"We Were Changing the World"
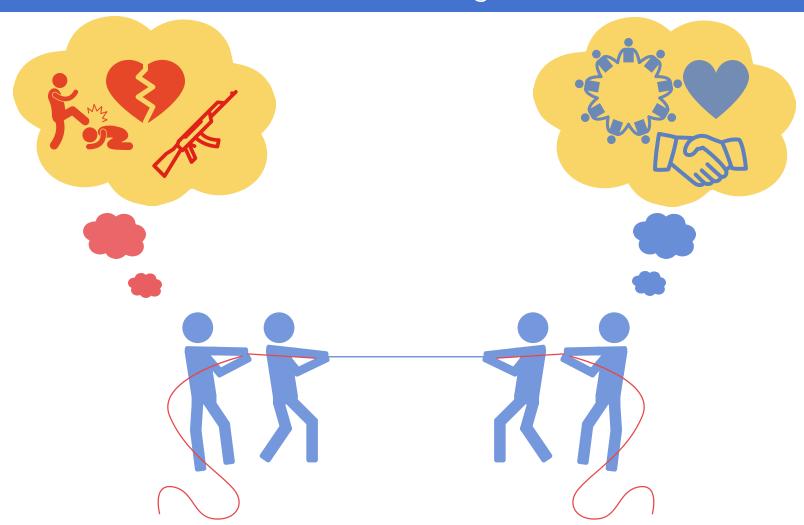
Radicalization and Empowerment among Young People Associated with Armed Opposition Groups in Northeast Nigeria

October 2018

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Acronyms

AOG	Armed Opposition Group (blanket term used to cover JAS and ISWA, groups often called Boko Haram)
CJTF	Civilian Joint Taskforce
CVE	Countering violent extremism
DDRR	Disarmament, demobilization, reintegration, and rehabilitation
EAI	Equal Access International
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP	Internally displaced person
ISWA	Wilayat al Islamiyya Gharb Afriqiyyah
JAS	Jama'atu Ahlis Sunnah Lida'awati wal Jihad
LGA	Local government area
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PYD	Positive youth development

I.   Introduction

The conflict in Northeast Nigeria has evolved in complexity and intensity since 2009, now extending beyond the country's borders into the Lake Chad Basin. While many associated with armed opposition groups[1] (AOGs) have done so against their will, these groups have demonstrated the ability to mobilize support and offer a sense of belonging, purpose, and community. As the violent conflict in northern Nigeria enters its tenth year, there is a need for a new strategy that examines the assets and agencies of vulnerable youth, prioritizes positive youth development approaches to transforming radicalization, and creates humanizing offramps for radicalized youth to reintegrate into society. As leadership of AOGs has fragmented along ideological lines, there is a unique opportunity to strengthen direct engagement with those who have left or wish to leave these groups. There is also space for strategic communications to challenge the group's violent and fundamentalist narratives, more deeply explore core motivating factors, and channel community assets and visions for inclusive pro-social outcomes.

Prospects for peace are increasingly defined by the ability to rehabilitate and reintegrate thousands of those formerly associated with AOGs, both as fighters and in support roles. Those seeking disengagement range across a spectrum of forced to voluntary association, likely requiring different approaches and interventions to attend to their reintegration. State responses continue to focus on kinetic operations, while state-led programs for the disarmament, demobilization, reintegration, and rehabilitation (DDRR) of former fighters are yet to be fully operational. Given that the Nigerian government has publicly announced ongoing ceasefire negotiations and an ultimate end to hostilities,[2] effective DDRR is growing increasingly relevant and urgent.

This study contributes to understanding the relationship between empowerment and radicalization[3] through interviews with young people who were ideologically aligned with AOGs in northeast Nigeria. The intent is for findings to inform and strengthen DDRR efforts by first studying young peoples' assets, agencies, and resiliencies. As our report highlights, the majority of our respondents (16 out of 22) were under the age of 18 when they became associated with AOGs. As such, it is critical that interventions be designed to target underage youth as well as young adults.

Rooted in a positive youth development (PYD) framework, our findings aim to provide specific guidance to strengthen a shared agenda and address evidence gaps related to youth risk, resilience, and assets in northeast Nigeria. These findings are designed to inform a more nuanced conversation and a more humane approach to engaging youth, their families, communities, and governments so that *all* youth in environments affected by violent extremism can be empowered to reach their full potential. These findings and subsequent recommendations have important implications for the fields of conflict management, transforming extremism, development, and peacebuilding and can help practitioners to develop more effective strategies to leverage and reorient the assets and impulses of radicalized individuals in a way that leads toward pro-social outcomes.

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[1]Please note that in the interests of accuracy and conflict sensitivity, the research will use the exact names of the groups involved where relevant and the term armed opposition groups to refer to all those active in the northeast as opposed to using the blanket term 'Boko Haram.' This term, rather than being the name of the groups themselves, is one given to them by the media and serves to simplify their message and aims. Furthermore, given the split in the group and the different tactics, strategies and engagement with civilians that groups have, using a blanket term to refer to all groups does not adequately reflect reality.

[2]F. Onuah, 'Nigeria Talking to Boko Haram about Possible Ceasefire,' *Reuters*, 25 March 2018.

[3]These terms will be explained and used in specific ways throughout the study.

The interview-based research was designed to assess the extent to which radicalization and participation in AOGs was an empowering experience for youth, and to better understand the structural motivators and individual incentives that facilitate young people's engagement. This should serve to inform the design of countervailing mechanisms that build assets, develop agency, and create opportunities for marginalized youth.

This paper builds on the Equal Access International (EAI) report, "Two Sides of the Same Coin? An Examination of the Cognitive and Psychosocial Pathways Leading to Empowerment and Radicalization, and Forging a Path to Reorient Violent Radicalization."[4] The earlier report unpacks key theories of empowerment and radicalization, uncovering and expounding on shared elements between these concepts for "the purpose of leveraging and transforming often destructive processes and behaviors associated with radicalization for positive, pro-social outcomes." Our research explores how many de-radicalization programs center reform on the "radicalized" individual often invalidating legitimate grievances. This gap in program design often misses a critical opportunity to harness the individual's potential for positive action and overlooks the environmental influences by which the individual exists, namely predatory communities, institutions, states, and the need to transform these institutions to truly foster sustainable peacebuilding. The research suggests that processes of radicalization and empowerment are characterized by a similar motivational framework grounded in the pursuit of agency, group bonding, and tangible change. As such, de-radicalization programs face a difficult challenge of fulfilling and catering to certain immutable psychosocial needs, while also moving an individual away from a group in which they were previously an active member.

The concept of 're-radicalization,' as explored in the previous report, aims to channel energy of 'radicalized' individuals in positive ways that benefit the whole society by recognizing, enhancing, and channeling their agency, commitment, leadership, and self-efficacy while reorienting their attitudes, behaviors, and impulses from violence to non-violent civic engagement. The original "Two Sides of the Same Coin?" report was largely grounded is desk and field research with Western foreign fighters and jihadis from the Middle East and North Africa. To date, there has been little related research conducted in the Lake Chad Basin region. This present report applies the first report's theoretical analysis to the context of northeast Nigeria and shows the ways in which AOGs build a sense of belonging, meaning and purpose, persuading members that they are living in 'an ideal society' as they consolidate and intensify group norms. Both reports aim to reframe our thinking of radicalization in an effort to conceptualize and implement more programming options to engage potentially radicalized and ideologically aligned individuals and opposition groups more fully and humanely.

II. Methodology

Primary respondents for this research included 22 individuals who were associated with JAS and/ or ISWA. 18 core respondents are young people (11 women and 7 men) aged between 18 and 35. The majority (10 women and 5 men) of the respondents are under the age of 26, all of whom were or continue to be ideologically aligned with AOGs operating in northeast Nigeria. An additional seven people interviewed (1 woman and 3 men) are either older, were forced to become associated with these groups, or joined due to financial incentives. As the study uses qualitative research methodology and given this sample size,

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[4]M. Niconchuk, K. Dietrich, "Two Sides of the Same Coin? An Examination of the Cognitive and Psychosocial Pathways Leading to Empowerment and Radicalization, and Forging a Path to Reorient Violent Radicalization." (Equal Access International, May 2018), Available at http://www.youthpower.org/resources/two-sides-same-coin-examination-cognitive-and-psychosocial-pathways-leading-empowerment

please note that findings are illustrative, not representative of those associated with AOGs in northeast Nigeria.

Researchers identified respondents through partner contacts and networks. This process was assisted by researchers' knowledge and experience in Borno state, as well as the trust inherent in the networks through which respondents were reached. In the selection of respondents, researchers did not aim for representativeness but, rather, to provide a snapshot of perspectives of young people who demonstrated some level of agency in their association with AOGs and who joined and left different AOGs at different times and for different reasons.

More readily accessible to researchers are those who were abducted or otherwise forced to be part of AOGs who are willing to speak about their experiences. It is challenging to locate young people who self-identify as being associated with AOGs for ideological reasons. This is likely attributable to the high levels of distrust, stigma, and suspicion encountered socially, as well as risks of physical harm if identified as such by community members, community militias, or the military. Clearly some of these distinctions between willing participation versus forced recruitment are hard to confirm, as it cannot be known with any certainty whether this was actually the case or respondents were reluctant to share stories of voluntary association. It took substantial amounts of time to build up trust with respondents so they were able to speak openly.[5] Researchers were respectful of respondents' choices as to the extent to which to share information rather than forcing them to reveal experiences they did not want to discuss.

The conceptual distinction between willing versus forced participation in armed groups is often not clear cut in practice: there can be elements of coercion and voluntariness for any particular individual. However, this distinction is one of many important psychological factors to be considered as it has implications for trauma healing, rehabilitation, and direct engagement work. Out of 22 respondents, 19 spoke of having been associated with groups willingly, of which 15 respondents were aged 18 to 35. In terms of current attitudes towards the group, three respondents (2 women, 1 man) regret leaving the group, with some of them actively seeking and planning ways to rejoin; seven respondents (2 women, 5 men) feel connected to one or more of the AOGs but see them as perpetrating injustice themselves; and nine respondents (5 women, 4 men) plus three women who were abducted are completely disconnected from and negative towards the group.

A semi-structured interview guide was designed and delivered using appreciative inquiry. The guide was reviewed for conflict sensitivity and meaningful integration of gender and social inclusion. Interviews were conducted in English, Hausa, and/or Kanuri at the discretion of the respondent. Some interviews used a mix of languages. Interviews were transcribed and transcripts analyzed using grounded theory with codes and themes emerging naturally from the data itself. This coding is reflected in the structure of findings.

A robust ethical approach was followed, with systems put in place to ensure adherence to the highest ethical standards at all times, particularly given the subject nature of the research and profile of respondents. This approach included ensuring respondents were clear about the aims of the research and what involvement meant for them in terms of risks and benefits[6] and obtaining informed consent. It also meant respondents received adequate support during the research process to be able to participate fully.

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[5]For example, one respondent only revealed her ideological affinity to the group after her interview finished thereby contradicting her earlier statements. This shift required the interview to be re-conducted which meant that it took half a day to elicit the story of just one respondent.

[6]Respondents were informed that no programmatic interventions would directly be forthcoming but that the research study aimed to inform policy and programme approaches to those formerly associated with AOGs.

Information was treated sensitively and confidentially, with anonymity preserved. Referral pathways were established.

Interviews were conducted outside the respondents' usual surroundings in a quiet and safe space to ensure privacy, safety, and security. Interviews were stopped in a number of instances where respondents became distressed after which respondents were referred to pre-identified providers of psychosocial care. The process was also stopped as soon as researchers became aware that respondents were under the age of 18 with interviews not conducted by children given additional risks of traumatization. Audio recordings and transcripts of interviews were stored using encrypted means. This paper identifies respondents using pseudonyms. All respondents are between 18 and 35 years old unless otherwise specified.

III.   About This Paper

This paper details the findings of a qualitative study using symbolic interactionist methodology and the grounded theory analytical model.[7] It presents the results of interviews carried out in and around Maiduguri in February 2018 with 22 people (12 women and 10 men) who were associated with JAS and ISWA in Borno State. The research questions explored using a semi-structured interview guide designed to elicit answers were as follows. Given limitations of time and other resources, sensitivities involved and questions of ethics, researchers did not aim to answer all questions equally.[8]

1. Belonging: To what extent do/did respondents feel a sense of family, group, community and/ or national belonging? What are the factors that enable/disenable this? How have these changed with time (age, evolution of the conflict and life experiences)?
2. Desired Change / Self-Actualization: What vision of society, the societal change required, and their role in/contribution to this did respondents have prior to the conflict/group association? Why did they think this was necessary/desired? To what extent and how did that evolve with time (and with group association)? What role did gender expectations, norms, and roles play in this? How do the above inter-relate with human rights norms?
3. Nonviolent Engagement: Had respondents tried any ways to engage in non-violent social transformation? What does empowerment mean? What does it feel like? What steps did individuals take to move from a disempowered state to an empowered state? How did that work (positively and negatively) and what was the role that violence played in providing a sense of empowerment? Did they persist with this and for how long? If they stopped, what led respondents away from this path?
4. Perceived Group Efficacy in Addressing Grievances and Injustices: To what extent do respondents feel AOGs are/were actually contributing to societal change in the direction in which they desired? How was it doing this? What were their frustrations with the strategies and tactics chosen? How did this change over time? What role did economic motivations play in their decisions to join, stay in, or leave AOGs? What role did hypocrisy and/or morality play in their decisions to join, stay in, or leave AOGs?

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[7]Symbolic interactionism is an approach which centers the viewpoint of those who participate in the research whereas grounded theory is a process whereby the data gathered is used as the basis for theoretical concepts that are subsequently discovered. Please see H. Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*, Prentice-Hall, 1969) and B. Glaser and A. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, (Routledge, 2000) for more information about these approaches.

