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Women organising in fragility and conflict: lessons from the #BringBackOurGirls movement, Nigeria

Martin Atela ⬤, Ayobami Ojebode ⬤, Racheal Makokha, Marion Otieno and Tade Aina

ABSTRACT

Public protests, including women-led struggles, are increasingly gaining a foothold in many parts of the world in response to multiple crises and growing exclusion, in a context of fragility. In the global South, most public protests involve temporary, informal coalitions where people come together and participate in a one-off event. The fluid nature of political space makes sustaining protests elusive because of protest fatigue. Yet, the #BringBackOurGirls (#BBOG), a women-led movement, headed a long-term protest that focused on the rights of the girl child to education – a direct response to Boko Haram's gendered terror tactics, in which girls were abducted, forced to abandon school, and get married. This article examines when and how movements crystallise into long-term programmes of action in fragile and conflict-affected societies where state–society relations are weak and government is considered to be unresponsive. We use the case of the #BBOG movement, one of Nigeria's intense social media-driven and women-led action, to examine the mix of pressures it faced, its characteristics, and strategies in situations of fragility, conflict, and closed political spaces. We identify four key strategies that the #BBOG has deployed to keep members coming, garner international support and sympathy, keep pressure on the elite in a safe manner for the movement members, and ensure an independent funding regime for durability and impact. This article finds that #BBOG was able to navigate fragility and the closing civic space in Nigeria by challenging the failure of government to address insecurity in the country, transcending societal barriers including gender, religion, and political class, transnationalising their movement, self-funding, and using social media strategically.

Les protestations publiques, y compris les luttes menées par des femmes, se taillent une place de plus en plus grande dans de nombreuses régions du monde en réponse aux crises multiples et à l'exclusion croissante, dans un contexte de fragilité. Dans l'hémisphère Sud, la plupart des protestations publiques font intervenir des coalitions informelles temporaires dans le cadre desquelles les gens se rassemblent et participent à un événement exceptionnel. La nature fluide de l'espace politique fait qu'il est difficile de faire durer les manifestations en raison de la lassitude associée. Cependant, le mouvement #BringBackOurGirls (#BBOG), qui est mené par des femmes, a dirigé une manifestation de longue durée qui se concentrait sur les droits des filles à l'éducation – une riposte directe aux tactiques terroristes sexistes de

CONTACT Martin Atela ✉ m.atelah@googlemail.com

Boko Haram, dans le cadre desquelles les filles ont été enlevées, contraintes d'abandonner l'école et de se marier. Cet article examine quand et comment les mouvements se cristallisent en programmes d'action à long terme dans les sociétés fragiles et touchées par des conflits, dans lesquelles les relations entre l'État et la société sont faibles et le gouvernement est considéré comme insensible. Nous employons le cas du mouvement #BringBackOurGirls (#BBOG), une des actions soutenues impulsées par les réseaux sociaux et menées par les femmes au Nigéria, pour examiner les pressions conjuguées qu'il a subies, ses caractéristiques, et les stratégies adoptées dans les situations de fragilité, de conflit et d'espaces politiques fermés. Nous identifions quatre stratégies clés déployées par le mouvement #BBOG pour continuer à attirer des membres, pour obtenir soutien et sympathie à l'échelle internationale, pour continuer à faire pression sur les élites sans que cela n'implique de risques pour les membres du mouvement, et pour garantir un régime de financement indépendant en vue de la durabilité et de l'impact. Cet article constate que le mouvement #BBOG a été en mesure de gérer la fragilité et l'espace civique de plus en plus fermé au Nigéria en mettant en question l'échec du gouvernement à remédier à l'insécurité au sein du pays, en transcendant les barrières sociétales, notamment liées au genre, à la religion et à la classe politique, en transnationalisant leur mouvement, en s'autofinançant et en utilisant les réseaux sociaux de façon stratégique.

En un contexto de fragilidad, que exige respuestas a las múltiples crisis y la creciente exclusión, las protestas públicas, incluidas las luchas lideradas por mujeres, están ganando cada vez más terreno en muchas partes del mundo. En el Sur global, la mayoría de las protestas públicas son coaliciones provisionales e informales en las que la gente se reúne y participa en un evento puntual. La naturaleza fluida del espacio político hace que sea difícil mantener las protestas debido a la fatiga que provocan. Sin embargo, el movimiento #BringBackOurGirls (#BBOG), liderado por mujeres, encabezó una protesta de larga duración centrada en los derechos de las niñas a la educación. La misma supuso una respuesta directa a las tácticas de terror vinculadas al género instituidas por Boko Haram, que significaron el secuestro de niñas y que éstas fueran obligadas a abandonar la escuela a casarse. Este artículo examina cuándo y cómo, en sociedades frágiles y afectadas por conflictos, en las que las relaciones entre Estado y sociedad son débiles y se considera que el gobierno no responde, los movimientos cristalizan en programas de acción a largo plazo. Utilizamos el caso del movimiento #BBOG, una de las acciones más intensas realizadas en Nigeria, impulsada en redes sociales y dirigida por mujeres, para analizar la mezcla de presiones que debió enfrentar, así como sus características y estrategias en situaciones de fragilidad, conflicto y espacios políticos cerrados. Identificamos cuatro estrategias clave promovidas por el #BBOG a fin de mantener la afluencia de miembros, conseguir el apoyo y la simpatía internacionales, mantener la presión sobre la élite de forma segura para los miembros del movimiento y garantizar un mecanismo de financiación independiente que reporte durabilidad e impacto. Esta indagación permitió constatar que el #BBOG fue capaz de sortear la fragilidad y el cierre del espacio cívico en Nigeria, poniendo en evidencia la incapacidad del gobierno para hacer frente a la inseguridad en el país. Además, el movimiento trascendió las barreras sociales, incluyendo el género, la religión y la clase política, se transnacionalizó, se autofinanció y utilizó los medios sociales de forma estratégica.

