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# DOGMATISM OR PRAGMATISM?

Violent extremism and gender in the central Sahel



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Cover photo: Guests bring gifts to the new home of a Fulani bride, Burkina Faso. © Irène Abdou/Alamy

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Violent extremism and gender in the central Sahel

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JULY 2020

## **Acknowledgements**

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# Abbreviations

<b>CEDAW</b>	United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
<b>DSF</b>	Defence and security forces
<b>FAMA</b>	Malian armed forces ( <i>Forces armées maliennes</i> )
<b>GBV</b>	Gender-based violence
<b>GSIM</b>	Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims
<b>ISGS</b>	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
<b>ISWAP</b>	Islamic State West Africa Province
<b>MINUSMA</b>	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali ( <i>Mission multidimensionnelle intégrée des Nations unies pour la stabilisation au Mali</i> )
<b>NAP</b>	National action plan
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental organisation
<b>UN</b>	United Nations

# Map of western Sahel



# Executive summary

The central Sahel is experiencing an escalation in violence that illustrates the problem faced by states in the region as they endeavour to hold back the advance of jihadist groups. Several studies have provided important perspectives in understanding the factors behind the control and influence violent extremist groups have gained in the border zones of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. However, one factor that has often been mentioned but rarely analysed in depth is the link between gender and violent extremism in the Sahel.

Although gender relations have often been treated as a factor of little relevance in the analysis of violent extremism in the Sahel, it is important to acknowledge the considerable efforts that violent extremist groups appear to be making to control women and ensure they conform to the behavioural norms of jihadist ideology. Similarly, the common perception that women are merely passive victims of acts of violence and of the rules imposed by violent extremist groups deserves more in-depth analysis. This report aims to explore the link between gender relations and violent extremism in the Sahel. It therefore seeks to understand the extent to which the expectations associated with gender roles contribute to the involvement of men and women in supporting violent extremism in the Sahel and examines the specific role of women in this context. The research into these issues is based on a range of empirical data collected in late 2019 within communities in the Liptako-Gourma region that are particularly exposed to the activities of violent extremist groups. A total of 339 respondents took part in focus groups, interviews with key informants and mini surveys organised at the village level.

In terms of victimisation, the study showed that, as a general rule, men are more likely than women to be the main targets of the violence fuelled by the conflict in the central Sahel. Although episodes of gender-based violence clearly occur, the available data do not provide evidence of systematic and deliberate campaigns of women being victimised. Examples of murders, attacks and torture explicitly targeting women are relatively rare and, in most cases, the perpetrators appear not be violent extremist groups but the various self-defence militias that operate in the countries of the region. Abductions of women for the purposes of propaganda, raising funds, intimidation or recruitment, which have long formed part of the repertoire of violent extremist groups in the area around Lake Chad, remain an extremely marginal phenomenon in the central Sahel. The information and testimonies gathered for this study also do not provide confirmation of allegations of widespread and systematic use of rape and gender-based violence (GBV) by the violent extremist groups active in the central Sahel. In fact, although rape and GBV are occasionally used as tools of collective punishment and to assert authority, as is the case in other conflict contexts, the violent extremist groups in the central Sahel seem generally to uphold the prohibition of GBV and the punishment of perpetrators. This appears to be part of a strategy to become integrated and accepted in the long term within certain communities.

The findings help in understanding why, in the areas where they are most established, the violent extremist groups of the central Sahel may sometimes be perceived more as a source of protection than as a threat, especially among women. This is what emerged from the analysis of perceptions of security



carried out in communities in the Mopti and Tillabéry regions. In the Burkinabe Sahel, the opposite view tends to prevail. These observations corroborate the theory that violence against civilians, including women, is inversely proportional to the level of control exercised by the armed actors in a particular area. In the places where the extremist groups have a stronger hold, it would be counterproductive for them to support abuses against communities. However, in a contested area, such as in Burkina Faso and the Sahel region in particular, attacks against civilians may form part of a deliberate strategy of intimidation with the aim of progressively gaining a stronger foothold.

Although most acts of violence are targeted at men, women are often the indirect victims of the violence that is becoming structural and normalised in the context of the conflict in the central Sahel. Many men have effectively deserted the villages of Liptako-Gourma, either to join the ranks of the armed groups or, as is more often the case, to go into hiding for fear of cross-reprisals by violent extremist groups and the defence and security forces (DSF). In the men's hurry to escape, women and children, who are thought to be less at risk from these threats, are often abandoned in their home villages. The women are thus at the mercy of the armed groups in the area who may turn their sights on them instead when they don't find the men they are looking for. Women who are widowed or forcibly displaced as a result of the conflict are especially vulnerable. In the absence of a stable source of income, the threat of violence from armed groups is combined with the threat of structural violence associated with precarious livelihoods. In addition, during times of conflict the rate of domestic violence increases. The trivialisation of violence in both the private and public spheres contributes to a normalisation of the oppression of women, revealing a direct relationship between domestic violence and violence in times and areas of conflict.

In the areas under their influence, the violent extremist groups strive to establish rules and institutions to discipline communities and institute power relations in accordance with their ideology. This 'jihadist governance' often takes a strongly gendered approach that focuses on tightly controlling how communities go about their lives. Measures include reconfiguring marital relationships, banning celebrations, imposing dress codes by force, especially in relation to female modesty, restricting women's mobility and segregating men and women in public spaces. Such rules, which can be seen particularly in the Macina region of Mali, are accompanied by a discourse that seeks to accentuate the differences in roles and rank within a society under Sharia law, undermining the concept of equal rights.

Despite the fact that the imposition of this new order is accompanied by many examples of brutality, it is not entirely rejected by local communities, including women. There are two factors that go some way towards explaining this apparent paradox. Firstly, the concept of society advanced by the violent extremists in the central Sahel doesn't necessarily aim to make radical changes to the existing social order. On the contrary, it resonates with the everyday life of rural communities as well as with deeply rooted social norms, which helps it to gain acceptance among both men and women. Practices such as wearing the veil, marginalising women from decision-making processes, devaluing women's work, excluding women from the education system and the duty of women to obey their husbands have been systematised and exacerbated by the violent extremists. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume that such practices were previously unknown in the rural communities of the central Sahel. Thus, it is reasonable to believe that, where there is support from communities for violent extremist groups in the central Sahel, it is less a matter of radical, existential conversion and more a continuation of existing attitudes and behaviours.





A Fulani woman decorates her face with colourful tattoos, as is tradition, Niger.  
PHOTO: © BOAZ ROTTEM/ALAMY

Secondly, the rise in power of violent extremist groups in the region can provide unexpected opportunities to challenge waning power relations marked by the extreme patriarchy that permeates the cultural environment of the central Sahel. Women may take a pragmatic approach, looking favourably on certain measures introduced by 'jihadist governance' that have progressive implications in terms of gender, without wholly sharing the ideology of the extremist groups. Thus, although relations between men and women outside the family are strongly discouraged and indeed severely punished in the context of 'jihadist governance', it should also be noted that the extremists' challenging of non-Islamic traditions (hierarchical rankings, social prohibitions and enormous increases in the bride price) resonate with the aspirations of many young people, both men and women.

On the one hand it helps to curb the practice of forced marriage, which continues to be a very widespread form of structural violence against women in the region. On the other hand, it facilitates access to marriage for young people, which is still a key measure of social success for both men and women. The influence of violent extremist groups has effectively relaxed the conditions for access to marriage for categories of people who were previously marginalised, such as low-caste women, divorced women, sex workers and others. Similarly, religious law may be perceived as supporting a discourse that, while not advocating gender equality, nevertheless commands respect for marital obligations and might represent an improvement compared to patriarchal absolutism. In the same way, the vast majority of respondents interviewed for this study appear to believe that being ruled by Sharia law benefits women in their everyday lives. According to one view rooted in Fulani tradition, domestic segregation offers an

enviable situation of peace and tranquillity, comparable to that enjoyed in aristocratic circles. From this perspective, the exemption of women from work can be likened to a royal privilege, whereas work in the fields, often in very harsh conditions, is considered less as an opportunity for emancipation and more as an onerous, not very honourable obligation. This capacity for violent extremism to resonate, if somewhat ambivalently, with the imagination and aspirations of certain fringes of rural communities, including women and young people, helps to explain how jihadist groups have been able to become established and accepted in the region.

Consequently, it is not really surprising that some women are actively involved in supporting violent extremist groups in the central Sahel. Unlike other settings where violent extremist groups are also present (such as Syria or Lake Chad), it appears to be extremely rare for women in the central Sahel to bear arms and take part in combat operations. They are also seldom present at bases in the bush. Sahelian women seem to play a more significant role within various ethnically based self-defence militias than in violent extremist groups. However, the escalation of military action led by violent extremist groups in the central Sahel since late 2019 could be playing a part in changing this pattern, although the data on this are still disputed. The possibility of women being engaged in the combat operations of the region's violent extremist groups, as seen in the recent military operations in the central Sahel, may highlight the significance of the ideological divides between the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). In line with their respective doctrinal positions at a global level, the groups linked to Islamic State in the region seem less reluctant to authorise the mobilisation of women in combat operations than groups associated with al-Qaeda, which see jihad as more of a collective obligation that exempts women from the duty to take up arms and participate in combat operations.

Even when they are not involved in fighting and keep away from the bases and frontlines, women's actions can ensure the performance of key functions that support the efforts of violent extremist groups in the central Sahel. Thus, most observers think that some women, while remaining in their village communities, are making an essential contribution to the bases in the bush by providing auxiliary services, such as laundry, cooking and nursing. They may also be involved in collecting information and money to support the war effort. These observations appear to apply particularly to Mali. They corroborate the conclusions of other research on this subject and suggest that the role women can play in the activities of violent extremist groups in the central Sahel should not be underestimated. It should, however, also be noted that, in the majority of cases, there is a clear, unbroken line of continuity between women's support for violent extremist groups and the social roles and behaviour expected of women in the region. Nevertheless, a reorientation of the purpose of these behaviours may reinforce the motivational framework of women involved in violent extremism, enabling them to base their actions on the prospect of a historic transformation of which they have often been deprived.

A gender analysis also facilitates a better understanding of what motivates men to become involved in supporting violent extremist groups. Women in the central Sahel have often been encouraged to incite men (sons, husbands, suitors and friends) to take up arms. Songs, accolades and preaching that celebrate martial values, stigmatise weakness and encourage men to demonstrate their bravery are part of an established cultural repertoire that contributes to the development of dominant ideals of masculinity. These practices may have a significant influence on recruitment to various non-state armed groups in the region. Violent extremist groups are no exception, especially where they are viewed more as a guarantee

of rather than a threat to the security of communities. Thus, it is not surprising that in some communities in the central Sahel, and especially in the regions of Mopti and Tillabéry, combatants who are members of violent extremist groups are able to gain the preference of girls and women. The access to women supposedly facilitated by the combatant's status and resources is one of the motivations that may push young men into joining violent extremist groups.

These observations show the importance of taking account of the gender aspect when seeking to prevent and combat violent extremism in the central Sahel. A better understanding of the impact of gender-related social norms and relations, as well as the specific vulnerabilities of women and girls in a context of violent extremism, could help to enhance the relevance and design of regional and national strategies to combat and prevent violent extremism. In order to avoid standardised responses that often reproduce the dominant perspective of urban settings, the specific needs, aspirations and demands of women from rural and marginalised areas must not be overlooked. Similarly, it is crucial to strengthen the accountability of those responsible for the management of security in the central Sahel and particularly in combating violent extremism, in order to stem the escalation of violence and weaken the hold of violent extremism in the region.

Recognition is also urgently needed of the fact that there is a continuum in all the countries of the central Sahel between the militarised forms of GBV perpetrated in the public domain and the domestic and interpersonal violence in the private sphere. In combination, these manifestations of violence and discrimination against women provide fertile ground for violent extremism to take hold. Thus, it is essential to take a holistic approach that can integrate security concerns into a context of promoting women's rights and human rights as a whole.





Worshippers celebrating Eid al-Adha (known locally as 'Tabaski'), Burkina Faso. PHOTO: © IRÈNE ABDOU/ALAMY

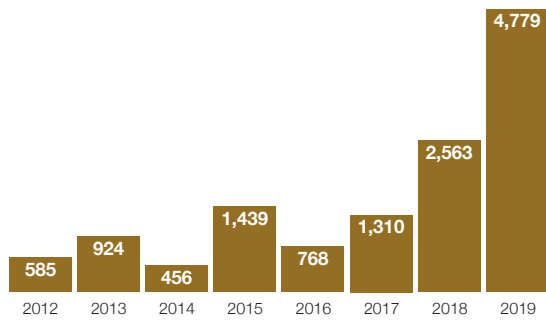
# 1. Exploring the links between violent extremism and gender

The Sahel is experiencing an intensification of what is termed the terrorist threat. In the face of the proliferation and exacerbation of the sources of conflict, the final months of 2019 were the most deadly since the beginning of the multi-dimensional crisis that has been affecting Mali since early 2012<sup>1</sup> and has now spread to the wider subregion. The rise in violence is particularly marked in the cross-border areas of the central Sahel between Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. In this area, known locally as Liptako-Gourma, armed groups are steadily gaining hold by waging jihadist insurrection. They include groups such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State, as well as their local configurations: Katiba Macina and Katiba Serma (affiliated to GSIM), Ansarul Islam and ISGS.<sup>2</sup>

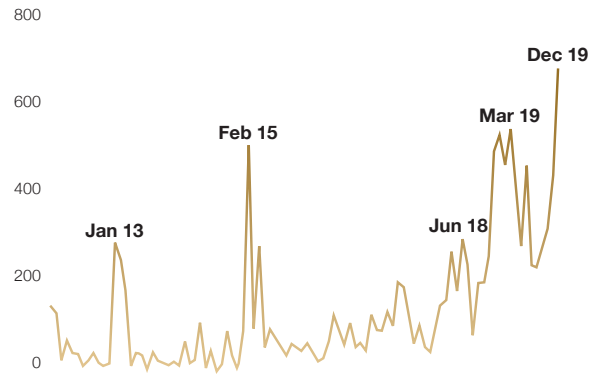
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1. Information based on data from ACLED: <https://www.acleddata.com/2020/01/10/regional-overview-africa-15-december-2019-4-january-2020/>.
  2. Since March 2019, ISGS has begun to move closer to Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and this is also reflected in the official communications from Daesh. However, ISWAP appears to be more well-established in the area around Lake Chad and the actual relationship between the two groups remains as yet unclear. For the avoidance of confusion, a distinction is maintained in this report between ISGS and ISWAP. See: H. Nsaibia, Heeding the call: Sahelian militants answer Islamic State leader al-Baghdadi's call to arms with a series of attacks in Niger, ACLED Report, 2019.