[8]For example, although respondents felt comfortable talking of their experiences in armed opposition groups, many felt hesitant and uncomfortable talking openly about family, group, community and national belonging. Given the significant amounts of time taken to build trust with this group of vulnerable respondents who are understandably wary of disclosing and talking openly of their experiences, researchers focused on exploring the other research questions rather than pushing respondents to talk of areas they were reluctant to discuss.

5. <u>Pathways / Access to Agency</u>: What avenues, if any, do respondents feel are open to them when it comes to their engagement for positive social transformation (as they define it) now? What are their hopes and fears around these avenues? Which individuals or groups (formal and informal) do respondents see as engaging in positive societal transformation, what are the levels of trust and confidence they have in them and what are their perceptions as to their openness to respondents' engagement? What are the gender dynamics of these avenues/groups and individuals and how does that influence respondents' perceptions about them?

6. <u>Gender</u>: How do the perceptions and experiences of young women and men respondents differ when it comes to the above questions?

IV.   Context

The Nigerian government operates at federal, state, and local government levels but effective and legitimate governance systems are weak across the country, particularly in rural areas. Here, the state can be absent and, often, community systems of leadership can be seen as biased, corrupt, politicized and inaccessible to all women, young men, and, in many cases, minority ethno-linguistic and religious groups.[9] The quality and availability of state infrastructure and services have noticeably declined in recent decades while there are indications that state coercive control is increasing.[10] At the same time, Nigeria is seeing increasing fracture of social cohesion along lines of religious, ethno-linguistic, and regional identities used in mobilizing support, power and opportunities and in the political arena.

Nigeria consists of six geopolitical zones but, in practice, the northern zones tend to operate as one political block to ensure northern relevance, influence and power in the federation. Fears of northern marginalization have a long history. Disparities between the north and south continue: in 2013, 73 percent of the inhabitants of northern states lived in acute poverty compared to 24 percent of those in southern states.[11]

In Maiduguri, the capital of Borno state in northeast Nigeria, against a backdrop of religious fragmentation, a crowded religious marketplace and disappointment with sharia codes, Mohammed Yusuf, an Islamic scholar and teacher, started preaching that modern western education, democracy, and government employment were religiously forbidden.[12] His followers, initially called the Yusufiyya or yan mallam (people of the teacher i.e. Yusuf), became a group named Jama'atu Ahlis Sunnah Lida'awati wal Jihad (JAS, translated as People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad). Over time, this group came to be (mis)labelled as Boko Haram by the media in reference to one of the slogans members would chant at their rallies.[13]

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[9]NSRP, 'Watching Us Die on CNN: Report on the Study of Community-Level Conflict Management Mechanisms in the Niger Delta, Middle Belt and North East Zones of Nigeria,' (NSRP, 2012).

[10]Recent years have seen arrests of bloggers and journalists. While draft laws designed to regulate communications and use of social media and regulate and restrict the independence of non-governmental organisations have been successfully resisted by civil society, the registration and operation of, participation in and support for gay clubs, societies and organisations was criminalised by the Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act of 2015. Please see Spaces for Change, 'Closing Spaces for Civil Society and Democratic Engagement in Nigeria,' 2017 for more information.

[11]A.R. Mustapha, 'Introduction: Religious Encounters in Northern Nigeria,' in A.R. Mustapha, and D. Ehrhardt (eds.), *Creed and Grievance: Muslim-Christian Relations and Conflict Resolution in Northern Nigeria*, (James Currey, 2018).

[12]P. Ostien, 'The Muslim Majority in Northern Nigeria: Sects and Trends,' in A.R. Mustapha, and D. Ehrhardt (eds), *Creed and Grievance: Muslim-Christian Relations and Conflict Resolution in Northern Nigeria*, (James Currey, 2018).

[13]Boko means 'Western' (as opposed to Islamic) education while haram refers to that which is forbidden by Islam.

According to Professor Raufu Mustapha, five inter-related factors are critical to understanding the group: religious doctrines; poverty and inequality (vertical and horizontal);[14] the political context of electoral competition post democratic transition in 1999; the geographical and international context; and, relevant to this present study, personal agency of those involved.[15] Protesting the corruption and inequality produced by state structures and calling for a return to a 'purer', more Islamic way of life, the group garnered substantial support among those disenchanted with Nigeria's fledgling democracy and failed institution of sharia codes. Disaffection by reinvigoration of sharia code implementation promised by the Borno Governor led to transformation of the sect into undertaking more sustained violence,[16] particularly after the wounding and killing of hundreds of Yusufiyya following a confrontation with police officers in 2009.[17] Yusuf, captured by the military, was transferred to police custody where he was summarily executed.[18] While Yusuf also spoke about the permissibility of violence, these events marked a turning point, as recognized by President Buhari in his 2015 inaugural address who said, 'An eccentric and unorthodox preacher with a tiny following was given posthumous fame and following by his extra judicial murder at the hands of the police.'[19]

Over time, under the leadership of Yusuf's deputy, Abubakar Shekau, JAS's vision for social change became increasingly less inclusive and cohesive and more exclusionary and violent. After fleeing the city in the aftermath of these events, JAS returned to Maiduguri, started engaging in targeted killings[20] and were responsible for bombing of the United Nations office and Police Headquarters in Abuja, Nigeria's capital, in 2011. They were pushed out of Maiduguri, largely due to the actions of the *yan gora* or Civilian Joint Taskforce (CJTF), a self-defense militia that emerged in the city after declaration of a State of Emergency in the northeast states of Adamawa, Borno and Yobe. Soldiers, finding it difficult to identify JAS members, engaged in human rights violations and mass arrests, particularly of men of fighting age so civilians, caught between JAS and the military started identifying JAS members to security force personnel.[21]

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[14]Mustapha defines vertical inequality as inequality between individuals and horizontal inequality as inequality between groups and regions.

[15]A.R. Mustapha, 'Understanding Boko Haram,' in A.R. Mustapha (ed.), *Sects and Social Disorder: Muslim Identities and Conflict in Northern Nigeria*, (James Currey, 2015), pp. 166-185.

[16]Ibid.

[17]A. Walker, *'Eat the Hand of the Infidel': The Harrowing of Nigeria and the Rise of Boko Haram*, (Hurst, 2016).

[18]Human Rights Watch, 'Spiralling Violence: Boko Haram Attacks and Security Force Abuses in Nigeria,' (HRW, 2012)

[19] Inaugural speech of President Muhammadu Buhari, 29 May 2015.

[20]of security agents, community leaders who were instrumental to identification and arrest of AOG members and clerics who had preached against their ideology.

[21]C. Nagarajan, 'Civilian Perspectives of the Yan Gora (CJTF) in Borno State, Nigeria.' (CIVIC, 2018).

Although no longer visible in Maiduguri, JAS fighters mobilized in areas outside the state capital. Initially targeting Christians, religious clerics who challenged their actions and interpretations, state officials and security agents from 2011 onwards, JAS came to see all those, including Muslims who were not part of their group, as the enemy and therefore required to be killed. This development was partly spurred by the development of community militias aligned with state security forces from 2013 onwards and initial and continued demonization of the group by the state, seen as reacting with force and brutality rather than reaching out to understand or address the causes of grievance. Indeed, the presence of community militias became a factor in determining whether a community was attacked.[22]

Over time, the group morphed into declaring territorial control, detonating bombs including through the use of 'suicide' bombers,[23] forced recruitment and kidnapping, and violence against women and girls including sexual violence and forced marriage.[24] However, civilian harm has been committed by all parties to the conflict: armed opposition groups themselves, the Nigerian security forces, and community militias that emerged in the face of the Nigerian's state inability to both protect civilians from harm and distinguish between AOG members and civilians. JAS went on to occupy and capture much of the territory of Borno state and some of the territory of neighboring Adamawa and Yobe states. It was responsible for bomb blasts in Abuja, Jos, Kaduna, and Kano, cities outside Nigeria's northeast. To complicate matters, the violent conflict between AOGs, the national security forces of the region and community militias has spread across regional borders in Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, with kidnapping, killings, and recruitment taking places in all four countries. Some areas and towns in northeast Nigeria were subsequently recovered between 2014 and 2015 by the actions of the Nigerian security forces and the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF), drawn from the armies of Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria, working together with community militias.

In March 2015, Shekau formally swore allegiance to Islamic State, renaming the group Wilayat al Islamiyya Gharb Afriqiyyah (translated as Islamic State West Africa or ISWA). In August 2016, the group, always with competing factions and a history of splintering,[25] split into two distinct groups. The reason for this split mainly centered on who was a legitimate target of violence and if this included Muslims not linked to the group as well as the decision of Islamic State, after Shekau refused to stop targeting Muslim civilians, to support and announce Abu Musab al Barnawi, supposedly the son of Yusuf, as the leader of their West African province.[26] Shekau rejected this development and announced his continued leadership of the group whose name reverted to its original JAS. Shekau and his followers remained in the region around Sambisa forest while Al Barnawi took his followers to the area around Lake Chad.

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[22]C. Nagarajan and H. Matfess, 'Conflict Analysis of Northeast Focal States: Biu, Bursari, Gombi, Hawul, Hong, Jakusko, Jere and Kaga Local Government Areas,' (CRS, 2018); O.A. Chukwuma, 'Nigeria: Volunteer Vigilantism and Counter-Insurgency in the North-East,' 20 Conflict Studies Quarterly 2017 34-55; International Crisis Group, 'The Watchmen of Lake Chad: Vigilante Groups Fighting Boko Haram,' Africa Report No 244, 23 February 2017.

[23]As the existence and level of agency of those who carry and detonate bombs is unknown, quotation marks will be used around the word suicide in the absence of another succinct descriptor. Reports are some people are drugged, duped or unaware of plans while others volunteer for the task, motivated by commitment to the group's ideals.

[24]Please see Amnesty International, '"Our Job Is to Shoot, Slaughter and Kill": Boko Haram's Reign of Terror in North-East Nigeria,' AFR 33/1360/2015 for more details.

[25]Jama'atu Ansaril Muslimina fi Biladis Sudan also known as Ansaru became independent from JAS in 2012, becoming largely dormant in 2015.

[26]Please note that Mohammed (commonly known as Mamman) Nur is said to play a large role in the group with Al Barnawi supposedly appointed leader due to the symbolism of his relationship with Yusuf. Many of the respondents in this study spoke of Nur in addition to and instead of Al Barnawi. He was reported to have been killed in September 2018, news which has yet to be definitively verified.

As of early 2018, approximately 1.7 million people remained internally displaced as a result of this violent conflict in northeast Nigeria with 3.7 million people expected to face critical levels of food insecurity and approximately 926,000 people living in areas hard to reach for humanitarian assistance.[27] While Adamawa and Yobe states have seen relatively low levels of violence recently, in many areas of Borno state, the Nigerian state controls local government area (LGA) headquarter towns and the areas around them. The territory beyond this perimeter is contested and there continue to be a number of attacks, ambushes, and abductions across the state.

> Motives for joining AOGs are similar but for women and girls, gender inequality and injustice are further mobilising factors as are pressures but inability to attain models of breadwinner masculinity that confer respect for men and boys. Women also join these movements to seek empowerment in the context of diminishing space as they provide relative empowerment and the opportunity to gain religious knowledge and be part of political and societal change. However, while many people in northeast Nigeria recognize a range of reasons for association with AOGs hold true across genders, in reality, women and girls tend to assumed to be helpless victims whereas men and boys are seen as active agents and perpetrators.

V.   Overview: Journeys to Self-Actualization

Radicalization and empowerment are analogous processes of self-actualization. **Empowerment and radicalization both seek to build internal and collective assets for change, as well as individual and group opportunities to realize the desired change in society**. At the most introductory level, the English dictionary states that to *empower* is to "promote the self-actualization and or influence of (Merriam-Webster 2018) a given individual, group, or entity." At this basic level, then, we already see that empowerment has internal and external components; internal change and outward-facing impact. Radicalization is defined herein as a cognitive and psychosocial process whereby an individual undergoes an alteration of attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs, gains agency and conviction, and gradually adopts a more hardline, activist, and counter-normative identity and ideology to bring about transformative social change that aligns with his/her cause.[28] This definition decouples radicalization and violence, suggesting they are not inherently linked. Instead, journeys to violent radicalization are studied in this research to inform how to best support individual journeys toward non-violent radicalization or empowerment—in

> **CRITICAL SIGNIFICANCE:** the need for and pursuit of **meaning, social value,** and **unique contribution.**
> **GRIEVANCE:** a sense of **injustice**, real or perceived.
> **IDENTITY THREAT:** threats to the **physical self** and/or gendered, national, ethnic, religious, or other **social group identity.**
> **SOCIAL BELONGING:** group belonging that correlates to notions of **loyalty**, associates **collectivism** and morality, and is often defined by a positive correlation between threat to the in-group and strength of **in-group identity**.
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> *See for more detail: M. Niconchuk, "Two Sides of the Same Coin? An Examination of the Cognitive and Psychosocial Pathways Leading to Empowerment and Radicalization, and Forging a Path to Reorient Violent Radicalization." (Equal Access International; Washington DC: May 2018)*

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[27]OCHA, 'North-East Nigeria; Humanitarian Situation Update,' January 2018.

[28] M. Niconchuk, "Two Sides of the Same Coin? An Examination of the Cognitive and Psychosocial Pathways Leading to Empowerment and Radicalization, and Forging a Path to Reorient Violent Radicalization." (Equal Access International, May 2018), available at http://www.equalaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/EAI-YouthPower-Report-1-FINAL.pdf.

other words, examining the dynamics related to agency and self-actualization at various stages of an individual's association with violent groups to better understand how to fortify similar associations with non-violent groups either prior to or following engagement with VEOs.

Data collected through field research is disaggregated for analysis by four phases of an individual's journey into and out of violent groups:
1) Journeys to Association (engagement);
2) Group Membership;
3) Journeys to Disassociation (disengagement); and,
4) Reintegration.