Background: Boko Haram's gendered terror in North-East Nigeria

Boko Haram is a jihadist group based in northern Nigeria, whose original name, *Jama'a-tuAhlissunnahLidda'awatiwal Jihad*, means people committed to propagating the Prophet's teachings and Jihad. Founded in 2002 in Maiduguri, Borno State, by a radical Islamist cleric, Mohammed Yusuf, the group's ideology is based on jihadism and strict observance of Sharia law in Nigeria (Olwan 2013). Boko Haram literally translates to 'western education is forbidden' (Okoli and Azom 2019). In February 2014, Boko Haram attacked the Federal Government College, Buni Yadi, Yobe State and killed 59 boys. The girls in the school were gathered and told to go away and marry and abandon their education. In April 2014, the group attacked the Federal Government College, Chibok, Borno State and kidnapped 276 girls, establishing the precedent for the group's strategy of gendered kidnapping (Oriola 2016).

Gender inequality and patriarchal norms in Nigeria have aided Boko Haram's tactic of mass abduction, which includes systematically kidnapping women and girls from their communities and schools, partly enabled by the poverty levels in Maiduguri, where Boko Haram is based (Oriola 2016). Often, fathers have given up their daughters in exchange for money from the terrorists, and have subsequently become sympathisers of Boko Haram. This gendered gift facilitates male misuse of power and emphasises women's social position in the society. These and other abuses of women and girls reflect the patriarchal structures in northern Nigeria and the *salafi-jihad*,[1] Boko Haram's religious ideology and guiding doctrine on the interpretations of Sharia law which marginalise women (Zenn 2018).

The patriarchal structures are reinforced by the poor socioeconomic conditions of women's lives in northern Nigeria (Okoli and Azom 2019). For instance, the average age at first marriage in the north-east is under 16 years, while 29 per cent of girls aged 15–19 years have begun childbearing (National Population Commission (NPC) [Nigeria] and ICF 2019). This has been attributed to low levels of education among women (51 per cent of women aged 15–49 in the north-east have no formal education). The situation is even worse in the rural north-east, where about 75 per cent of women have never been to school. Similarly, the levels of poverty in the north are worse than in the south. For example, north-east Nigeria has high poverty rates of 72 per cent compared to the South's 12 per cent (National Bureau of Statistics 2019). As a result, many women engage with Boko Haram for basic necessities such as food and protection in an extremely insecure environment. While Boko Haram poses insecurity challenges, there are other dangers emanating from insurgency in the Niger Delta where groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) engages the state in violent resistance (Oriola 2016).

Boko Haram has used sexual violence and forced marriage against women for recognition (Oriola 2016). Even though it had carried out attacks previously, including the killing of 59 high school boys, it is only after the abduction of the Chibok girls that they became known worldwide. As Crawford (2013) states, sexual violence in conflict attracts attention.

These events, coupled with the prevalence of gender-based violence against women and the government's inability to protect citizens in the face of banditry and insurgency, create an atmosphere where the existence of an enduring and impactful movement is most unlikely. Yet, in March 2021, the #BringBackOurGirls (#BBOG), a women-led movement, marked its seven years of existence and impact within and outside Nigeria. Given the context of official neglect, violence, and backlash in which the movement has existed, the significance of their existence and impact compels contemplation.

This is not to suggest that women-led movements are novel in Nigeria. On the contrary, Nigerian women have a heritage of protests dating back to colonial days. Landmark examples include the Aba women's riots in the south-east, and the Egba women's riots led by Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti in Abeokuta, in the south-west (Byfield 2003); or, more recently, the nearly bloody protest in Abuja by women against a police raid on clubs and brothels (African Feminism 2019). However, while these uprisings had an impact, they neither had a global reach nor lasted as long as #BBOG has.

The #BBOG movement makes an interesting case because it appears to have flourished in a harsh context of fragility, conflict, and violence. Even though the movement was initially described in some quarters as 'spontaneous', 'episodic', and 'ephemeral', with no depth, consciousness, ideology, and values (Aina *et al.* 2016; Oriola 2021), it has defied all odds and sustained its actions for the seventh year running. Additionally, it cuts across generations, gender, ethnicity, and religions in an authoritarian and patriarchal context. This context is important to emphasise because it helps to tell the story of a women-led movement that has defied the deep social and gender cleavages that make Nigeria prone to conflict and violence (Oladapo *et al.* 2021).

In this article, we assess the emergence of the #BBOG, the context in which it operates, its strategies and gains, and the lessons useful for understanding women-led social movements.

Data and methods

The study adopted an interpretive approach combining participant observation with key informant interviews (KIIs), and online media tracking of the #BBOG movement.

Participant observations

Three research team members participated in and observed #BBOG advocacy marches and sit-outs in Abuja and Lagos in December 2017. They carefully and systematically observed and documented #BBOG's operations, strategies, and approaches in its campaigns. Activities included participation in a three-day Advocacy March to the Presidential Villa from 11 to 13 December 2017, which attracted 25–30 participants daily. In addition, the researchers observed 12 #BBOG protests and sit-outs, paying attention to the settings of the marches and sit-outs, actions taken, and actors involved.

Key informant interviews

We conducted 31 KIIs with three groups of key informants directly involved or affected by the #BBOG movement, between November 2017 and July 2018. These were 11 key informant interviews with leaders of the #BBOG, known as the Strategic Team; nine interviews in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State (Chibok is in Borno State);[2] and 11 interviews in Chibok with an abductee's parent, abductees' relatives, and community leaders.

