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Beijing 1995 and female terrorism in 21st century West Africa

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between the 1995 World Conference on Women held in Beijing and the emergence of female terrorism in West Africa during the 21st century. It examines how the conference, which was intended to promote global gender equality and women's rights, unintentionally influenced the dynamics of female participation in extremist activities. This study provides insights into the motivations, strategies, and effects of female terrorism in West Africa by analysing historical events, regional context, and socio-political factors, casting light on the complex relationship between gender, empowerment, and violence. The gendered socialisation theory served as the theoretical framework for this study. Noting that the study is qualitative and non-experimental, a descriptive research design was chosen for this investigation. The qualitative method was used to generate data for this study, and the qualitative descriptive method was used to analyse the collected data. The study revealed a correlation between the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing and the rise of female terrorism in West African nations. The study recommended adequate public enlightenment, strengthened responsive counterterrorism strategies, enhanced women's participation in counterterrorism efforts and genuine empowerment of women and girls through education and economic opportunities.

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Introduction

The World Conference on Women, which was held in Beijing in 1995, is recognised as an important landmark in the ongoing global movement to advance gender equality and women's empowerment. Although the purpose of the meeting was to advance the position of women all over the world, unintentionally, it ended up having an effect on the dynamics of female participation in extremist activities. This article sheds insight on the complicated interplay between gender, empowerment, and violence by investigating the connection between Beijing 1995 and the growth of female terrorism in West Africa in the 21st century. This study gives unique insights into the motivations and impacts of female terrorism in the region by analysis historic events, regional context and socio-political issues.

Beijing 1995 World Conference on Women: An Overview

The Beijing 1995 World Conference on Women, also known as the Fourth World Conference on Women, took place in Beijing, China, from September 4 to September 15, 1995. The United Nations (UN) convened representatives from 189 nations for a conference that sought to advance women's rights and gender equality worldwide (United Nations, 1995) ^[20]. The Beijing Conference had two primary goals:

1. To review and assess progress made since the adoption of the 1975 World Conference on Women in Mexico City and the 1985 Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women; and
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2. To develop the Beijing Platform for Action, a comprehensive global action plan to promote gender equality and empower women in key areas of concern (United Nations, 1995) ^[20].

For the advancement of women's rights, the conference embraced an extensive array of crucial thematic areas.

- (1) Poverty
- (2) Education and training;
- (3) Health;
- (4) Violence against women;
- (5) Armed conflict;
- (6) Economy;
- (7) Power and decision-making;
- (8) Institutional mechanisms for women's advancement
- (9) Human rights;
- (10) The media;
- (11) The environment; and
- (12) The girl child (United Nations, 1995) ^[20].

The Beijing Conference produced numerous noteworthy outcomes. The most significant was the September 15, 1995, adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The Platform for Action was a comprehensive plan for combating gender inequality and advancing women's empowerment. It provided governments, international organisations, and civil society with strategic objectives and concrete actions to implement over the next 15 years. In addition, the conference mobilised global attention and support for women's rights, resulting in an increase in global awareness, advocacy, and policy changes.

The Beijing Conference was a pivotal moment in the global women's movement. It facilitated dialogue, collaboration, and networking among governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and women's rights activists by providing a forum for disparate voices and perspectives. The conference's emphasis on intersectionality and the incorporation of marginalised groups contributed to the expansion of knowledge regarding gender issues. In addition, the Beijing Platform for Action influenced subsequent international agreements and frameworks, such as the Millennium Development Goals and the Sustainable Development Goals, by establishing a new standard for global gender equality efforts.