This framing allows us to examine the experiences, impulses, and social influences that motivated respondents at various stages of engagement with violent groups, while still recognizing that these paths into and out of violence are highly individualized and often non-linear. The framework takes an asset-based approach to its examination of radicalization and empowerment, emphasizing the humanity and human potential of all individuals, while seeking to identify and channel often-destructive processes and behavior associated with radicalization for positive pro-social outcomes. Analysis of each phase is broken down by four themes EAI has identified as pillars of both empowerment and radicalization—critical significance, grievance, identity threat, and social belonging.[29] We suggest that these four pillars are *neutral influences and individual motivations* that interact with social environmental inputs, and it is the way in which an ideology or a group engages with these motivations that dictates whether an individual will utilize constructive or destructive impulses as they grow in agency, power, and worldview.

VI.   Journeys to Association

"Before they [the armed opposition group] came, I always just sat down and lamented over bad things happening... I don't have a say. I'm just a small child... Then you saw someone coming in with power and wanting to change it. The right thing to do is to follow." – Young male respondent, Borno state

Journeys to Association in northern Nigeria cannot be defied neatly in categories of 'voluntary' and 'fixed,' instead falling on a spectrum of forced recruitment to voluntary enlistment.[30]

> **AGENCY:** one's ability to influence his or her life course.

Association journeys for both men and women range from intrinsic motivation, to abduction and coercion, to social pressure and circumstantial motivation.[31] Respondents' reasons for engaging with AOGs in northeast Nigeria range from the power of persuasive preaching and the groups' perceived legitimacy to the emotional pull, need for belonging, and search for meaning. Some participants joined groups in search for love and/or community. Others were pulled in by family members. Most spoke of motivations more closely aligned with "pull factors" while some spoke of "push" factors such as state corruption, abuse, and perceived injustice against their communities.

While this study focuses on those intrinsically motivated, researchers also interviewed young people at different stages of this spectrum. **Most respondents felt these groups offered an opportunity to create change in their lives and their communities** but the extent to which they could freely choose to believe and participate in the group was sometimes questionable.

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[29] Ibid.

[30] Mercy Corps, 'Motivations and Empty Promises' Voices of Former Boko Haram Combatants and Nigerian Youth, (Mercy Corps, 2016).

[31] '[A] series of small events or circumstances that led a youth to become part of the group': Ibid at p. 12.

For example, one young man joined as a boy because his brothers were all members and his father was a leader. One young woman interviewed had been sold the benefits of JAS by her uncle as a child and was subsequently happy at her abduction. Some of the respondents had been forced to join but later on became convinced. They talked of how they enjoyed their time in the Daula (translated as religious community, used to signify the AOG) and felt fully committed to the cause. Respondents spoke of group rhetoric and arguments used to persuade, the use of force, and societal attitudes and relations between group members and others. This study is unique in that it focuses primarily on young people who believed or had believed in the aims of AOGs. However, as the report illustrates, levels of agency experienced while members of the group varied greatly depending on the time when individuals belonged to the group.

CRITICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Consistent with research findings that establish a correlation between boredom and feelings of insignificance,[32] approximately 30% of young male respondents named boredom and search for adventure, excitement, and purpose as their primary motivators for joining the group. Lawan (M, 19) had heard of the group and that they were engaged in good work as a child in his village. When they came to the area, many of his friends joined and he became impressed by what they were being taught and the stories they would come back and tell him. Lawan was living with his grandparents, uncles, and aunts and started thinking, *"I am staying with these old people. What I go through is suffering. Why can't I go with my friends and do what they are doing?"* He later spoke about all the locations and expedition in which he had taken part and how he enjoyed seeing new places, meeting different people and acquiring skills, for example in shooting, assembling guns, and bomb making. According to Abba (M, 35): *"We were just staying in one place. Nothing takes place. Doing the same thing. Then someone asks you to do something and then for the sake of your Creator. I think it's an opportunity. It's a change… I was tired of doing the same thing ever since I was born."*

Interview data illustrates some nexus between boredom, a desire to be with peers, and the desire to have a significant role, though distinctions exist along gender lines. Young women spoke of how exciting and purposeful they found life in the Daula but did not explicitly mention this as a reason they joined. That no young women directly talked about this does not necessarily mean young women who join do not wish for adventure but, rather, that none of those with whom researchers spoke articulated this reason. Given gendered expectations, norms, and roles, young women may feel that longing for adventure and change is not socially acceptable to voice.

Borno has some of the worst socio-economic indicators in Nigeria, with low levels of education and lack of opportunities for young people in particular to gain a livelihood in a context where to be seen and respected as 'a man' requires young men to earn enough money to be able to afford to marry and be the breadwinner of their own household.[33]

GRIEVANCE

Grievances related to injustice committed by government and community leaders, as well as security forces, featured in the respondents' narratives. However, for the majority, **immorality and the threat to Islamic identity were more prominent**. Most only mentioned attitudes toward government when expressly asked. Respondents who had been part of Muhammad Yusuf's group in Maiduguri, two of whom

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[32]Wijnand A. P. Van Tilburg, "Going to political extremes in response to boredom," European Journal of Social Psychology, 21 June 2016, Available at https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/ejsp.2205.
[33]C. Nagarajan, 'Masculinities, Conflict and Violence in Nigeria,' (NSRP/ V4C, 2016).

are older than 35, were more specific about state injustices. According to Abdulrahman (M, 38), "the injustice caused by the state government is the reason why we are in the state we are in." He spoke of how the government neglected students of Quranic education who had to beg for food as a result. He went on to say, *"Ever since we were born, we just saw people practicing politics. When they go to campaigns, we see them promising a lot and giving out but when they win, we never see them again. If these kinds of things become many, certain fraction of people in the society have to seclude themselves and seek justice."* He highlighted this corruption, buying of votes, and unfulfilled campaign promises as intrinsic to democracy and preaching against and trying to find a way to address this dynamic as one of the factors that underlay Muhammad Yusuf's appeal for him.

Garba (M, 35) spoke of extrajudicial killings committed by government security agencies[34] saying *"Everyone knows the atrocities committed by government where youth are brought out from under their mother's beds where they were hiding and killed by military."* Musa (M, 40) offered his views on the Governor of the time: *"We're living under democracy. The kind of power, he got his power through forceful manner, usurped power. He uses political thugs who he feeds with marijuana and other hard drugs... You cannot reach him no matter how close you are to him. Except through these boys."* A number of respondents characterized Borno as 'a society without leaders,' said that if leaders were interested in resolution, they would have investigated and resolved grievances. Instead, the state continues to engage in heavy-handed tactics and human rights violations, further showing the preaching and teaching of AOGs to be right.

Weak government presence outside of Maiduguri helps to explain why community members were more concerned about immorality and injustice in rural areas, as traditional and religious leaders had more power and influence than state or federal politicians. Some respondents mentioned that the draw of AOGs is their condemnation of these actions and promises to affect societal change. They blamed the government for allowing the conflict between the state and JAS to continue and for the escalation of violence. **Non-Muslims dominating positions of power in the federal government was a particular source of contention.[35]** Zahrah (F, 23) recounted her husband characterizing former President Goodluck Jonathan as *"a person without religion, which is why all these injustices and suppressions exist."* This type of rhetoric appeared to be generalized opposition to the government, rather than naming specific policies or actions. Zahrah (F, 23) went on to say, *"I cannot precisely say this is what is meant by the injustice but I do see sons of people, especially people in government or rich people, enjoying their lives while the majority will be just."*

Others named community leaders as the sources of injustice. In Borno, respondents suggested that many community leaders are seen as corrupt, biased, ineffective, self-interested, politicized, and linked to (corrupt) politicians. In some locations, while previous community leaders had been seen as effective, fair, and just, the current generation of leaders are seen as not fulfilling their responsibilities.[36] Given the lack

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[34]Please see International Crisis Group, 'Curbing Violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency' *Africa Report No 216*, April 2014; Amnesty International, 'Stars on Their Shoulders, Blood on Their Hands: War Crimes Committed by the Nigerian Military,' AFR44/1657/2015; K. Dietrich, "When We Can't See the Enemy, Civilians Become the Enemy": Living Through Nigeria's Six Year Insurgency,' (CIVIC, 2015); for more information on civilian harm and human rights violations committed by government security forces.

[35]President Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian from Nigeria's Niger Delta in the south of the country was President from 2010, after the death of former President Umaru Yar'Adua in office, until 2015 when he was defeated in elections by Muhammadu Buhari, a Muslim from northwest Nigeria.

[36]Authors' interviews with people in Borno state 2013 – 2018; C. Nagarajan and H. Matfess, 'Conflict Analysis of Northeast Focal States: Biu, Bursari, Gombi, Hawul, Hong, Jakusko, Jere and Kaga Local Government Areas,' (CRS, 2018).

of government services, particularly in rural areas, this leaves a vacuum when it comes to any type of governance in many localities, a space where legitimate grievances can intensify and oppositional narratives thrive, paving the way to a turn to violence being seen as justified.

Respondents spoke of power and control dynamics in communities and of the corruption that led to impunity. Bukar (M, 18) gave this example: *"You go and suffer in the farm to grow your crops. After harvest, someone can just cut them away and nobody will do justice to you... Only the lawans and bulamas are here. If you do the wrong thing, you are taken to the bulama, the bulama ties you up but when their people come, they give him money and he will let you go."* Bukar spoke about how we wanted to be part of changing this. He felt he would learn the necessary skills through association with the AOG and learn to preach in a way that compelled people to *"leave the bad things they were doing."* Ballama (M, 18) spoke of how, although group members were doing 'some bad things' such as burning houses and food and killing, *"that bad has stopped people doing the bad things they were doing too."* He saw the use of violence as having impact in terms of addressing anti-social behavior. In contrast, the policing function carried out by soldiers was not seen to have the same effect. Ballama noted, *"They were brought to save people but whenever anyone tells them, they catch and kill."*

While most grievances were directed at state and community leaders, **some grievances focused on social shifts attributed to the AOGs, emphasizing gender-related grievances.** Many respondents spoke of increasing restrictions on women, whether by husbands who were members or by the group on women as a whole. Zahrah (F, 23) spoke about changes in her husband's mindset after becoming a

> Bukar joined when he was 16 years old and was trained in handling weapons. On his way to his first operation, he and some others were separated from the rest of the group due to heavy rain. They could not find their way back and so, when they came across soldiers, they threw away their guns and 'went to them with empty hands.' He says **JAS was like a family but that he did not like the beating of 'defiant women**.' He noted he would still be part of the group if he had not gotten lost but he is now in school and has forgotten all JAS's teachings. Although he does not see anybody focusing on working for societal change, he hopes to do 'my own part to change society' after he finishes his education.

member: *"At that time, since he became a member, he secluded me in the house, he doesn't even want me to peep out, he doesn't want me to go out, he doesn't want me to communicate with even my family members."* Zahrah was very clear about the extent to which her life had become restricted during this time but seemed powerless to change this situation.

In many interviews JAS was described as the antidote to these grievances and feelings of disempowerment. Former members saw JAS as a group focused on religion and spreading messages with genuine intentions capable of creating transformative social change. According to Lawan (M, 19), *"I saw them as the real missionaries or messiahs, spreading the religion and urging people to be good."* Ibrahim (M, 18) said, *"I was thinking about them as good people. Honest people. Disposed to religion. They asked us to do good. As good people who had held their religion with all seriousness."* AOGs that directly address immorality and injustice as a mobilization tactic, while claiming to own the solution, was powerful for young people and children who felt they had little voice, power, or influence, or who themselves wanted to be counted among the pure, among those free of hypocrisy. Their subsequent radicalization likely could have led to non-violent and constructive engagement in social change, if the means and tactics used to promote and elicit Islamic values and norms had been nonviolent. However, respondents spoke of the absence of spaces outside of AOGs to develop agency, civic engagement, critical significance, belonging, and control over their future among young people.

IDENTITY THREAT

Overlapping with grievance-related narratives are those emphasizing a threat to Islamic identity. Respondents saw JAS members as stressing through their preaching that 'society had gone bad' in Borno, defining immorality primarily in terms of women's behavior and dressing, adultery and fornication, and stealing and cheating; acts they felt were forbidden by Islam. Some also cited community celebrations, drumming, and dancing as evidence of immoral behavior. When they spoke, they cast back to an era where Islam (as interpreted under Salafist ideology) was followed more closely with society organized around these principles and modes of behavior and contrast this idealized vision of the past with current corruption, inequalities and injustice, seen as signs of immorality, and social mores. However, as with other fundamentalist projects,[37] this 'history' and 'tradition' is constructed in ways that are ahistorical and highly selective, in contrast to the diversity of religious interpretations and syncretism that existed in the past.[38] It is also important to place this discourse in the context of increasing fundamentalism in Nigeria, linked to influence and financial support from groups in Saudi Arabia, Libya, Sudan, and Iran, and their use of such narratives.

Often immorality and injustice were talked about in one breath and used interchangeably to refer to the same circumstances or actions. For example, Hauwa (F, 18), reflecting back on her 10-year-old self and conversations with her uncle, remembered him talking about how behavior in the community was against the dictates of the Quran: *"Women were walking with their heads uncovered. They weren't dressing properly. There is a lot of fornication. Adultery is being practiced openly. Men are drinking. People are cheating on one another. People are going to steal each other's property. Then you will see the culprits will be allowed to go free while somebody innocent can be accused. We see this all over."*

Preaching was used to shape identities in opposition to a society gone bad. According to Ibrahim (M, 18), through preaching *"the community itself became like their own community."* He went on to say, *"The thing started entering our heads. They were telling us this western education and others are not allowed so we removed the idea of western education completely off our heads and focused on what they were telling us."* He said, *"When they tell you anything, they bring the corresponding Hadith or Quranic verse to support what they have told you… when they translate it for you, you who have transgressed or even committed something will really see where you went wrong."* People also recognized changes in others' behavior. As Bukar (M, 18), who joined for a mix of economic and ideological reasons, said *"Our people who were doing those things that they said were bad were asked to change their ways and many of them have changed. I no longer see those bad things being done... That is what impressed me and I started liking them to the extent of following them."*

Many respondents, both women and men, spoke of the nature and quality of the preaching of the group engaged in their communities. For those in Maiduguri at the time, Muhammad Yusuf was noted as a charismatic, intelligent, and highly convincing speaker well versed in the Quran, Hadith, and Islamic scholarship and jurisprudence. Yusuf was still widely known and respected among respondents, even those who were young children when he was killed. ISWA's attempts to demonstrate their faction's continuity with Yusuf's original ideals, plans, strategy, and tactics, particularly boosted by Al Barnawi's claim of being Yusuf's son.