Through the interviews, we established rapport and trust with community leaders who were not part of initial engagement meetings in Abuja and Lagos, and solidified the rapport with the #BBOG leadership. We also used the interviews to seek clarity of ideas and information emanating from ongoing data analysis in cases where conversations had started with the #BBOG leaders. We obtained insights on the reach and depth of the movement and its perceived influence at the local levels through individual interviews with the community leaders in Maiduguri and with Chibok relatives.

Interviews were conducted in Hausa or English depending on the interviewee's preference, audio-recorded, and transcribed by the research team. Full consent was obtained before the interviews were done, and permission to record was obtained following full disclosure from the researchers on the purpose and objectives of the study.

Online media tracking

We conducted six months (January to May 2018) of online media tracking of the activities of the #BBOG to map and trace the various actors driving the media discourse on the abducted girls; which media platforms they were most visible on; which actors attracted a high level of reactions in social media; and the implications of the strategies in the Nigerian context. We tracked the activities of the #BBOG group on its Facebook and Twitter pages through Facebook and Twitter searches and Google Alerts. The non-participant observation method was combined with quantitative content analysis.

Women-led movements and closing civic spaces in fragile settings

Closing civic spaces and exclusionary politics

Since the end of the Cold War, the space in which civil society can operate without fear of disapproval, hostility, and abuse has been closing (Hossain *et al.* 2018; Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014). The waves of closing civic spaces have been attributed to the war on terror which restricted funding to movements (Howell and Lind 2010; Hayes 2013), WikiLeaks, which elicited a strong backlash from powerful states, and the rise of terrorist movements such as the Islamic State – which prompted further restrictions on freedom of association (Hossain *et al.* 2018). States close civic spaces in three ways: restrictive legislation, overboard application of existing laws by state agencies, and deliberate negative rhetoric that smears movements' campaigns and stigmatises them (Ibezim-Ohaeri 2017). States can also use violence to intimidate non-state actors. This may take the

form of physical harassment, threats, killings, impunity, criminalisation, instituting terrorism taskforces, and restrictive bills on NGOs' operation and co-optation (Van der Borgh and Terwindt 2012).

Despite state repression, some movements in African countries such as the women's movements in Ethiopia have produced unexpected outcomes of revitalised organising from below (Ossome 2018).

Women's movements and women-led social and political actions are often triggered by exclusion from the centre of official political decision-making (Fallon 2008). In Nigeria and other similar postcolonial societies, women's exclusion derives primarily from colonial and postcolonial patriarchal systems, which hinder the participation of women in decision-making (Jaiyeola and Isaac 2020). Because states rely on gendered institutions that exclude women from power (Kriesi *et al.* 1992), social and political action outside the official circles becomes a significant way for women to be heard.

Fragility, exclusion, and women organising

Exclusion is more pronounced in fragile, conflict- and violence-affected settings where the poorest and the most vulnerable groups in society, including women and children, are the most negatively affected (Harcourt 2009; Koch 2008). For many African women in work, the modes of struggle and organising have historically emanated from below in relation to their lived experiences (Ossome 2018). In precolonial times, the political and cultural systems favoured women by offering them elite positions either through status or kinship. Power and authority came from their productive roles in the society (Ossome 2018; Oyěwùmí 1997). However, during the colonial period, labour was gendered and the control of women's labour by colonial authorities provoked women into organising. Nationalist movements gradually became masculinised while women's agency was subjugated to patriarchal and elite state power.

Fragility can be both a hindrance and a trigger for women's social and political action. As a trigger, it justifies the emergence of social and political actions in cases of government's failure to meet its social contract, such as provision of security and protection, fair and equitable taxation, and social goods such as education and health. On the other hand, even though fragility can result in the conditions that necessitate social and political action, it does often truncate the action or its consequences. Fragility often permits excesses of government security apparatuses against women marchers and protesters. Often, given multiple and opposing loyalties that characterise fragile contexts, counter-movements may erupt with deadly tactics and tools, and neutralise the original social and political movement. Thus, the survival strategies of durable women's movements become important.

In Nigeria, fragility is characterised by bad governance and the government's inability to provide essential services. It is also characterised by religious fundamentalism, ethnic chauvinism, gender inequity, and inequality (Oladapo *et al.* 2021). There is also a complex connection between decentralised politics, armed militias, and resource extraction that prevent ideologically informed groups seeking systemic reforms from emerging.

The groups that emerge usually do not mobilise considerable support because of state repression.

Inequality is another important angle in Nigeria's fragility. Even with its vast resources, over 40 per cent (83 million people) of the Nigerian population live on less than one US dollar a day (National Bureau of Statistics 2020). The inequality is geographic and demographic: some states have much worse poverty rates than others. For instance, three of the states in the north, where Boko Haram has been most active, have over 87 per cent of their population living in poverty (Nigeria Bureau of Statistics 2020). Moreover, women's rights and freedoms are significantly curtailed in the north far more than in the south (Oladapo *et al.* 2021). It is in this context of fragility and shrinking civic space that the #BBOG, a women-led movement, emerged and has persisted, employing a variety of tactics and strategies and remaining true to its founders' call – the release of the abducted Chibok girls. In the following sections of this article, we look at the emergence of the #BBOG movement, its strategies, and the influence it has generated.

The emergence of the #BringBackOurGirls movement

On 23 April 2014, during a World Book Capital Conference in Port Harcourt, Dr Obi Ezekwezili, former World Bank Vice President and former Minister of Education in Nigeria, spoke about the abductions by Boko Haram while addressing the conference. A lawyer, Ibrahim Abdullahi, tweeted Dr Ezekwezili's words, #BringBackOurDaughters, and minutes later, #BringBackOurGirls. In attendance was the Nobel Laureate Prof. Wole Soyinka, who also made a statement on the abducted girls. Subsequently, Hadiza Bala Usman, an influential political activist and women's leader, sent out emails calling for a meeting at Unity Fountain in Abuja on 29 April for people who felt they needed to take action.