**Figure 1: Western Sahel: reported fatalities**

**Annual (2012–2019)**

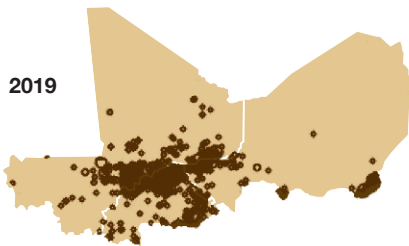
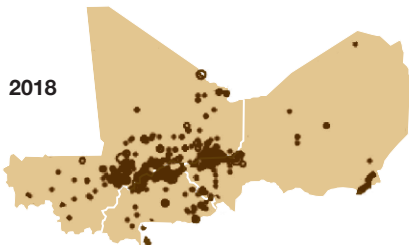
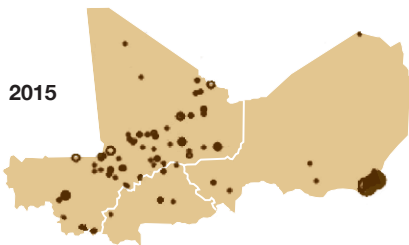
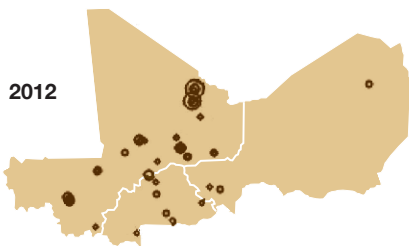


**Monthly (1 January 2012–31 December 2019)**

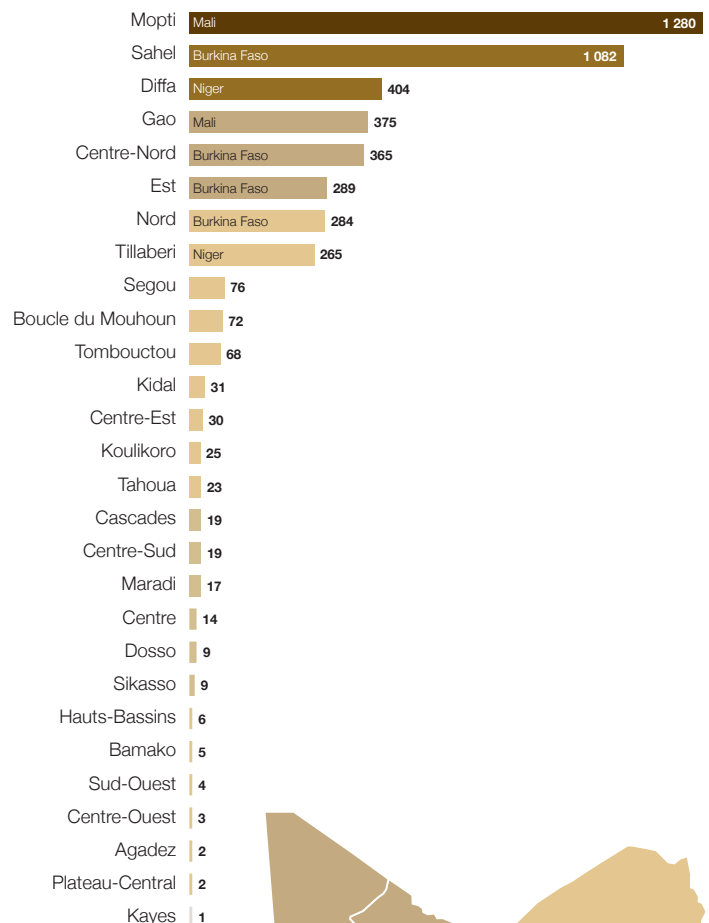


**Magnitude and location by selected year**

• 0    ○ 50    ○ 100    ○ 150    ○ 200    ○ 229



**Subnational region (2019)**



Data source: ACLED (as of 4 January 2019)

Visual: J. Luengo-Cabrera

The inability of states to contain the advance of jihadist groups has exacerbated the tendency for self-defence militias to form and take hold, with recruitment strategies that often reproduce underlying ethnic divisions. The resulting polarisation has triggered a spiral of violence, as evidenced by the massacres at Yirgou (Burkina Faso) and Ogossagou (Mali) in January and March 2019, which cost the lives of over 250 civilians.<sup>3</sup> This escalation of conflict has led to large-scale population movement – since mid-2018 the numbers of internally displaced people has increased threefold in Mali, fivefold in Niger and more than 30 times in Burkina Faso, reaching a total of almost one million people.<sup>4</sup>

The situation has sparked concern among the governments of the region and their international partners. Over the course of at least the last five years numerous studies have been conducted in an effort to gain a better understanding of the reasons behind the appeal of violent extremist ideals, the influence of the armed groups that advocate them and the sources of local communities' vulnerability and/or resilience to radicalisation and terrorism.<sup>5</sup> While these studies have provided valuable insights, one factor that has often been mentioned but rarely analysed in depth is the relationship between gender and violent extremism in the Sahel. This study therefore aims to enhance understanding of the causes, dynamics and consequences of violent extremism in the central Sahel by focusing specifically on the relationship between violent extremism and the gender dynamics in the region.

Conventional accounts of the rise in violent extremism in the central Sahel generally treat gender relations as a factor of little relevance, giving it very marginal attention at most.<sup>6</sup> Despite the fact that the violent extremist groups appear to make significant efforts to control women and ensure their behaviour conforms to the rules of jihadist governance, analyses of violent extremism in the Sahel have paid little attention to gender relations.<sup>7</sup> By way of explanation, it is often noted that the visibility of women in the military actions of what are described as terrorist groups in Liptako-Gourma is very low, in contrast to the situation in the relatively nearby area around Lake Chad. However, this appears to be an interpretation based on analytical assumptions that are of questionable validity. Namely the idea that the only way for women to interact with violent extremist groups is as active participants in military action, as combatants bearing

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3. It remains difficult to calculate the exact number of victims of these attacks. Initial accounts recorded 46 victims of the Yirgou massacre, but other observers have given a much higher figure of over 200. See: Reuters, Dozens killed in ethnic violence in Burkina Faso, 5 January 2019; Traoré, Au moins 210 morts lors du massacre du 1er janvier, selon un collectif [At least 210 dead in the 1 January massacre, says a collective], Voice of Africa, 4 February 2019. Regarding the Ogossagou massacre, the assessment certified by the United Nations (UN) cites "at least 157 victims": Mali: Ogossagou massacre could be a crime against humanity (UN), UN Info, 2 May 2019.

4. Data from UNHCR: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/country/mli>.

5. See, among others: B. Sangaré, Le centre du Mali: épicerie du djihadisme? [Central Mali: epicentre of jihadism?] Brussels, Note d'analyse du GRIP [GRIP Analytical Note], 2016; Institute for Security Studies, Mali's young 'jihadists': Fuelled by faith or circumstance?, Policy brief 89, Dakar, 2016; Interpeace, Au-delà de l'idéologie et de l'appât du gain: trajectoires des jeunes vers les nouvelles formes de violence en Côte d'Ivoire et au Mali [Beyond ideology and greed – trajectories of young people towards new forms of violence in Côte d'Ivoire and Mali], Abidjan, 2016; International Alert, They treat us all like jihadis, Policy brief, London, 2016; International Crisis Group, The social roots of jihadist violence in Burkina Faso's north, Africa Report 254, Dakar/Brussels, 2017; M. Pellerin, Les trajectoires de radicalisation religieuse au Sahel [The trajectories of religious radicalisation in the Sahel], Notes de l'IFRI [IFRI Notes], Paris, 2017; UN Development Programme (UNDP), Journey to extremism, New York, 2017; International Alert, If victims become perpetrators: Factors contributing to vulnerability and resilience to violent extremism in the central Sahel, London, 2018; International Federation of Human Rights, In central Mali, populations are caught between terrorism and counterterrorism, Paris, 2018; International Crisis Group, Speaking with the "bad guys": Toward dialogue with Central Mali's jihadists, Africa Report 276, Brussels/Dakar, 2019.

6. Interviews with several stakeholders and security experts in the region, January 2018–November 2019.

7. Notable exceptions to this are a number of studies which have explored this issue. They generally focus solely on the situation in Mali. See, in particular: G. Possémé-Rageau, Strategic alliance: The role of women in the implantation of jihadists in Mali, report for the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2013; Interpeace, Je marche avec les garçons. Trajectoires des jeunes vers la violence, miroir des dynamiques de genre à l'échelle de leur société? Une analyse locale des rôles de genre et des pressions sociales en Côte d'Ivoire et au Mali ["I walk with the boys". Trajectories of young people towards violence: mirror of the gender dynamics of their society? A local analysis of gender roles and social pressure in Côte d'Ivoire and Mali], Abidjan, 2017; E.J. Abatan, The role of women in west Africa's violent extremist groups, Institute for Security Studies, ISS Today, 12 October 2018; N. Rupesinghe and Y. Diall, Women and the Katiba Macina in Central Mali, NUPI Policy Brief, 13/2019, Oslo, 2019; Z. Gorman and G. Chauzal, Hand in hand: a study of insecurity and gender in Mali, SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security, 6/2019, Stockholm, 2019.

arms; and that understanding gender dynamics can ultimately be reduced to observations of women's behaviour. The empirical data collected for and discussed in this report challenge these received ideas.

Gaining a better understanding of the complex relationship between gender relations and violent extremism in the Sahel is not simply a response to an academic question. It could also facilitate a clearer understanding of the ideological differences and operational approaches of the various armed entities evolving in the Liptako-Gourma area, as well as help in the development of more relevant and nuanced responses to the challenges posed to men and women by violent extremism in the central Sahel. In addition, there is a human rights obligation,<sup>8</sup> in line with the most recent version of the United Nations (UN) Women, Peace and Security Agenda,<sup>9</sup> as well as an explicit recommendation in the UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism that calls on the 'international community' to, "Invest in gender-sensitive research and data collection on women's roles in violent extremism, including on identifying the drivers that lead women to join violent extremist groups, and on the impacts of counter-terrorism strategies on their lives, in order to develop targeted and evidence-based policy and programming responses."<sup>10</sup>

## 1.1 Research methodology

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### 1.1.1 Data sources

The investigation of the reciprocal relationship between gender relations and violent extremism in the central Sahel was operationalised by defining a number of specific research questions:

- A. ARE women involved in supporting violent extremism in the central Sahel?
- B. HOW are women involved in supporting violent extremism in the central Sahel?
- C. WHY are women involved in supporting violent extremism in the central Sahel?
- D. TO WHAT EXTENT do expectations linked to gender roles contribute to men's involvement in supporting violent extremism in the central Sahel?

To answer these questions, the research drew on a range of empirical data obtained by means of complementary methodologies with the aim of facilitating triangulation, reinforcing the robustness of the observations and maximising the capacity to make adjustments according to the context. Overall, the study had a relatively broad empirical base, comprising 339 respondents, divided up as follows:

- 12 mini surveys carried out in the six target communities (two per community, one for men, one for women), each comprising 15 respondents, totalling 180 people.

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8. UN Women, Gender mainstreaming: Principles, dimensions and priorities for PVE, New York, 2019.

9. See: UN Security Council Resolution 2467 (2019), which reaffirms the links between the Women, Peace and Security Agenda and combating terrorism and violent extremism.

10. UN General Assembly, Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism (A/70/674), New York, 2015, 53.b.



- 12 focus groups in the six target communities (two per community, one for men, one for women). Between five and 12 people took part in each focus group, totalling 85 people.
- 43 interviews with key informants within communities, including from the village authorities, religious leaders, leaders of women's organisations, members of the DSF (men and women) and men and women with close links to jihadists.
- 31 interviews with relevant stakeholders based in the national capitals of the three countries concerned, including representatives of civil society organisations (CSOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international organisations working on gender issues, religious leaders, security experts and researchers, both national and international.

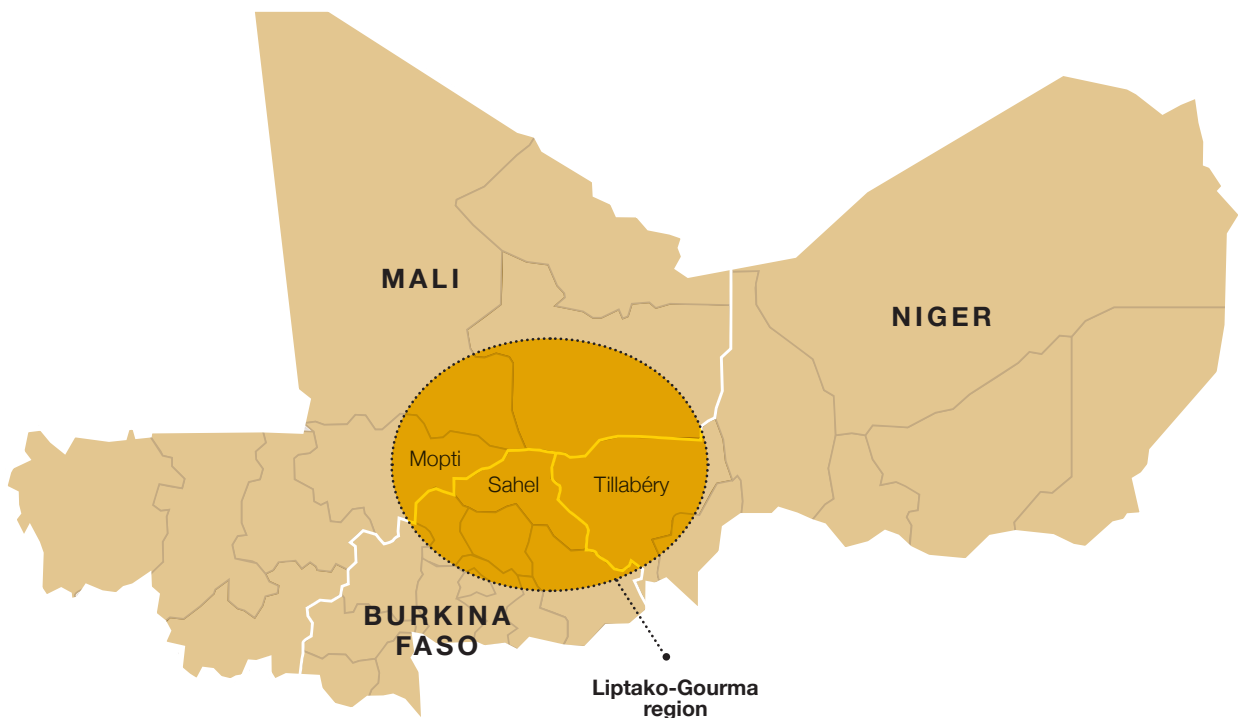
Most of the data collection fieldwork was carried out between October and December 2019. Research teams comprising a pair of national researchers, one man and one woman, with proven expertise in the regions of the central Sahel, approached the target communities in the villages. Meanwhile international researchers and members of International Alert conducted interviews in the capitals. In accordance with ethical research criteria, the anonymity and confidentiality of all respondents was guaranteed, to facilitate an experience that was as discreet and stress-free as possible.

### ***1.1.2 Selection of target communities***

Given the limitations of a relatively undeveloped literature, the research adopted an exploratory approach to the issue of the relationship between gender relations and violent extremism, based on analysis of heuristic cases. The work was therefore founded on the hypothesis that empirical manifestations of the presumed relationship between gender relations and violent extremism in the central Sahel would be most evident close to the areas with the highest incidence of the phenomenon. It would follow from this that if no significant relationship were to be observed between gender and violent extremism in places where violent extremism is most prevalent, its existence in other areas might reasonably also be ruled out.

