The next source of crowd-sourced insight? Mobile phones.
READ NOW
sas
EXPECT THE EXCEPTIONAL
This year's must-have gift doesn't come with batteries.
Just Illumination.
Give The Economist for £1/$1 a week GIVE A GIFT ›

More than meets the eye

Women and Boko Haram

Outrages by the Islamist group obscure the ineptitude of the Nigerian state, the rotten fate of escapees and the few women who willingly joined the group

Print edition | Books and arts ›
Nov 30th 2017

Women and the War on Boko Haram: Wives, Weapons, Witnesses. By Hilary Matfess. *Zed Books; 288 pages; $24.95 and £14.99.*

ON APRIL 14th 2014, militants from Boko Haram, a group of Islamic extremists, snatched 276 schoolgirls from their dormitories in north-east Nigeria. The taking of the "Chibok Girls", as they became known, was unplanned (the insurgents had reportedly meant to grab food and a brickmaking machine). But the heist catapulted a little-known conflict to international attention. The #BringBackOurGirls campaign led by the girls' parents and activists had the resonance needed to go viral: young, innocent and mostly Christian girls forced to convert to Islam by violent jihadists. Boko Haram knew the girls' propaganda power too. A video it released in 2014 showed more than 100 swathed in gloomy hijabs, chanting prayers.

ADVERTISING
Infread Inserted by Teads

Latest updates
The Senate passes a tax bill
DEMOCRACY IN AME... 4 HOURS AGO
Michael Flynn pleads guilty to lying to the FBI over Russia contacts
DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA A DAY AGO
Republicans grouse about tax models they once supported
FREE EXCHANGE › A DAY AGO
The 2017 Daily chart advent calendar
GRAPHIC DETAIL › A DAY AGO
Sexual politics on stage
PROSPERO › A DAY AGO
Evo Morales finds a way to run for re-election
AMERICAS › A DAY AGO
See all updates ›

The Chibok Girls became symbols in other ways. Some escaped, others were let go after negotiations and more than 100 are still captives. Those escapees given scholarships to study in America were made by their benefactors to talk endlessly about their abduction for fundraising appeals. The kidnap also allowed Nigeria's incompetent army to strut as heroes on a rescue mission (though the army has not directly rescued any of the girls).

It also obscured a much bigger problem. More than 2,000 women were abducted by Boko Haram between the beginning of 2014 and spring 2015, according to Amnesty International, and many more since. A majority of Boko Haram suicide-bombers have been female, many of them girls coerced or brainwashed into their missions.

Hilary Matfess, a doctoral candidate at Yale University, adeptly dismantles stereotypes and myths in her new book, "Women and the War on Boko Haram". That war has displaced up to 2.1m people and killed more than 30,000 since 2011. Not all the women involved are victims. Many decided to marry into the group, often against their parents' wishes. In a region where just 4% of girls finish secondary school and many women do back-breaking farm work, life as a stay-at-home Boko Haram wife receiving Quranic education can appeal. "There was 100% better treatment under Boko Haram," a commander's wife who had been "rescued" by the army told Ms Matfess. "There were more gifts, better food and a lot of sex that I always enjoyed."

Uncommonly for an armed group, Boko Haram's leaders purportedly forbid their soldiers to commit rape, outside of marriage at least, so many women have been forced to wed their captors. But here Ms Matfess provides valuable context: more than half of women in northern Nigeria marry by the age of 16, and marital rape is not illegal.

Meanwhile, women escaping the jihadists have often fared no better. Nigerian soldiers burn villages cleared of Boko Haram (ostensibly to stop looting), and have been accused of killing men and forcing women to become their wives. Camps for those displaced by the war are rife with abuse, with repeated reports of rape.

Ms Matfess is best when weaving the stories of women with analysis of Boko Haram and Nigeria's gender politics. But her argument for "gender-sensitive programming" in the humanitarian response feels less than equal to the enormous task. Nonetheless, hers is a welcome contribution to a narrative that has been dominated by oversimplified symbolism.

This article appeared in the Books and arts section of the print edition under the headline "Both sides of the coin"

View comments
About *The Economist*
Reuse this content

Advertisement
Open & Secure
How companies are looking to openness and innovation to tackle the £335bn problem of cyber-crime
Learn more
SPONSORED BY SAMSUNG Knox

Advertisement

Editors' picks
Growing the deficit
The Senate passes a tax bill
Republicans' claim to be the party of balanced budgets is now laughable
DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA ›
Bearing witness
Nadia Murad's tale of captivity with Islamic State
CULTURE ›
Twist after twist
Honduras's disputed election provokes a crisis
AMERICAS ›
Deal or no deal?
The siren song of a no-deal Brexit
BRITAIN ›

Tell us what you think of Economist.com
Leave feedback
Need assistance with your subscription?
Contact us
Classified ads

Published since September 1843 to take part in
"a severe contest between intelligence, which presses forward, and an unworthy, timid ignorance obstructing our progress."

Terms of Use Privacy Cookies Accessibility Modern Slavery Statement
Copyright © The Economist Newspaper Limited 2017. All rights reserved.