Thus, the #BBOG appeared on the streets of Abuja on 30 April 2014, with the gathering of concerned Nigerians, mostly women, at the Unity Fountain in Abuja. The movement has since attracted many Nigerians from all walks of life, across age, gender, religion, and social status. It has organised over 300 marches and only recently marked seven years of advocacy. In this period (2014–2021), the movement transformed into a women-led global social media and political phenomenon. The movement created a rupture in the complacency that often characterises responses to violence against women (including kidnapping and sexual enslavement). It became a point of convergence for building a so-far sustained coalition encompassing political leaders, celebrities, youth activists, students, human rights groups, and other concerned Nigerians to push the government to provide an adequate response to bringing back the abducted girls.

Strategies and influence of the #BBOG

The strategies of engaging with the state vary and have proven more successful when both integration and autonomy were pursued (Goetz and Jenkins 2018). It is the skilful mix of the strategies that is often key. Studies of women-led movements' machineries in fragile

states show that access to the executive is critical, as well as legal powers that protect them from obstruction (*ibid.*). Although, Hassim (2014) warns that this has led to co-optation which shows a trend of lesser autonomy.

Despite emerging and operating in fragile, conflict, and closed political spaces, the #BBOG movement has managed to keep going and keep attention on the plight of the abducted Chibok girls in Nigeria and internationally for seven years. The movement has done this by sustaining the conversation about the missing girls through various tactics, including social media activism, protests, rallies, and daily sit-outs at Unity Fountain (Abuja). Here we assess some of its strategies.

Ensuring a steady stream of members

Widening the purpose while maintaining a central concern

One of the significant successes of the #BBOG movement cited by most interviewees is keeping the plight of the abducted girls in the limelight while also taking on other related and emergent issues. Although the movement aimed to pressure the government to rescue the abducted girls, it kept redefining the meaning of the rescue. For instance, when some women were abducted in Bassa, a local government area in Kogi State, the movement started the slogan, *bring back our girls and women*. Equally, when lecturers at the University of Maiduguri (UNIMAID) were abducted, the movement begun demanding *bring back our girls and the UNIMAID lecturers*. Similarly, when Boko Haram terrorists killed soldiers, the movement chanted *bring back our girls and don't bury our soldiers secretly in mass graves*. The movement also visited Sambisa forest in Borno State, north-east Nigeria, to give soldiers moral support. Essentially, the movement demanded the government to practise good governance.

The #BBOG earned support for addressing issues that have personal stakes, including the abduction of a relative or soldiers killed by terrorists. As such, they attracted a wide array of participants in their protests, ensuring a steady flow of members. This kept the movement alive in the media. Also, by continuously redefining their purpose, they increased their support base, and the number of people who put pressure on the government to secure the girls' release. The following comment from one of the leaders of the movement is illustrative:

> More and more Nigerians are now adding their voices to the call for the return of the Chibok girls; since #BBOG is not relenting or giving up, it has moved many people to join the call on the government to act for the release of the girls. (Interview 002, Abuja, December 2017)

Alliance building for greater impact

Conversations with the #BBOG leadership suggested that the movement intentionally sought to create alliances with local and international organisations to amplify its voice and impact. Locally, they partnered with the National Human Rights Commission to create a national missing persons' register to track missing people during conflicts. A member noted that, the

purpose of the register was to force the government to acknowledge that the girls were missing and begin working on it. (Interview 006, Abuja, January 2018)

Moreover, they worked with the National Emergency Management Agency to provide relief for internally displaced persons. However, there was a notable absence of #BBOG partnerships in the Chibok community, where interviewees lamented the lack of involvement of local groups in the #BBOG activities. A member of the Chibok community complained about this #BBOG absence:

the Chibok people are hearing that there is a certain group fighting for the return of their children or abducted daughters, but nobody is coming to them to have collaboration with them to fight collectively to achieve this aim. (Interview 002, Chibok, December 2017)

Members of the movement acknowledged this weak link in the movement. This lack of local involvement at the Chibok community level, where the girls were abducted, might explain some of the challenges that the movement faced, as discussed later.

Transcending membership

The #BBOG seems to have overcome the challenge of factions within the movement with its membership transcending class, religion, and ethnic divides. This trend follows in the noted path among women's movements that have been shown to transcend socioeconomic and cultural divides within their structures (Anderlini 2007; Kaufman and Williams 2010). Women's movements often overcome their differences as they come together as the 'signature mobilizing structure … in advancing or defending women's rights and status' (Beckwith 2013, 18).

The movement maintains a free entry, free exit principle for its membership. 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 since 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. (Interview 010, Lagos, February 2018)

Post-war peace building has given women movements an opportunity to create new alliances (Tripp 2015). These alliances allow activists to access resources, networks, and necessary skills to advance their cause. The #BBOG demonstrates how cross-sectional alliances and solidarity emerge and are sustained in women-led movements in vastly heterogeneous contexts. By focusing on core shared group values, de-emphasising subgroup differences that tend to polarise, and making reasonable minimal demands on members, #BBOG holds a key lesson for movements seeking gains and durability in the face of resistance and backlash. However, Molyneux (2001) cautions that seeking alliances can lead to relegation of the movement goals if the group is not aware of the existing different interests.