Accordingly, the research focused particularly on Fulani communities and/or villages situated close to the bases of violent extremist groups in the central Sahel and that had had more or less direct exposure to the activities of these groups, either at the time of the research (in the zone of influence of a jihadist cell) or in the past (a village that had previously been occupied or a community that had fled due to violence to a camp for internally displaced people). On the basis of these criteria, and taking logistical and security considerations into account, the research team identified two target communities for the field research in each of the relevant regions (the Mopti region in Mali, the Sahel region in Burkina Faso and the Tillabéry region in Niger).

**Figure 2:** Map of research area



The villages selected were Siniré and Sampara (Mopti Cercle) in Mali; Arbinda (Soum Province, on the border with Mali) and Gorgadji (Séno Province, on the border with Niger) in Burkina Faso; and Torodi (Say Department, on the border with Burkina Faso) and Abala (Filingué Department, on the border with Mali) in Niger. Having a variety of target locations broadened the scope of the observations and allowed nuances to be evaluated and contexts compared. At the same time, the villages shared the common feature of being located in areas particularly affected by the actions of violent extremist groups and their selection was therefore especially relevant. It should be noted that:

- Siniré and Sampara are situated between Mopti and Konna, in the historical Macina region where the influence of Katiba Macina (led by Hamadoun Koufa and affiliated to GSIM) is most apparent. Furthermore, the two villages are often inaccessible for government representatives due to checkpoints set up by the jihadists.
- Arbinda and Gorgadji were badly affected by the conflicts linked to the presence of armed groups and violent extremists. Arbinda, in particular, was the site of several massacres during 2019. In early April the assassination of a community leader triggered armed clashes resulting in the deaths of 62 people. On 9 June, 19 people from Arbinda were killed during an attack carried out in broad daylight by unidentified armed men. On 4 October, suspected jihadists attacked the village of Madoudji, in Arbinda Department, leaving 23 local gold miners dead. On 24 December a failed jihadist attack on a military camp gave way to reprisals against civilians, leading to the deaths of 35 villagers, 31 of

them women.<sup>11</sup> Responsibility for these attacks was not systematically claimed, making it difficult to establish the identities and affiliations of those involved, unlike in Mali and Niger, where there was clearer evidence of the influence of GSIM and ISGS.

- Abala and Torodi are located within the ISGS zone of influence. Torodi has been affected by the activities of jihadist groups, and especially ISGS, since 2018. It is also the village where Pierluigi Macalli worked, an Italian Catholic missionary who was abducted by jihadists on 18 September 2018. Meanwhile, Abala and its surrounding area have been seen as being at the heart of ISGS influence and recruitment since 2016. Abala lies between the village of Sanam, a market where criminal and terrorist activities intersect,<sup>12</sup> and Inatès, a village targeted by a succession of attacks for which the extremists claim responsibility, including one on 10 December 2019, which resulted in the deaths of 70 soldiers, a figure that at the time represented the highest number of fatalities ever suffered by the Nigerien army.<sup>13</sup>

### **1.1.3 Constraints and limitations**

The concept of gender relations concerns the social construction of identities, norms and roles. Gender relations are involved in strengthening, reproducing and also modifying the economic, political and cultural determinants that shape society. It is therefore important to move away from any rigid approaches to analysing gender relations, particularly when investigating the origins and impact of material and regulatory differences linked to male and female roles in society. The qualitative methods favoured in this study are better adapted to capturing the nuances and interpreting the specific contextual factors required to understand gender relations. At the same time, the methodology adopted means that a certain degree of caution should be used when reading and interpreting the data presented in this report.

Despite the use of research protocols that aim to ensure the confidentiality and protection of the respondents' data, the highly sensitive nature of the topic, in a context where levels of mutual mistrust are often extremely high, could have affected the transparency of the exchanges and could have led to some information being withheld. Moreover, the national research teams were not always able to fulfil all the criteria for gender diversity, regional expertise and language skills and this may in some cases have undermined the trust of the respondents and introduced some bias into the exchanges. However, the triangulation of different data sources helps to gain a better understanding of different concerns and positions.<sup>14</sup>

The terminology used in the report was not employed systematically during the exchanges with the respondents. In the interests of transparency and adaptation, the interviewers often felt they had to reformulate the concepts in line with the vernacular expressions used by the communities. This was the case, in particular, with the concept of 'violent extremism'. Although it is absolutely central to the

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11. The security context in northern Burkina Faso is very unstable. To compensate for the very considerable problems with access, some of the respondents from Arbinda and Gorgadji were identified from among the internally displaced people in the Dori camps.

12. W. Assanvo et al, *Violent extremism, organised crime and local conflicts in Liptako-Gourma, West Africa Report 26*, Dakar, Institute for Security Studies, 2019.

13. A. Armstrong, *Behind the jihadist attack in Inates*, International Crisis Group online Q/A, 13 December 2019.

14. For example, a number of village leaders who didn't hesitate during the focus groups to condemn the alleged abusive behaviour of the defence and security forces (DSF) turned out during private conversations to be far more concerned about the violations perpetrated by violent extremist groups.

research, the term risks reproducing an analytical framework that is abstract and politically charged, losing sight of the extremely local nature of the phenomenon and leading to misunderstandings.<sup>15</sup> The terminology of violent extremism doesn't necessarily have an equivalent in the discourse and practices of those it seeks to describe. When talking about the myriad armed groups that could be described as violent and extremist, the communities in the Mopti region tend to use the carefully ambiguous expression 'people from the bush', which enables them to simultaneously distance themselves and withhold any value judgement. The same phrase is found in Burkina Faso, where the concept of jihadism is not well known. Meanwhile, in the region of Tillabéry, the terms used during interviews were 'mujahideen' and 'armed bandit', suggesting a relatively clear affinity with those being described.

The survey seeks to understand the respondents' perceptions and is thus based on the collection of self-declared information that, in the majority of cases, is impossible to verify independently. In addition, the sample selection of the respondents was not entirely random, since it was influenced by logistical constraints and the support available from contact people. Finally, it is important to highlight that, while the survey results offer an indicative insight into communities' perceptions of security, the methodology was not designed to provide a representative evaluation on a national, regional or even village scale.

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15. The concept of violent extremism has been the subject of criticism by numerous authors. See, among others: M. Sedgwick, The concept of radicalization as a source of confusion, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 22(4), 2010; C. Heath-Kelly, Counter-terrorism and the counterfactual: Producing the 'radicalisation' discourse and the UK PREVENT Strategy, *British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, 15(3), 2012; L. Lindeskilde, Radicalization, de-radicalization, counter-radicalization, in R. Jackson (ed.), *Routledge handbook of critical security studies*, London, Routledge, 2016. Even the UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism recognises the fundamental ambiguity of the concept, conceding that, "Violent extremism is a diverse phenomenon, without clear definition" (UN General Assembly, 2015, Op. cit., para. 2). The absence of a universally accepted definition runs the risk of the concept being abused with the intention of stigmatising political opponents, and the Sahel is particularly vulnerable to this type of authoritarian tendency. For the sake of simplicity, this report has retained the concept of violent extremism, which is used as a synonym for armed groups claiming to adhere to jihadism. Nevertheless, an awareness of the limitations noted here means it is important to use the term with critical vigilance and caution.

A family transports the millet harvest to the weekly market, Burkina Faso.  
PHOTO: © IRÈNE ABDOU/ALAMY



## 2. Gender relations in the central Sahel

An analysis of gender relations in the central Sahel is an essential first step towards gaining a better understanding of the causes and measuring the consequences of the rise of violent extremism in the region. The stigmatisation evident in the ‘obscurantist’ media language of the violent extremist groups, especially on the subject of women’s rights and roles, should not make us forget the fact that many societies in the central Sahel have long been governed by a very oppressive patriarchal system. Relations between genders have been established against a cultural background in which greater value is placed on differences in roles and ranks than on equal rights. This chapter therefore seeks to provide an overview of gender relations in different domains of society in the region.



## 2.1 Institutions and structural violence

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### 2.1.1 Rights and institutions

All the countries of the central Sahel have ratified the international legal instruments that recognise equality between men and women, as well as the right not to be discriminated against on the ground of gender. Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger are parties to the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Mali and Burkina Faso have also ratified the Maputo Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa. Niger has signed the Protocol, but hasn't ratified it. However, many obstacles remain to the effective transposition of these provisions into national legislation and their implementation.

The area that presents the most difficulties is probably the regulation of relations within families. To some extent this can be explained by the difficulties of regulating an area considered to be part of the private sphere. In addition, it is due to a hardening of positions fuelled by religious figures who claim to be resisting the domination of legal norms imported from the west. The poor reach of state institutions across the region serves to compound the striking discrepancy between legal norms and social norms and practices on the ground.

In Mali the Family Code was adopted in 1987. It draws largely on French civil law and advocates gender equality, with the notable exception of inheritance rights. In 2009 the government tried to amend some of the Code's provisions, with the ultimate aim of bringing Malian law into line with international law. The process prompted strong social opposition stoked by certain religious leaders, including the Salafist imam, Mahmoud Dicko, who was then head of the High Islamic Council of Mali. Accusing the law of not complying with Islamic precepts and Malian culture, the opposition persuaded the President of Mali to abandon the reform process.<sup>16</sup>

In Burkina Faso, the Family Code dates from 1989. As in Mali, it is based on the principle of equal rights and responsibilities for men and women. However, there is a divergence between this ambition and some of the provisions of the Code, including those relating to access to inheritance, property and marriage. In the context of the democratic transition initiated in 2015, civil society representatives called on the government to revise the Code to make it conform more closely to international law. The revision process began in 2019, but the Federation of Islamic Associations of Burkina Faso (FAIB) immediately protested against both the terms and the objectives of this process.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the impact of this opposition from Islamic organisations may be different from that in Mali and Niger as, unlike these countries where virtually the whole population is Muslim, around 40% of Burkinabes identify themselves as Christians or animists.

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16. Z. Gorman and G. Chauzal, 2019, Op. cit.

17. Relecture du Code des personnes et de la famille : La FAIB déplore "le fait qu'elle n'ait été ni impliquée ni consultée" [Revision of the Family Code: the FAIB regrets that "it was not involved or consulted"], LeFaso.net, 24 June 2019.

Niger doesn't actually have a Family Code. On two occasions, in 1975 and 2010, attempts to draft one were abandoned due to very strong opposition from numerous Islamic organisations to the promotion of gender equality and the bans on underage marriage and the repudiation of wives. Some religious leaders went so far as to issue fatwas for the excommunication of the political leaders who gave their support to the law. Consequently, the draft law was eventually withdrawn. According to a representative of the Nigerien National Commission on Human Rights and Fundamental Liberties, "The institutions of the patriarchy are very powerful in Niger and the politicians don't dare to oppose them."<sup>18</sup>

Despite the resistance generated by the attempts to adopt family codes that are human rights compliant, the Sahel countries, often owing to encouragement from international partners, have recently established positive discrimination measures that aim to promote women in political leadership roles. Laws adopted in Mali (2015), Burkina Faso (in 2009 and undergoing revision since 2018) and Niger (in 2008 and updated in 2018) stipulate that at least 25 to 30% of appointments and elective positions must be reserved for women. However, inclusion on electoral lists is far from a guarantee of election and this attempt to change the norm is coming up against major economic, social and cultural barriers that continue to marginalise the role of Sahelian women in decision-making processes.

In Mali, women elected to the National Assembly comprise 14 of the 147 deputies (fewer than 10%) and the government appointed in May 2019 included eight women out of a total of 36 ministers. In Burkina Faso, 17 of the 127 members of the National Assembly are women (13%) and, of the 34 ministers, only six are women. In Niger there are 29 women among the 171 elected members of the National Assembly (17%), but only seven of the 43 ministers in the government are women. The marginalisation of women in decision-making bodies outside the capitals and major urban centres is all the more acute, especially in Mali and Niger. In these two countries none of the regional governor posts are occupied by women, while in Burkina Faso just four of the 13 regions have female governors.

The lower administrative tiers are difficult to compare, but for illustrative purposes it is worth noting that in Mali only 26 of the 703 communes have at least one woman on their communal councils; in Burkina Faso, just 41 of the 351 prefectures are headed by women and in Niger there are only two departments out of a total of 64 that are led by women. The central Sahel regions are no exception to this. On the contrary, in fact, it is here that the level of participation by women in formal decision-making bodies is at its lowest.

### ***2.1.2 Social customs and practices***

Gender relations in the Sahel are not only governed by positive laws, with questionable effectiveness in terms of reducing discrimination. In addition, the importance cannot be underestimated of customary laws and social norms that are often just as discriminatory against women. They have a profound influence on legitimising ideological and cultural gender inequality and undermine the relevance of the ostensibly modern legal provisions in a framework supposed to be characterised by legal pluralism.

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18. Interview with a member of the Nigerien National Commission on Human Rights and Fundamental Liberties, Niamey.



Access to inheritance is a particularly sensitive issue. Although positive laws establish the principle of equality in the way inheritance is divided among the beneficiaries, a deeply rooted custom in many communities in the central Sahel stipulates that the portion of the inheritance that goes to men should be twice that which goes to women, thus based on a ratio of two thirds for men and one third for women. This practice, which claims to draw on Islamic law, appears to be inescapable in the Fulani region of the central Sahel.<sup>19</sup> For example, Mali was ruled to be in violation of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights for its tolerance of discrimination in relation to inheritance<sup>20</sup> and Niger has adopted reservations to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, specifically regarding equality of inheritance rights. Similarly, in Burkina Faso discrimination against women in access to inheritance is common practice, despite being formally prohibited by law.<sup>21</sup>

Property law is another area affected by discriminatory practices in relation to women, especially as regards land ownership. Although the land ownership laws and agricultural policy in the three countries advocate equal rights in access to land, practices in the central Sahel strongly discourage land ownership for women. They have to work the land granted to them by men, but with little hope of purchasing it, even if they have the financial means to do so. This is explained locally by the need to preserve the integrity of family property, which passes direct down the male line. In an environment where there are no real alternatives to agricultural and pastoral activities, this practice only exacerbates women's vulnerability.<sup>22</sup>

Obstacles have also been identified in girls' access to education.<sup>23</sup> All the countries of the Sahel have measures to promote access to education for girls and to encourage them to stay at school. However, these efforts often encounter resistance from parents, especially in rural areas. They are suspicious of possible promiscuity in schools and dormitories.<sup>24</sup> It is therefore normal for girls to be withdrawn from school when they reach puberty, before their marriage prospects are damaged by the risk of encounters with their male peers and their advancing age.<sup>25</sup> For many families, marriage continues to represent the pinnacle of social success for girls and any deviation from this path risks stigmatising the unmarried girl and imposing an additional economic burden on her family, which must then continue to support her.<sup>26</sup> Even though the differences in access to primary school are less explicit, very few Sahelian girls have the opportunity to finish school, especially in the rural areas of Liptako-Gourma.

Girls dropping out of school early is inextricably linked to the phenomenon of early marriage. Niger ranks highest in the world for child marriage, with 76% of girls being married before they reach adulthood.

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19. This information was confirmed in a number of interviews and focus groups with experts and people from the regions concerned.

20. Z. Gorman and G. Chauzal, 2019, Op. cit.

21. Interview with the director (male) of a national NGO, Ouagadougou.

22. On this topic see, among others: Oxfam, Food crisis, gender and resilience in the Sahel: Lessons from the 2012 crisis in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, Oxfam Research Report, Oxford, 2014.

23. Interviews with heads of human rights and women's rights organisations, Bamako, Ouagadougou and Niamey. The information was subsequently confirmed by several interviews and focus groups with experts and people from the regions concerned.