Theoretical Framework

The study was based on the Theory of Gendered Socialisation. The theory of gendered socialisation suggests that individuals are taught specific gender roles and actions based on society's expectations and norms related to their perceived gender. Throughout history, numerous scholars have supported and advanced this view. Notable advocates of this concept include Sandra L. Bem (1981) ^[4], Judith Butler (1990), and Nancy Chodorow (1978) ^[7]. Bem (1981) ^[4] proposed the notion of "gender schema theory," which posits that humans construct cognitive frameworks, known as schemas, to comprehend and structure knowledge related to gender. These schemas shape individuals' perceptions of themselves and others in relation to gender roles and behaviours. According to Butler (1990), gender is not an innate characteristic but rather a societal creation that is consistently enacted and reinforced via acts and behaviours. Butler contends that consistently enacting culturally

prescribed gender roles helps to form gender identity. Chodorow's (1978) ^[7] psychoanalytic perspective highlights the significance of early childhood events, specifically the interaction between the mother and child, in influencing gender identity and behaviour. She proposes that boys and girls form distinct connections with their main carers, which results in the adoption of gender-specific characteristics and behaviours. These researchers have made substantial contributions to the development and comprehension of the idea of gendered socialisation. They have illuminated the ways in which societal norms and expectations impact individuals' formation of gender identity and behaviour. Gendered socialisation processes, cultural norms, and societal expectations play a significant role in influencing women's participation in the Beijing 1995 empowerment movement and female terrorism in 21st-century West Africa. This is supported by the fact that gendered socialisation processes have a substantial impact on women's participation in both movements. It examines how gender roles and inequalities, such as limited access to education, economic opportunities, and decision-making authority, contribute to women's vulnerability to radicalization and participation in extremist activities. It focuses specifically on how women are more susceptible to radicalization than men and how they are more inclined to join extremist groups.

Application of the theory

This theory served as a lens for examining the relationship between Beijing in 1995 and female terrorism in West Africa in the 21st century. It clarified the fundamental dynamics, social structures, and power relations that influence the experiences and actions of women in these contexts.

Methodology

This investigation employed a descriptive research strategy, and it should be noted that it is qualitative in nature and does not involve experimental procedures. For this study, the qualitative method was used to generate data, and the qualitative descriptive method was used to analyse the data obtained.

The Impact of Beijing 1995 on Gender Empowerment Globally

The 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which were adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, China, had a significant impact on gender empowerment worldwide. The conference brought together delegates from 189 nations and produced a comprehensive framework for promoting gender equality and empowering women. This landmark event has had an impact on numerous aspects of gender equality, including political participation, economic opportunities, education, and health.

The recognition of women's rights as human rights was an important consequence of the 1995 Beijing Conference. The declaration highlighted the significance of eradicating all forms of discrimination against women and promoting gender equality in all spheres of life. This recognition stimulated global efforts to resolve gender disparities and empowered women to assert their rights in a variety of contexts (United Nations, 1995) ^[20].

The Beijing Declaration emphasised the significance of women's equal participation in decision-making processes in terms of political participation. It called for the increased

participation of women in political and public life as well as the elimination of obstacles to their participation. This has resulted in significant progress in a number of nations, with more women holding political office and participating in policymaking bodies. For instance, as of 2021, Rwanda has the highest proportion of women in parliament worldwide, which can be attributed in part to the country's dedication to achieving the objectives of the Beijing Declaration (United Nations, 2021) ^[22].

Concerning women's economic empowerment, the Beijing Declaration emphasised the importance of ensuring women's access to resources, education, and employment opportunities. It acknowledged the significance of women's economic autonomy in attaining gender equality. Since the 1995 Beijing Conference, efforts have been made to enhance women's access to credit, land ownership, and entrepreneurship training. The United Nations (1995) ^[20] noted that these initiatives have contributed to the economic empowerment of women worldwide, allowing them to partake more fully in economic activities and decision-making processes.

In terms of education, the Beijing Declaration emphasised the significance of providing girls and women with equal access to high-quality education. It demanded the eradication of gender stereotypes in education and the promotion of gender-sensitive curricula. As a consequence, there have been significant increases in the enrollment and retention rates of girls in schools around the world. United Nations Women (2021) ^[22] reports that efforts to close the gender disparity in education have increased women's literacy rates and increased their opportunities for personal and professional advancement.

