**Title:** Foundations of Peacebuilding, Empowerment and Political Education: Building a Voice for Indigenous Women in Areas Most Impacted by the Boko Haram Insurgency

**Location:** Nigeria, Chibok Local Government

**Sponsoring University:** University of California, Berkeley

**Project Leader:** Dinah Lawan, Nigeria, University of California, Berkeley. **Participating Students:** Na’omi Luke, Nigeria, Mubi Polytechnic Institute (MPI); Saraya Bitrus, Nigeria, MPI; Juliana Lawan, Nigeria, MPI.

**Project Summary:** The project will pilot local mothers’ voter education, peacebuilding, and empowerment initiatives in four Nigerian villages most impacted by the Boko Haram insurgency. Inspired by the Liberian women’s “Mass Action for Peace”, this pilot will build on cultural practices by holding thrice weekly women’s education workshops after church/mosque services. With local polytechnic students, we will teach political mobilization – democracy, citizenship, and peacebuilding – to women in remote areas of Chibok Local government, so that they can organize to use their tools as citizens to build a movement that will put pressure on the local, state and national governments to provide them with the security they dearly need.

**Background:** The Chibok region has battled one of the world’s most brutal insurgencies, Boko Haram, since 2009. Women have been majorly targeted; in 2014, over 275 school girls were kidnapped, including three in my own family. I have deep knowledge of the area in which we will conduct this project, as I was born and raised in Kuburmbula Village, the only place I had ever been until my own kidnapping in 2014. This is a tight local community. Boko Haram is a threat to me, my family, and my community, and it is one of the major reasons I am studying political science at Berkeley, and chose peace studies as an undergraduate at Notre Dame. During my undergraduate program, I took a field research course where I learned how to conduct interviews, focus groups, surveys, and most importantly, how to engage with participants during the fieldwork. When I started my graduate studies a few months ago at Berkeley, I took another methods course, where I learned how to construct questionnaires that will not be uncomfortable.

Historically, Nigeria only became a democratic country in 1999, and did not allow the teaching of history in public schools until just a few short years ago. Our parents were denied the opportunity to know what democracy means, why votes matter, what Nigeria’s history of conflict has been, or what other places have done to achieve peace. In my community, Chibok Local Government, few, if any, women participate in political activities. There is no indigenous women’s peace movement, and no understanding of the power of citizens to demand action from our leaders. There is therefore an extremely low representation of women in politics in my region of Nigeria, particularly local women who often have less knowledge about how politics work and, most importantly, why their votes matter. They do not understand that even those who speak an unwritten language, such as ours, can “write” letters to which the government must respond.

This project is inspired by the Liberian women’s peace movement, which launched a nonviolent campaign that led to the end of the Second Liberian Civil War in 2003. I admire the Liberian women’s peace movement as a good example where women from modest backgrounds once they become aware of their power, have played a determining role in ending deadly violence. Some tools and strategies, such as mobilization through religions used by Liberian women, could be useful in Chibok. Peace is when society is free from violence, conflict, social disturbance, and when an individual is able to sleep in their home without fear of being killed, slaughtered, or kidnapped by someone for no reason, something Liberia achieved through women’s voices. Perhaps Chibok can do the same.

Security is the first step for the achievement of my peace. One of the major reasons I plan to conduct this project is that women hold a key to peace in society, but only if they know and exercise their rights to exercise their voices through votes and peaceful movements. Chibok women can be educated through some of the tools and strategies that Liberian women use to end deadly violence in their community. Given the overwhelming insurgency that has been going on, it will take time to obtain peace
in the Chibok LGA; Boko Haram has caused unimaginable damage. However, this project will be a foundation to help meet my definition of the peace I have proposed for two reasons. First, this project will enable women to learn how to mobilize, form peace campaigns, and demand security through writing their own stories and making their voices heard. Second, it will guide them as they exercise their rights in advance of the 4/14/24 10th anniversary of the Boko Haram “Chibok Girls” kidnapping, which is especially important in a society where cultural norms restrain women from publically voicing their opinions. Through this project, especially its collaboration with the local polytechnic students and faculty, we can hope that we can once again sleep in our homes without fear of being killed, burned, or kidnapped by Boko Haram.

**Implementation:** Should I be so fortunate as to have this project approved, before summer, I will communicate with current and former students at the Federal Polytechnic Mubi, Adamawa Yola, Nigeria, who study mass communication and public policy, to make arrangements about working together on this project. The Mubi Polytechnic Institute is also a stable institution in the impacted region, so it can act as a base of support for the long term, one that understands the need for peace before any other policy work it teaches can begin in earnest. This project will be beneficial not only for the women in the Chibok Local government area but also for the students I intend to work with, and their professors. (Note: Since most women are illiterate, all trainings will be conducted orally with some pictures printed). This project seeks to start with workshops for 80 women, many of whom have already expressed interest in participating, in four villages of Chibok local government areas to learn civic education, including democratic voting, mobilization, and citizenship. To do this, our workshops will collaborate with the culturally powerful women’s religious fellowships, building on the Liberian model. Each workshop will accomplish a distinct task: **Workshop #1.** Play and discuss a video of the Liberian women’s peace movement (“Pray the Devil Back to Hell”). **Workshop #2.** Review the political history of Nigeria during the participants’ own lifetimes, and how military dictatorship changed into fragile democracy. **Workshop #3.** Teach the women how to use their votes for more than a small amount of money, and show examples of how voting can help mothers choose good leaders. **Workshop #4.** Teach participants that change in their communities is possible through peaceful mobilization and letters to politicians and international organizations.

**Anticipated Results:** We expect the immediate outcomes of this project to be as follows. First, women will learn about the importance and impact of their vote and how it can be used to achieve their goals for peace. Second, the women will have a better understanding of democracy beyond mere voting to include advocacy and how to make their voices heard. Third, we hope to initiate letter-writing campaigns to political and media leaders, where the women will “write” their own stories and the consequences of war to their families and communities. Finally, this project will enable women to understand their own value as citizens and equal participants in the path for peace, especially in communities that overlook women’s participation in politics. The long-term outcome of this initial project, we hope, is that it could potentially build a foundation for a women’s peace movement in Chibok Local government. In the interim, we plan to keep count, in conjunction with the Polytechnic students, of the activities such as letter-writing, advocacy visits, meetings, workshops, media appearances, and other mobilization inspired/enabled by this program.

Thank you very much for your kind attention and consideration.