24. Interviews with experts in human rights and security, Niamey and Ouagadougou.

25. According to the World Bank, school drop-out among girls in Africa is influenced by a number of factors, including poor economic situations; conflict; the practice of early marriage; and the inflexibility of the education system in the Francophone countries. These factors, which are very prevalent in the Sahel countries, mean that the chances for girls over the age of 15 to pursue their education are reduced by between 11% and 22% compared with boys. See: K. Inoue, E. di Gropello, Y. Taylor and J. Gresham, Out-of-school youth in Sub-Saharan Africa. A policy perspective, World Bank, Washington DC, 2015.

26. See: C. Arnaud, Jeunesses sahéliennes: dynamiques d'exclusion, moyens d'insertion [Sahelian youth: dynamics of exclusion, means of integration], Notes Techniques de l'AFD 15 [Technical reports] Paris, French Development Agency, 2016; Interpeace, 2017, Op. cit.

This phenomenon is also widespread throughout the region where, as a result, the fertility rate is the highest in the world.<sup>27</sup> In rural areas, girls usually marry between the ages of 12 and 14, when they reach puberty. Sometimes they are promised in marriage from babyhood, typically to a cousin, a neighbour or a member of the extended family.<sup>28</sup> In a context where the patriarchy and birthright permeate social hierarchies, especially in the Liptako-Gourma, girls have very little power to influence a decision that will determine their whole lives.

Abundant evidence of such cases exists. According to people interviewed for this report, “It is the parents who make the decisions about marriage for girls”,<sup>29</sup> or more specifically, “It is the men of the family who make the decisions about marriage.”<sup>30</sup> They further comment that, “Parents say [the girl] must marry someone she doesn’t like in view of an alliance between the families”,<sup>31</sup> and this sometimes happens “... without the couple even being aware of it. This is a practice found in the bush.”<sup>32</sup> Early marriages are thus in fact forced marriages. However, some observers consider that these customs are increasingly out of step with the practices of young people, both men and women, who are resistant to arranged marriages, particularly in urban areas and educated circles.<sup>33</sup>

Parental authority is not the only limit to freedom of marriage. Fulani society is very hierarchical and rigid social taboos discourage inter-caste marriage, to ensure that social reproduction conforms to the established order. Furthermore, the payment of the bride price may be a considerable financial barrier. In accordance with a deeply rooted customary law, the prospective marriage candidate must be in a position to demonstrate his financial independence in order to obtain the consent of his future wife’s family (to whom the bride price is usually paid). Previously symbolic, the cost of the bride price has risen progressively due to changing customs and competition and can now easily reach considerable sums: 300-400,000 CFA francs (XOF) in Mali and Burkina Faso and up to 1 million CFA francs (XOF) in Niger.<sup>34</sup>

Such figures may exceed the annual income of a young Sahelian and, according to numerous sources, may represent a major barrier to the union of two young people.<sup>35</sup> While migration or criminal activities offer young people tempting opportunities to amass sufficient resources quickly to enable them to marry,<sup>36</sup> it tends to be older men who are able to marshal the necessary resources to win the hand of the youngest girls who are the most prized. This incentive structure therefore ends up encouraging marriages between wealthy older men and young girls who are often taken as second or third wives. The interests of adult men take precedence over those of the couple, reinforcing the power imbalance in gender relations within the household itself. In addition, the substantial investment represented by the payment of the bride price shapes the reciprocal expectations of husband and wife and contributes to the objectification of the woman within the couple: “It’s as though your husband owns you.”<sup>37</sup>

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27. Source: <https://data.unicef.org>

28. This information was confirmed in various interviews with civil society representatives in the regions of the central Sahel.

29. Focus group and interviews, Arbinda.

30. Interview with a religious leader (male), Gorgadji.

31. Focus group, Siniré.

32. Focus group, Torodi. A similar point of view was expressed during an interview with a religious leader in Arbinda.

33. This opinion was reiterated in several interviews and focus groups with men and women in the regions concerned.

34. This information was confirmed by numerous interviews and focus groups with experts and people from the regions concerned.

35. This information was confirmed by numerous interviews and focus groups with experts and people from the regions concerned.

36. Focus group, Siniré.

37. Interview with a Malian expert (female) on gender issues, Bamako.

These considerations suggest that domestic violence is extremely widespread in the Sahel, including in the regions of Liptako-Gourma. Several observers believe it is the most frequently occurring type of GBV in the Sahelian countries.<sup>38</sup> Domestic violence comes in many forms and typically includes: psychological violence, such as the threat of assault and repudiation; emotional violence, such as systematic belittling; and physical violence, including beating, hitting, rape and sometimes even murder. Despite its large-scale prevalence, domestic violence remains very difficult to quantify and document because it is subject to taboo and normalisation. Although apparently contradictory, together these social attitudes contribute to erasing the issue of domestic violence from public debate.

Organisations working on gender issues in the region have made the following observations: “Hitting your wife is a normal practice that everyone accepts, even the wife’s parents.”<sup>39</sup> “Men raping women who are subordinate, such as domestic workers, minors, slaves and even their own wives, is deeply rooted in the traditional way of life.”<sup>40</sup> “Domestic rape is a concept that is poorly understood because marriage is seen as implying complete submission on the part of the wife, without need for any additional consent.”<sup>41</sup> “For us, rape within the home is an everyday occurrence, so much so that is not described as rape. If you go out and say your husband raped you, the community will lynch you: ‘What are you in his house for otherwise?’.”<sup>42</sup> This helps to explain why Mali and Niger are struggling to adopt laws to criminalise domestic violence. Meanwhile, Burkina Faso did adopt a domestic violence law during the transition in 2015 but its implementation has encountered significant resistance.

## 2.2 Traditional roles and social expectations among the Fulanis of the central Sahel

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### 2.2.1 *The male paradigm*

In the Fulani areas of the central Sahel, an ideal of masculinity shapes the social norms and expectations of both men and women and significant pressure is exerted on men to conform to the ideal. A ‘real man’ is essentially defined by his ability to fulfil three complementary roles that comprise the male paradigm: head of the family, breadwinner and protector. Furthermore, gender relations and ideals resonate with other criteria in the social hierarchy. In particular, the male paradigm is based on parameters of nobility and birthright, which contribute to the strong gender polarisation found in the Fulani communities of the central Sahel.

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38. Interviews with NGOs, CSOs and experts working on gender, conducted in Bamako, Ouagadougou and Niamey. Some respondents also mentioned the significance of female genital mutilation. However, these practices currently seem to be in decline in the region and they are now localised in certain pockets a long way from Liptako-Gourma, such as in southwestern Burkina Faso and the regions of Kayes and Sikasso in Mali. In Niger the prevalence of FGM is low.

39. Interview with a Malian expert (female) on gender issues, Bamako.

40. Interview with a Malian human rights expert (male), Bamako.

41. Interview with a Nigerien human rights expert (male), Niamey.

42. Interview with a Burkinabe expert (female) on gender issues, Ouagadougou.

The head of the family is the founder of a household. This emerged very clearly from both the men's and the women's focus groups. "A good man must first and foremost start a family."<sup>43</sup> "A real man is married and has a wife and children."<sup>44</sup> The role of head of the family is defined by the fact that he is no longer dependent on his parents and instead has dependants of his own – wives and children – and the number of these is a sign of prestige. This aspect of the male paradigm draws a clear distinction with youth, which is consigned to the category of childhood. Instead the hierarchies are reinforced that arise from ideals of nobility and birthright and these converge to accentuate the figure of the patriarch.

The head of the family should demonstrate authority over and responsibility for the individuals who are dependent on him. Thus, while it is the wife's role to manage the children's upbringing and education, it is the head of the family who is ultimately responsible for the moral conduct of both his children and his wives. In this way, the wife remains an infantilised figure whose parents are simply replaced by her husband. It is the job of the head of the family to teach his wives and children to understand and respect the social and religious norms, to avoid 'immorality' and any degeneration and corruption of the traditional way of life. A man who doesn't manage to discipline his wife "is not a real man",<sup>45</sup> "he is a scoundrel – more like a drug addict".<sup>46</sup> At the same time, the unconditional obedience traditionally expected of young men in relation to their elders – father, grandfather, uncles and brothers – fuels growing tensions due to a disparity with the modern ideal of individual freedom.



A Fulani herdsman tends to his cattle, Mali. PHOTO: © MAURICIO ABREU/ALAMY

43. Focus group (men), Gorgadji.

44. Focus group (women), Arbinda. Interviews and focus groups throughout the region expressed similar points of view.

45. Focus group (men), Abala.

46. Focus group (men), Gorgadji



A man's worth is also measured by his ability to provide for his family's material needs, particularly in terms of food, clothing and housing.<sup>47</sup> This doesn't necessarily mean that perceived masculinity increases in proportion with the flaunting of wealth and luxury. A successful man, a good man, doesn't necessarily have to be rich. However, it is felt that a man's dignity and integrity is undermined if he lacks the means of subsistence. Material need is ascribed not so much to adverse circumstances as to a sort of moral decadence: "An unemployed man is seen as good for nothing, someone who is unable to satisfy his family."<sup>48</sup> Thus living in poverty makes it difficult to express masculinity. Several focus groups substantiate the widespread perception that social instability is a threat to men's dignity<sup>49</sup> and that, for example, "Being displaced means a loss of dignity for men because they are forced to beg in order to eat."<sup>50</sup>

On the basis of these observations, it is not unreasonable to suggest that for some Fulanis in the central Sahel it may be less stigmatising to be a jihadist than to be unemployed. It is interesting to note that the same value judgements are not applied to women, whose affluence or poverty is seen as a reflection of the man's position. Thus, in some areas the masculine ideal is also expressed in terms of the man's ability to protect his wife from the arduous need to work. This is a view that appears to be shared by some women: "The man must go out and look for a way to earn for his family and leave his wife at home."<sup>51</sup> This resonates with the paradigm of social success of the Fulani aristocratic elite, whereby a man's resources allow his wife to be treated like a queen. The masculine ideal thus reflects the dominant ideals of Fulani society, a factor likely to be a source of frustration in less affluent communities where the social barriers inhibit the possibility of appearing as 'a real man'.

The social standards of masculinity are also defined by how ready men are to ensure the protection of their loved ones, without exhibiting fear or hesitation or retreating in the face of danger: "A man provides protection and has no fear of danger. If he does that, he's fulfilling his role."<sup>52</sup> It is worth noting that this valuing of men's martial skills also resonates with the aristocratic ethic and may be interpreted as a sign of nobility among the communities of the central Sahel: "During the Dina period, [bearing arms] was a sign of respect and esteem."<sup>53</sup> The same concept is also expressed in opposition to the stereotypical female paradigm: "Everyone is fleeing at the moment. I think leaving is also a sign of cowardice: the men of today have turned into women."<sup>54</sup> In other words, the accentuation of certain male attributes results in women being defined in opposition to ideals not only of birthright, as mentioned above, but also of nobility, and this has repercussions on social hierarchies.

Taking up arms is considered to be legitimate particularly when it comes to someone defending their community and their family: "Anyone who refuses to fight to protect the community shouldn't be seen as a man: he is a coward."<sup>55</sup> This implies a duty specifically to protect women, whose vulnerability and passivity are not questioned. It is an opinion that appears to be shared by both men and women. Even

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47. This information was confirmed by numerous interviews and focus groups in all the regions concerned.

48. Interview with the director (male) of a Malian NGO, Bamako.

49. Focus group (men), Torodi, and focus group (women), Gorgadji.

50. Focus group (men), Siniré.

51. Focus group (women), Siniré. However, this point of view is not necessarily shared throughout the region and its scope must thus be qualified.

52. Interview with the director of a Burkinabe NGO, an expert in radicalisation and an individual from the Sahel region, Ouagadougou.

53. Focus group (men), Sampara.

54. Interview with a traditional leader (male), Arbinda. However, it should be noted that the men of the region who were interviewed in focus groups (in Arbinda and in Gorgadji) seemed to feel torn when confronted with the option of fleeing and displacement – they describe it as a necessity in the face of growing danger, but also as a threat to their male dignity, especially when it involves leaving their wives behind in the village.

55. Focus group (men), Gorgadji.

those who are the most reluctant to justify the use of violence accept armed vengeance as legitimate when it is a matter of avenging major wrongs or humiliations suffered by a female relative, such as arbitrary arrest, rape, abduction or murder.<sup>56</sup>

Accordingly, men who prove their courage by taking a stand as protectors of their community, and especially of women, can become models of masculinity and nobility who arouse admiration in both women and men: “Men who have taken up arms are seen as brave and valiant. They have a lot of success with women. There is a village where the women sing songs in praise of them.”<sup>57</sup> In Mali, it appears that the duty of men to protect the community is ultimately legitimised by religious arguments that are becoming increasingly audible, probably because of the specific context of the data collection: “We [women] see [those who take up arms] as good people, particularly if it’s to fight in the name of religion. They are men of faith who defend our religion.”<sup>58</sup>

It is notable that several communities highlighted the duty of protection in response to abuses perpetrated, in particular, by the DSF of the respective countries, as well as by self-defence militias.<sup>59</sup> These acts were seen as especially humiliating for men, revealing them to be unable to fulfil their duty of protection. They also provoked a strong desire for vengeance that the violent extremist groups have adroitly manipulated in their recruitment strategies. According to one local observer: “The DSF have long been seen as enemies... When the young people hear that those people [DSF], who they thought were so strong, are the ones on the run, they want to be part of that.”<sup>60</sup>

### **2.2.2 The female paradigm**

Among the Fulanis of the central Sahel, women must conform to a traditional social order that prescribes obedience and modesty. A respectable woman is one who shows she is able to control herself and to fulfil her obligations with dedication and discipline. The models provided for girls as they are growing up are intended to equip them for this role. Thus, for a Fulani woman from Liptako-Gourma, submission to men – first her father and then her husband – might be more a sign of success than of oppression. This position may be challenged in urban areas and educated circles, but it is widely viewed as normal in rural areas.

Within the existing social order in the central Sahel, it is hard to give women real power to act and make decisions. Women are instead valued for their ability to support and follow those who are considered to hold these powers – that is, men. Men’s responsibility towards women thus goes hand in hand with women’s duty of obedience towards men: first their fathers, then their husbands. The terms used

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56. Focus groups (men and women) Abala, Torodi and Arbinda; interviews, Siniéré, Bamako and Ouagadougou. However, the village mini surveys reflect a wider diversity of opinions. While in Niger the majority of respondents believe it is legitimate for a man to use violence to avenge a wrong committed against the honour of a female relative (wife, daughter or mother), the Malian and Burkinabe respondents seem less accepting of this view. In the case of Mali, this divergence of opinion is explained by the focus group respondents in terms of the religious duty to refrain from seeking revenge and to delegate the settling of disputes to the authorities if they apply Sharia law.

57. Focus group (men), Sampara.

58. Focus group (women), Siniéré. Similar comments were expressed in other focus groups held in Mali.

59. Focus groups (men) Abala and Arbinda; interviews, Ouagadougou and Bamako. This point echoes observations made in other reports. See, in particular: International Alert, 2018, Op. cit.