The Beijing Declaration also addressed women's reproductive rights and health. It acknowledged the right of women to access reproductive healthcare services and make informed decisions about their bodies and sexuality. This has influenced global efforts to enhance maternal health care, expand access to contraception, and decrease maternal mortality rates. In addition, the Beijing Declaration called for the elimination of violence against women, resulting in the development of legal frameworks and policies to prevent and address gender-based violence (United Nations, 2021) ^[22].

The Impact of Beijing 1995 on Gender Empowerment in West Africa

The 1995 Beijing, China, World Conference on Women, which had as its goal to promote global gender equality and women's rights, had a significant impact on gender equality in West Africa.

1. Policy and Legal Reforms: The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action provided a framework for governments to address gender inequality and promote women's empowerment through policy and legal reforms. Numerous West African nations, including Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal, have enacted and implemented policies and legal reforms to advance women's rights, improve access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, and combat gender-based violence (Adeyemi and Olajide, 2018) ^[3].

2. Participation of Women in Decision-Making: The Beijing conference emphasised the significance of women's participation in all levels of decision-making processes. In West Africa, efforts were made to increase the number of women in positions of political power, public administration, and civil society organisations. To increase women's

participation and voice in governance, quota systems, affirmative action policies, and women's empowerment programmes were implemented (United Nations, 2020) ^[22].

3. Gender-Based Violence and Women's Rights: The Beijing Conference shed light on and urged the elimination of gender-based violence. In West Africa, the recognition of violence against women as a violation of human rights has increased. Advocacy, awareness campaigns, and the establishment of legal frameworks and support services have contributed to addressing gender-based violence and enhancing women's rights protection (Osifeso and Awosusi, 2017).

4. Women's Economic Empowerment: In West Africa, initiatives have been introduced to promote women's entrepreneurship, access to finance, skill development, and economic opportunities. These initiatives sought to increase women's economic participation and reduce gender gaps in employment and income (UNECA, 2017). The 1995 Beijing conference played a crucial role in influencing the West African discourse on gender empowerment. Inadvertently, however, these developments also affected the avenues through which women sought empowerment, including those associated with extremist ideologies.

A Brief History of Terrorism in West Africa

Numerous political, social, and economic factors have influenced the complicated and evolving history of terrorism in West Africa over time. Understanding this historical context is essential for appreciating the dynamics and challenges of terrorism in the region. Political transitions, ethnic tensions, socioeconomic disparities, and the aftermath of the Libyan conflict have an impact on the historical context of terrorism in West Africa (Okereke and Adeyemi, 2021) ^[16].

West Africa experienced a series of political transitions, ethnic tensions, and socio-economic disparities in the 20th century, all of which contributed to the emergence of armed groups and extremist ideologies. The decolonization process that occurred in the middle of the 20th century and led to the establishment of independent nations was a significant event. Some newly formed states faced governance challenges, such as weak institutions, corruption, and uneven resource distribution, which created fertile ground for instability and grievances that extremist groups could exploit.

In the 1990s, there was an increase in ethno-religious conflicts and separatist movements in West Africa, particularly in Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Liberia. These conflicts fostered the proliferation of armed groups and the escalation of violence. Moreover, transnational issues, such as drug, arms, and illicit commodity trafficking, further complicated the security landscape, enabling terrorist networks to establish illicit connections and exploit porous borders.

West Africa has struggled in recent years with the growth of jihadist terrorism. This phenomenon can be traced to the aftermath of the 2011 Libyan civil war, which led to the proliferation of arms and the displacement of combatants across the Sahel region. Extremist groups such as Boko Haram in Nigeria and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) were able to acquire a foothold and expand their operations as a result of the deterioration of state control and the presence of ungoverned spaces.

In addition, socioeconomic factors have contributed to the allure and tenacity of terrorist organisations in West Africa.

