

Case 3: Combating Stigma and Radicalization through Islamic Peace Education



		Thematic Areas
Country	Nigeria	
Organization	Allamin Foundation for Peace and Development	
Programme	Engaging Young Women Who Were Wives and Ex Combatants of the JAS Insurgency in MMC and Jere Local Government Area Communities of Borno State	

Summary

Allamin Foundation for Peace and Development provides support to women and girl returnees and works with community leaders to reduce stigma and reintegrate them into society. Through its work, Allamin has developed a holistic community-based reintegration module, combining it with realignment of social norms in communities where Boko Haram has heavily recruited. They have also initiated two women’s groups, seeking accountability and justice for victims of enforced disappearance and survivors of mass atrocities. One is led by victims and the other by relatives of Boko Haram members. Following extensive interviews with women and girl returnees in the internally displaced persons (IDP) camps of Borno State, Allamin is now working to transform the ideologies of women and girls who have returned from Boko Haram through emotional support, religious mentorship, skills training, and community sensitization. Through the local radio and religious leaders, Allamin works to counter the prevailing stigma against these girls, calling upon communities to “take back their daughters.”

Context

Over the past eight years, the violent extremist group Boko Haram—whose name translates as “Western education is forbidden”—has conducted hundreds of deadly terrorist attacks, frequently using children, and increasingly women, to target mosques, schools, markets and churches in northern Nigeria.²²⁸ Eighty-three children were used as suicide bombers alone in 2017.²²⁹ Boko Haram has also kidnapped more than 1,000 children in Nigeria since 2013, including the 110 Dapchi schoolgirls this year.²³⁰ During the colonial era, missionaries in Nigeria introduced Western education in regions where Islam was not present, creating a perception that such education was not for religious people. This misperception underpins Boko Haram’s ideology.²³¹ However, poor governance, corruption, patrimonial policies, marginalization, and exclusion of communities, particularly women and girls, have all motivated people to join Boko Haram.

²²⁸ ICAN (2018), How Hamsatu Allamin Changed Boko Haram to Boko Halal in Nigeria (available at: <http://www.icanpeacework.org/2018/01/08/hamsatu-allamin-nigeria/>).

²²⁹ Al Jazeera (2017), UNICEF: Boko Haram use of child bombers soars (available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/08/unicef-boko-haram-child-bombers-soars-170822160541719.html>).

²³⁰ CNN (2018), UNICEF: Boko Haram has kidnapped more than 1000 children in Nigeria (available at: <https://www.cnn.com/2018/04/13/africa/boko-haram-children-abduction-intl/index.html>).

²³¹ ICAN (2018), How Hamsatu Allamin Changed Boko Haram to Boko Halal in Nigeria (available at: <http://www.icanpeacework.org/2018/01/08/hamsatu-allamin-nigeria/>).

The government of Nigeria initially responded to Boko Haram with a Joint Task Force (JTF) of all security agencies, led by the military.²³² The military mismanaged the situation with gross human rights violations, such as arresting all youth and burning homes in the name of counter-terrorism operations. Since Boko Haram exists within local communities, this behaviour increased recruitment for Boko Haram to take revenge.²³³ When the military intervenes, they usually arrest the men and their wives and families are not informed of their whereabouts.

Allamin Foundation for Peace and Development is a not-for-profit, non-political, non-religious and non-governmental peacebuilding organization, founded in response to the pervasive illiteracy level, widespread abject poverty, and long period of neglect suffered in the northeast region of Nigeria. These factors led to emergence of the Boko Haram insurgency in Borno, from where it spread across to northern Nigeria to extend throughout the Sahel, resulting in a humanitarian and social crisis to which local actors did not have the capacity to respond. Allamin Foundation aims to significantly reduce the entrenched culture of silence in society and empower stakeholders to take responsibility for managing their conflict and grievances in a non-violent manner. Through its field research, Allamin has identified four categories of women and girl returnees:

- Those who joined Boko Haram because of the ideology and became commanders
- Those who married men with the ideology
- Those abducted by Boko Haram
- Those who are children under the age of 19 and became child soldiers.

Women and girls who have been associated with Boko Haram through marriage or as child soldiers have returned due to experiences of violence and injustice within the group. Between the ages of 12 and 35 years, often married and either pregnant or with young children, these girls have no homes to return to. Some who are still girls, but considered women by society, have reportedly abandoned their children to find a way to survive. Boko Haram kidnapped girls as a strategy for breeding future jihadis.²³⁴ This knowledge has created fear and stigma that poses a challenge to community acceptance upon their return. Maiduguri has three IDP camps where women—when screened and released by the military—finally settle to continue their lives. As women return to their communities, community members do not know whether the women have truly disengaged from Boko Haram and therefore do not trust them. As they do not know the level of their amount or type of involvement in the group, they treat the women with suspicion, stigmatize them and their children, and exclude them.

OBJECTIVES	STAKEHOLDERS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Deradicalization, reintegration and rehabilitation of ex-wives, ex-fighters and those associated with them in Borno State ■ Reducing stigma against women and girl returnees in local communities through intra-community dialogue. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Allamin Foundation for Peace and Development ■ Federation of Muslim Women’s Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN) ■ HERWA Community Development Association ■ Jam’atu Nasril Islam (JNI) ■ Islamic scholars ■ Skilled persons and tradespeople ■ Ministry of Women’s Affairs ■ State Emergency Management Authority (IDP camp coordinator)

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Allamin, Hamsatu at GSX Oslo workshop, April 2018.

