginning was distributing N50,000<sup>6</sup> to affected members. Even at the national headquarters, as a result of the workshop we had with the Solidarity Center, national leadership assisted with N300,000<sup>7</sup> for the purpose of assisting the affected members. But as there were many, we couldn't afford to continue.

Also, the most pressing need for women workers is the need to be rehabilitated first (psychotherapy). After the insurgency, the workers now go to work freely, we even go on shift. Before now, one dares not go out because of fear of unknown and insecurity.



<sup>4</sup> Pseudonym used as requested by interviewee

<sup>5</sup> NOTE: The Civilian Joint Task Force (JTF) are local civilian militia groups formed to combat Boko Haram. Examples of JTF success exist, including the arrest of Boko Haram members and help to the security forces negotiating unfamiliar geographic territories. However, JTF members are also implicated in urban vigilante violence. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/nigerias-civilian-joint-task-force>. Accessed August 27, 2018

<sup>6</sup> About \$138.

<sup>7</sup> About \$833.

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**MY NAME IS HANATU.** I am a member of Nigeria Postal and Telecommunication Services (NUPTTE). My story is about my colleague in the office who is a cleaner, the husband is a policeman. The husband was a victim of the bomb blast that occurred at the state secretariat and that led to his death, leaving behind six children to be taken care of by the poor cleaner. Feeding the children, schooling and paying rent has been challenging to her. She receives help from nowhere.



**MY NAME IS ZAINAB.** I work with Borno State Specialist Hospital, Laboratory Department and I am member of the health workers union. I am from Chibok. Nine of the abducted Chibok school girls were from my immediate family, and one of these victims just gave birth and decided to return to school for exams leaving the child with my sister to watch over. This led to health challenges for the family head. (He developed high blood pressure, which resulted in loss of sight, and he also became deaf). A man from my place who is a major general helped in talking to one of the soldiers to bring the father to us in Maiduguri. We had to spend much in the hospital to do various operations.

When the government wanted to take people from Chibok to IDP camps, some of my relations who had found their way to Maiduguri and environs refused. Some (more than 30 people) stayed with me for a while before they could find a means of a living in Maiduguri.

Sometimes, the NGOs don't reach the needy ones. The stakeholders will not allow people to come close, yet the donors will not know these vulnerable persons did not get the acclaimed help/aid. I am sure it will be helpful if aid could come through the unions. We are not selfish since we fight for the well-being of fellow humans.

The simple truth is that people are suffering. Children move from house to house to seek/beg for food and in the process, young girls would be taken advantage of (sexually abused). Sometimes, after aid is given at the IDP camp, the people in-charge of distribution will come back to meet those who managed to get one (aid package) per person and then pair two or three people with that person to share the one while they retrieve the other ones.

Challenges these vulnerable people face vary from unwanted pregnancies to various STDs, poor hygienic environment, no proper healthcare and sometimes they are even given expired foods to eat.



**MY NAME IS HAWA.** I am a teacher in Maiduguri. I am member of NUT. My husband is Mallam Ajili Mala. He was a teacher at the government day secondary school Maiduguri. On the September 25, 2012, in Maiduguri, my husband drove me to my place of work. After dropping me off, he drove to where he taught. He was shot dead by one Boko Haram member, who was alleged to be one of his students, at the school gate.

This happened 30 minutes after he dropped me at my own place of work. I was three months pregnant when my husband died. I collapsed when I got the news of his demise and was taken home.



Since his demise, I have suffered... gone through emotional and physical challenges, passed through hard times. We had four children before his demise, three girls and a boy. My first son is 18 years old and is now a first-year agriculture student at University of Maiduguri. My second child is 16 years old. My third child is 13 years old in JSS2, and my last child is 8 years old. Life has not been easy for me at all. Even to pay my children's school fees and our house rent has been a very big problem. I had to apply for my transfer from the school where I teach to where I now teach because, at a point, money to pay my transportation fare became a problem.

As for the pregnancy I was carrying when my husband died, I delivered the baby, but the baby did not survive. I have been borrowing money from friends—even our head teacher—for my children's school fees, their upkeep and our house rent just to make ends meet and to meet our other needs. My husband's people do not care about our welfare. They on their own part are not financially okay.

Women and children are suffering, even those in the IDP camps. Their conditions are deteriorating. The government did not pay us my late husband's benefit, and he died in active service. The union in Borno state lost too many of its members. They have equally been asking for the government's assistance, but the government has not done much.

In 2014, the union called us and gave us N10,000<sup>8</sup> each and a bag of rice. Since then we have not heard from the union. My priority now is how to get financial support for my family to enable me take care of my children. I equally want the government to pay us my husband's benefit. Men have a better chance than women in terms of remarrying, but women may not like to remarry because of their children, who may be placed under a wrong hand where they will suffer. Women are always afraid that they won't be able to take care of their children when they remarry. Considering what has been going on in Borno state since the insurgency, my advice for my fellow women is to try all their very best to take part in any activity that will help educate their children for them to know their rights.

My advice to the government is that they should make laws that those affected by the insurgency in Borno state should have their children educated by the government to alleviate their pains and sufferings. At a point I felt like giving up my teaching job because the alleged killer of my husband was his student. I lacked the courage to stand and teach them again, but I later summoned courage to go back. The principal even knew the name of the boy who shot my husband. The boy was shot two months later after killing my husband.