Garnering international support and sympathy

The movement also builds alliances with external actors as part of its internalisation process. A strategic team member pointed out that,

> The US Embassy, British High Commission, Germany, Italy, and other European countries were very supportive, some of which sent delegates to us here in Nigeria, and they even tweeted and campaigned for the return of the Chibok girls in their own countries and even mobilised for support and advocates within their parliamentary settings, for instance in the US Congress, members put on red every Wednesday [led by Congresswoman Teressa Wilson] to support the call for the return of our Chibok girls, so those are the kind of support we appreciate. (Interview 001, Abuja, November 2017)

Online campaigns

Increasingly, the use of social media such as Twitter hash-tagging has been a key strategy used by social movements in fragile and conflict-affected settings (Earle 2011). The #BBOG movement's use of social media as a tool for campaigning was a strategic move to circumvent traditional media barriers (newspapers, radio, television), which are often controlled by the male ruling elite and businessmen, as well as to attract young people. This proved highly effective as the movement was able to use multiple social media channels (Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp) to gain, expand, and consolidate support locally and internationally, beyond its control. Our media tracking showed that whereas the #BBOG media platforms set the pace for online discussion of the Chibok abduction in 2014 and 2015, by May 2018, the most influential posts were from groups other than the #BBOG; 60.6 per cent of posts on the abduction were from people and groups outside the #BBOG. In January to May 2018, only three out of the ten most popular posts originated from the #BBOG movement. The other seven posts were shared by the #BBOG movement on its Facebook page. Two of the shared posts originated from local media – Sahara Reporters and Premium Times. Five were stories initially published by foreign media – the BBC, New York Times, and Voice of America. The focus of all ten posts was consistent with the objective of the group.

Similarly, a review of the movement's tweets in January to May 2018 shows that the tweets with the highest interaction statistics were not from the #BBOG but CNN. Two tweets by Rep Frederica Wilson, a member of the US House of Representatives, also featured in the top ten. Even though only one tweet with a high level of reaction originated from @#BBOG_Nigeria, four other tweets originated from #BBOG – Florence Ozor, Ms Maureen Kabrik, Bukky Shonibare, and Aisha Yesufu. Thus, 50 per cent of the tweets originated from the #BBOG group. Of the remaining two tweets, one originated from the foremost Nigerian journalist reporting Boko Haram-related issues, Ahmad Salkida, and one from a local online news channel, Premium Times. All ten tweets were consistent with the focus of #BBOG advocacy. Beyond the global reach, the #BBOG's adoption of social media allowed bypassing state monitoring and control. For instance, the strategic arm of the movement developed a secret communication platform through WhatsApp, enabling it to communicate and monitor the movement's activities and organising.

The outcome of online campaigns by the #BBOG was the spread of its message and the attraction of many sympathisers in solidarity with its specific cause, not only nationally but, importantly, internationally. However, this does not imply that #BBOG is unique in its adoption of online communication as central to its advocacy; on the contrary, a number of groups organising around women's rights have used social media with remarkable success. Hashtag feminism has become a strategy for organising action around a cause (Clark-Parsons 2021). The #MeToo movement is one of the most successful campaigns that encouraged women to speak up if they had experienced sexual violence. It quickly went viral, reaching 109,541 tweets (Main 2017) and 10 million Facebook posts and comments (Park 2017) in 2017.

However, while some have argued that hashtagging is helpful in creating awareness, others warn that it often fails to transform the structures of inequality (Banet-Weiser 2018). Studies have shown that while these platforms can be useful in widening the reach of the message and appeal of the movements across geography and demography, and increasing their global visibility and solidarity (Chu 2018; Jain 2020; Şener 2021), they have not significantly proven to be effective in entrenching the ideology of feminism that undergirds these movements, or in uniting international actors into an enduring cohesive movement (Ainara *et al.* 2021). Indeed, it could be argued that the reason #BBOG garnered international attention was because the action of Boko Haram in abducting girls was conflated with sexual violence in conflict, an issue that attracts attention (Crawford 2013). Nonetheless, as we noted earlier, the #BBOG movement has achieved immense success using social media in a context and country where this has not been possible before.

Involving big actors

The internationalisation of the Chibok abductions illustrates how an otherwise local issue can attract international attention if properly fuelled by social and political action. It also shows that original issue advocates can attract followers with greater energy and consistency than their own, giving the action new life. Finally, it further illustrates the success of the #BBOG in priming the abduction issue to the point that it took on a life of its own, almost independent of the #BBOG.

Interviews with the #BBOG members shows a link between the plight of the abducted girls and the significant attention the issue received from major global political actors such as the United Nations (UN), the European Union, the US Embassy in Nigeria, and the British High Commission in Nigeria, among others. The movement also obtained the support of influential global individuals such as Congresswoman Theresa Wilson of the United States within the US parliament, for the rescue and return of the girls. Michelle Obama, Malala Yousafzai, and others are among global figures that tweeted, spoke, and held signs supporting the #BBOG movement and its course. Press (2009) underscores the importance of international support from humanitarian organisations and the diplomatic community in making the demands of the social movements known. Still, critics of #BBOG argued that the cry for western help was misplaced and only served to strengthen their legitimacy (Shearlaw 2015).

Sustaining the pressure

Creating discomfort for the ruling elite

The #BBOG used its international reach and maintained an elastic circle of concerns by redefining and extending what the abduction issue meant, to pressure the government to take action. The movement repeatedly pointed at the inability of the government to rescue the abducted girls as an indication of the incapacity of the ruling class to meet their social contract obligations, undermining their legitimacy and thus pushing the government to act.

Tweets from the #BBOG membership included:

EVAN AGONMUO @Evapax2 – 15 Aug 2014
What could be the condition of our daughters, Do they eat at all? Do they sleep? Are they being sexually molested? @BringBackOurGirls#

Decontee Kofa @Decontee_Kofa – 14 Aug 2014
@BringBackOurGirls, You are absolutely right. I was taken over solely by what the Nigerian govt failed to do for her people and Africa.