High rates of poverty, youth unemployment, and a lack of access to education and essential services have made communities susceptible to extremist recruitment. These groups frequently exploit local grievances, ethnic divisions, and religious ideologies in order to gain support and recruit new members.

Female Terrorism in 21st Century West Africa

According to the United Nations (2021) ^[22], female terrorism refers to the participation of women in terrorist acts or their support of terrorist organisations through various methods. Despite the fact that terrorism has traditionally been associated with male perpetrators, the participation of women in terrorist activities has garnered increased attention in recent years. Female terrorists may engage in a variety of activities, including the planning and execution of attacks, the provision of logistical support, the recruitment and radicalization of others, and the promotion of propaganda. Depending on the specific context and motivations of the individuals involved, the characteristics of female terrorism can vary.

In recent years, the emergence of female terrorism in West Africa has been a noteworthy phenomenon, with women playing increasingly active roles within extremist groups and committing violent acts. Historically, women's participation in terrorism has been overlooked or underappreciated, but their participation in West Africa has acquired attention due to its unique characteristics and implications for counterterrorism efforts. Within extremist organisations, female terrorists in West Africa frequently assume diverse strategic roles. These roles may consist of suicide bombers, recruiters, propagandists, fundraisers, and facilitators (Ibrahim, 2020) ^[11]. For instance, female suicide bombers may exploit gender stereotypes and societal norms to conduct attacks with less suspicion (Ishola and Onapajo, 2020) ^[13]. Female militants may also use social media for radicalization and propaganda (Abdullahi and Kofoworola, 2020; Cochran, 2019) ^[1, 8].

Boko Haram, a Nigerian extremist organisation, represents one of the most prominent instances of female terrorism in West Africa. Boko Haram has employed female suicide bombers, combatants, recruiters, and intelligence gatherers (Cochran, 2019) ^[8]. The group has specifically targeted women and girls, abducting them for recruitment, forced marriages, and sexual enslavement while also encouraging female members to engage in violent acts (Elden and Williams, 2017) ^[10].

Several factors contribute to the escalation of female terrorism in West Africa. The strategic value that female terrorists bring to extremist organisations is a crucial factor. Women can utilise their social roles and expectations to avoid suspicion, gain access to sensitive areas, and conduct assault. For instance, female suicide bombers have been able to leverage gender norms that result in less scrutiny and suspicion during security checks (Kassim, 2019) ^[15]. Furthermore, the marginalisation and vulnerability of women in conflict-affected regions make them susceptible to recruitment by extremist groups. Elden and Williams (2017) ^[10] state that economic hardships, a lack of educational opportunities, and gender-based violence contribute to the appeal of extremist ideologies that promise empowerment, purpose, and a sense of belonging. The emergence of female terrorism presents West African counterterrorism efforts with unique challenges. Women's participation in extremist activities may be difficult to detect and address with

conventional counterterrorism strategies. Effectively countering this phenomenon requires gender-sensitive approaches that account for the distinct motivations, recruitment strategies, and roles of female militants (Cochran, 2019) ^[8].

Factors Contributing to Female Terrorism in West Africa

Multiple factors contribute to the rise of female terrorism in West Africa, highlighting the complex dynamics and root causes underpinning women's participation in extremist activities. These social, economic, and political factors influence the motivations and vulnerabilities of women in this region.

1. Marginalisation and Gender Inequality: Marginalisation and gender inequality drive women towards extremist ideologies and actions. Discrimination, limited access to education, economic opportunities, and social exclusion exacerbate their vulnerability and foster resentment, making them more susceptible to radicalization (Higate, Henry, and Abu-Duhou, 2020) ^[11].

2. Socioeconomic Difficulties: Extremist groups can exploit the frustrations and desperation of marginalised women as a result of socioeconomic challenges such as poverty, unemployment, and a lack of opportunities. Joining extremist organisations may provide a sense of economic security, autonomy, and purpose (De Larrinaga, 2020) ^[9].