Strategy and Implementation

The rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives of Allamin Foundation, built on years of work in a context of ongoing war and conflict, are conducted by Mrs. Hamsatu Allamin in partnership with several organizations, notably the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN), HERWA Community Development Association, and Jam'atu Nasril Islam (JNI). By organizing dialogues with multiple stakeholders—both state and non-state actors including service providers, CSOs, and security agencies—they have built trusting relationships with communities affected by Boko Haram to help them heal from their trauma and prepare themselves to welcome returnees back into their community.

Allamin uses intra-community dialogue to foster reintegration of returnees and dialogue within schools to support the return of children from communities where violent extremist groups had heavily recruited. They also support the economic empowerment of women by training them in skills and income-generating activities, promoting the culture of saving, and identifying trades or small businesses of their choice for which they are given small seed grants. This makes them self-reliant and encourages them to promote their children's education.

Allamin has worked with Islamic scholars to develop counter-narratives to address the religious ideology underlying extremism, weaving together human rights principles and conflict resolution and peacebuilding skills with Islamic teachings to transform the societal attitude of "Boko Haram" into "Boko Halal". Utilizing local radio, Allamin shares religious messages, including Qur'anic verses and Hadith (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad); good practices from other conflict-affected areas; and relevant research findings to help the community understand that abducted girls returning from violent extremist groups are not at fault. It is necessary to win their hearts and minds so as to interrupt the circle of violent thinking and indoctrination of their children and the young people who live with them.

In the Borno state of northeast Nigeria, Allamin has formed networks of women in response to the number who have returned to their communities after being rescued from occupied territories, or from the Sambisa Forests. The women return for many reasons: to see family members, whom they claim to have missed; because of marital discord and violence from husbands and co-wives; to escape the increasing unhappiness with violence in the Boko Haram camps, noting hypocrisy, injustice, and concerns about safety; or to avoid being forced to carry out suicide attacks, which women with Boko Haram must undertake if they have been widowed twice. Others who have returned said they did not choose to disassociate themselves but circumstances such as heavy rain or getting lost in the course of an operation forced them to surrender to soldiers. Notably, none of the women return as a result of changed ideology.



Hamsatu Allamin, founder of Allamin Foundation

Another group consists of women who have experienced separation and arbitrary arrest by the Nigerian military, with missing husbands, fathers or sons, who are now at risk of radicalization because of the frustration of losing their loved ones. Some of these women were arrested and detained along with their children for as long as three years. Allamin has advocated for these women to be released or handed over to the police for investigation as



Young women reading in northeast Nigeria

they have grave concerns of human rights violations in these centres. However, the police are not perceived as trustworthy since the military and vigilantes have played a more prominent role in protecting communities from Boko Haram. Working with women Islamic scholars, Allamin strives to create a safe space for them within both the IDP camps and receiving communities where they are discriminated against due to their connection with Boko Haram.

Along with other human rights defenders and organizations, Allamin has contributed to interviewing 1,600 women who have formed the Knasar (Knifar) Movement of women separated from their husbands. They said they are not Boko Haram and seek accountability and justice for their losses. Allamin is helping organize them to raise their collective voice. Women and young girls with this profile spanned a wide spectrum in their attitude towards their former groups. Many are actively seeking and planning ways to rejoin, especially given what they have gone through while in military detention, and finding society worse than when they left it. Thus, the need to engage them in deradicalization and rehabilitation cannot be overemphasized.

Based on this research, Allamin is developing a deradicalization, rehabilitation and reintegration initiative that seeks to instil positive behaviours in young women who are ex-wives and ex-combatants through life, social, and economic skills-building. Three social groups of 10 women each are being formed, and a safe space was created for them to meet and interact with each other. This enables them to reflect on their past, share experiences and gain access to services like psychosocial and trauma healing support. Through dialogue with women Islamic scholars, they are introduced to newly developed and accepted norms to change their psyche through religious messaging, based on an understanding of their perception and indoctrination. After identifying what skills they have or want to learn, Allamin facilitates training and mentorship by skilled persons in order to build economic independence, which is vital for resilience and re-engagement.

Progress and Results

- Emergence of more women with this profile, who come forth on their own to reveal their identity and seek to be included in these life-changing initiatives

Lessons Learned and Challenges

- Focused engagement with women returnees can actually influence their thinking and result in them realizing their mistakes in joining or marrying into the group.
- Almost all the beneficiaries talked about the desire for peace in their wishes for the future; engaging with them rekindled their hopes and they are eager to cooperate to contribute to making it happen.
- Every individual wants to be given attention and be listened to no matter how violent their disposition.
- Despondency and hopelessness about effecting any change in society is now giving way to real hope, as they are excited by being remembered and considered worthy by a portion of society.
- Civil society actors engaging returnees risk being branded as sympathizers of Boko Haram by the authorities.
- The empowerment women and girls enjoyed in the extremist camps, combined with the disempowering nature of their circumstances now, will likely generate re-radicalization if not handled quickly.
- The sense of hopelessness and desire to return to Boko Haram was striking in many.

Sustainability and Potential Application

The results of this initiative will be used to design a live phone-in radio programme to reach the wider society. The programme will address stigma and other issues related to returning women and girls. Due to the challenges of access and security risks, such an intervention is rare. The findings and outcomes of this initiative will be published in various forms and made available to those working in different contexts for comparative study and reference.



Hamsatu Allamin speaks during a workshop