



# THE IMPACT OF THE CONFLICT ON FEMALE-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS IN THE NORTH EAST



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## FEMALE-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS ON THE RISE

There has been a high prevalence of single females heading their households within areas in the North East most affected by the conflict. The UNHCR Vulnerability Screening (December 2017) found that 63% of vulnerable households were female-headed. The breakdown of the 62,113 female-headed households (FHH) screened included 2,283 women reporting to have been widowed, 1,589 reporting to be lactating and 405 reporting to be pregnant.<sup>1</sup> The highest numbers of FHH identified in the Vulnerability Screening were in Dikwa LGA (14,142), Ngala LGA (9,520), Monguno LGA (8,537) and Damasak, Mobbar LGA (5,578) in Borno State and Gulani LGA (5,458) in Yobe State.

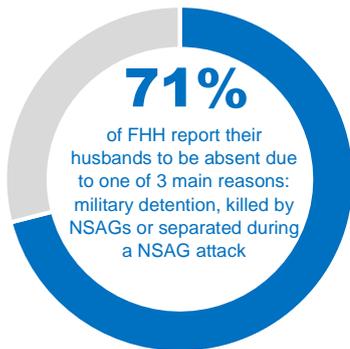
In 2018, with every new arrival of IDPs, IDP returnees and refugee returnees, protection monitors have noted high numbers of female-headed households.

## THEMATIC REPORT METHODOLOGY

This thematic report analyses information gathered by UNHCR protection monitors through numerous focus group discussions with females heading their households throughout May and June 2018 in sites in which UNHCR is conducting protection monitoring. This includes interviews with 1,722 females heading their households to provide disaggregated data analyzed in the report. This report seeks to identify particular protection issues affecting women heading their households to enable evidence-based programming and response.

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR North East Nigeria: Vulnerability Screening Report (December 2017), available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/nigeria/unhcr-north-east-nigeria-operational-vulnerability-screening-report-december-2017>

## WHERE ARE ALL OF THE HUSBANDS?



A myriad of reasons surround the absence of men and rise of female-headed households. Of the female-headed households surveyed by protection monitors, **28%** report their husbands to be in military detention, **27%** state that their husbands were killed by non-state armed groups and **16%** say they were separated from their husbands during an attack by non-state armed groups. These three answers make up **71%** of the reasons given for husbands being absent. For instance, the majority of FHH surveyed in Bama (**53%**) report that their husbands had been detained, stating during a focus group discussion: “We arrived together with our husbands to the screening center in Bama. After being screened, they took our husbands to Giwa Barracks in Maiduguri.” In Dikwa,

females heading their households report that the majority of their husbands had been killed by non-state armed groups (**55%**). In Fufere LGA, Adamawa State, most of the women interviewed report to have lost their husbands at the hands of violence perpetrated by non-state armed groups.

Other reasons stated for the absence of men include that the women are divorced (**11%**, with highest numbers reported in Monguno and Ngala), that the husband died for non-violent reasons including due to health issues (**8%**) and that their husbands were captured/forcefully recruited into non-state armed groups (**4%**, with the majority of cases reported in Gwoza and Pulka). Smaller numbers of women report that their husbands were staying outside Maiduguri, that their husbands had been killed, or that they are missing due to other reasons (including having claimed asylum in Cameroon or had been killed in a car accident).

## PROTECTION ISSUES AFFECTING FEMALE-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS

In patriarchal Northern societies, men traditionally head their households and manage finances without input from their wives. With the newfound reality of the emergency situation and many men missing from households, women and girls have been forced to take on the role of head of household for the first time, some with nearly no livelihood skills or financial literacy to fall back upon. FHHs report a number of specific challenges they face daily in struggling to make ends meet, while caring for young children.

Women heading households report immense challenges in **gaining adequate access to assistance**, as humanitarian interventions often don't cover the households' basic needs. They particularly report to lack access to adequate food including condiments, firewood, clothes for themselves and for their children and access to shelter including repair of damaged shelters. Where they are unable to access sufficient basic services, women report resorting to selling food items distributed to them by humanitarian organizations, sending their children to hawk or beg around town and/or sending their children to the bush to collect firewood despite acute security risks of attack or abduction. In many locations, women heading households implored protection monitors on the need for scaled up **livelihood assistance**. While many women report to receive food assistance, because they **lack firewood** to cook the food and **condiments** that are culturally required for cooking including seasoning cubes and vegetables, they are forced to sell part of the food given to them. This renders the food portion provided too small for the household to live off of for the month before the next distribution. Some women also stated that they've had to sell non-food items given to them to enable them to buy condiments. In Bama, for instance, women report to have sold their mattresses for as low as NGN 3,000 to enable them purchase condiments for cooking. Other women must rely on the benevolence of their neighbours to be able to feed their families.