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[37] S. Cowden and G. Sahgal, 'Why Fundamentalism?' 2017 *Feminist Dissent* 2 7-38.
[38] As documented in A. R. Mustapha (ed), *Sects and Social Disorder: Muslim Identities and Conflict in Northern Nigeria,* (James Currey, 2015); C. Pereira, 'Zina and Transgressive Heterosexuality in Northern Nigeria,' 2005 *Feminist* Africa 5 52-79; R. P. Gaudio, 'Male Lesbians and Other Queer Notions in Hausa,' in S.O. Murray and W. Roscoe (eds). *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities*, (St. Martin's Press, 1998).

Many people, even those who were initially distrustful and/or subsequently distanced themselves from tactics used, spoke of the difference between this preaching and that to which they were accustomed. While respondents spoke of how content was similar to what they had previously been taught, the quality, persuasiveness, and focus on changing minds was markedly different. Respondents specifically emphasized outreach conducted to convince people using their own languages for discussion of Quranic passages and stories from the life of Prophet Mohammed to instead defer to rote recitation of the Quran in Arabic. Aisha (F, 18) perceived the group to be just, despite the killings in which they engaged, due to their preaching, *"They do general preaching on the religion that I know initially in my Islamiyya school and these people do it better… In the Islamiyya, it's just pure recitation and reading. But these ones, when they recite, they translate to your language and it appeals to even your emotions so it will even make you completely submissive and follow them and believe in them."*

Almost all respondents mentioned the perceived level of immorality in the community. Speaking of the time when Muhammed Yusuf would come to her town to preach, Fanna (F, 30) said *"At that time, there is a lot of fanfare and merrymaking... People don't even care about prayers. When there is drumming, all the children and women would go and cluster around it…. There are many men going after people's wives, even girls fornicating. You will see someone coming to take loans from you and refusing to pay. This impinges on your rights."* Bukar (M, 18) and Ballama (M, 18) described the selling and consumption of alcohol and drugs, with Ballama talking about '*yan iska*'[39] who would take drugs and get drunk before getting into fights. Ballama spoke reverently of how AOG members coming to his town to arrest and kill drug vendors and users, saying he believed that *"the work of Allah is gradually going to address these things… Since it is those I see are doing wrong, bad things that they kill, I think this is good."*

Within JAS's efforts to construct Islamist identities, there was a particular focus on the behavior of women. There were strong gendered norms and roles for both women and men even before JAS mobilized in these communities. According to Hauwa (F, 18), as a woman *"you are supposed to dress well and do everything your parents tell you to do. If you do not, it's defiance and it is bad […] They would abuse her and say she has deviated and left the straight path, castigate her, and curse her."* Meanwhile, for a man, she said, *"If a male does not obey or disrespects his parents, that is the worst you can do as in the religion, you are asked to obey your parents. Or if he does not take care of the family, his wives and children, that's also very bad. Or if he goes about stealing or fighting in the society."*

> During her time with the group, Hauwa was taught to shoot guns, use other weapons and assemble bombs. When adult men went on operations, she would keep to ensure the safety of the camp and repel any attacks. She was happy about what she learned and her contribution to JAS. She started to miss her parents and siblings and becoming increasingly unhappy that JAS killed people saying, 'That is the only thing that makes me hate them in my heart.' She surrendered to soldiers, only to be beaten, punished and humiliated. She continues to be bitter about this treatment that she received. She currently lives in an IDP camp in Maiduguri and sees the abuse, cheating, victimisation and marginalisation of people there, particularly those suspected of association with AOGs in sharp contrast to the Daula's 'ideal society.'

Jallaba (F, 25) was 17-years-old and in her marital home when her brother started to indoctrinate her: *"When he came back [from time away studying with them], he came to me, he lay down on my bed and he was narrating. He started by telling me that the type of life you are living, the way you dress, it's like*

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[39]The term iska comes from iskanci which can be translated to mean immorality. Yan iska refers to those who are seen to be immoral or 'useless' people.

you are going naked. Fear God, fear Allah, and dress well." She asked him to help her to leave her current husband and find another who was part of the group, as she and her current husband were no longer aligned ideologically.

SOCIAL BELONGING

A number of respondents spoke of how they felt comfort and belonging as they were introduced to the group. For example, respondents talked about how members felt like brothers and sisters despite coming from different families. One respondent named Garba (M, 35), a Tsangaya[40] student at the time, spoke about a sense of curiosity and the need as a 'son of the city' to see and be part of what was happening. He had been to many other Islamic teachers for learning but found, *"There was no other facility where [he] was as comfortable as there as the preaching was very unique and very pleasant to us… It's the way Muhammad Yusuf teaches and preaches."* When he spoke, Garba's explicit mention of comfort was intertwined with his search for belonging and a sense of purpose.

Although often overlooked in many research studies on pathways to AOG association, the family, as a core social unit, was raised in all interviews. Respondents mentioned family members facilitating both voluntary and forced association with AOGs. For many respondents, feelings of loyalty to and belonging in the group were strengthened by family bonds. These dynamics have been recorded in studies across contexts examining motivations for joining violent jihadi groups.[41] This consideration is particularly salient in the present study given 16 out of 22 respondents were under the age of 18 when they became associated with AOGs.

In the present study, some respondents initiated their association with AOGs in secret, working through extended family members while keeping plans from their parents. For others, however, the group was a complete family affair with sisters, brothers, parents, cousins, grandparents, and distant relatives all joining around the same time and reinforcing their growing bonds with the group with those of family. For example, after Jibrin's (M, 18) two cousins had joined, they later came to abduct his younger brother. He knew they were planning to do so but did not want to tell his father as *"I knew he wouldn't agree. If he didn't agree, it would not be good for him. They might kill him."*

When JAS came to their village, Ibrahim's (M, 18) family formed social ties with them. Over time, the family aligned themselves with the group and the children were entrusted to members: "*Our family is also with them so we don't even visit the family, we are always with the teachers."* Jibrin's (M, 18) father was a bulama (village head), later given the title of amir by JAS when he joined their leadership ranks. Jibrin was proud his father was a *"double leader [...] the whole town fears him. He is the only person who is feared by the whole community."* In addition to the parents, all siblings, uncles, aunts, and cousins became members. Whether some children joined specifically to remain with their parents is not known. In Ballama's (M, 18) own case, he and his father were taken to two different places and it was some time before they were reunited. Aisha (F, 18) spoke of cases where *"girls themselves will bring them to kill their fathers"* if they wanted to follow the group and parents refused to allow them permission to do so saying: "*Like I am now, I have agreed to follow them and they want to marry me. If you, the parents, say no, I will be motivated to bring them to kill the father so I can go with my husband."* While she did not state it clearly, there was a strong indication that this might have been what she had herself done.

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[40]Quranic school.
[41]For example, S. Ladbury, Women and Extremism, paper written for DFID examining dynamics in Afghanistan, Iraq, Kenya, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria and Yemen, shared with the author.

Marriage, as a means of forging inter-familial bonds and transforming one's social identity, also played a role in association journeys. Three out of eight young women were inducted through husbands, strengthening findings from previous research of the role of husbands in recruitment of women and girls.[42] Falmata (F, 18) spoke of how her husband was secretly a member, like many others. She realized this later, only after marrying him. Similarly, Zahrah (F, 23) did not know her husband was a member, although she knew he was an ardent follower of Muhammed Yusuf. In 2010, citing the widespread nature of *"infidels and disbelief in society,"* he told her they would be moving to a different village but moved the family to a JAS forest enclave instead. Others had husbands who were ardent and open followers with the whole family seen as such by the community.

Approximately 30% of the young women interviewed described attraction to and/or falling in love with members because they cared for and guided them as a motivating factor behind their association. Aisha (F, 18) spoke about how she and her friends liked group members saying, *"all the girls, we admired them."* Prior to conducting the interviews, the research team members had heard of girls and young women in other towns also being taken with JAS members when they took over their communities.[43] According to Falmata (F, 18), similar scenarios played out in Madagali. When asked the reasons why she liked the group, she said: *"They dress well. They ride the motorcycle in the town. When they come, they teach and preach... All girls love them at that time. They were preaching that you should fear Allah, the life that you are living is not the life you should be living... Honestly they are guiding us."* At age 13, she fell in love with a member she came across while fetching water. He came to her house to tell her grandmother he wanted to marry her; her grandmother refused. However, her uncle, who one of the JAS fighters who took over the town, ordered that the marriage should take place. Falmata went on to say, *"Whenever he came and sees me, he holds my hands and prayed for me. I loved him. Even when the grandmother was saying that she doesn't allow me, I wanted to go so my uncle contracted the marriage. I went of my own free will."*

Key Findings and Recommendations to Prevent Engagement with AOGs

- All respondents spoke about their present realities and ways in which bias and favoritism on the basis of ethnic and religious identities or connections to those with power in the community as well as corruption and diversion of aid created difficulties in accessing adequate food, water, shelter, healthcare, education, and other items and services. Implementing can effect change in material circumstances including through assistance with improving livelihoods and access to goods and services including in ways that offer opportunities for and build pride in education, skills, and work.
- Research shows that organizations can create opportunities, such as through youth centers and extracurricular activities, to strengthen social networks so young people, particularly those otherwise excluded, feel connection, support, and solidarity, thereby fostering enhanced resilience and self-esteem. Social networks can also offer the opportunity for finding role models.
- The draw of youth to the persuasive rhetoric, charisma, and religious preaching of leaders such as Muhammad Yusuf combined with what young people describe as a lack of positive role models is of real concern. As such, more programs are needed that position young people as leaders and messengers, thereby providing powerful alternative narratives and opportunities for youth to be positive online and offline role models and to be part of something bigger than themselves.
- Community relations need to be addressed, particularly those affected by violence and projects should find ways for different groups to talk about the conflict and violence and their role in and

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[42] For example, S. Ladbury, Women and Extremism, paper written for DFID examining dynamics in Afghanistan, Iraq, Kenya, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria and Yemen, shared with the author.
[43] No such information is available about ISWA zones of influence.

attitudes to this in order to build social cohesion. This area of intervention needs to be implemented with care and conflict sensitivity to ensure conflict dynamics are addressed rather than exacerbated.

- Given the importance of families in influencing pathways to association, donors should prioritize family-based interventions including community referral mechanisms and holistic treatment and support options for vulnerable and at-risk youth. Interventions should avoid stigmatizing counter-normative views held by youth and instead encourage collective self-responsibility and a whole-of-family approach to understanding risk, resilience, and protective factors and approach interventions.

- Efforts should be designed to facilitate youth civic engagement in influencing decision making and working for social change including against injustice, corruption, impunity, and inequality they witness around them and at the highest levels. These areas of intervention addresses young people's need to have a sense of purpose, to address a society gone bad, to feel able to effect change in the society around them, and requires support to self-mobilize for action, to connect to influencers and decision makers, and to be part of those who make decisions in the community.

- While it is important to support young people to have voice and agency in mainstream decision-making forums, given the reality of these spaces being dominated by older men and the difficulty to transform social norms and hierarchies around gender and age, it is also key to ensure young women and men, including those who are 'radicalized' are supported to associate themselves. Genuine intergenerational dialogue that is sensitive to hierarchies of gender, age, and power and institutionalized as part of a long-term process which enables the voices of young women and men to be heard on a regular basis is required to address youth exclusion. Interventions should reach out to young people of all genders as separate constituencies with agency and capacities to effect change and whose interests are not represented well by existing mechanisms of community leadership.

VII.   Group Membership: Experiences in the AOGs

"There is a difference in the belief system, in the slaughtering of human beings. Al Barnawi's group does not slaughter and Shekau slaughters. We know that that group [ISWA] only fights government forces. They hardly kill civilians." – Hauwa (F, 18)

Respondents' experiences within AOGs varied. Thirteen of 15 youth respondents recounted feelings of agency as a result of their membership in these groups. They became animated, excited, and spoke freely about these times, in contrast with their perception of a profoundly disempowering reality outside of the groups. When talking about experiences in the group, the following key themes emerged: living in an ideal society in which religious observance and study were central, provision of goods and services, pride in knowledge gained and actions taken, opportunities to feel powerful, and feeling an ability to make social change. Other themes relating to grievances within the group related to restrictions on and violence against women and girls, excessively harsh sanctions, and extrajudicial killings.

CRITICAL SIGNIFICANCE
Many of those interviewed described feeling a sense of purpose and possibility for change after joining the group. According to Fatima (F, 19), "*At that time, the world was in our hands.*" Eleven respondents described how happy they were to have a focus on changing the world as well as personal (religious) growth. Indeed, the more they felt changes within themselves, the more they wanted to share this change with others. This belief in transforming society was noted by both women and men, although, as described under restrictions on and violence against women and girls below, the extent to which women were able to partake was limited.

Bukar (M, 18), who saw injustice in decisions by community leaders, felt his time in the group was preparing him to change this. He said that when he returned, *"I will preach to them what I was taught and I believe this will make them leave the bad things they were doing."* Garba (M, 35) spoke of how he saw changes in society due to the preaching of Muhammed Yusuf and his followers. He remembered that, *"At that time, even traditional orthodox scholars you would see there listening to him and adhering. There would be people who would hide themselves at night to go and listen to him. If he was allowed to continue what he was doing until this day, the whole of Maiduguri could be converted to follow his ways."* He joined the group to be part of and find meaning in working to bring about this change.