3. Ideological Appeal: Extremist groups' ideological appeal, which is frequently based on distorted interpretations of religious or political beliefs, can attract women in search of purpose, identity, or a sense of belonging. For those who feel marginalised or disillusioned, ideologies that promise social change, empowerment, or redemption can be compelling (Ishola and Onapajo, 2020) ^[13].

4. Gender Roles and Expectations: Traditional gender roles and expectations may influence women's participation in terrorism. Extremist organisations may take advantage of women's roles as carers, wives, or mothers to facilitate logistics, recruitment, or concealment of illegal activities. In order to recruit female suicide bombers, they may also manipulate notions of honour, duty, and sacrifice associated with femininity (Elden and Williams, 2017) ^[10]. The extremist ideologies promoted by Boko Haram and other jihadist groups may serve as inspiration for female terrorists in West Africa. These ideologies frequently provide a sense of purpose, identity, and belonging, in addition to a distorted interpretation of religious beliefs (Adegbulu and Essien, 2019) ^[2]. Women may engage in extremist violence out of a desire for social change, the restoration of perceived religious values, or the pursuit of justice. Personal motives can also contribute to women's participation in terrorism. Some women may be motivated by a desire for autonomy and independence, seeking to challenge traditional gender roles and social constraints (Abdullahi and Kofoworola, 2020) ^[11]. Personal grievances, marginalisation, trauma, and the desire for vengeance may also play a part in motivating female terrorists (Abdullah and Kofoworola, 2020; Sani, 2018) ^[1, 18].

5. Discord and Instability: Protracted conflict, political instability, and feeble governance are conducive to the formation and expansion of extremist organisations. In conflict-affected regions, the deterioration of security, displacement, and the disintegration of social structures create an environment where extremist ideologies can flourish and offer alternatives to disempowered women (Ishola and Onapajo, 2020) ^[13].

Beijing 1995 World Conference on Women and Female Terrorism in 21st Century West Africa

Although it seems there isn't a direct and widely accepted academic nexus between the 1995 World Conference on Women and female terrorism in 21st-century West Africa, however, it unintentionally encouraged and emboldened women in the sub-region. This article provides potential arguments to explore the intricate relationship between the 1995 World Conference on Women and female terrorism in 21st-century West Africa.

1. Empowerment and Radicalization: The 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing focused on empowering women worldwide. Empowerment initiatives can sometimes unintentionally result in radicalization in certain situations. The improved education and possibilities for women may have enabled some people to question established gender norms, provoking opposition from conservative factions and potentially resulting in radicalism as a reaction (Jones, 2009) [14].

2. Marginalisation and Desperation: Despite the empowering aspirations outlined in Beijing, numerous women in West Africa still encounter marginalisation, restricted educational chances, and limited economic prospects. The failure to keep the promises made at the conference may cause some women to feel desperate, prompting them to join extremist groups that provide them with a sense of purpose and connection, even if it involves violence (Smith, 2017) [19].

3. Intersectionality and Conflict: The Beijing Platform for Action acknowledged the interconnectedness of gender with other dimensions of identity and social order. Women in West Africa may face a higher proportion of adverse consequences due to the intricate socio-political issues that often fuel wars in the region. If these intersectional concerns are not addressed properly, it could lead to women feeling alienated and frustrated, which might make them more vulnerable to recruiting by terrorist groups in the area (Williams, 2014) [27].

4. Weaponization of Gender Issues: Extremist groups in West Africa weaponize gender concerns for their own purposes. They could spread twisted views of gender equality or exploit issues of gender-based violence to recruit members. International dialogues concerning women's rights, such as those stemming from the Beijing Conference, could influence the discourse of these groups, even if they manipulate it to align with their violent ideology (Brown, 2018) [5].

The Impacts of Female Terrorism on West African Society

The effects of female terrorism on West African society are multifaceted, affecting numerous facets of the region's social, economic, and political existence. These effects have substantial effects on individuals, communities, and the overall stability and development of societies in West Africa.