Throughout Borno, women are feeling forced to send their **young children out to beg or hawk** small items, such as satchets of water, and fetch firewood. In Monguno, the majority of FHHs report to send their children to beg on the street while some households are sending their children to hawk. This creates a protection concern as the children are exposed to protection risks including of sexual violence and exploitation. In Damboa, some of the women take their children with them to beg in the community. FHHs further report that many of their **children are out of school**. Women lament the high prices of school fees and costs of uniforms for children as barriers for their children to access education. In Fufere and Yola South LGAs, Adamawa state, women report that the school fees being charged (NGN 700 per child per term for primary school and NGN 1,550 for secondary school) are prohibitive.



Without the protection of male family members, females heading their households report to be at heightened risk of being targeted for **sexual violence** and/or subject to **sexual exploitation**, where they are forced to have sex with men in and around the camp for food and other basic necessities. In Monguno, women revealed that they are engaging in survival sex in order to take care of their family. The women are also resorting to **marrying out their young girls** to eliminate the burden of providing for that child.

Many females heading households reported **security risks stemming from the collection of firewood** in the bush in order to cook food for the family. In some locations like Bama, the women are not allowed to go out of the camp to fetch firewood due to stated security concerns. In Fufore LGA, Adamawa State, women recounted: “A woman was raped when she went to gather firewood in a nearby farm. Because we suspect such thing could happen to us, we only go to collect firewood in groups of four or five to prevent anyone from attacking us.” In areas of return in Adamawa where farming activities have resumed, females heading households are sending their adolescent daughters to engage in farming activities and are worried that this may expose them to risks of sexual violence.

FHHs report to face **stigmatization** within the community, particularly directed at those whose husbands may be associated with non-state armed groups. In some locations such as Monguno, females heading households report to be discriminated against by community members and left in isolation, apart from the community. Women state that IDPs call them names such as “Boko Haram Wives” and women in Monguno further revealed that they have been called prostitutes because they do not have husbands. In Fufore LGA, Adamawa, FHHs report that negative name-calling and stigmatization has become the norm for the many single women households. FHHs have also reported to be **marginalized from decision making** and from partaking in opportunities that are culturally reserved for men. In Ngala and Banki for example, women are not allowed to conduct trade/business in Cameroon as this is strictly perceived as a ‘man’s business.’

A large number of the females heading households also report to be suffering **trauma** over the loss of their husbands and children during the conflict. **Uncertainty** persists for those whose husbands disappeared, are missing, were detained or were abducted, and they are anxious to know the status of their husbands and if they are dead or alive. According to them, this will help them move forward and take decisions for the future like **remarrying**. Some of the women are afraid they may not be able to remarry because of the stigmatization of their husband being associated with the conflict.

Single females heading households face daily challenges in providing for their children and other family members and many report *not to be receiving assistance even from family* members. In Dikwa for example, FHHs said despite having family members within the community, particularly those related to their husband, they would not assist the women in taking care of the children or sending them to school. In Damboa, FHHs said that they do not have relatives within the community who can assist them in providing for their families.

## RESPONSE BEING PROVIDED TO ADDRESS THE PROTECTION RISKS FACED BY FEMALE-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS

Understanding the heightened vulnerabilities of females heading households, UNHCR has prioritized such households for a range of assistance. Such interventions include provision of *shelter* and of *protection-based material items* such as hygiene items, dignity kits, solar lanterns and mattresses. UNHCR has focused on the engagement of women heading their households in *livelihood* activities such as knitting, tailoring, small-scale trading, jewellery making and soap making. In return locations in Adamawa, *farming cooperatives* are being established for FHHs. UNHCR has further provided vulnerable FHHs in Borno State with *energy-efficient charcoal and stoves* to prevent women and children from going outside the security perimeters in the most affected sites to find firewood in order to minimize exposure to risks of rape, harassment, abduction and other harm. Children within FHHs have also been provided with appropriate *clothing, birth registration* and *birth certificates*.

## UNHCR PROTECTION MONITORING PROJECT OVERVIEW

UNHCR implements a community-based approach to protection monitoring in areas of displacement and return in Borno, Yobe and Adamawa States, partnering with local non-government organizations of AIPD, GISCOR, SAHEI and CCEPI, and the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC). The project focuses on capacitating community-based leadership to build sustainable self-protection mechanisms for affected communities. In Borno State, UNHCR has deployed **48** protection monitors to areas of displacement and return most affected by the conflict and has formed and capacitated **23** community-based protection action groups (PAGs) comprised of **123** members (**62** male, **61** female) to identify, mitigate and report on/respond to protection risks and concerns. Further, UNHCR maintains **15** protection desks within IDP camps for individuals to be able to report abuses and risks. From January – June 2018, the UNHCR protection monitoring project has identified and referred **1,252** individual cases and has further reached **9,542** through community-level monitoring and sensitization activities in Borno, Yobe and Adamawa States.



**9,542**

Persons reached through community-level monitoring and sensitization activities from January – June 2018



**1,252**

Individual cases referred for specialized services from January – June 2018



**123**

Protection action group (PAG) members in Borno



**48**

Protection monitors deployed to areas of displacement and return in Borno



**15**

UNHCR protection desks within IDP camps