A number of respondents spoke of the sense of power and control they felt. This dynamic is significant, particularly given patriarchal realities where status and power are largely determined by age and gender. To have power—particularly over men for women, and over older men for younger men—is very appealing. Falmata (F, 18) spoke of how women enjoyed the fact that members were able to loot and take the houses and property they wanted. Aisha (F, 18) spoke about being able to tell husbands what exactly to bring from operations: *"Whatever you like, they have to look for it and bring it to you. Whatever you want to do, they will do it. Whatever you feel like, you could say and it will be done."* Aisha also spoke of how much she enjoyed being able to police the behavior of others in the community in line with the group's dictates. She gave the following examples: *"People are not allowed to go out to fetch water during the day. No matter how big you are or if you're even a man, if I see you outside at that time, I will follow you. I don't fear… We don't beat them but we will warn them if they don't [comply] that we will report them to those men who will do the beatings... We who are their wives or perceived wives, we are very powerful. We can do everything that we want, whatever it is."* Men talked about the sense of power achieved by defeating soldiers and how it strengthened their resolve. As Ibrahim (M, 18) said, *"that sign of victory which we had over the soldiers impacted strength in us. We feel, we have the capacity now that we can even repel soldiers so in fact since then honestly, our admiration for them became more than ever. We had to learn to be real fighters. So we just wanted to be part and parcel of them completely."*

Still, the extent to which respondents felt empowered to contribute to societal change depended in great part on their gender. While many respondents felt a sense of purpose, restrictions on behavior and freedoms of young women, once married, were particularly stark in contrast to the sense of power young men experienced.

Upon joining the group, there is typically a period of religious instruction, administered separately to women, men, girls, and boys. Many respondents felt a sense of purpose that came from the centrality of religion to Daula life and the potential to spread religious messages. Later, **both women and men are taught fighting skills**.[44] Respondents were clearly proud of what they had learned about religion and fighting and expressed joy in learning, contrasting it with previous lives where many had had little educational opportunities. Hauwa (F, 18) recounted how all the girls with whom she had been abducted asked to be trained, saying with pride, *"We know everything about guns. I can dismantle gun and connect gun. I can even assemble the bombs for you if you want…. We were all given AK47. We were trained. We were taught to shoot."* They spoke surprisingly openly and honestly about roles and actions undertaken and their sense of purpose, displaying a degree of animation when talking about this that was in marked contrast to their demeanor when talking about their lives previous to joining and after leaving the group.

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[44] Please note that other interviews conducted by researchers show that this is not necessarily the case for those who were abducted or coerced to join.

Women interviewed played many roles, including how to shoot guns, assemble bombs, mold bullets and operate the guns on armored vehicles and fire anti-aircraft weapons. If married, a woman would be taught by her husband. According to Fatima (F, 19), *"When your husband comes and trains you to be crawling, shooting, handling the guns, in the house, the two of us will be crawling and learning how to do this. He said you have to learn how to shoot because these unbelievers, when it comes to killing, it is women who kill women. So you too should be trained so you know how to defend yourself and also to kill other women."* The aim of this training was not necessarily so they could go on operations, it was more for defending the camp when the men were away fighting and assembling bombs for use by others. While there have been reports of women fighting in attacks,[45] none of those interviewed participated in them. As Hauwa (F, 18) said, *"Women are not taken for operations especially young women. They said when they go away for operations, sometimes they would spend days. Even when they are around, we can repel those attacks and protect ourselves… whenever they go out, all of us would be stationed in strategic positions with our guns fully armed and be keeping watch."* When men went on operations, they would entrust their wives and children to other members in the event of their death. The men to whom their families were entrusted were supposed to ensure they were taken care of.

Young men also described being given religious instruction and being taught how to handle weapons. They were taught in groups with other young men. Young boys were considered too young to participate in operations but, once old enough, allowed to go with older men to fight.[46] Boys and young men played other roles too. Ibrahim (M, 18) described how he was made a grinding machine operator in a village with his role being to spy: *"While I stayed in the community, I am just like their eyes so I will identify grown up girls and tell them. So thereafter when I identify and show them they will go after the girl."*

Jibrin (M, 18) was one of the young men anxious for his chance to participate in operations. He talked about the training on offer with excitement: *"There is training on assembling and dismantling of guns. There is training on warfare... on evacuation… on assembling the bombs. There are different kinds of trainings. Everyone chooses which one he wants and is trained."* Lawan (M, 19), whose friends had joined the group, was very much taken with the skills they had learned and remembered thinking, *"What I go through is suffering. Why can't I go with my friends and do what they are doing? Some of my friends, one of them assembles bombs, one of them repairs the guns whenever it gets stuck, one of them is a mechanic who repairs the war vehicles, one of them is a trainer of younger children, new fighters."* He spoke with pride about how, with time, he learned to be a good shooter and operative.

GRIEVANCE

Many respondents spoke of time with the group as living in an ideal society, free of the material grievances of their prior lives. According to Hauwa (F, 18), *"We don't sleep at night. We only do prayers glorifying Allah. We eat well. We don't abuse people there. You don't disobey anybody there. We strictly follow guidelines given to us. If it's food that we have in plenty, we carry and give to others. It's a perfect ideal society."* The phrase 'ideal society' arose frequently despite respondents also describing attitudes and practices they did not like. The impression of the interviewer was that the phrase could have been one repeated to persuade people of its truth. Indeed, when some respondents spoke, the group sounded akin to a cult, making members feel nothing and nobody else mattered. This is particularly so given

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[45]C. Nagarajan, 'Gender Assessment of Northeast Nigeria,' (June 2017).
[46]Please note that other research shows children fighting for AOGs so this age requirement may not be true across the board. See for example: NSRP/ UNICEF, 'Perceptions and Experiences of Children Associated with Armed Groups in Northeast Nigeria,' Research Report, 2017.

respondents' ages at the time. Ibrahim's (M, 18) story is a good example: *"We came to hate everybody. The whole society except them. We have sold our lives to them. We don't care even if we die in their cause."*

Nearly half of respondents were impressed by the availability of food, other basic items, and services. Hauwa (F, 18) said, *"All kinds of drinks were given to us. Fresh fruits like bananas, apples. In our room, we have refrigerators, televisions that we watched. A whole cow was slaughtered and we were allowed to fry as we want."* Aisha (F, 18) also said, *"Initially, the forest was very nice. You will see what you have never seen. You will eat what you have never eaten... You will even think, why didn't I come before?"* Fanna (F, 30) was diagnosed as being HIV positive by the group's clinic but counselled, given dietary advice, and provided daily medicine—she later contrasted this to her current level of care in an IDP camp where she struggles to maintain the diet her doctor prescribed. Aisha described how the standard of living dropped precipitously as the conflict with government security forces intensified: *"When the bombing became much, all these facilities, good things were burned. We were exposed to sleeping on the river side with snakes, grasses, and other things."* Ballama (M, 18) spoke of how this change affected his perception of the group: *"Initially, we thought that they were an authority but we see that the food is no more coming. That has changed my perception. I only see the food they steal from people that they bring us. The people who can resort to stealing, I have bad impressions about them."*

As time passed many respondents reported new sets of grievances resulting from their experiences living in the group. Chief among them was the group's excessive use of violence and punitive measures to control members and punish anyone who opposed them in anyway. Almost all respondents discussed the sanctions against and killings of Daula and non-Daula members they knew of or witnessed. **Despite their unhappiness with the killings, many respondents believed Islam requires one to kill**. This teaching is not one which is common within society outside of these groups, but is the result of religious preaching that JAS gives to its members. Many respondents had some level of education before joining the group but believe that JAS gave them the 'real Islam.' Aisha (F, 18) said, *"The kind of horror we witnessed, this slaughtering. It's just like you slaughter a ram but the head will be severed and placed on the chest and the blood will be flowing. The frequency is just too much and it's horrific too."* Jibrin (M, 18) recounted how members who would be taking or selling drugs would be punished and killed and one particular case where *"the whole of the community was assembled along the road and they were executed."* He also told the story of a thief who tried to kill his wife who threatened to report him, ending the story by saying, *"That night, the whole town was assembled and he was executed in front of everybody."*

Zahrah (F, 23) witnessed a number of killings of members during the time of the split between Shekau and Al Barnawi/Mamman Nur. She said, *"There was a time Mamman Nur took certain members and left. [Shekau] believes that all those like minds will eventually leave him. So he started killing. Commanders like [names redacted], Shekau killed them saying they are aligned to Mamman Nur and accused them of stealing arms and weaponry …. It was during this period that Shekau also sentenced people according to accusations that they are aligned. He can level accusations, sentence them to death, and kill them."*

Indeed, attitudes toward killing was described as the main difference between JAS, headed by Shekau, and ISWA, headed by Al Barnawi. Lawan (M, 19) spoke about how Mamman Nur would argue against the killing of followers by Shekau for smoking and drug use. Zahrah (F, 23), who came to see Mamman Nur and his followers as infidels and unbelievers due to the split, said *"Shekau believes that killing is part of the religion but Mamman Nur believes there is no killing in the religion. We believe in Shekau's line, that*

Islam requires you to kill. If someone does not believe in your belief, you kill him. Mamman Nur does not believe in that so he is a non-believer."[47]

According to respondents, there was active preaching to make followers see the need and justice in sanctions, including talking of punishments prescribed by Allah and what happened during the time of the Prophet. According to Hauwa (F, 18), they were told by JAS that *"we don't just kill for nothing but that people had committed sins and had to be killed because they deviated from the good."* Ibrahim (M, 18) also spoke of narratives spun around killings, saying, "*Whenever someone suffers any kind of punishment, we the followers also see reason in whatever punishment no matter how grave it is."* Despite this preaching, he himself had mixed feelings. While he was unhappy about the killing, he would remember what he had been taught and think "*Yes, really, the Prophet and other people before have done it so that's why they are also doing it. I just console myself."* Fanna (F, 30) her displeasure over the killings with her husband, he responded *"it has to be this way but don't worry, there will be a time when the whole world will be what we want."* She was unhappy but comforted by Shekau's promise of forgiveness to all those who sought forgiveness and aligned themselves with JAS, including those fighters who had left to join ISWA. She said, *"if the whole world seeks forgiveness and aligns themselves, it will work. So if the CJTF will seek forgiveness, throw away their sticks and align themselves with us, we will see them as brothers. If everyone did that, we will see the society we want."*

In addition to general community-level violence, many noted grievances over sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Women's perceptions of the empowering effects of group participation were a stark contrast to the violence and restrictions they experienced during their time in these groups. Eight of 12 women interviewed spoke about male violence and/or increased restrictions as to behavior and movement while associated to the group. However, attitudes towards women, including violence against them, were disliked by many respondents and affected their feelings about the group.

Respondents recounted not only that husbands would be violent but that violence against women and girls seen as 'defiant' was sanctioned, required, and perpetrated by the community at large. Ibrahim (M, 18) spoke about how it was seen as a husband's duty to keep their wives in line: *"Any woman who exposes any part of her body then her husband's attention will be called. So you will be the person to impact discipline in your wife."* Many respondents, both male and female, spoke of how they did not like this violence and how it affected their views of JAS. Bukar (M, 18), who joined as a boy, said *"Some women will want to escape or do certain disobediences. They will catch them, keep them in a room, and beat them up. From morning to night, they will beat them."* He spoke about how he was unsettled by this, feeling these punishments were too harsh. Infractions could be small or large. According to Falmata (F, 18), *"Should a woman mistakenly maybe mention her parents, they would say, oh you are mentioning the names of your parents who are unbelievers and you would be beaten up seriously."* She also spoke about how if women or men would *"fornicate or commit adultery, they will break your head. That I don't like."*

Fatima (F, 19) spoke about how, at one point, the men started warning the women that they would be killed if they even thought of running away. The women knew of many incidences where women had tried to escape but would be brought back and either disappear or they would see them killed. She tried to run away herself but was caught and taken to the *handak*, *"a room where you are locked in and remain there and be beaten as punishment… That place is not pleasant. That is one of the things that made me hate*

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[47]As stated in the introduction, this distinction between the two groups was generally borne out by research and the pattern of attacks until September 2018 when Mamman Nur was reported killed and, around the same time, a ICRC midwife was executed, presumably by ISWA fighters.

them the most." Husbands would also use the *handak* to keep 'defiant' wives in line. Some reasons for this punishment included going to locations without your husband's permission, talking with another woman in a way others feel gives rise to planning to run away and not observing prayers ardently, or any other laxity or lapses in religious observance. According to Fatima, *"Your husband will just say, take her to the handak and some people will come and take you away to the handak because you are defiant. So if you disobey your husband, you will be taken to the handak…. We are not happy with this at all. So gradually, even the religion will just come to be off your head."*

Husbands could also divorce their wives, after which women would stay in the *gidan musarafi*[48] until they married again. Falmata (F, 18), who was divorced by her husband while pregnant for visiting her neighbor's house, was left without food or water when he decided to go to another camp. She spoke about what happened to her afterwards and the stigma attached to divorced women: *"Once you are divorced from your husband and the husband announces your divorce, the munzir comes and takes you to the gidan musarafi. Sometimes the members bring food to that house for people to eat. Sometimes there might not be food. When this happens, we are allowed to go out to other people's houses to beg. But when this happens, we are not allowed to commit adultery… You were treated differently than married women. They will take you to be very defiant, you don't obey your husband. That is why he divorced you."*

Women also described acts of intimate partner violence unrelated to compliance with the moral code. Aisha (F, 18) was shot in her lap by her husband during an argument. Hajiya (F, 36) spoke about her husband started to beat her only once he joined JAS. She believed her co-wife who was an active member of the group would create lies against her and her husband would therefore be violent against her. She recounted how he would not give her food to eat and that *"The beatings I suffered were when I was pregnant and he hit me below the abdomen. I could not stand straight and when I stood straight, I could feel the urine..."*

Some women had joined the group to be part of activities but were prevented from doing so. As Aisha (F, 18) said, *"I am feeling that if I am able to teach others, I will be exactly equal like them so I can enter the paradise with them and work on the unbelievers who don't believe and enter paradise together."* Falmata (F, 18) spoke at length about how she was not being allowed to contribute to success and effectiveness of JAS because she was a woman. She said, *"At that time, I know what I can do. If I am allowed to come out, I can teach people as I was taught. But these boys do not allow you to go out and reach the communities. I wasn't allowed to go out or given the chance. That even frustrates us."* While many women joined the group wanting to be part of societal change, it is clear that, once members, their abilities to do so were severely restricted to extents they detested.