The government of President Goodluck Jonathan and his All Progressives Congress (APC) party was seen as being slow in responding to the abduction issue. A #BBOG member tweeted:

simon goza @simongoza – 14 Aug 2014
'APC has failed lagosians' Daily Times of Nigeria: e-Newspaper, Issue 3 disg.us/8jay30 @APC-Nigeria @BringBackOurGirls n #takeAPC

Mired in corruption allegations and globally perceived as not proactive enough on many issues, the government needed to respond to this international public relations embarrassment to redeem its image. Oriola (2021, 649) reports that the #BBOG leadership believed that the 'Nigerian government seems to respond to the language of international embarrassment', noting that the 'state failure narrative gradually became the epicentre of #BBOG framing'.

Members of the #BBOG Strategic Team and some Chibok community members attributed some of the actions taken by the government to the strong push by the #BBOG movement. One of the interviewees, a member of the #BBOG Strategic Team said,

Any time we come out to protest, the government will come out to speak … Okay, for example, look at our last outing; it is because of it they went to Chibok. They went and held a meeting with parents who their children are still in the forest. (Interviewee 010, Lagos, February 2018)

Some of the government responses included: setting up a probe panel, exerting pressure on the military to pay attention to the north-east – the centre of the conflict – and sending a delegation to Chibok Secondary School for an on-the-spot assessment. President Jonathan also attempted to visit the north-east but was prevented by the security chiefs. The electoral victory of President Muhammadu Buhari was in good

part the result of his promise to end the insurgency in the north-east by leading the military from the front.

The second indication that the local and global advocacy on the Chibok abduction had an effect specifically on the Nigerian government becomes apparent when the aftermath of the Chibok abduction is compared to the aftermaths of other abductions and attacks. The murder of scores of schoolboys in the town of Buni Yadi, the abduction of several hundred women in different villages in Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe States, the bombing in Nyanya, and the attack of the UN House in Abuja, among numerous others, at best attracted condemnation from the government and a promise to 'bring the perpetrators to book'. None drew the kind of official response that the Chibok abduction attracted.

Gendered leadership, respect for individual rights

The other strategy that has worked for the #BBOG in ensuring its continued relevance is having an effective organisational structure. Interviews with members of the movement suggest that #BBOG felt the need to bring in some structure and order as it began attracting more members. It initially organised itself in five parallel teams: Mobilisation Team; Media and Communication Team; Resource Team; Legal Team; and the Sit-Out Team, which were later subsumed into a three-layer structure[3] (Aina et al. 2019) (see Figure 1).

A member of the communication team explained why the movement needed some form of structure;

> … we are growing, and we've stayed here for long [sic], we needed some form of structure. (Interview 006, Lagos, January 2018)

At the time of our fieldwork, the strategic team was composed entirely of women leaders[4] (see Table 1). On the other hand, the sit-out team had four women and two men.
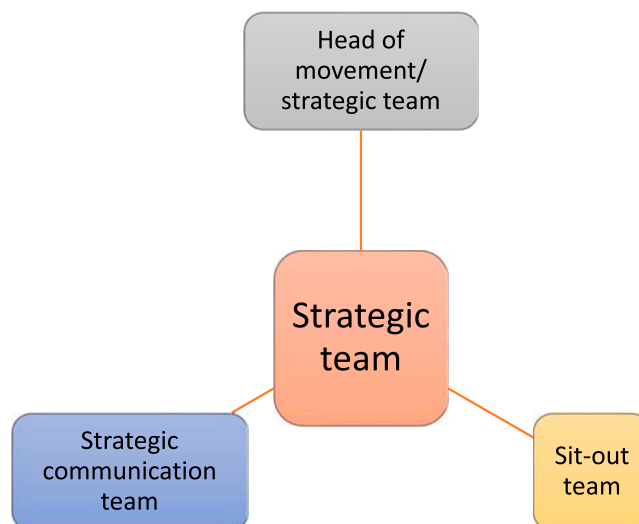
Figure 1: #BBOG organisational structure. Source: Aina et al. (2019).

Table 1: Gender of #BBOG leaders, March 2018

Leadership sequence	Head of Movement/Strategic Team	Sex	Sit-Out Team	Sex	Strategic Communication Team	Sex
1st	Dr Obi Ezekwesili	F	Hadiza Bala Usman	F	Olawole deputised by Tunji	M
2nd	Aisha Yusuf	F	Florence Ozo	F	Sesugh Akume	M
3rd	Florence Obi	F	Bukky Shonibare	F	Olufemi Olufade	M
4th	Edith Yasin	F	Aisha Yusuf	F	Jeff Okoroafor	M
5th	–	–	Abubakar Malunfashi	M	–	–
6th	–	–	Gapani Yanga	M	–	–

Source: Aina *et al.* (2019).

The dominance of female leadership can be explained by the issue at the centre of the social movement. Social movements revolve around issues considered close to women such as education and welfare (Kaufman and Williams 2010). The abduction of school girls can be argued to have affected women more than men. Indeed, the Nigerian government, which is dominantly male, did not react to the news of abduction and neither did it take any form of action. The #BBOG movement was thus filling this gap and opening up the civic space for women's participation in politics and activism. Additionally, this female leadership in #BBOG could have been a visible strategy of ensuring the use of non-violent means to get the government's attention. Men in leadership would have probably altered the strategy to confrontational protest activities (Aina *et al.* 2019).

Another key thing to note is that female leadership was made up of the elite. Leaders included professionals, business people, and even influential political activists. This was key in pushing the #BBOG's agenda beyond the Chibok community to the global space. Besides this, the elite leadership also implies that these were not *disempowered women* (Aina *et al.* 2019). However, our interactions with various stakeholders highlighted some fear among some Nigerians with the leadership being composed mainly of elite women. But this is not unique to #BBOG. Castillejo (2008) argues that since women's education levels are generally lower than men's, it is inevitable that most women activists are from the elite. The attendance of elite leaders in social movement protests and sit-ins is a core strategy (Shrestha and Adhikari 2010) and encourages collective action (Earle 2011).

