

## Seeking Accountability, Nurturing Empowerment: Lessons from the BBOG's Movement in Nigeria

**B**oko Haram's brutal abduction of 276 secondary school girls from Chibok, Northeast Nigeria in April 2014 was the catalyst for the formation of the Bring Back Our Girls Movement (BBOG). The incident was just one among several violent and ruthless attacks executed by Boko Haram, an internationally prescribed terrorist group (see Table 1). In each instance of violence, the Nigerian government has been accused of remaining silent (or at times even denying the occurrences) and failing to take any decisive action. Yet in a context of sustained violence and conflict in Northern Nigeria, the Nigerian women-led BBOG movement has not only maintained its focus on demanding government action for achieving the girls' release, but has achieved much success including the release of around 160 of the girls, and the establishment of a national missing person's register. Alongside these successes, it has enabled the empowerment of its membership through capacity building and by providing a strong support system.

The BBOG movement can provide valuable lessons on advocacy for accountability on critical issues affecting the safety of women and youth-, and for empowering citizens in conflict and violence affected settings. This policy brief highlights the ways the movement has organised for citizen empowerment and government accountability. It draws on findings from a study commissioned by the Partnership for African Social and Governance Research (PASGR) as part of the Action for Empowerment and Accountability research programme (A4EA), an international research programme led by the Institute of Development Studies in the UK. This study investigated new forms of social and political action with a focus on BBOG movement. Data was obtained through key informant interviews with BBOG leaders, members of the Chibok community, and with Chibok indigenes in Maiduguri and Abuja. Additional data was obtained from field observation at BBOG protest marches and sit-outs, the use of a structured online questionnaire and tracking of the movement's online activities.

**Table 1: Selected attacks and abduction in North-East Nigeria between January and April 2014**

Date	Name	Location	Impact	Gender
26 Jan 2014	Borno & Adamawa Attack	Market in Borno & neighbouring Adamawa States	78 Deaths	Mixed
15 Feb 2014	Izghe Attack	Izghe Village Borno State	106 Deaths	105 Male & 1 Female
19 Feb 2014	Bama Attack	Bama LGA Borno State	60 Deaths	Mixed
25 Feb 2014	Federal Government Boys College Buni Yadi Attack	Buni Yadi Yobe State	59 Deaths	Boys
13 April 2014	Goza and Konduga Attack	Nagoshe and Kaigamari villages in Goza Borno State	38 Deaths	Mixed
14 April 2014	Government Girls Secondary School Chibok Attack	Chibok Community, Borno State	276 Abducted	Girls

Source: Authors compilation from various sources

## The BBOG Movement

The BBOG movement began via social media on 23 April 2014. Protesters appeared on the streets of Abuja on 30 April 2014 led by concerned Nigerians, with a large group consisting of mostly women congregating at the Unity Fountain in Abuja. The movement was conceived by former minister, Dr Obi Ezekwesili (its first chairperson) and took to social media with the popular #BringBackOurGirls hashtag. It has since attracted Nigerians from all walks of life – including political leaders, celebrities, youth activists, and, human rights groups across age, gender, religion, ethnicity and social status.

The aim of the movement is to lobby the Nigerian government to act on bringing back the abducted girls alive and safe, by whatever legitimate means possible. To date, the movement has been accredited with the release of about 160 of the abducted girls. It continues to push for the release of the other remaining girls as well as supporting other accountability initiatives around youth safety. In the process of this advocacy, BBOG has successfully empowered many women who had hitherto been unknown, unseen or unheard.

## Empowering Members

According to Eyben (2012: 2), ‘women’s empowerment happens when individuals and organised groups are able to imagine their world differently and to realise that vision by changing the relations of power ...’ Eyben sees ‘women’s empowerment through grass-roots organisations and popular participation [as] one of the most important steps towards changing historical relations of inequality and exclusion’ (2012: 6). Yet, articulating voices and challenging structures as a way of increasing citizens’ power, typically creates tensions between those who have power and those being empowered. Therefore, empowerment is neither easy nor widely accepted by everyone especially in traditional and conservative societies; this is even more the case in settings affected by conflict and violence.