60. Interview with the director of a Burkinabe NGO, an expert in radicalisation and an individual from the Sahel region, Ouagadougou.

locally reflect this image of women as being ‘trained’ for docile inferiority. “We say that women are big children.”<sup>61</sup> “A woman is like a filly or a mare, you have to look after her.”<sup>62</sup> “The Fulani word *rimaybé*, meaning ‘slave’, can also be used to describe women in general.”<sup>63</sup>

The duty of obedience for women is articulated at all levels. “A woman should always consult her husband before making any decision. In addition, she should be faithful, submissive and respectful.”<sup>64</sup> “A woman should listen to her husband – she should do what he wants.”<sup>65</sup> “A woman should sit and be silent, she should respect what [her husband] says and his orders.”<sup>66</sup> “She should obey him, do what he asks and not do what he tells her not to do. When you choose to live with someone you choose to accept everything.”<sup>67</sup>

Furthermore, a religious argument is often used to justify women’s duty of obedience to their husbands: “Women must do what God said: they must submit to their divine duties and submit to their husbands.”<sup>68</sup> At most, a woman should advise her husband. However, the decisions he eventually makes affect her as though they were her own. “According to custom, a woman doesn’t have a religion, she must follow her husband’s religion.”<sup>69</sup> “A woman must obey her husband even if she thinks his decisions are bad decisions.”<sup>70</sup>

According to the views of both men and women locally, a woman’s place in the societies of the central Sahel is in the home. This reflects the elite ethic of noblewomen in Fulani tradition.<sup>71</sup> Household tasks are therefore an integral part of the female paradigm and are among the activities deemed appropriate for a respectable woman. These include “grinding grain, cleaning the home and doing the laundry”;<sup>72</sup> “cooking in the home, going to fetch water, going to fetch firewood for the home, sweeping the yard, making tea for her husband and looking after the house”<sup>73</sup> and managing her children’s upbringing and education.

While household chores are considered rewarding, work outside the home may be seen as onerous and inappropriate for women. This was expressed particularly strongly by the Nigerien respondents who had no hesitation in describing work in the fields or other physical labour as ‘drudgery’,<sup>74</sup> as coarse and demeaning tasks that should only be done by men. Only in cases of extreme necessity may exceptions be tolerated, such as in the event of the absence, sickness or death of the husband. Yet the extreme destitution of many households in the central Sahel often means that women in the poorest areas have to contribute to the family’s subsistence by means of various income-generating activities. However, these stem from women’s wish to fulfil their social obligations towards their husbands and children rather than from their desire for emancipation. Fundamentally, paid work for women is still likely to lead to tensions with the ideal and elite model of femininity that permeates Fulani culture in the central Sahel.

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61. Interview with a human rights expert (male), Niamey.
  62. Interview with a traditional leader (female), Arbinda.
  63. Interview with the Fulani director (female) of an NGO, Bamako.
  64. Focus group (men), Gorgadji.
  65. Focus group (men), Arbinda.
  66. Focus group (women), Sampara.
  67. Focus group (women), Siniré.
  68. Such comments were frequently made in conversations with all the religious leaders in the region.
  69. Focus group (women), Gorgadji.
  70. Interview with a community leader (male), Gorgadji.
  71. Interview with a Fulani noblewoman, Bamako.
  72. Interview with a female leader, Gorgadji.
  73. Focus group (woman) and interviews, Arbinda.
  74. Focus groups (men and women), Torodi and Abala.



Outside the home, there is a great deal of social pressure on women to demonstrate modesty and humility. This can be seen in the requirements around dress and escorts: “A woman doesn’t have the right to reveal certain parts of her body or to be with men, particularly if her husband is not present.”<sup>75</sup> A respectable woman should not walk with a man who is not her guardian, that is, a member of her family or her husband. Wearing the veil is now considered obligatory, despite the fact that there are questions about the origins of this practice. It is strongly encouraged by various religious leaders, although its place in local tradition is not universally recognised. There is disagreement about the specific details of how this obligation should be fulfilled, although according to various respondents, both male and female, the full veil appears to be preferable. The full veil is considered to be a sign of modesty and religiousness, but also of social status because it is only really practical attire for women who are in a position not to have to work (thus once more reproducing social hierarchies in the context of gender-based norms). On the other hand, popular customs and traditional Sufi religiousness demonstrate flexibility regarding the admissible models of modesty. Opinions differ on the issue of whether such flexibility should be interpreted as a lamentable deterioration of morals or as proof of pragmatism and modernisation.

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75. Interview with a Sufi religious leader (male), Arbinda.



### 3. Gender relations as a target for violent extremist groups

The subjugation of women to new norms and power relations has often been a crucial element, both physically and symbolically, in the development of political structures. The creation myths of the west are full of such examples, from the Trojan War to the Rape of the Sabine Women.

Africa and the Sahel are no exception. Across the continent, the abduction and remarriage of the wives of the vanquished by the victors has been a common practice during conflicts, as well as being a feature in processes of integration, alliance and reconstruction.<sup>76</sup> There is clear evidence of this in the history of the Sahel, where the end of the Askia Dynasty in 1591 was concluded by the matrimonial policies of the Moroccan conquerors who married the Songhai women to gain a foothold in the region and establish their political power. In more recent times, the (provisional) end to the inter-tribal conflict following the Tuareg rebellion of the 1990s in Mali was marked by the remarriage of the wife of rebel commander Elhajj Gamou to his rival, Iyad Ag Ghali (now leader of GSIM), by way of compensation or war booty, consecrating the new power relations.<sup>77</sup>

Similarly, matrimonial policies without doubt form part of the repertoire of strategies employed by the violent extremist groups seeking to establish themselves in the region. Following the example of Algerian al-Qaeda leader, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, who gained the support of certain Malian Arab tribes by marrying locally,<sup>78</sup> other leaders of violent extremist groups in the central Sahel have taken women from tribes in the areas where they were seeking to gain a foothold. According to various sources, this applies particularly to the case of Hamadoun Koufa, leader of the Katiba Macina, affiliated to GSIM, and Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, leader of ISGS.<sup>79</sup>

It is therefore not really surprising that the violent extremist groups active in the central Sahel seem to attach such importance to controlling women. This control is exercised by claiming power over life and death, but also by strictly regulating the minutiae of women's everyday lives and behaviour. Part of this is reconfiguring the relationships and rules governing marriage. The subjugation of women is thus part of a strategy to project a 'shadow governance' as a visible manifestation of a new order being established in the contested areas.<sup>80</sup> Despite the examples of brutality reported in the media, this emerging order is not rejected outright by the local communities, including women. This observation calls for an in-depth analysis of the way in which 'jihadist governance',<sup>81</sup> that is the forms of control introduced by violent extremist groups in the areas under their influence, may resonate with the aspirations and concerns of the communities of the central Sahel. This chapter seeks to present just such an analysis at a time when women appear to be the primary targets for acts of violence as well as governance by violent extremist groups.

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76. G. Possémé-Rageau, 2013, Op. cit.

77. B. Lecocq, *Disputed desert: Decolonization, competing nationalisms and Tuareg rebellions in Mali*, Leiden, Brill, 2010.

78. L. Ould Salem, *Le Ben Laden du Sahara. Sur les traces du jihadiste Mokhtar Belmokhtar* [The Bin Laden of the Sahara. On the traces of jihadist Mokhtar Belmokhtar], Paris, La Martinière, 2014.

79. Interviews with specialists and people from the regions of Mopti and Tillabéry, conducted in Bamako and Niamey. This theory is borne out by the fact that one of Koufa's wives is the ex-wife of a village chief hostile to Koufa whom Koufa had killed so he could then marry his wife.

80. N. Rupesinghe and Y. Diall, 2019, Op. cit. On the concept of 'shadow governance' in Africa, see W. Reno, *Corruption and state politics in Sierra Leone*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

81. On the concept of 'jihadist governance', see B. Lia, *Understanding Jihadi proto-states*, in *Perspectives on terrorism*, 9(4), 2015.

## 3.1 Targets of violence

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### 3.1.1 Attacks

Men, rather than women, appear to be the main targets of attacks perpetrated by the different armed actors throughout the Sahel, including violent extremist groups. Women in the region tend instead to be indirect victims and are not generally the focus of systematic campaigns of military aggression or armed violence. This was the opinion of the vast majority of the stakeholders, men and women, consulted during the course of this research.

Women seem overall to share the same views of security as the men and their communities. In this respect, the communities for the most part express particular concerns about the threat posed by the self-defence groups and ethnically based militias, including the Dozos in Mali, the Koglweogo in Burkina Faso and the Tuaregs in Niger.<sup>82</sup> A Burkinabe public figure expressed it very clearly: “For us, the main threat comes from the self-defence groups. Our great fear is these Koglweogo groups. The guys from the bush, they only kill DSF collaborators. The DSF kill people they suspect of being with the guys from the bush. But the Koglweogo self-defence groups kill everyone.”<sup>83</sup>

Similarly, in Mali you hear that, “It’s the inter-community conflict that threatens the safety of the village. We’re scared of the Dozos who attack Fulani villages. If they attack, the women get killed and raped.”<sup>84</sup> It is interesting to note that communities do sometimes single out the DSF as such, but they are primarily accused of a lack of impartiality and ethno-centrism due to their alleged tolerance of or complicity with the self-defence militias. “Today the main threats to the security of the village or the community come from bandits and Dozo hunting groups. [...] The Malian security forces are also a threat to community safety because they think ‘Fulani’ is the same thing as people from the bush.”<sup>85</sup> “The Fulanis who are accused [by the DSF] are innocent. The current regime has achieved a lot for other groups, but the Fulanis haven’t benefited.”<sup>86</sup>

Focusing specifically on the victimisation of women, the mini surveys carried out in the villages tend to reflect the same concerns. Among the main sources of violence and aggression against women in Mali and Niger, the self-defence militias are predominant. They also play a significant role in Burkina Faso, albeit there violent extremist groups are seen as a greater threat. In contrast, these are only seen as a marginal threat in Mali and Niger. In line with these results, the great majority of respondents in Mali and Niger, both men and women, consider that the violent extremist groups help to protect women’s dignity and security, whereas the view of respondents in Burkina Faso is diametrically opposed to this.

The fact that perceptions in Burkina Faso are so different may be explained by the memory of recent abuses that specifically targeted women, something that was not mentioned in other countries. Violent

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82. This information was confirmed in numerous interviews and focus groups throughout the region.

83. Interview with a community leader (male), Arbinda.

84. Interview with a public figure (female), Mopti region.

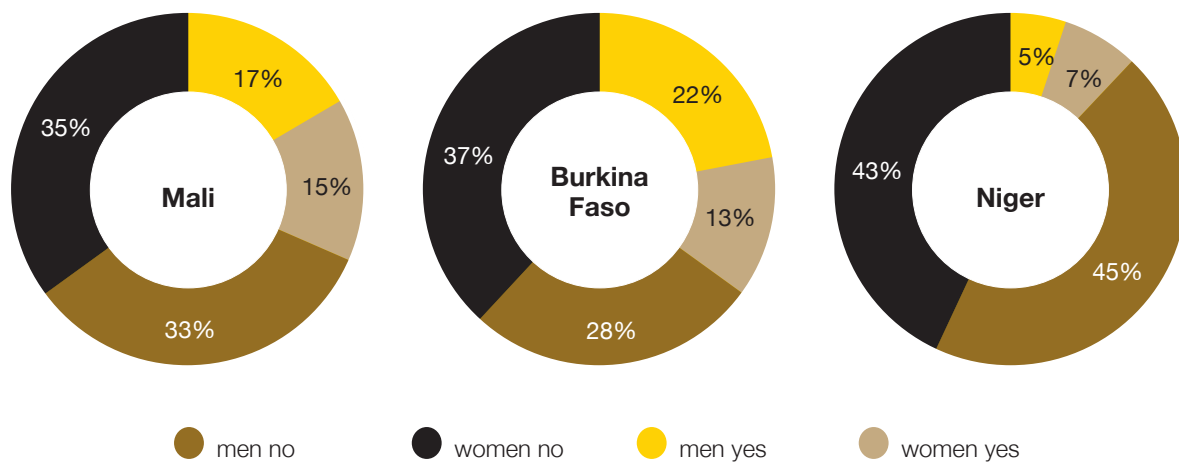
85. Interview with a public figure (male), Sampara.

86. Focus group (men), Abala.

extremist groups have been identified as the assumed perpetrators, along with the Koglweogo self-defence militias.<sup>87</sup> The attack that took place on 24 December 2019 in the village of Arbinda provides a vivid illustration: following a failed attack on a military camp by what were assumed to be jihadists, the attackers turned on the civilian population and summarily executed 35 villagers, 31 of whom were women.<sup>88</sup> Although not directly linked to the above-mentioned opinions, since it took place after the data collection phase, this event corroborates the impression that the Burkinabe situation is a special case in the context of the conflicts in the central Sahel. According to consolidated political theories,<sup>89</sup> the hypothesis might be put forward that violence against civilians, including women, is inversely proportional to the control exercised by the armed actors in the area. In a contested area like the Burkinabe Sahel, the victimisation of civilians appears to be part of a deliberate strategy of intimidation aimed at progressively gaining a foothold. In contrast, in the Malian Macina region, and perhaps also in the north of the Tillabéry region, the considerable control exercised by the violent extremist groups reduces the need for and legitimacy of such abuses.

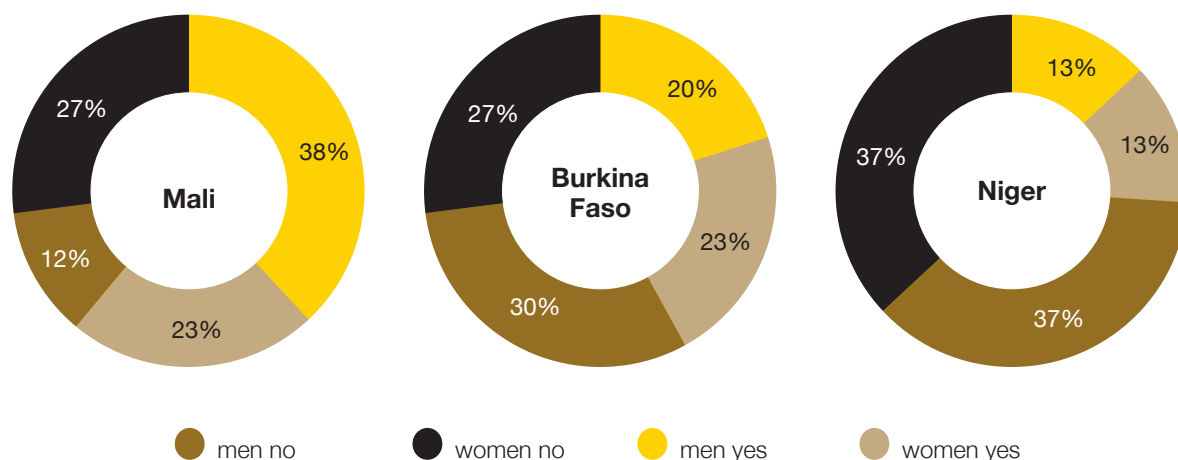
The lower degree of internal coherence, coordination and management within the violent extremist groups that are active in the Burkinabe Sahel, in comparison to the other regions studied, may also help to explain their less restrained use of violence, including against civilian populations. In contrast, the similarities in the dynamics observed in the regions of Mopti and Tillabéry, where two different violent extremist groups are active, namely the GSIM and ISGS, appear to contradict the theory that the differing patterns in the use of violence reflect differences in identity or ideological preferences.