As articulated above, for women especially, there were very strict restrictions on what one could do, with grave sanctions for pushing boundaries. While men interviewed tended to rationalize the constraints against what was permissible as justified, for some women, having joined the groups in order to have freedom and power and to affect change to find the reality to be somewhat different was jarring. Many women and men interviewed found sanctions for 'bad behavior' and the violence that they experienced difficult to rationalize on an intellectual level and deal with on an emotional or psychological level, despite being told this was required by Allah. Indeed, as will be explored below, these factors were among those which led to some respondents deciding to leave the group.

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[48]House of divorcees.

IDENTITY THREAT

In the context of group belonging, a sense of threat to the in-group can facilitate the intensification of in-group identity, which some scholars also explore as identity 'fusion.' Identity Fusion, which lies at the heart of the Devoted Actor theory of extremism (Atran 2016) has been reinforced by studies in moral psychology, which suggest that with the notion of *loyalty* the group injects a certain moral quality to group identification. The intensification of in-group identity can lead to an unquestioning ascription to group norms and the *dehumanization* of out-groups. Simply, entitativity – the degree to which a group is perceived as a tight entity – increases both personal perceptions of agency vis a vis the group, as well as risk of out-group antipathy. As this research shows, group formation is a process that is malleable and plastic. It can be cultivated easily for destructive ends, as our biological and cognitive systems are profoundly oriented by group belonging.

Many of our respondents felt marginalized and that their views were counter-normative. For Fatima (F, 19), who was abducted and married to a fighter, the preaching and Quranic teaching made her feel like she belonged. The preaching changed her attitudes toward the group, noting that, *"I am also a Muslim so when they teach the Quran, I believe them. I had studied the Quran before but not as significant as they taught me."* Zahrah (F, 23) also spoke approvingly: *"Throughout the 9 years in our stay in that place, we have a daily routine. At night, we don't sleep, we do prayers. After morning prayers, we are all assembled to be taught the Quran. In the afternoon too. That is our normal daily life. Eating and reading."* Many respondents wanted to learn so they could also be part of spreading the word.

SOCIAL BELONGING

As discussed in *Two Sides of the Same Coin*, group radicalization often implies the consolidation and intensification of group norms. Simply, once a group is tightly bonded, perceived threats to identity facilitate the radicalization of norms, and the vilification and dehumanization of out-groups (a.k.a. parochial empathy). Many young people interviewed seemed to notice this trend. Their engagement with the group was of deep importance. Their belonging with the group and inclusion in an 'ideal society' was, if subconsciously, more important than norms they previously held. In this context, it often can be easy to post-hoc justify acts of violence. In the choice between belonging and intergroup tolerance, belonging generally wins.

Many respondents spoke of a strong sense of community. Fanna (F, 30), part of the group in its early days, spoke of forming a distinct group with women wearing long robes and only leaving homes for healthcare or Islamiyya classes and men wearing trousers above their ankles, mostly wearing white and refusing to work for government. Falmata (F, 18) spoke of living in a village occupied by JAS: '*The whole village is them. It was like a community. Some of them were met there by the community of JAS. When they come, they surround the village so even those who are there when they surround cannot leave so they have to stay there and become members.*' Respondents also talked about having a sense of family. According to Bukar (M, 18), '*When we were there, we were a family.*' Fanna (F, 30) said, '*To tell you honestly, we all feel like we are born from the same parents.*' Some respondents saw themselves as trusted allies or sons. They mentioned the freedoms this provided: '*When you stay for about 6 months with them and they have trusted you, when you say you want to go and see your mother, they will allow you.*'

Many respondents came to feel there was nothing more important than the group and that all was permissible in furtherance of aims. This aligns with the psychological phenomena outlined in *Two Sides.* Research has brought to light how violence against parents was required for promotion within JAS's ranks with documented cases of young people killing their parents and raping their mothers to gain higher

positions.[49] In this way, JAS purposefully tried to weaken and sever ties between those associated with it and family and friends outside or oppositional to the group, and encouraged counter-normative drastic actions (like parent rape) as a way to signal commitment to the new society and group. As said in *Two Sides,* in times of perceived threat, threatened groups often elicit more drastic and counter-normative indications of commitment and affiliation. Some respondents spoke of their minds being clouded and, as described below, felt that, after some time away, their minds had cleared and they had completely changed their attitudes towards the group.

Marriage featured as a critical means of fortifying social belonging and advancing social status within the group. While all but one of the women interviewed had been married, quite a few of the young men were single during their time in the group. This marital status was usually due to age as boys considered too young were asked to wait. For example, Ibrahim (M, 18), who joined when he was 13, informed his father that he wanted to marry but was told to wait. Those who were older and/or had found favor with commanders were given wives. The way that working for the group and being favored was incentivized and rewarded by access to women and to the higher status accorded to married men was apparent. For example, Lawan (M, 19) left the group two years ago was a favorite of leaders and so always received new guns and had Al Barnawi marry two women to him.

Key Findings and Recommendations to Support Disengagement and Offramps

- Whereas many 'empowerment' programs in northeast Nigeria tend to focus on livelihoods—with varying degrees of impact—this study demonstrates needs of 'radicalized' young people as far broader than income generation and occupation. Youth require a sense of purpose, opportunities for self-actualization and personal growth, demonstrations of respect from their families and communities, and inclusion in the decision-making processes that affect the fate of those families and communities. Knowing what elements of being part of the groups were appealing on the one hand and objectionable or repugnant on the other is key to understanding what potential interventions need to achieve or avoid.
- Given the prevalence of misinformation and competing narratives, programs should continue to highlight and amplify positive alternative narratives that tap into the imagination and psychological needs of AOG members. Such messaging should be well coordinated and reinforced through a locally branded alternative messaging ecosystem approach, similar to the White Dove (*Farar Tattabara*) transmedia Messaging Hub in northern Nigeria.
- Security forces and local security partners should incentivize disengagement by exploring restorative justice approaches, amnesty for disarming, and protection for defectors.
- Media and community development programs should prioritize engagement and dialogue with religious leaders to address the impact and consequences of religious fundamentalist ideologies. A wedge can be drawn between devout followers that feel unhappiness and concern with the group's violent tactics.
- Community-based referral and treatment mechanisms can be created in coordination with traditional and religious leaders, schools and parents, and supported by civil society groups. These groups can build the capacity of partners to detect signs of growing radicalization, to provide holistic support and treatment options and mentorship, and to counsel communities on how to engage with returning fighters and supporters of AOGs.
- To increase the credibility of interventions, offramps should be co-designed with local communities including former members that are working to support disengagement.

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[49] For example C. Nagarajan, 'Gender Assessment of Northeast Nigeria,' (June 2017).

- Women often left the group after growing frustrated with oppressive gender norms and lack of mobility and agency. P/CVE interventions can tap into this need by designing programs that empower women to contribute in meaningful ways.
- Programs should take a PYD approach to engaging young people and employ a group-based strategy to strengthening identity and social belonging in asset-based interventions. The social psychological and cognitive influences of group belonging and entitativity of programs for at risk youth are key elements to reorienting radicalization.

VIII.   Journeys to Disassociation

"Honestly, this fighting between the society and [AOGs] must change. Must stop... I just see soldiers as human beings as well as the [AOGs] themselves so why fight?" – Ibrahim (M, 18)

All respondents were disassociated from the AOGs at the time of the interview although, as will be discussed in the next section, some of them continued to have affinity for their group and several hoped to return to the group. Respondents offered a number of reasons and pathways to their disassociation. These reasons included missing family, experiencing marital discord and violence, increasing unhappiness with the tactics and ideology around violence, noting the group's hypocrisy, worrying about safety, and not choosing disassociation at all. For those who made conscious decisions to leave, they misled group members into thinking that they were coming back, ran away with others, were helped to escape by members who were leaving one group for another, and surrendered to soldiers.

Several respondents did not make a conscious choice to leave the group. For example, Bukar (M, 18) and some other young men were separated from the group due to heavy rain and/or getting lost. They could not find their way back and so, when they saw soldiers, they threw away their guns and turned themselves in. He said, *"If I hadn't got lost, I would still be with them."* Jibrin (M, 18) left the area along with his family because there was no food remaining. One respondent, Ibrahim (M, 18) was part of a group that lost their battle with the military and were captured.

CRITICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Despite intense indoctrination and attempts to force individuals to live and act a certain way, respondents maintained a sense of right and wrong. In fact, many rejected the group's turn to violence. Whether it was a threat to their personal safety or witnessing the killing and beating of fellow Muslims, many respondents struggle to normalize violence or accept the group's religious arguments for killing. This was a primary cause for respondents deciding to leave the group.

When asked about their wishes for the future, many respondents talked about their desire for peace. These desires for peace are a direct result of their experiences with violence. As such, these individuals have the potential to be credible peacebuilders and messengers to persuade individuals considering defecting. Hauwa (F, 18), who stays awake at night, "*worried, thinking, and in contemplation of the world*" spends a lot of time thinking about life in the Daula. "Day and night, we never stay with our people. We were always on the run." She spoke about how she wanted to see "*peace reign in our society so that we leave this misery that we are living in IDP camps and go back to our communities to live a peaceful life*." Jibrin (M, 18) also talked of AOG fighters coming back from the bush "*so they sort out their differences with the government and all of us can stay together. I'm not going to the bush to continue the fight but many are coming and stopping*."

GRIEVANCE

As described above, many respondents were unhappy with violence perpetrated by the AOGs, both against group members and perceived opposition. **All respondents who were part of Yusuf's group in Maiduguri said they left when it turned violent in the aftermath of the confrontation with the police**. Abba (M, 35) said, *"We had been going and coming back and became ardent followers, believers, and students. Gradually violence erupted. Since the eruption of violence and escalation, we had to pull back."*

Fatima (F, 19) felt, *"When they teach the Quran, I believe them. But inside the preaching, there is a part that you are free to kill anyone who stands in your way. This, I don't believe, but I believe the preaching and the teaching on the Quran."* Bukar (M, 18) spoke about how he did not like and felt bad about beating 'defiant' women. Ballama (M, 18) mentioned how he changed his mind: "*Honestly, when we went, we saw people being slaughtered. I don't see them slaughtering but I see the slaughtered bodies. And it is this that made me think it is not Allah's work."* The violence experienced and witnessed was one of the biggest reasons for disassociation because respondents grew to believe that this could not be religiously justified as well as had an aversion to this violence in general.

Some of the respondents spoke of an evolution in group identity. Falmata (F, 18) spoke about how *"they no longer dress the way they used to even though they teach us and preach."* Aisha (F, 18) went further and said, *"I see them as hypocrites. I think they are cheats. I am just reflecting now how many people along the way, they will take youth in front of their mothers, kill them, every property when they took over communities, they take everything for themselves, everything that people labored for. I didn't think before but now I am thinking, these are all injustices too."*

For Jibrin (M, 18), his own family's experiences were the final straw. They had all joined the group and he felt had sacrificed much for it. However, military actions meant there was no food in the locality so they decided to go to another place where they would be able to eat. He and his father and brother were walking ahead of other family members when one of his stepmother's brothers, a senior commander, saw they were deserting and shot all the people in the second group dead. After this, he said, *"I feel like that I have left them for good. I have no feelings towards them. I have suffered in their hands. How many junior brothers I have lost, my grandfather, my stepmother? It is they, in spite of all that I suffered, it is they who killed them. What else will I do with them? Even me, the kinds of things I went through because of them, going through Giwa barracks and others, it's not a small thing I went through for them. Of course, I am committed to them but the kinds of things they meted to my family has taken my mind off them now."* For Jibrin, that his family members had been killed despite their service marked an irrevocable break with JAS.

Seven respondents (2 women, 5 men) still feel connected to the groups and their aims, while also seeing them as involved in perpetrating injustice themselves. Hauwa (F, 18) said, *"What I see right is continue with your prayers, do your Ramadan fasting, do good to others, don't fornicate, don't do adultery, don't abuse people, don't steal – all these are still valid. What I see is not proper is killing people, slaughtering people, also injustice and stealing from people because when they go, they do take people's property too."* Zahrah (F, 23) felt that *"Much as I don't believe in the killings and others but I believe that everything taught there was based on the fear of Allah... It is a very close society based on trust there."*

IDENTITY THREAT

In the disassociation journeys described, threat to the physical self was most often cited as the incentive to leave the group. Respondents spoke about being under attack and losing territorial gains over time. They saw threats to themselves from the military as well as from within. Zahrah (F, 23) talked of how she

would try to convince her husband to leave as Shekau was killing members suspected of alignment to Mamman Nur and she was worried her husband would fall under suspicion. Aisha (F, 18) spoke of her fear of being made to 'go on jihad' (become a 'suicide' bomber) when her second husband went on operations after hearing this is what happened to women who had had two husbands die. Lawan (M, 19) spoke of how he was being viewed with suspicion by Mamman Nur and started to feel that he would one day fall under suspicion. Other respondents saw people being killed by military bombs. Fanna (F, 30) said, *"The airplanes also intensified hovering over us and people became jittery. **We listened to radio there also in the enclave. We heard an announcement being made that if you want to give up, you should come, nobody will touch you. Things were becoming too much and we had tiny children with us. So we felt that it is best that we come out."***

SOCIAL BELONGING

Three women respondents spoke of missing their families. As Hawua recounted, *"Gradually, when we were there, I started feeling I wanted to see my mother and father. So when the soldiers came, I ran away and held my hands up and they collected me.* Zahrah (F, 23) started thinking of her family after her husband's death. While Fatima (F, 19) had come to believe in the group, she had been forced to marry someone unwillingly. This fact, together with her thinking of her parents, were the reasons she left.