1. Security and Stability: Female terrorism exacerbates West Africa's insecurity and instability. Attacks perpetrated by female terrorists, such as suicide bombings, create panic and disrupt daily life, thereby affecting the social fabric of communities (Ishola and Onapajo, 2020) [13]. In addition to adding complexity to security operations and counterterrorism efforts, the presence of female militants within extremist groups further complicates these endeavours.

2. Social Dynamics and Gender Roles: In West African communities, female terrorism challenges traditional gender roles and societal norms. The participation of women in violent extremist activities contradicts the notion that women are predominantly passive victims, highlighting their agency and capacity for violence (Ishola and Onapajo, 2020) [13]. This could result in changes in societal expectations, perceptions, and responses to gender roles.

3. Humanitarian Consequences: In West Africa, female terrorism exacerbates humanitarian crises. Attacks by female terrorists frequently result in casualties, displacement, and infrastructure devastation, thereby increasing the vulnerability and suffering of the affected population (De Larrinaga, 2020) [9]. The resulting humanitarian requirements strain already fragile systems, including access to healthcare, education, and means of subsistence.

4. Stigmatisation and Discrimination: In West African societies, the involvement of women in terrorism can result in stigmatisation and discrimination against women. The actions of a few female militants have the potential to reinforce negative stereotypes and biases against all women, thereby limiting their access to resources, opportunities, and social inclusion (Elden and Williams, 2017) [10].

5. Counterterrorism Countermeasures: The presence of female militants necessitates gender-specific counterterrorism strategies. While respecting human rights and avoiding further marginalisation of women, security forces and authorities in West Africa must modify their approaches to effectively address the unique dynamics and strategies employed by female terrorists (De Larrinaga, 2020) [9].

Policy Recommendations

In light of the preceding, the investigation recommends:

Comprehensive public education: It is important for all West African member states to actively promote comprehensive public education to discourage women and girls from accepting and believing the ideological appeals of extremist groups. These appeals are often rooted in a distorted interpretation of the Beijing 1995 Declaration and platform for action, as well as religious or political beliefs.

There should be an increase in gender-sensitive counterterrorism strategies. Develop and implement counterterrorism strategies that address the unique motivations and vulnerabilities of women in West Africa who are involved in extremist activities. While promoting gender equality, women's empowerment, and human rights, these strategies should take into account the distinct motivations, recruitment tactics, and strategic roles of female terrorists.

Enhancing women's participation in counterterrorism measures should be a priority. Increase the participation of women in West African counterterrorism and security decision-making processes. This includes promoting women's participation in law enforcement agencies, intelligence services, and initiatives aimed at fostering harmony. The perspectives and experiences of women are essential for the development of effective and inclusive anti-terrorism policies and programmes.

Women and girls should be genuinely empowered through education and economic opportunities. Invest primarily in education and economic opportunities for West African women and girls. By addressing gender disparities in education and providing skill training, entrepreneurship support, and access to economic resources, women and girls can be empowered to resist extremist ideologies and pursue

alternative paths to success, thereby decreasing their vulnerability to terrorist recruitment.

To encourage regional cooperation and information sharing: we should enhance regional cooperation and information exchange between West African nations to combat female terrorism effectively. Establish mechanisms for the exchange of intelligence, best practices, and lessons learned regarding the fight against female extremism. This collaboration can facilitate the identification and monitoring of transnational terrorist networks as well as the development of transnational coordinated responses.

Conclusion

The unintended effects of the 1995 Beijing Conference on female terrorism in West Africa emphasise the complexity of the relationship between gender, empowerment, and violence. By scrutinising the motivations, strategies, and effects of female terrorism, this article provides policymakers, researchers, and counterterrorism practitioners with valuable insights. Moving forward, it is essential to ensure that gender empowerment initiatives address the underlying socio-political factors that contribute to radicalization while also providing women in the region with opportunities for genuine and sustainable empowerment.

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