**Mini survey results 1:** Do some armed state actors commit acts of violence (rape or harassment) against women?

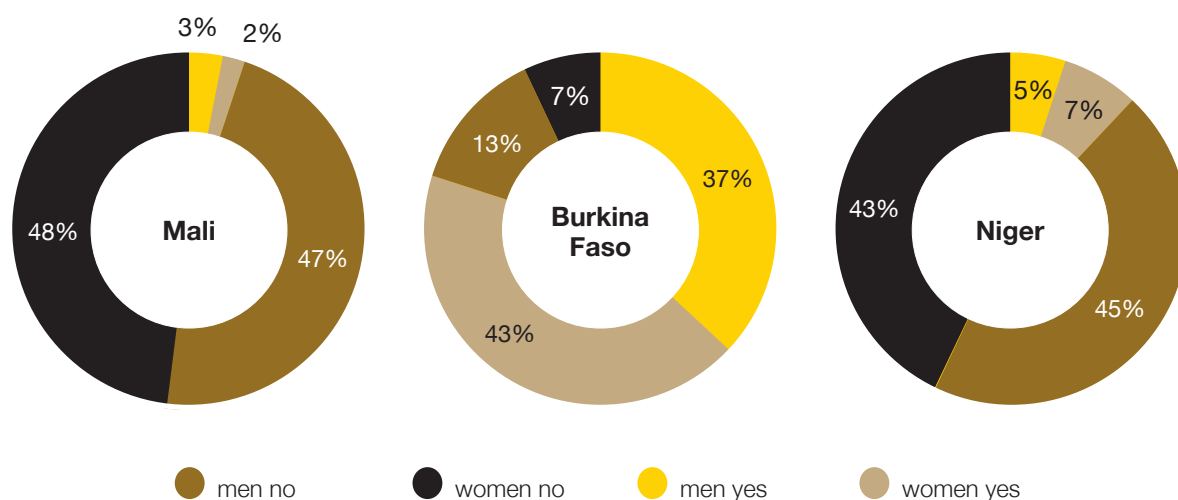


87. Focus group (women), Gorgadji, and interviews with village dignitaries, Arbinda.  
 88. Some observers question the official account of the Arbinda attack and instead point to the Burkinabe DSF who were involved in reprisals intended to intimidate the population alleged to be complicit with the extremist groups. However, there is no convincing evidence for this version of events, so it remains a hypothesis.  
 89. S. Kalyvas, *The logic of violence in civil wars*, Connecticut, Yale University Press, 2006.

**Mini survey results 2:** Do some armed actors from ethnically based groups (signatory groups, self-defence groups, hunting groups and militias etc.) commit acts of violence (rape or harassment) against women?



**Mini survey results 3:** Do some violent armed extremists commit acts of violence (rape or harassment) against women?



### 3.1.2 Indirect victimisation

Although women are not considered to be the intended targets of the deadly attacks by various armed groups, they may nevertheless end up being their main indirect victims. Many men have abandoned the villages of Liptako-Gourma, either to join the ranks of the armed groups or, more commonly, to go into hiding for fear of cross-reprisals by violent extremist groups and the DSF. In the men’s hurry to escape, women and children, who are thought to be less at risk from these threats, are often abandoned in their home villages. The women are thus at the mercy of the armed groups active in the area who may then attack them when they don’t find the men they are looking for.<sup>90</sup> “When villages are attacked it’s the

90. This has happened in Mali and Burkina Faso, for example.



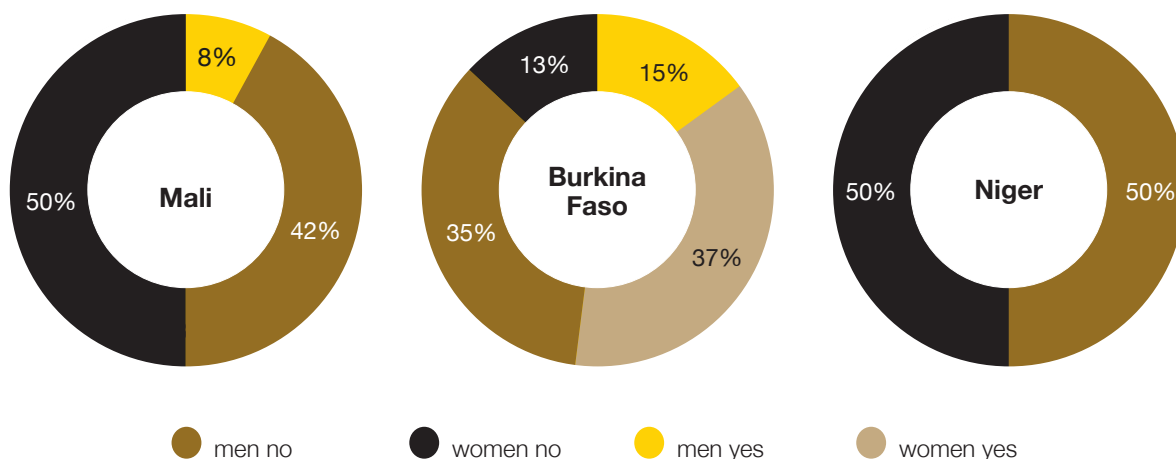
women and children, who are unable to defend themselves or run away like the others, who end up being the victims.”<sup>91</sup>

At the same time, the absence of men usually means the loss of the household’s main, and often only, breadwinner, so that the women “have to do the men’s work as well”<sup>92</sup> to ensure that their families are provided for. “They [the women] have become the heads of the family who have to meet the needs of family members and protect them.”<sup>93</sup> However, the inaccessibility of the fields and the departure of NGOs due to the security situation deprive women of the possibility of engaging in income-generating activities. This poses a real risk of a humanitarian crisis, which increases the vulnerability of women and girls on several levels. “A woman who no longer has a husband has to meet her family’s needs. She is capable of doing anything to make sure her children don’t go without food. She loses her dignity in such cases.”<sup>94</sup> “A mother who has lost her husband often doesn’t have the means to pay for her children’s schooling. If a choice has to be made, it’s the boys who are sent to school.”<sup>95</sup>

### 3.1.3 Abductions

In the Lake Chad area the abduction of women has long been a powerful tactic of negotiation, propaganda, fundraising, intimidation and recruitment for violent extremist groups, including Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP).<sup>96</sup> However, the phenomenon has been much less common in the Liptako-Gourma region. Abductions of women by violent extremist groups were largely unknown to the respondents in Mali and Niger, as demonstrated by the village mini surveys and the focus group discussions.

#### Mini survey results 4: Have women ever been kidnapped by violent extremist groups in the area?



91. Interview with a public figure (male), Sampara.  
 92. Interview with a public figure (female), Arbinda.  
 93. Focus group (women) Gorgadji.  
 94. Focus group (men), Siniré. Similar comments were made in other interviews and focus groups in Niger and Burkina Faso.  
 95. Interview with an expert on gender issues (female), Ouagadougou.  
 96. J. Zenn, The terrorist calculus in kidnapping girls in Nigeria: Cases from Chibok and Dapchi, CTC Sentinel, 11(3), 2018.



Again, the response is different for Burkina Faso. A number of local observers mention cases where Fulani women were victims of abductions perpetrated by Koglweogo self-defence militias as well as violent extremist groups.<sup>97</sup> It is less a systematic strategy, but isolated episodes of opportunism by armed actors. The respondents implied that sexual exploitation was the main motivation: “When a woman or girl is kidnapped, the guys from the bush abuse her and leave her in a very bad state”, which often results in the death of the victim.<sup>98</sup> The Burkinabe armed forces also issued a press release claiming to have succeeded in “liberating several women who were being held by the terrorists and used as sex slaves”, but this information has not been substantiated.<sup>99</sup>

### **3.1.4 Rape and gender-based violence**

As is often the case in theatres of conflict, women in the central Sahel have suffered various forms of GBV, including rape, sexual violence and harassment. Again, overall it is primarily the self-defence militias who are identified as the perpetrators, but violent extremist groups, especially in Burkina Faso, and the DSF, mainly in Mali, are also mentioned as being responsible. According to the respondents, GBV is less prevalent in Niger.<sup>100</sup>

For example, in Burkina Faso there was a case where extremist groups attacked a village and, on failing to find any men, mounted a guard and took it in turns to rape the women.<sup>101</sup> In addition, the observation was made that, “...lots of women were raped by the Koglweogo militias in Yirgou”.<sup>102</sup> In Mali, however, one respondent believed that, “The soldiers rape the women, especially when they are redeployed in villages that were occupied by the jihadists. It’s the same with the Dozos and for the members of other armed groups. The jihadists are responsible for less sexual abuse compared with the others. [...] And any of their people who are found guilty of these kinds of acts are executed.”<sup>103</sup>

The information and testimonies collected for this study cannot substantiate the statements in some reports indicating that rape and GBV are perpetrated systematically and on a large scale, in particular by Malian violent extremist groups that are active in the central Sahel.<sup>104</sup> On the one hand, the possibility cannot be ruled out that this difference is due primarily to information on such a sensitive subject being withheld. On the other hand, the observations made in this study concur with the conclusions of a growing number of researchers who believe that the extent of GBV perpetrated by violent extremist groups in the central Sahel, and especially in Mali, may have been overestimated by certain stakeholders

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97. Interviews and focus groups, Arbinda and Gorgadji.

98. Focus group (women), Arbinda.

99. Plusieurs terroristes neutralisés suite à d’intenses combats dans les régions du Centre-Nord et du Nord [Multiple terrorists neutralised following intense fighting in the regions of Centre-Nord and Nord], Army of Burkina Faso, Ouagadougou, 16 November 2019.

100. It is difficult to put forward concrete theories to explain these differences. The cultural similarities of the contexts do not seem to account for a significant difference in approach to social taboos and prohibitions on the part of the different communities. Instead it seems more likely that the contingencies of the data collection may have influenced the willingness to share information on what is an extremely sensitive subject. This means this section must be read with particular caution and the conclusions should not be interpreted as definitive or infallible.

101. Focus group (men), Gorgadji. Similar information came from the interviews with experts on gender issues conducted in Ouagadougou.

102. Interview with a young woman from the Sahel region, Dori.

103. Interview with a public figure (female), Mopti region. Similar information was gathered from interviews with journalists and members of NGOs conducted in Bamako.

104. See, in particular, G. Possémé-Rageau, 2013, Op. cit.

and may have been subject to biased accounts from the alleged victims seeking to conform to the expectations and priorities of the international community.<sup>105</sup>

Overall, our observations appear to suggest that the practice of rape is linked to a logic of territorial control, even if its use is far from always being coherent or systematic. As indicated by a Malian expert on GBV, “Rape in the context of conflict is used as a means of demonstrating power to other men, to show you can strike at what they hold most dear.”<sup>106</sup> It is therefore used as a tool of power affirmation, social destabilisation and collective punishment. At the same time, prohibiting GBV and punishing transgressors forms part of the strategy of violent extremist groups to gain acceptance and win hearts and minds, as well as to facilitate their longer term establishment.

In conclusion, it should be noted that, alongside the strategic use of rape by various armed actors, the conflict context leads to an increase and intensification of GBV. The worsening tensions exacerbate women’s vulnerability to domestic violence. According to a Burkinabe expert on the issue, “Everyone is on edge, so the men take it all out on the women – their anger, their lack of money and their frustrations.”<sup>107</sup> These observations lead to the conclusion that the conflict in the central Sahel risks causing GBV to become normalised as a result of the continuum that is gradually becoming established between the public sphere, marked by violent clashes and the victimisation of women, and the private sphere, marked by domestic violence, especially in the most vulnerable areas. This corroborates the conclusions of various research studies, which have demonstrated the direct and mutual relationship between domestic violence and violence in times of conflict.<sup>108</sup>

## 3.2 Targets of governance

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### 3.2.1 Dress code

The imposing of rules on dress is one of the most visible expressions of the way ‘jihadist governance’ affects women in the central Sahel. Violent extremist groups throughout the region order women to be covered whenever they go out in public. They are not expected to wear the full black niqab, but instead have to wear the hijab, a headscarf that just covers the hair and neck. In fact, the wearing of the hijab was already a fairly common practice in the central Sahel from well before the arrival of extremist groups,

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105. Interviews with an international researcher, an investigative journalist and the director of a Malian NGO, conducted in Bamako. It is worth noting that an independent investigative commission was appointed by the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) with the aim of shedding light on the allegations of abuse, rape and GBV attributed to violent extremist groups in northern Mali. However, despite detailed work carried out over several months, it proved very difficult to find convincing proof to corroborate the rumours.

106. Interview with an NGO director (female), Bamako.

107. Interview with an expert on gender issues (female), Ouagadougou.

108. International Alert, *The complexity of sexual and gender-based violence: Insights from Mogadishu and south central Somalia*, London, 2015; International Alert, *Conceptualisation et normalisation socioculturelle des violences basées sur le genre dans l’est de la République démocratique du Congo* [Sociocultural conceptualisation and normalisation of gender-based violence in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo], London, 2019.

as previously mentioned regarding social rules in general. Therefore, the rule itself doesn't represent a major change from traditional customs relating to women's clothing and modesty.

The real change is in the introduction of a universal requirement and strict sanctions for anyone who fails to comply. The application of these sanctions provides an indicator of the degree of influence of the violent extremist groups in the region: in the Macina region of Mali the application is unequivocal and severe, in the Tillabéry region of Niger sanctions are commonly applied, while in the Burkina Faso Sahel application is more sporadic. In Mali, in particular, violations of the rule on wearing the veil may result in brutal punishments by the extremists, such as violent assaults or whipping: "If you don't wear the veil, you'll be beaten. They give you three warnings and then they beat you. Women who've been beaten have become ill because they were beaten so mercilessly."<sup>109</sup> In Niger, if women violate the rules, their husbands may be punished.<sup>110</sup> In Burkina Faso, women are subject to contradictory social pressures – wearing the veil may simultaneously protect them from the jihadists but arouse the suspicion of the DSF.<sup>111</sup>

It is worth noting that the dress code requirements introduced by the extremist groups don't only apply to women. Men are also targeted by the order to dress in accordance with the rules of the violent extremists, including growing a beard and wearing cropped trousers. Although these rules are enforced less systematically than those relating to women, anyone who refuses to conform risks being marginalised.<sup>112</sup>

### **3.2.2 Education**

The violent extremist groups active in the central Sahel disapprove of the national education systems, based on the secular French model, and advocate the closure of state-run schools in the areas under their control. In Mali and Burkina Faso the extremist groups themselves attack schools, while in Niger school closures are due more to the general security situation that has caused teachers to leave. The result is largely the same in all three countries, with hundreds of schools being closed and thousands of pupils left without access to state education.

In contrast to what has been seen in the area around Lake Chad controlled by Boko Haram,<sup>113</sup> the violent extremist groups in the central Sahel don't at present seem to support the large-scale opening of quranic schools to replace the state-run schools that have been closed. There are only isolated cases, such as in some villages in the Macina region of Mali: "Since 2016-2017 women have been meeting to learn the Quran. They are taught by a woman from the imam's family."<sup>114</sup> This does not seem an adequate response to the widely expressed demand from women throughout the region for access to better education or to the aspiration of reformist Islam to equip women with knowledge of religion so they are

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109. Focus group (women), Siniré. Similar statements were made during other interviews and focus groups in Mali.