Those whose voices have often been suppressed bear the brunt of conflict and violence. They are doubly disadvantaged: in peace times, they are powerless; in times of conflict, they are worse off. Boko Haram’s activities in Northern Nigeria, for instance, continue to create a security vacuum within the region. The group has engaged in guerrilla warfare against the Nigerian government and its citizens for the last decade and poses a threat to survival in the region (Azama, 2015). Statistics from a recently concluded research by IFRA Nigeria and the African Studies Centre Leiden suggests high fatality rates in the area are due to endemic communal clashes (Pérouse 2016).

The security situation in the Northern region continues to deteriorate with increasing attacks on herders, and the government seemingly powerless to end Boko Haram’s activities. Schools have become unsafe in the region due to incessant attacks and kidnapping, making it increasingly difficult for excluded and suppressed groups to gain any power.

Yet despite this difficult context, BBOG movement has managed to support the empowerment of its members; predominantly women, through capacity building initiatives such as providing communications skills, exposing them to advocacy methodologies, and giving them a voice. One of the members of the sit-out team at Unity Fountain in Abuja said:

“... BBOG is a school, personally for someone like me, I never knew I have a voice, I found my voice here; I found my voice at the Fountain. Then the education we got from it is not just to come and stand and demand anything, there are so many things: the issue of governance, the issue of demand and supply, the issue of knowing where your rights starts and so many things.

Another member at a project event said:

“The BBOG has given members leadership skills – BBOG has enabled ordinary people to even address the UN. (Oluwajulugbe, 2018).”

This sense of voice and empowerment has subsequently enabled members of the group to look beyond the specific issue of the Chibok girls’ abduction and to engage with broader issues of governance, accountability and transparency. The movement has been able to put a spotlight on the challenges faced by millions of internally displaced people (IDP’s) who have previously been invisible. They also promoted the Safe School Initiative (SSI), which raises the issue of safety in schools, and which was taken up by former UK Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, with the special repertoire of the UN Secretary General. In the light of increased insecurity and kidnappings, BBOG also collaborated with the Human Rights Commission in establishing a Missing Persons Register at the Federal Government level in 2015. The register is a useful tool in challenging questionable government statistics. The skills and confidence acquired has enabled some of the women to take up leadership roles in organisations and situations outside of the BBOG.

## Women Leadership in the Movement

A defining feature of the BBOG movement is the centrality of women figures and leaders. Women figures such as Dr Obi Ezekwesili, Hajia Aisha Yusuf, Hajija Saadatu Madi, Hadiza Bala Usman, Mariyam Uwais, Florence Ozor, and Maureen Kapiri have worked unrelentingly in establishing BBOG as a sustained point of convergence for pressing for a government response on bringing back the Chibok girls. This is a remarkable achievement in a predominantly patriarchal society where leadership roles are mainly occupied by men. The movement has remained largely women-led even though there are men in the ranks.

In seeking to empower people, organisations must bridge the gender and socio-cultural gaps between them and the people being empowered. BBOG members interact freely based on the issues in spite of their socio-economic, socio-cultural and religious backgrounds and statuses; the singularity of purpose has blurred these differences between and among members.

Men and women from Chibok and neighbouring Bama community feel that the BBOG movement has given them a safe space and community of support amidst the numerous challenges and fears experienced over the years. One Chibok community member sees BBOG as a strong support system:

“I personally used to say that, I dread the day they will say the [BBOG] movement is over. And I will always demand from Dr Obi that it cannot be over, because of the problems of Nigeria...we will leave it to our children at the rate we are going.”

## Free Entry; Free Exit

One way the BBOG's movement has facilitated its members' empowerment is through having an effective organisational structure. As the movement began attracting more members, it became necessary to bring in some structure and order. The movement developed a three-tier structure with a Strategic Leadership Team at the centre. Other active members support the team by taking part in protests and daily sit-outs in Abuja and in weekly sit-outs in Lagos. Following them are the ordinary members of the movement, who come for daily sit-outs. These members come up with ideas for activities and ratify decisions made by the strategic team. The strategic team cannot implement any decision without first getting back to the sit out for approval.