For three women respondents, the state of their marriage was one factor in to their decision to leave. In addition to Fatima (F, 19) who left due to missing her parents and the forced circumstances of her marriage, Hajiya (F, 36) and Jallaba (F, 25) spoke about discord in the marital home. Hajiya's co-wife became an active member along with their husband. While her children were grown up and could bring food and other goods to their mother, Falmata (F, 18) did not have grown children who could provide for her, was not given food by her co-wife's children, and experienced regular and violent abuse from her husband. Jallaba and two of the co-wives had issues with one of their co-wives. She said: *"Our belief system did not change. I would have stayed if not for her. But for the fact that there is no way to go back, even now if I can get a way, and without that woman, I will go back. There is nothing in particular about the group, I never said I had any change of mind about them."* The extent to which respondents held similar views about the group will be discussed in the next section.

Key Findings and Recommendations to Create Alternative Pathways

Similar to the recommendations in the previous sections, these recommendations aim to create viable offramps and alternative pathways to encourage defection and disengagement from AOGs. However, the assumption at this phase is that, while some individuals continue to be fully committed to the group, others are already demonstrating the will and agency to disengage and therefore need the opportunity. The latter group of individuals targeted do not need to be convinced of the failings of JAS or ISWA, but rather need to see how they and their loved ones can be safe and how they can continue to be activated and useful in support of a greater good.

- Strengthen media programming and local messaging to address nuanced challenges and resources available to defectors in current DDRR (disarmament, demobilization, reintegration, and rehabilitation) interventions.
- Given that many respondents report listening to radio while living with the group, efforts should be made to map which stations and programs are most popular among AOG members and integrate discreet messaging to encourage defections.
- Programs should continue to highlight and amplify positive alternative narratives that tap into the imagination and psychological needs of AOG members. Such messaging should be well

coordinated and reinforced through a locally branded alternative messaging ecosystem approach, similar to the White Dove (*Farar Tattabara*) transmedia CVE Hub in northern Nigeria.

- Security forces and local security partners should be trained to recognize and process defectors without further marginalizing or stigmatizing them, with gender-sensitive approaches.
- Community-based support and treatment mechanisms can be created in coordination with traditional and religious leaders, schools and parents, and supported by civil society groups. These groups can build the capacity of partners to support defectors and counsel communities on how to engage with returning fighters and supporters of AOGs.
- Other offramps can be co-designed with local communities including empowering former members that are working informally to support disengagement and deradicalization.

IX.   Reintegration

"The society has gone so bad that I don't think I will ever witness the kind of society I want to see."
– Zahrah (F, 23)

Over the course of dozens of hours of interviews a pattern emerged. As respondents began to open up about life after the group, it was striking how many had left physically but not ideologically. Among the key challenges faced after disengaging from the group, respondents spoke about the actions of the military, life as an IDP, strained/broken community relationships, persons changes in their behavior and desires for their lives, their current attitudes towards AOGs, and their thoughts about the future and social change. Some respondents are now completely disconnected from the group and bear negative feelings, including three women who were abducted, and an additional nine respondents (5 women, 4 men) who joined the groups willingly but say they have now turned away from the group.

CRITICAL SIGNIFICANCE

For some respondents, their current situation is a far cry from the power they held in the Daula or over those not part of the group. Lawan (M, 19) was a favorite of the leaders and was treated with respect but *"As I am here, I don't have any proper place to sleep in, I have nothing to do. These are my shoes, completely cut up and worn out. I have no clothes. I have to be begging, running helter skelter. Nobody takes me to be anything. While there, I was something people were looking at me, respecting me as I am."* Lawan had gone back to being just another young unemployed single young man. It was clear he felt this loss of prestige, respect, and power was particularly galling.

When asked about their role in societal transformation, many respondents felt powerless and despondent, unable to effect change. According to Hauwa (F, 18), *"I went to join the fight and change society but at that time our belief was strongly in Allah's will and as we had the knowledge and firepower, we thought we will do it. But now, changing this whole system, it is so mundane and everybody is engaged in the evils that I feel myself, [Hauwa], can do little to change it."* Prominent among these 'evils' was the level of diversion of humanitarian assistance due to corruption that Hauwa observed in her IDP camp. The only action some people felt they could do was to pray. As well as praying themselves, some respondents were part of groups that collected money from the little they had managed to earn during the week to give to mallams on Fridays to pray for peace to return.

Zahrah (F, 23) was so convinced she had been part of a group that was changing the world that she expected dramatic shifts when she left the Daula but was disappointed. She said, *'I thought maybe… society has now changed since my husbands and others were going for operations and telling of victories… I believe in them that they will change the world, not only the society but the world... But when I came*

back, I found even the society was worse than what I left it before. So my belief that they would change did not work.' Zahrah also felt that being involved in change now was *"beyond me. It is impossible…. Things have degenerated to a level that you cannot assume control over your immediate family or environment."* Hauwa (F, 18) felt that she couldn't do anything now because of a lack of skills: *"What they taught me before is not real preaching but mischief and this is all I have learned so I can't do it'"* Ballama (M, 18) felt he was both too young and uneducated, saying, *"Honestly, there is nothing I can do because I am a young man. I am a small person. I am not going to any school. So I don't know how I can do anything to make things better."* Going to school was seen as the route to a good job, the knowledge required to succeed, and the respect of others but provision of education in Borno is limited with schools, if they exist, are often oversubscribed have and/or fees beyond the reach of those without means.

For many, the desire for critical significance after leaving the group turned into disillusionment and feelings of marginalization. However, a small number of respondents felt able to be part of societal change and were focused on ending the conflict. Two older men, ages 38 and 40, were involved in trying to negotiate for peace. Abdulrahman (M, 38) continues to be engaged in preaching and calling those he knew from his time in the group who are still members to refrain from violence. Musa (M, 40) wanted, after he finished his 'secular' education, to become a teacher and do his own part to change society and the system. Ibrahim (M, 44) wanted to be able to reach out to AOGs himself to call for peace. However, he feared their suspicion, saying, *"When I go they may suspect me to even becoming back to spy on them. This is my fear but I believe if I make it honestly, I have the capacity, I have the know-how and connections to reach out to them and then call them for peace."* Jibrin (M, 18) also focuses his activism on AOGs themselves. He is already engaged in trying to support those who leave saying, *"If someone should come out from that enclave today, since I have come out for long, I know how to talk to the person and then change his mindset. So I can tell him certain things that will console him and then forget about them."* Although his actions are not planned out and tend to be dependent on the opportunities he comes across to engage, he tries to be a positive role model and show what is possible for life after JAS to these young people who are exiting the group.

GRIEVANCE
For many respondents, soldiers were the first people they came across after leaving. For some, this was a positive experience. Fatima (F, 19) said soldiers gave them food to eat, allowed them to go into the community and helped them get to Maiduguri. She said, *"The soldiers have never maltreated us, perhaps because they don't know that we are the wives of the boys."* Falmata (F, 18) talked of how she was unable to run when soldiers came to their camp as she was very pregnant. She said, *"When the soldier saw me, he said, 'I'm not going to touch you, don't run'. I had to remove my cover so he could see that I'm really pregnant… The soldiers came and surrounded us. We are 35 women, 3 men, and several children... They never molested us. They never touched us."* She and the others were taken to Maiduguri, given health check-ups, and brought to an IDP camp.

Aisha (F, 18) spoke about seeing 'rescued' women coming back to rejoin the Daula - but not recently. She had such low levels of trust in security agencies that she said, "*I think they just kill whoever [leaves the group], whether a man, a woman, or a child, they just kill them."* She had been told that security forces kill those who leave and spoke about mass graves that she had seen.[50] However, she herself surrendered and was treated well. She talked about the military differentiating in treatment between different categories of people from forced conscripts who had no choice to those who joined willingly or surrendered.

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[50]Please note that evidence of the existence of these mass graves does not yet exist.

Other respondents had a much more negative experience of the military. When Hauwa (F, 18) came across the military, she was searched and a mobile telephone with photographs of her carrying guns and being trained was found. After that, soldiers started physically assaulting her. She was still very bitter about her treatment saying, *"They laid me down, stepped on me, beat me… I said I had repented and didn't want to be with them. I thought that all would be over… I am a young girl... I will never forget Nigerian soldiers, what they did to me. They tied my hands to my back and placed me on the sand from 5am to 5pm and every soldier passing has to hit me and kick me. When I vomit, I vomit blood."* Lawan (M, 19) surrendered and was 'beaten thoroughly' despite him passing on useful information. This beating stopped when 'one soldier commander' came. He shouted and said, "*someone who is telling you all this truth, why did you subject him to all this hardship, untie him.''* After this, Lawan, who is an Al Barnawi follower, would pass on information to soldiers and show them locations of Shekau bases. He was subsequently taken to Giwa Barracks where he stayed for one year. He said, *"Life in that barracks, the soldiers have cheated me. Despite the fact that I brought myself and surrendered myself, they brought and subjected me to this kind of life... I tell them everything. In spite of this, after interrogating me, they would tie me to the wall from morning to sunset. The sun would be burning me. Sometimes my back, it would be like you put hot water on it. [After] all the information I have given them."* Some respondents experienced abuse by the hands of CJTF members also. Fanna (F, 30) said, *"As soon as we arrived Bama, when they saw us, the CJTF said, ah your husband is a known member. They caught and started beating me. They lied me down. They lashed me with a cane. They gave me 15 strokes of the cane. No medicine. No hot water. I could not get up. I was lying on my stomach for almost one week because all my back is swollen... They told me that if not for this number of children that you have, we will kill you, we will finish you up."*

Many respondents spoke about the difficult realities of living as IDPs. Hauwa (F, 18) characterized the experience as *"We are living in another man's land, uncomfortable, crowded. Honestly, it's the worst situation. We are now affected by hunger. Even clothing we used to have, we no longer have. There is nobody to relate to whenever we want something."* Fanna (F, 30) spoke of how food in the camps, meant for the month, runs out after 15 days. She believes that although the government brings enough food, this food is being diverted by camp management. Jallaba (F, 25) is HIV positive and talked of how taking her anti-retroviral medication makes her dizzy and how the doctors stress the importance of eating while taking medicine but that there is not enough food given out in the camp to enable her to do so.

Some respondents spoke about desire for education. One respondent was going to the camp school and said this had positively transformed his outlook and his ideas about his future life. However, others spoke about their frustration at not being able to attend school as those in the IDP camp were already oversubscribed. Bukar (M, 18) suggested the answer is for "*everyone to become a mallam [teacher] – both Islamic and secular mallam - as both are useful. If everybody should be learned in both religious and secular ways, people will know people's rights and we can stay peaceful. If we can get that, everything else will follow."* To illustrate his point, Ballama (M, 18) felt AOG members engaged in killing because they were 'not trained well in good manners' and talked of the need to train up young children to be good citizens.

Most respondents felt it was the responsibility of the government to make the situation better but also that Borno state suffered from a lack of leaders. Despite choosing an 'empowered' path by joining an AOG, many struggled to see their role once rejoining society. In fact, this is why many chose to create an idealized society that made space for their unique contributions and visions for social change. A central challenge to reintegration efforts is determining what engaged

> When asked, none of the young people interviewed could name any individual or group that they felt was engaging in positive societal transformation.

citizenship could look like for former members of AOGs, given that most willingly turned their backs on a society they perceived as immoral, corrupt, and not representing or benefiting most people.

Some respondents contrasted their current situation with life in the Daula and felt relieved to be away. Fatima (F, 19) characterized her current reality with her time in the group as *"It's like normal. It's not like it was before. Before, there are a lot of killings."* Aisha (F, 18) stressed that, *"The people here look better for me. I have never seen anybody killing anyone here. I have not come across anything I don't like here, considering my former experiences."* Other respondents were very clear that life in the Daula had been better. According to Hauwa (F, 18), *"if it is in terms of misery and suffering, it is here that we suffered rather than that place. We are better off there than here… We eat well. We don't abuse people there. You don't disobey anybody there. We strictly follow guidelines given to us. If it's food that we have in plenty, we carry and give to others. It's a perfect ideal society… In this world, people are abusing people, people are cheating people, people are marginalizing people, people are victimizing people."* Jallaba (F, 25), who had been stigmatized in her brother's house after leaving the group, asked, *"What kind of society is this? There, nobody despises me let alone abuses me."*

As respondents began to speak more openly, it became clear that without some significant improvements in their life conditions and ability to contribute, these new grievances that emerged after leaving the group could lead individuals to feel socially excluded and cause them to re-join the group.

IDENTITY THREAT

Noticeable among respondents at different stages in their social reintegration was increased self-doubt, confusion, and disillusionment around issues of personal identity, religious adherence, and what they wanted their future to look like. Being part of the group affirmed a certain pathway, however improbable and idealistic, which suddenly came to an end. Respondents spanned a wide spectrum in their current attitudes toward their former groups. Three respondents (2 women, 1 man) openly regretted leaving, with some of them actively seeking and planning ways to rejoin. Lawan (M, 19) was very clear he would return if possible. He said, *"After all, it's not a change of idea or mind that pushed me out. Then with the suffering that I went through in the hands of soldiers and what I am now, honestly, I am always thinking that I shouldn't have left."* All that is preventing him from going back is fear he would be viewed with suspicion after spending time away and lack of transport money. For those in this category, they still consider AOGs to be heroes. According to Ibrahim (M, 18), *"I see them as people who are following the rules of Allah and his Prophet because when I am here now I don't see people doing those kind of intense reading, I can't see people are seriously committed to their prayers, I can't see people as seriously committed to doing good or working against stopping bad so honestly, to date they are my heroes."*

Some respondents reflected on how they had changed since leaving the Daula. Some said they had moved away from the ideology. For example, Bukar (M, 18) talked of how his attitude had completely changed and credited this shift to being enrolled in school and now having hopes for his and his society's future.