110. Focus group (women), Torodi.

111. Interview with a Burkina Faso expert on gender issues (female), Ouagadougou.

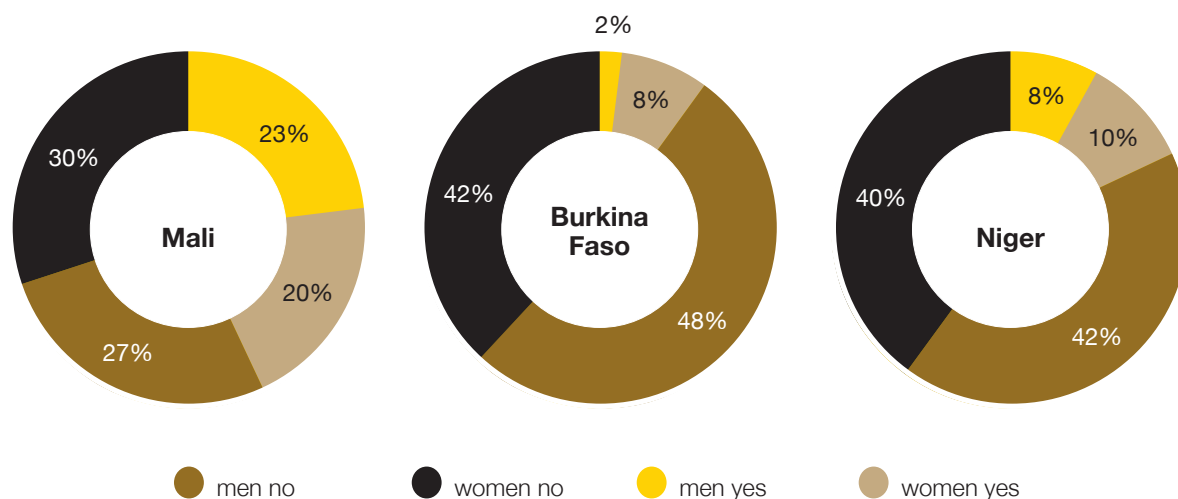
112. Interviews with various people from the regions of the central Sahel.

113. H. Matfess, *Women and the war on Boko Haram. Wives, weapons, witnesses*, London, ZED Books, 2017.

114. Focus group (women), Siniré.

better able to educate their children. Consequently, as suggested by the mini surveys, the people of the region are mostly of the opinion that ‘jihadist governance’ has not improved access to education. It is interesting to note that this view is also expressed in regions where support for extremist groups seems to be strongest, such as in the Macina region of Mali.

**Mini survey results 5:** Has the presence of violent extremist groups improved access to education?



The real impact of school closures in the central Sahel raises questions. Some observers have noted that the accessibility and quality of education in the region was very poor in any case.<sup>115</sup> In particular, the scale of school drop-outs among girls well before the crisis means caution must be exercised when evaluating the impact of this phenomenon on women’s education. Thus, in relation to this issue too, the introduction of ‘jihadist governance’ in the central Sahel appears to tread a line between continuity and disruption in the lives of women.

**3.2.3 Marriage**

The violent extremist groups in the central Sahel have devoted considerable attention to the rules governing marriage, an area that has a particular impact on women. On the one hand, ‘jihadist governance’ prohibits festivities, music and men and women mixing during wedding celebrations, previously among the few occasions where women were allowed to socialise. On the other hand, the violent extremist groups have also questioned the traditional restrictive customs and prohibitions pertaining to marriage. For example, both Hamadoun Koufa and Ibrahim Dicko have spoken out openly in favour of inter-caste marriages, provided that they conform to Islamic rules.<sup>116</sup> This has been greeted with enthusiasm by some women from lower castes.<sup>117</sup> Similarly, the doctrinaire individualism of the violent extremist groups has called into

115. Interviews with various researchers, Bamako and Niamey.

116. Interviews with experts and people from the regions of the central Sahel.

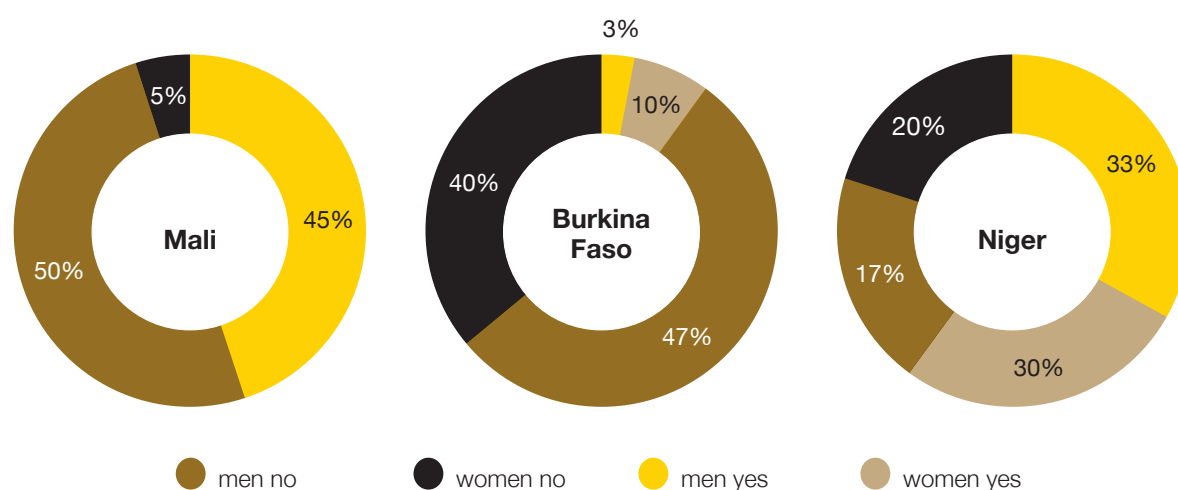
117. Focus group (women), Sampara.

question the exclusive authority of parents to arrange the marriages of their sons and, especially, their daughters. Thus, several women noted that, if a girl is forced into marriage, she may now appeal to the armed extremists to uphold her right to consent.<sup>118</sup>

The condemnation of ostentation and luxury by the violent extremists has also led to a reduction in the costs associated with marriage. Reducing the bride price to a symbolic sum<sup>119</sup> and banning (relatively) lavish celebrations means marriage is more accessible for young people. “High bride prices are now prohibited, they have to be reasonable.”<sup>120</sup> “Nowadays you’re free to marry without money being demanded from you.”<sup>121</sup> Sometimes the extremists may even “give resources” to young men to help them find a wife.<sup>122</sup> This certainly serves to bring some young men from less well-off backgrounds closer to the violent extremists, as they see joining the groups as providing them with a relatively easy means of emulating the model of male social success associated with establishing a home, without being obliged to get involved in risky activities such as migration or fraud as their elders did.<sup>123</sup>

This explains why, according to a number of both male and female observers, the presence of violent extremist groups in the region seems to have facilitated access to marriage. Again, this applies particularly in Mali and Niger, that is in the areas where ‘jihadist governance’ is more established. The fact that marriage continues to represent a fundamental social aspiration for the majority of young people in Liptako-Gourma, but also an increasing challenge, emphasises the significance of this result. Opinions diverge considerably in the case of Burkina Faso. The extent of the violence and the large-scale displacement of communities there is disrupting relations between men and women and leading to the separation and sometimes break-up of families.<sup>124</sup>

**Mini survey results 6:** Has the presence of violent extremist groups improved access to marriage?



118. Focus groups (women), Sampara, Siniré and Torodi.  
 119. This observation was made in all the regions of the central Sahel.  
 120. Focus group (men), Siniré.  
 121. Focus group (men), Sampara.  
 122. Focus group (men), Siniré.  
 123. Focus group (men), Siniré.  
 124. Focus group (men), Gorgadji.



The regulation of marriage as ordained by the extremists also aims to reduce the ‘risk of fornication’. Instances of cohabitation that are judged to be ‘irregular’ are subject to harsh punishments or forced regularisation. This has led to a considerable reduction in marital infidelity that seems to have been a major source of concern, especially for many women across the region.<sup>125</sup> However, this approach runs the risk of reinforcing the factors that favour the practice of early marriage.

The extremists’ line on marriage may appear remarkably modern in comparison with the patriarchy of the traditional institutions of the central Sahel. However, it cannot be said that their approach seeks to ensure gender equality and women’s emancipation. ‘Jihadist governance’ is exercised solely by men and for their benefit. For example, a recent study showed that decisions by divorce courts presided over by violent extremist groups in the Mopti region (and more specifically in the cercles of Djenné and Bandiagara) ruled in favour of the man in every single case.<sup>126</sup>

### **3.2.4 Public and domestic life**

The segregationist ideology of the violent extremist groups in the central Sahel prohibits proximity between unmarried men and women in all circumstances. Ideally, women should not leave the house of their guardian, father or husband. In reality, the compromises between doctrinaire directions and everyday needs determine a meticulous regulation of women’s behaviour in public spaces controlled by ‘jihadist governance’. Among other things, a woman must always wear the veil when she is outside the home; she must not go out after sunset; she must not travel or use public transport with a man who is not her husband or a member of her family; and she shouldn’t frequent crowded places, such as markets. As is the case with other manifestations of ‘jihadist governance’, the application of these measures seems to be proportional to the degree of control exercised by the extremist groups in the different regions. These provisions represent considerable restrictions on women’s work. In particular, they hinder activities such as collecting firewood, selling milk and itinerant trade.<sup>127</sup> The restrictions are starting to reshape gender roles, compelling men to take on some of the tasks traditionally done by women, but that they are now prevented from doing.

These restrictions are accompanied by a discourse that seeks to highlight the differences in roles within a society under Sharia law. Domestic segregation is presented as an enviable situation of peace and quiet in contrast to the worries and concerns of the outside world. Similarly, the exemption from work is equated with a royal privilege, corresponding to the duty of the pious man to meet the needs of his wife through his labour. Thus, the people interviewed for this report who are close to the extremist groups commented: “If you apply Sharia law it’ll just be good for the women, because all the work will be done by the men”;<sup>128</sup> “It’ll be better for the women when Sharia is introduced. They’ll be treated like queens by

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125. Focus groups (women), Arbinda and Torodi, and interviews with people from the Mopti and Tillabéry regions.

126. Interview with an NGO director (male), Bamako.

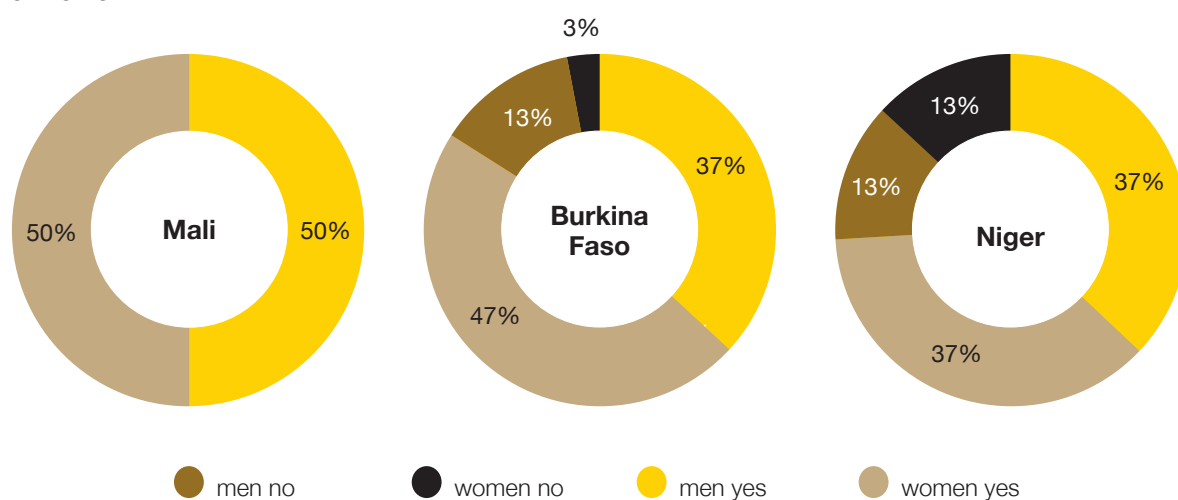
127. This information is corroborated by several observers and people from the three target regions. At times the violent extremist groups have demonstrated pragmatism by accepting a less rigid implementation of the rules on women working, in order to avoid households no longer being able to support themselves. See: International Federation of Human Rights, 2018, Op. cit.; International Crisis Group, 2019, Op. cit.

128. Interview with a radicalised religious leader (male), Mopti region.

their husbands”;<sup>129</sup> “Under Sharia, the women won’t go out any more and the men will have to meet all their needs.”<sup>130</sup> This also echoes the feminine ideal and the aristocratic ethic of the Fulanis, as confirmed by several traditional authorities across the region: “A woman’s role is to stay at home. The man’s role is to provide for her. All the chores should be done by the husband.”<sup>131</sup> “A married woman is dependent on her husband for everything. But for that to be possible, she must be kept at home.”<sup>132</sup>

These observations help to clarify why the vision of a society under Sharia law is greeted so positively by the great majority of respondents across the central Sahel, especially women.<sup>133</sup>

**Mini survey results 7:** Could a system of governance inspired by Islam be better at meeting the needs of women?



There are numerous testimonies from Sahelian women who say they feel relieved at the prospect of Sharia law. “[With Sharia law in force] women won’t have to work until they’re exhausted. They will stay at home and have cherished children.”<sup>134</sup> “It would be better for government to be based on religion. We would be protected and we’d stay quietly at home.”<sup>135</sup> “If the government was really based [on Sharia law], it would be a good thing for women, because they would be relieved of their everyday chores.”<sup>136</sup> The fact that the results of the mini surveys in Burkina Faso are in line with those in other countries illustrates the level of consensus around this vision and the cross-cutting legitimacy of the religious ideal (including in a relatively secular country like Burkina Faso), in the face of a progressive erosion of the credibility of the state authorities.

129. Focus group (men), Torodi.

130. Focus group (women), Torodi.

131. Interview with a religious leader (male), Torodi.

132. Interview with a traditional leader (male), Arbinda.

133. Some observers consider that the enforcement of religious law and its provisions on the domestic segregation of women could, paradoxically, contribute to a softening of attitudes to sexual behaviour. They say that in disadvantaged areas women have an intensive and exhausting workload. In such conditions, the fulfilment of their conjugal duties may be a matter more of obligation than consent and marital relations are at risk of descending into domestic violence. In contrast, being exempted from work could lead women to start feeling genuine desire. Interviews with people from the region.

134. Focus group (women), Siniré.

135. Focus group (women), Sampara

136. Focus group (women), Torodi.

Thus, in this area too, the 'jihadist governance' that violent extremist groups are seeking to establish in the central Sahel reveals a surprising capacity to resonate with the imagination and aspirations of rural communities, including among women. This ability to understand, adapt and appeal to the imagination helps to explain how extremist groups have been able to become firmly established and accepted in the region. In contrast, the discourse and strategies around gender promoted by international actors often replicate views dominant in urban areas. They therefore run the risk of peddling clichés that are out of step with the realities on the ground where the violent extremist groups are advancing.