**MY NAME IS YAGANA.** I reside in Maiduguri. I am a civil servant. I am a member of medical and health trade union. I was not directly affected by the insurgency but witnessed what people passed through during the insurgency and after the insurgency. Food is being distributed to women at a hotel near where I live because of the insurgency. By 5 o'clock in the morning, women are already lined up waiting for the food to be shared. Sometimes they will stay from morning til night without food nor drink and still go home with nothing.

<sup>8</sup> About \$28.

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In the process of struggling to get food, some women lost their babies (two women I knew). The food that is being shared is sometimes expired food. I know that the trade union gave out money and foods to the affected members. Some NGO's like WHO, UNICEF equally helped in the distribution of foods. They have their clinics at the IDP camps. They equally took care of malnourished children.

Most women are traumatized now and medical assistance for them is a pressing need. We need to enlighten them through training, creating awareness and giving them resources to enable them to know how to handle the pain they have been through and start life again. On how the union should address conflict issues bothering women, I suggest that the union should be fully involved in decision-making and in any activities concerning women.

I must commend the union at state level for its intervention. They asked us to accommodate our colleagues who were affected and displaced. Our chairman always tried reaching out to those affected in the hospitals to offer them a helping hand.



**MY NAME IS BINTA** and I am 30 years old. I had a normal life up to four-and-a-half years ago but now teach in Yerwa Internally Displaced Peoples Camp, Borno State. I remember a time when I could move around freely without restrictions, without fear. This is not so now. I know I must now always pray to get back home as a suicide bomb attack could happen anywhere, without warning. Before coming to teach in the camp, my family owned their own house, but I now have to pay rent for one small room I share with two of my children. What I saw during the insurgency is too difficult to narrate. I lost most of my relatives to terror attacks and the trauma has yet to leave me. Even now, out of fear, I had to send some of my children away to live with distant relatives in areas considered safe. Separating my family in such a painful manner is the only way I know to prevent any eventuality at any given time. Even with all the misery in my life, my spirit is only psychologically battered but it is not broken. Once there is life, I will continue to manage my life, as God alone knows why all this has happened to me. All that my husband used to do, I now do. But I never have enough for my family needs.



**MY NAME IS IBRAHIM.**<sup>9</sup> I am a 40-year-old primary school teacher from Gubio. I am a member of the teachers' union. I moved to the Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT) secretariat and was housed temporarily there by my union. It was from here that I moved with my family to Teachers Housing Estate, which is a makeshift camp for displaced workers, in November 2014.

Before the insurgency, farming was a good source of additional income for my family needs, but now my family fully depends on my salary even as we have had to deal with additional family expenses. My family now spends an additional N4000 for firewood that only lasts for five weeks, as compared to the N1000 (\$5) we used to spend over a period of six months. I am also taking care of the two wives and children of my slain brothers with my meager salary.

<sup>9</sup> Pseudonym based on interviewee's request.



This has brought untold hardship to my family as my salary is no longer enough. At least I have a salary to depend on at the end of the month, and I thank my union and the state government for that. Even while the insurgency was on, government continued to pay teachers their salary. If not for this gesture, I do not know how I would have fared with my family. I am just happy to be alive today. Each time I hear the story of one of my comrades who died, I shudder that it could have been me. I thank Allah for sparing me. It is true I lost my house and that I am presently displaced, but it is better than being dead as only the living have hope. You asked if I regret being a teacher? No, not at all. I will not regret what I have chosen to do because insurgents ran me off my home. I will remain a teacher forever. That is what I have been born to do.



**MY NAME IS ZAINAB.** I am a 43-year-old grandmother and a teacher. I lost four of my family members (husband, two sons and daughter) to Boko Haram insurgency. I watched one of my daughters die with her unborn child as a result of pregnancy health complications, which could have been prevented had there been a well-equipped hospital and proper medical attention in our insurgency-torn community. My younger brother, a fruit trader, died from a Boko Haram bomb planted in the community market, while my son was slaughtered by insurgents when the mosque he was praying in was invaded in an early morning attack. I am still struggling to overcome what my eyes saw during this period. As a result of all these experiences, I am now stricken with high blood pressure and persistent fainting spells. I cannot even afford proper medical care as I am solely dependent on my meagre salary. Even to keep going to school to teach is now a big struggle for me. But if I do not go to work, how will I survive? Look at me. I used to be better than this. People who used to know me will tell you that I am now a skeleton of my former vivacious self. My loved ones died, and I am alive. Only God knows the reason he spared me. I will continue to educate many young ones and give hope to many who are fast losing hope of ever regaining their normal life; that is the way I have chosen to honor my lost family members.



**MY NAME IS MARIAM.** I am originally from Abadam but presently live in Bokolis Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) Camp. I am 35 years old and a primary school teacher. I came to the camp in 2014 after I lost my home to Boko Haram insurgency. I now tutor children under trees, a stark opposite to the formal classrooms at my former workplace. With so much instability around me, I had to take up the extra form of employment of selling veils to augment earnings and support my family since my husband can no longer work. This means longer work hours for me despite my primary household care responsibility.

It is true that the insurgents have forbidden us to teach boko (Western education), but that is the only profession I have. I will therefore remain a teacher all my life.



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