Zahrah (F, 23) was unhappy about no longer being as religiously observant as in the Daula, for reasons that are unclear but seemed linked to her experiences and current religious confusion. She said, *"Ever since I came and stayed in the [IDP] camp, even my religion started coming out in blood. I don't have the same feelings about the whole doctrine that I had… I can't say why I've changed but it's like procrastination."* She is confused by the difference between what people now preach to her and what she was previously taught: ***"There is no point of believing now, honestly. Because what they are telling us then was quite different from what people are telling us now what Allah says and what the Prophet said. So honestly, I'm now kind of lost."*** While levels of religious observance are high in Borno society

outside of AOGs, Zahrah was experiencing confusion as to what Islam actually meant, torn between what she had been taught in the Daula and attempts to counter AOG religious messaging by religious leaders and NGOs. Furthermore, she had come to see Islam as requiring the commission of violence and, given her aversion around this, was experiencing intense personal struggles which were leading her to move away from religion altogether.

SOCIAL BELONGING

Many young people interviewed struggled to find people to care for and love them. Hauwa (F, 18) spoke of how her family had been torn apart with each member having to fend for themselves. Lawan (M, 19) spoke about how, after being told his parents had died, he found someone he knew from before. This person had been helping and taking care of him but recently told him he no longer had enough for even his own children and that Lawan, now an adult, should look after himself. Lawan asks people if he can run errands for them in return for small sums of money which he says is far from enough to sustain himself. Ballama (M, 18) had been entrusted to a man in the camp by his mother when she went to visit her mother. However, not only had this man not looked after him but he had stolen the N8,000 (roughly $20) Ballama (M, 18) had managed to save up. He is currently trying to get the police to help him have the money returned so he can go to the location where his mother and grandmother are living.

As many people in their communities, whether in their home locations, in formal IDP camps, or informal IDP settlements, knew of their association with the groups, they experienced marginalization, isolation, and stigma. There are programs that focus on addressing the experiences of those who have left the groups but these tend to focus on 'innocent' abductees and stress their lack of culpability in their association and subsequent actions. This type of programming is particularly evident for women and girls who were formerly associated with AOGs. As a result, **respondents spoke about presenting themselves to others in the community and those undertaking programming interventions alike as having been abducted and forcibly recruited in order to access services**. They spoke of being in sessions aimed at trauma healing and concocting stories that were not true, with obvious consequences for the efficacy of such mental health services. This presentation of self was not always successful when it came to their community. Respondents spoke about being viewed with suspicion and hatred, thereby further increasing their alienation from their community.

Many respondents were rethinking their decision to leave the groups. Fanna (F, 30) said, *"Sometimes I wonder why did I go out? I better have stayed there with my children where we could eat. My mind was at ease rather than this condition… But here, even though they are members of my community, they don't accept me, they don't like me, neither do they like my children. I sometimes wonder why ever did I bring myself out and subject myself to the life I am living here?"*

Key Findings and Recommendations to Prevent Re-engagement with AOGs

As is outlined in *Two Sides*, radicalization is a process akin to building "motivational scaffolding," whereas participation in an AOG is linked more to fulfillment of specific needs like belonging, agency, and critical significance. Throughout this report, we have tried to give examples of how these specific needs are felt and addressed during the different phases of one's "Journey to Self-Actualization." During each phase, it is possible to create interventions that address individuals' needs while also reorienting them away from violence and towards inclusive, peaceful pathways. These pathways or offramps can take many forms:

- Training in life skills with an emphasis on critical thinking, media literacy, empathy, conflict resolution, and effective communication;
- Technical training in social innovation and entrepreneurship;

- Offline and online civic engagement platforms for young people of different backgrounds to build agency and influence decision making, policy, and programming on issues affecting their lives, including injustice, impunity, corruption, and inequality;
- Youth-led media programming to amplify youth voices and promote positive alternative narratives;
- Arts and recreational facilities, including youth centers and after-school programs;
- Mentorship programs that support healthy bonding and provide positive role models;
- Martial arts and sports programs that tap into youth's need for physical activity and control;

These areas of intervention address young people's needs to have a sense of purpose and feel able to effect change in the society around them and requires support to self-mobilize for action, to connect to influencers and decision makers, and to be part of those who make decisions in the community. Youth development and empowerment programs are often successful at building skills, agency, and vision, but fall short of creating long-term meaningful opportunities for young people to engage civically. The result is often more disillusionment and frustration, which extremist groups target and leverage. As a result, these programs must embed a positive youth development approach that leverages the assets and agencies of young people with an enabling environment to help youth access opportunities and resources to overcome social exclusion and marginalization and create pathways toward self-actualization.

- Across the humanitarian to development spectrum, many actors – including NGOs, CSOs, government agencies and multilaterals – can effect change in the material circumstances of vulnerable communities through assistance with improving livelihoods and access to goods and services including in ways that offer opportunities for and build pride in education, skills, and work. All respondents spoke about their present realities and ways in which bias and favoritism on the basis of ethnic and religious identities or connections to those with power in the community as well as corruption and diversion of aid created difficulties in accessing adequate food, water, shelter, healthcare, education, and other items and services. Addressing these needs is a pre-requisite for any proposed empowerment and youth development work.
- As our report highlights, the majority of our respondents (16 out of 22) were under the age of 18 when they became associated with AOGs. As such, it is critical that interventions be designed to target underage youth as well as young adults, with a particular emphasis on understanding group bonding and group identity fusion. While mental health resources are scarce in northeast Nigeria, there are resources available and a small amount of funding could support the training of social workers, teachers, and others in how to identify and address early signs of aggression, isolation, and loneliness and their correlation with poorer mental and physical health outcomes and decreased psychological resilience in the face of stress. The people interviewed for this report were clearly traumatized. Unfortunately, given the stigmatization associated with AOGs, many have to misrepresent themselves as being abducted.
- Lasting positive change for disenfranchised individuals and communities requires work in three interlocking levels—individual change, institutional change, and policy change. PYD offers a powerful framework for beginning with personal change and activating young people to engage more broadly.
- While it is a core strategy of recruitment efforts by extremist groups, empowerment practitioners often overlook the merits of a group-based strategy to strengthening empowerment, belonging, identity, and agency among vulnerable youth.
- Ensure interventions aimed at people associated with AOGs are designed so as to also reach those with ideological affinity with groups rather than just those who were abducted or otherwise forcibly recruited. It is important to work with and support all those who were associated with AOGs across

the forced to voluntary spectrum. This should be as holistic and humane as possible, including interventions that support basic needs, health, and education, as well as economic self-empowerment, psychosocial support, and civic participation. At present, young people who were ideologically engaged in the groups can be left out as focus can be on 'innocent' abductees and/ or feel forced to frame themselves as being abducted or forcibly recruited in order to avail of services and sympathy and not face retribution. Being sidelined or having to misrepresent your attitudes and experiences is profoundly disempowering in and of itself.

- While some are perceived as political or corruption, engagement and dialogue with religious leaders will help address the impact and consequences of religious fundamentalist ideologies. A clear example of this is the dissonance some respondents experienced between teachings, for example that Allah requires one to kill in jihad, and their own feelings about these actions. Given the widespread unhappiness with the group's violence, religious leaders could help reveal the anti-Islamic nature of intimate partner violence and violence against Muslims.

- Create forums and safe spaces to help such individuals think through and analyze their experiences in a collective forum and create social networks of mutual support. Many respondents had no outlet for talking and thinking through their experiences and felt isolated and alone, particularly as many in the community were aware of their association with AOGs and stigmatized them as a result. These programs can strengthen social networks so young people, particularly those otherwise excluded, feel connection, support, and solidarity, thereby leading to enhanced resilience and self-esteem. Social networks also offer the opportunity for finding role models, for example as in the case of the young man who helps to support and mentor those who have newly left JAS to mitigate their having to go through the same difficulties that experienced.

- Similarly, address relations with others in the community affected by violence and find ways for different groups to talk about the conflict and violence and their role in and attitudes to this in order to build social cohesion. At present, many respondents described broken relationships between themselves and their community. They described being isolated and feeling lack of care and belonging, contrasting this state of affairs with what they had experienced while in the Daula. These dynamics are understandable given what many people have experienced as a result of violent conflict. However, addressing these toxic relations between 'radicalized' young women and men and others in the community in a way that is respectful of past experience and trauma is important for social cohesion and for ensuring these young people feel they have a stake in their community and society. Please note that this area of intervention needs to be implemented with care and conflict sensitivity to ensure conflict dynamics are not addressed rather than exacerbated.

- Design interventions to reach out to young people of all genders as separate constituencies with agency and capacities to effect change and whose interests are not represented well by existing mechanisms of community leadership. While it is important to support young people to have voice and agency in mainstream decision-making forums, given the reality of these spaces being dominated by older men and the difficulty to transform social norms and hierarchies around gender and age, it is also key to ensure young women and men, including those who are 'radicalized' are supported to associate themselves. Genuine intergenerational dialogue that is sensitive to hierarchies of gender, age, and power and institutionalized as part of a long-term process which enables the voices of young women and men to be heard on a regular basis is required to address youth exclusion.

- Given the negative perception of security forces and graphic accounts of abuse by many respondents, more efforts much be made to professionalize military treatment of victims and defectors. Respectful security forces are critical to delegitimizing a longstanding narrative of military heavy-handedness and has the potential to increase overall security, intelligence gathering, and force protection.

X.   Conclusion

Those interviewed experienced both empowerment and disempowerment across their lives, including in the time they spent with AOGs. Given the strict nature of rules they were required to follow, including being sanctioned for 'defiant' behavior, the nature of indoctrination and their ages, the extent to which this was true agency is questionable. However, these experiences need to be seen relative to former and current circumstances and ways in which young people are often viewed and treated by those older to them. Indeed, association with the groups provided young people opportunities to overcome barriers to community respect, to gain power and influence, and feel part of societal transformation. That these opportunities were not available to young people before or open to them now is an indictment of age (and gender) hierarchies in mainstream society.

This dynamic continues even after their disassociation. Indeed, to a large extent, AOGs have been more effective in creating a sense of belonging, possibility, and change than either the state or society at large and have been able to both mobilize many of the respondents interviewed to join and stay in the group as well as make the contrast clear between this sense of purpose and excitement while in the group and life after leaving the group. Indeed, in other contexts, perpetrating violence can, in and of itself, increase identification with violent groups.[51] The sense of hopelessness and desire to return to AOGs was striking in many. It is clear that current interventions around rehabilitation and reintegration, structured as they are around victims, the abducted women, boys, and girls, are not effective for the category of young people studied who choose to be part of AOGs to varying extents and at different times. Indeed, many respondents pretended that they had been abducted in order to forestall mistrust and reprisal attacks against them. Gendered stereotypes of how government and security agencies view people associated with AOGs are evident here. While there is a spectrum of forced to voluntary for both women and men, women, girls, and younger boys are automatically seen as vulnerable victims and abductees who have been 'brainwashed' and need rehabilitation. However, while some men and older boys are viewed as having been abducted or forcibly recruited too, most are seen as active agents and perpetrators. That women and girls are denied agency and men and boys seen as only perpetrators are both problematic for those concerned.

It was clear from respondents interviewed that current interventions (or the lack thereof) are not working. Alternative approaches, like those mentioned in the recommendations above, to truly empower individuals to build possibilities for self-awareness, self-responsibility, agency, belonging, and involvement in social change need to be explored. Governments and implementers must be comfortable with taking risks and trying new approaches, including direct engagement with radicalized individuals and ex-members. By understanding the journeys of young people to association with AOGs, their experiences during that time and in the present day as well as the reasons why they became disassociated from these groups, it is possible to create offramps for reorienting young people towards inclusive and constructive opportunities for self-actualization, civic engagement, and social change. It is important to recognize that actors can influence but not control the results of a person becoming further empowered. The ways in which an empowered person can use their empowerment can vary greatly. It is important to ensure individuals' empowerment or radicalization journey is built around an inclusive value-based system to ensure mobilization for human rights, peace, and social justice.

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[51]See R. Littman, 'Perpetrating Violence Increases Identification with Violent Groups: Survey Evidence From Former Combatants,' 2018 *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* for evidence from Liberia and Uganda.

About the Report: The conflict in northeast Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin has evolved in complexity and intensity since 2009, with armed opposition groups (AOGs) like Boko Haram demonstrating the ability to mobilize support and offer disaffected youth a sense of belonging, purpose, and community. As the violent conflict enters its tenth year, there is a need for a new strategy that examines the assets and agencies of vulnerable youth, prioritizes positive youth development (PYD) approaches to transforming radicalization, and creates humanizing offramps for radicalized youth to reintegrate into society. Current interventions around rehabilitation and reintegration, structured as they are around victims – the abducted women, boys, and girls – are not effective for the category of young people studied who choose to be part of AOGs. That women and girls are denied agency and men and boys seen as only perpetrators is problematic for those concerned. As leadership of AOGs fragments along ideological lines, there is a unique opportunity to strengthen direct engagement with those who have left or wish to leave these groups. That these opportunities were not available to young people before or open to them now is an indictment of age (and gender) hierarchies in mainstream society.

This study, a companion to an earlier EAI report, "Two Sides of the Same Coin," (released in May 2018), contributes to understanding the relationship between empowerment and radicalization through in-depth interviews with 22 young people who were ideologically aligned members of AOGs in northeast Nigeria. Our findings aim to strengthen a shared agenda and address evidence gaps related to DDRR efforts by examining young peoples' assets, agencies, and resiliencies in northeast Nigeria. It is clear from respondents interviewed that current interventions (or the lack thereof) are not working. Alternative approaches, described herein, to empower individuals to increase self-awareness, self-responsibility, agency, belonging, and involvement in social change need to be developed. Governments and implementers must be comfortable with taking risks and trying new approaches, including direct engagement with radicalized individuals and ex-members. By understanding the journeys of young people before, during, and after association with AOGs it is possible to create offramps for reorienting young people towards inclusive and constructive opportunities for self-actualization, civic engagement, and social change.

Equal Access (EA) is an international nonprofit organization dedicated to creating positive social change for millions of underserved people across the developing world by providing critically needed information and education. With award-winning expertise in communications for social change, Equal Access combines innovative media programming with direct community engagement activities to inform, educate, and inspire individuals and communities, providing them with the skills and tools they need to improve their lives.