While it is important to have high-profile and charismatic leaders, Obi (2005) warns against revolving everything around one leader since this may weaken the organisation and create factions.

Ensuring longevity and autonomy

Use of non-violent confrontational tactics

The literature on social movements points to the widespread use of confrontational tactics such as sit-outs, mass demonstrations, labour walkouts, hunger strikes, and economic boycotts as weapons of political coercion (Taylor and Van Dyke 2004). Some feminist movements have targeted specific parts of the state to express their

grievances, rather than the political arena, as a way of avoiding close relations with political parties (Nazneen and Sultan 2014). This has prevented their loss of credibility and legitimacy in the civic space (*ibid.*). The #BBOG developed a creed – HUMANI-TEEDS (hope, unity, motivation, affability, nationalism, integrity, transparency, empathy, equity, discipline, and sacrifice) for its members to ensure they remain focused on the goal of pressuring the government to secure the release of the abducted girls. The values were developed following a near-ugly experience while the movement was meeting the president:

> We wanted to see the president and to talk about the abduction that was in May 2015. In going there, we were stopped by security, and there were lots of people, and some of those people felt we should move on and badge on, but our leaders said no, we must be disciplined, we must be the example of Nigeria we want to see. So it was from there we started developing the core values. (Interview 006, Abuja, January 2018)

Research shows that non-violent campaigns are more successful than violent campaigns (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Nepstad 2013). Campaigns that take a non-violent approach tend to be in urban settings, involve more participants, and have broader coalitions (Gleditsch and Rivera 2017). As a result of their HUMANITEEDS values, the #BBOG has been successful in carrying out peaceful protests. Members are not allowed to pelt stones, insult anyone, or disrupt the lives of the rest of the citizens. They are required to remain peaceful and to accord the police civility despite their attitude. This has had an impact on government authority, who, although they have intimidated the group by their presence in their sit-outs, did not suppress the group's activities. Although some members left because they were not allowed to be rowdy and rude during the protests, the core value of discipline helped sustain the group's focus.

Above all, the rules mentioned earlier were used to prevent distractions caused by ethnic differences, management of funds, and political affiliations. About the latter, a member stated that:

> We ensure members drop their political party affiliations at the park entrance and pick them up when you are leaving. And we have done well in that regard, so it is not a challenge. (Interview 004, Abuja, December 2017)

Commitment to political neutrality also meant that prominent leaders, including Dr Obi Ezekwesili and political activist Hajia Adiza Bala Usman, resigned from the movement's leadership when they decided to enter formal politics. This was crucial at the onset of the movement, when the government accused the group of plotting with the opposition party (understandably as most vocal political supporters of the movement were from the opposition).

Rejecting NGOisation
A final strategy adopted by the #BBOG was the deliberate principle not to accept funding from external actors. Funding is key to the survival of every movement. However, how and from whom funds are obtained may become an obstacle to a group's ability to

achieve its aim. Group autonomy might become compromised, and credibility may be jeopardised (Alvarez 1999; Nazneen and Sultan 2009).

When asked how they financed their activities, interviewees said that they contribute to their activities financially. They also try to come up with activities that are not costly. For example, a member of the strategy team noted that:

> We are a self-funded movement; we do not accept anything from anyone whatever we get we use it within our movement, we get it within our members and most times, we don't use money. We try to be ingenious, and we try to be creative. (Interview 006, Abuja, January 2018)

Interviewees claimed this enables them to avoid losing their autonomy to donors, and to have to face internal wrangles over funds management. The members pointed out that they had received several offers from foreign governments, including Denmark, and from the UN, but they turned down the money. Additionally, the Argentine government awarded the movement with the Emilio Mignone Human Rights International Human Rights Award that came with a cash prize. The movement turned down the money and asked that it be redirected to a Chibok Girls' fund. However, while the #BBOG does not take any donor funds, some members of the Chibok community believe that wealthy politicians and foreign governments fund them. This idea can be explained by the lack of interaction between the #BBOG members and the Chibok community, who only heard of the movement from the media.

Challenges of the #BBOG movement

Women's movements in the global South face several challenges. These include political exclusion (Banaszak *et al.* 2003; Chappell 2003; Kriesi *et al.* 1992; Tarrow 1998); co-option by the state and other political actors (Abdullah 1995); fragmentation, which may be as a result of co-optation by political actors (Alvarez 1999; Beckwith 2000; Waylen 2004); NGOisation or shift from grassroots movements to formal NGOs (Alvarez 1999); divisions between younger feminists and veterans in their approach (Siddique 2011); and backlash, particularly in conservative societies (Nazneen 2017).

The #BBOG has grappled with some of these challenges. Externally, the movement has faced counter-movements created to oppose or neutralise it; government harassment including sponsored adverse online attacks and inaction that has seen the movement members grow weary; as well as pressure from and mistrust of parents of the abducted girls (Aina *et al.* 2019). Internally, it has experienced recurring disagreement over strategy (some preferring militancy and disruptive, unruly confrontation, while others prefer a pacifist approach), and a waning commitment of its members, perhaps due to the prolonged nature of the issue (Aina *et al.* 2019).

A recurrent challenge has been the attempts at co-opting the #BBOG members into government to control its affairs. Those attempts are not unique to the #BBOG. In most African settings, ruling regimes try to exert indirect control over women's movements through co-option (Tripp 2001). Amina Mama called this the first-lady phenomenon in which, in countries such as Nigeria and Ghana, the first lady takes a vital position

in the political arena as representative of women's movements (Makan 1997). Mama uses the term *femocracy to* refer to situations where women's participation in decision-making is created by co-opting women in conservative politics (*ibid*.). In such circumstances, women's movements are forced to choose autonomy or risk co-optation by the state (Abdullah 1995).