The movement maintains a free entry, free exit principle. As a result, some of its members, including some in the leadership, left to become involved in other activities or simply stopped attending meetings. The free-exit principle empowers members of the movement in two ways: firstly, the absence of coercion allows trust to thrive and creates a conducive environment for learning. As one of the founding members of the movement remarked:

“When people know that they can come in and leave at any time, they are more relaxed to stay and participate.”

Secondly, members can feel comfortable in transferring the leadership skills they have gained through practical experience in leading BBOG to other activities and movements. The key lesson here for organisations seeking to empower the voiceless is that making demands on them around their membership impinges on their rights, can further disempower them and deter them from participation.

## Multiple Tools, Multiple Channels to Push for Accountability

BBOG relies strongly on social media for its communications. Its Twitter handle and Facebook accounts have thousands of followers, likes and other forms of engagement. The movement does, however, take a blended approach to advocacy and combines its online presence with a physical presence, especially in Abuja and Lagos. It uses multiple tools, such as mass media press releases, documentation, champions in the houses of parliament, linkages with schools through the 'adopt-a-girl' initiative, and street protests organised through the BBOG WhatsApp group, Facebook and agreed at daily sit-outs. The

street protests are held almost monthly to coincide with major events in the federal capital, while a protest is held annually in April to commemorate the Chibok kidnap. On this occasion, BBOG members march to the seat of government to reach out to policy makers and to maintain public attention and sympathy.

Adopting multiple channels of communication and advocacy has been advantageous for the movement. Had it adopted only one of the two channels, it may not have been able to reach as many followers as it has. With diversified sources of information, members are free to choose which channel works best for them. The method has been somewhat successful in exacting a response from the government. Pressure from the BBOG movement has resulted in the government issuing press releases, creating a Chibok desk, meeting with Chibok parents, and the stationing of a battalion in Chibok.

## Aim for Quick Results with a Plan for the Long Haul

The BBOG movement was intended as a short-term event. It was believed that a loud outcry would push the government into action, eventually leading to the release of the schoolgirls and an end to the violence in Northeast Nigeria. Nonetheless, the leaders had prepared for the long haul right from the start, with plans for continued advocacy until all the abducted schoolgirls are returned safely. At the time of this project's fieldwork in November 2017, the movement had held over 100 protests since its inception. Four years after their abduction, the objective is yet to be fully achieved with over 100 girls still held captive. This situation has provided the impetus to keep the movement going, empowering its members as it develops.

Empowering people at the margins is not a 100-metre dash, but rather a long endurance walk. Workshops, seminars and other advocacy activities that keep the issue of the girls' abduction in the public conscience, whilst also empowering BBOG members must be woven within a framework that can be sustained over time.

## Key Lessons from the BBOG Movement on Advocacy for Accountability on Critical Issues Affecting the Safety of Women and Youths, and for Empowering Citizens in Conflict and Violence Affected Settings

- The BBOG movement emerged from the outrage provoked through a major act of terror: the abduction of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok in 2014. Its leaders harnessed the emotion raised around this act to develop a strong and sustained women-led movement. It makes a point of its independence, and being self-funded facilitates its continued political engagement. In a context of instability where people are hurting, BBOG shows the importance of providing a space

- to vent and a platform for the voices of the affected to be heard.
- BBOG has a strong, central leadership who have worked tirelessly to keep the issue in the public eye and to support their members' empowerment. Having the right people who are able to energise the organisation is a key ingredient.
  - Multiple engagement tools and channels work best, especially in an era of globalisation. BBOG has made use of a number of communication channels and advocacy both on- and off-line. It is important to undertake a thorough analysis of stakeholders' skills and opportunities to determine the channels and tools to use.
  - Convenient spaces for member's voices help enhance members' empowerment. The spaces should protect individuals' right to opt out anytime they wish. BBOG's free-entry, free-exit policy has facilitated their members sharing the skills they have learned with other organisations and in other activities.
  - Plan for the long-haul: getting traction on its focus issues and empowering its members has been a lengthy process for the BBOG movement.

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