The #BBOG, like other women's movements in Africa, has resisted co-optation attempts through a rule that automatically sees any member who expresses political interest leave the leadership, also because of the nature of its cross-class, cross-religion composition. We see a similar trend with the Women in Nigeria (WIN), founded in 1982, which has outlived others because of its multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-party composition. WIN consistently focused on increasing female representation in politics and condemning government corruption. Despite Nigeria's government threats to imprison its leaders, WIN also refused to be subsumed under one state agency, a strategy used by the government to control their agenda (Abdullah 1995).

The other challenge comes from the issues in which some women's movements engage. How specifically a movement frames its cause is important to the amount and kind of support it attracts (Benford and Snow 2000). The frame has to resonate with people, for them to join and stay on in the movement, resonance itself being a product of the framer's credibility and salience (Benford and Snow 2000).

Here it is interesting to note that women's movements in Africa and Latin America tend to draw on a mothering framing more than the movements in western societies (Oriola 2021). This has been used in anti-apartheid struggles (Wells 1993), struggles for human rights in Chile (Noonan 1995), and the quest by mothers of political prisoners in Kenya to have the government release their sons during the multi-party struggle (Worthington 2001). Motherhood is a powerful claim to make on the state, and the mothering framing is especially important in states rife with repression. In the #BBOG movement, this was used to endear the movement to mothers, thus generating considerable mobilisation success. Adopting the mothering frame might also have helped the #BBOG sustain its momentum and attract both many women and men because of the sociocultural context.

The girl-child education framing also continues to be important in the national discourse on girls and education in predominantly conservative Muslim northern Nigeria.

Conclusion

There are many lessons from #BBOG's experience. First, the disciplined and non-violent approach of the movement helped it survive longer and perhaps achieve some of its commendable success. Additionally, a clear stance of political neutrality also earned the movement wider support from within and outside Nigeria. Indeed, #BBOG may not have survived for years had it taken a disruptive style or have been too politically engaged, especially since Nigeria is a fragile and conflict-affected setting, where the excuse of terrorism could have been used to crush the movement.

From the story of the #BBOG, it is clear that strategies matter to the continued existence and impact of a women's movement. Such strategies must be inclusive; strategies

that exclude men or other groups whose interests are not necessarily antithetical to the interests of the movement will block a steady stream of members and will, therefore, cause the movement to atrophy after a short season. Inclusion, as argued earlier, also involves networking with international communities and the Diaspora – those who by virtue of their location or position enjoy considerable reach while being away from the backlash and violence possible within Nigeria.

The use of contemporary media, particularly the Twitter hashtag, propelled the movement to the global limelight. Internationalising issues is an essential strategy for women's movements, especially in fragile and conflict-affected settings, as external actors also play a significant role in pushing the government to be responsive. However, the interests of external actors should not take centre stage, to guarantee that the issues and actions are locally owned.

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, strategies have to appeal to young people. This requires leveraging social media as well as appealing to their passion and sensibility. Elite women's leadership plays a vital role in mobilising and sustaining the protests. The #BBOG elite women leadership confirms the observation in the literature that attendance of elite leaders in social movement's protests and sit-ins can be a core strategy (Shrestha and Adhikari 2010).

Moreover, the presence of a robust structure, and the issue of self-funding cannot be understated, as they can be a major factor for the movement's sustainability. Self-funding, in particular, prevented otherwise possible internal wrangles over money and ensured the movement maintained their autonomy, dictating their own strategies and actions.

Notes

1. *Salafi-jihadi* refers to a religious ideology and doctrine of extremist Sunni Islam which emphasises the importance of returning to a 'pure' Islam, that of the Salaf, the pious ancestors, and that violent jihad is a personal religious duty (see Jones *et al*. 2018). It is practised by al-Qa'ida and its associates such as Boko Haram.
2. Many of the people in the rural areas, including Chibok, had relocated to Maiduguri where the heavy military presence offers some measure of security.
3. The movement's leader also doubles as the head of the Strategic Team and spokesperson of the movement. The Strategic Team is at the centre of the movement's leadership structure and sets its goals and objectives as well as planned activities and events. The Sit-Out Team is made up of all other members who observe the daily sit-outs at Unity Fountain in Abuja. The Strategic Team reports to the Sit-Out Team; they are not to execute any programme unless approved by the Sit-Out Team. The Strategic Communication Team, a subset of the Strategic Team, consists of persons with expertise in media and communications, responsible for managing all media platforms, disseminating information, and keeping members informed. For more details, see Aina *et al*. (2019).
4. Dr Obi Ezekwesili, Aisha Yusuf, Florence Obi, and Edith Yasin.

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Notes on contributors

Martin Atela is a member of Peterhouse, University of Cambridge, UK and the Head of the Research and Policy Unit, Partnership for African Social and Governance Research (PASGR). Postal address: 6th Floor, I & M Building, 2nd Ngong Avenue, Upper Hill, P.O. Box 76418-00508, Nairobi, Kenya. Email: m.atelah@googlemail.com

Ayobami Ojebode is Professor of Applied Communication, Office of the Head of Department in the Department of Communication & Language Arts at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. Email: ayo.ojebode@gmail.com

Racheal Makokha is Tutorial Fellow at the Department of Government and Legal Studies, The Technical University of Kenya, and Research Associate at the Research and Policy Unit, Partnership for African Social and Governance Research (PASGR). Email: rachealomukhulu@yahoo.com

Marion Otieno works at the Research and Policy Unit, Partnership for African Social and Governance Research (PASGR). Email: paulsmarie285@gmail.com

Tade Aina is Professor of Sociology and Head of Research, The MasterCard Foundation. Email: omotadeakinaina@gmail.com

ORCID

Martin Atela 🔵 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1600-663X
Ayobami Ojebode 🔵 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1158-8578

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