Traders at the weekly market,  
Burkina Faso.  
PHOTO: © IRÈNE ABDOU/ALAMY

## 4. Perpetrators of violence

There is a stereotypical but nonetheless widespread view that women are ‘naturally’ peace-loving, maternal figures associated with caring and vulnerability rather than violence and fighting. The warlike feats of terrorist groups, acting in the name of an ideology that appears obscurantist, reactionary and retrograde in its attitude towards women, shape a concept of women as passive victims rather than active participants in the activities of extremist groups.<sup>137</sup> However, throughout history, women have played an active role in violent uprisings. The involvement of women within, alongside and even at the head of various terrorist groups across the world is well documented.<sup>138</sup>

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137. C. Cockburn, War and security, women and gender: an overview of the issues, *Gender and development*, 21(3), 2013.

138. C. Gentry and L. Sjöberg, Female terrorism and militancy, in R. Jackson (ed.), *Routledge handbook of critical security studies*, London, Routledge, 2016.



Armed movements drawing on political Islamism and jihadism are no exception, as evidenced by the mobilisation of women in support of groups such as al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, Hamas, Dukhtaran-e-Millat, Jemaah Islamiyah, al-Shabaab and others.<sup>139</sup> In these cases the active involvement of women generally tends not to focus so much on participation in frontline combat as on auxiliary roles in accordance with the segregationist doctrine that prohibits women from being in the company of men other than their husbands. For example, the ideologues of al-Qaeda called on women to support the jihad by emphasising their vital role as mothers and wives giving birth to the next generation of mujahideen.<sup>140</sup>

However, in recent years some extremist and jihadist groups have started to authorise and even encourage female militants to participate actively in military action on the frontline, primarily as suicide bombers. This is particularly true of al-Qaeda in Iraq, Boko Haram and the Islamic State organisation (Daesh). The reciprocal links between these organisations may explain their ideological proximity.<sup>141</sup> An article published in October 2017 in the Daesh newsletter, *al-Naba*, included an appeal to women to take part in armed action.<sup>142</sup>

Globally, the involvement of women in violent extremist groups, including jihadist groups, continues to grow. Today, women represent 30% of the members of terrorist organisations worldwide,<sup>143</sup> either as frontline combatants or in roles such as auxiliary or logistics staff, informants, recruiters and fundraisers. This raises the question of the extent to which this also applies in the central Sahel.

## 4.1 Women as participants in violent extremist groups in the central Sahel

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### 4.1.1 Women and armed militancy in west Africa

Several observers contrast the low visibility of women within the violent extremist groups in the central Sahel with the central role played by women in Boko Haram's strategies to become established in the area around Lake Chad. The involvement of women in Boko Haram goes back to the early 2000s. For founder Mohammed Yusuf, it was part of a strategy to train women to become both wives to the insurgents and mothers to the next generation of combatants. Under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau, the enlistment of women in Boko Haram took on a coercive character with the abduction of over 2,000 women between 2014 and 2015 (including the notorious case of the 276 Chibok school

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139. J. Davis, *Women in modern terrorism: from liberation wars to global jihad and the Islamic State*, London, Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.

140. N. Lahoud, 'The neglected sex: The jihadis' exclusion of women from jihad', *Terrorism and political violence*, 23(1), 2014.

141. During the American invasion, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) soon moved away from the doctrines and practices advocated by the al-Qaeda network centred around the charismatic leader, Osama Bin Laden. Daesh, which is the successor to AQI, resumed its acute sectarianism from 2014. The same sectarianism is also found in Boko Haram, which joined the Islamic State organisation in 2016 as the West Africa Province.

142. *Al-Naba*, 150, 4 October 2017.

143. B. Nacos, *Terrorism and counterterrorism*, New York, Routledge, 2016.



girls who were kidnapped on 14 April 2014), even if other women have joined the group voluntarily. Its control over women has provided Boko Haram with a formidable tool for propaganda, negotiation and insurrection, as well as the armed struggle. The media focus has primarily been on the victimisation of the women held by the terrorist group. However, some women refused to leave Boko Haram when they had the opportunity to do so and ended up taking part in suicide bombings. Ultimately, over half of the 434 suicide attacks carried out by Boko Haram in the Lake Chad area between 2011 and 2017 were perpetrated by women and girls, some of whom were recruited by force while others apparently joined the group of their own volition.<sup>144</sup>

Women have undeniably been less involved so far in the armed actions of violent extremist groups in the central Sahel. However, this does not justify resorting to the gender stereotypes that contribute to erasing women's activism in support of armed groups, including violent extremist groups. A closer look at the situation reveals that women appear to be significant participants in several armed groups in the Sahara and Sahel regions, including bearing arms and wearing uniforms. This applies particularly to the self-defence militias and the ethnically based armed groups that resemble them.

In Burkina Faso, the presence of women in the Koglweogo hunter militias is said to be significant,<sup>145</sup> including in leadership roles.<sup>146</sup> In northern Mali, the High Council for the Unity of Azawad (HCUA), an armed group very close to the Tuareg Ifoghas tribe, has a brigade of women that it tasks with law enforcement.<sup>147</sup> Similarly, in the Liptako-Gourma region, the president of the Coalition des Mouvements – Front Patriotique pour la Résistance (CMFPR), Harouna Touré, delegated his personal protection to a team of bodyguards comprised exclusively of armed Songhai women.<sup>148</sup> Insofar as the rise in violent extremism in the central Sahel is now linked less to action by small underground groups and more to an ethnically based insurrection,<sup>149</sup> it is notable that similar phenomena are appearing among the Fulanis of the central Sahel.

#### **4.1.2 Women's support for violent extremist groups in the central Sahel**

According to a survey conducted recently throughout Mali, around a quarter of respondents (24%) knew more than one woman who had joined an armed or jihadist group and this proportion was considerably higher in Liptako-Gourma.<sup>150</sup> However, the same survey suggested that women's support for armed and violent extremist groups is expressed in different ways, of which participation in armed actions was the least common. More women were to be found operating as informants (according to 56% of respondents), providing logistics support (38%), as concubines or wives (34%) or providing economic support (29%).<sup>151</sup>

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144. For more on the 'gender policy' of Boko Haram, see: International Crisis Group, Nigeria: Women and the Boko Haram insurgency, Africa report 242, Dakar/Brussels, 2016; H. Matfess, 2017, Op. cit.; J. Warner and H. Matfess, Exploding stereotypes: The unexpected operational and demographic characteristics of Boko Haram's suicide bombers, CTC Report, West Point, 2017; J. Zenn, 2018, Op. cit.; E.J. Abatan, 2018, Op. cit.

145. M. Ouedraogo, Burkina: Plus de 2 000 femmes dans les rangs des groupes d'autodéfense Koglweogo [Burkina: Over 2,000 women in the ranks of Koglweogo self-defence groups], *Libreinfo.net*, 20 October 2019.

146. Interviews with a Burkinabe human rights expert (female), Ouagadougou.

147. Interview with a Malian researcher (male) specialising in gender issues, Bamako.

148. Interview with an NGO director (male), Bamako.

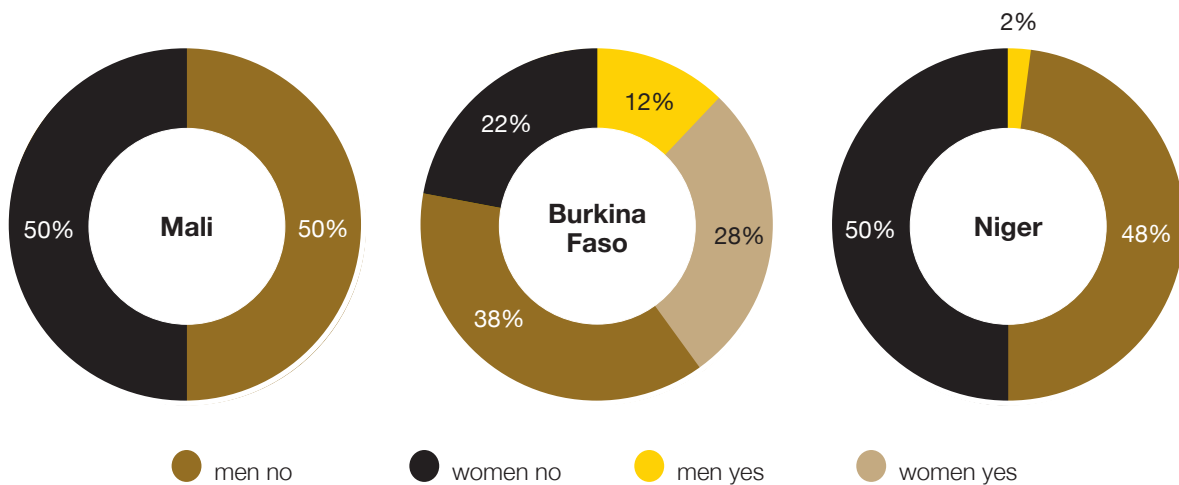
149. M. Pellerin, Les violences armées au Sahara. Du djihadisme aux insurrections ? [Armed violence in the Sahara. From jihadism to insurrections?], Études de l'IFRI, Paris, 2019.

150. Z. Gorman and G. Chauzal, 2019, Op. cit.

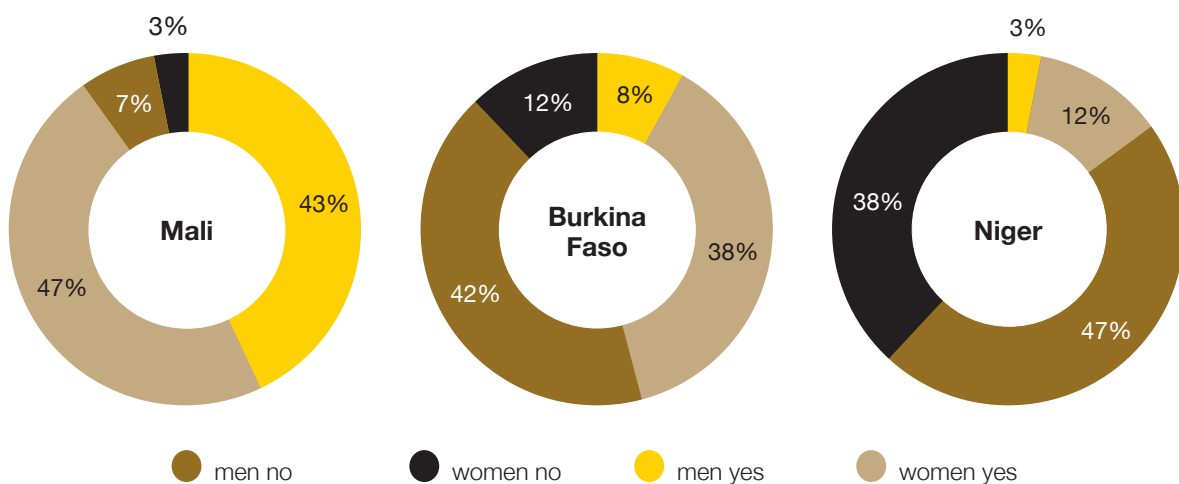
151. Ibid.

These results are consistent with those of the mini surveys carried out in the villages for this report. Although women participating directly in violent actions by extremist groups are generally considered to be very much in the minority (with the notable exception of Burkina Faso, where the phenomenon is confirmed by 40% of respondents), women providing support to violent extremist groups in auxiliary roles as laundrywomen or cooks is substantiated by 93% of respondents in Mali, 46% in Burkina Faso and 15% in Niger. Similarly, many respondents (men and women) believe that women may help violent extremist groups as informants integrated into village communities: 68% in Mali, 16% in Burkina Faso and 61% in Niger.

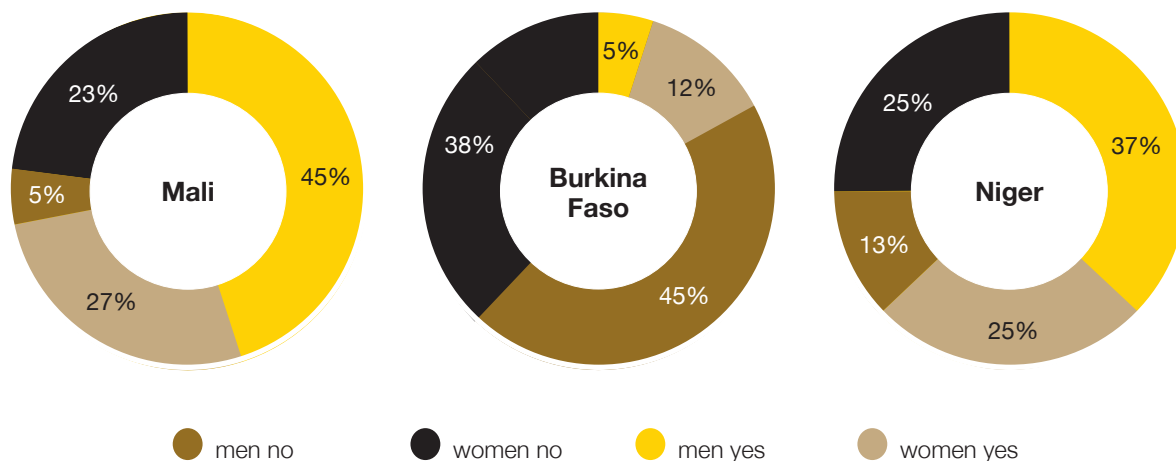
**Mini survey results 8:** Are there women who commit acts of violence (armed: as combatants, perpetrators of attacks etc.) specifically in support of violent extremist groups?



**Mini survey results 9:** Are there women who support violent extremist groups without taking up arms, i.e. in auxiliary roles (as cooks, laundrywomen or concubines etc.)?



**Mini survey results 10:** Are there women who support violent extremist groups within villages, for example by collecting information or levies for fighters in the bush?



This suggests that women’s support for violent extremist groups in the central Sahel is more a case of them continuing to perform their usual roles rather than experiencing radical existential conversion.<sup>152</sup> In the majority of cases, the women who support violent extremist groups confine themselves to replicating the social roles they would perform in their everyday lives: they stay at home where they discreetly receive their husbands when they return from the frontline and offer them shelter, care and consolation. They may also go to the market, prepare meals and do laundry for the bases in the bush.

Less frequently, women may also perform tasks outside their usual remit in support of members of violent extremist groups. At the market, for example, they may have to purchase ingredients that will be used by the militants to make explosives.<sup>153</sup> They may also share information with their husbands, either by phone, through an intermediary or directly, for purposes that are not solely social but also tactical, such as about the movements of the DSF.<sup>154</sup> In Mali it is not unusual for women to organise collections of money for combatants to support the war effort. Sometimes they may even contribute their own jewellery:<sup>155</sup> “To pay for arms for our children we sell our cows and even our gold. Yes, there are women who have done that here.”<sup>156</sup>

The situation appears to be rather different in Burkina Faso. There, the violence of the ongoing conflict and the resulting displacements threaten the strength of relations between the combatants in the bush and the people in the villages. In the face of the disruption of social ties, relations between women and

152. The same argument was put forward about the process of radicalisation in Europe. See, for example: R. Basra and P. Neumann, *The new crime-terror nexus in Europe*, in A. Gofas (ed.), *Terrorism and European security governance*, Robert Schuman Centre, Florence, 2018.

153. Interview with a security expert (male), Ouagadougou.

154. It is interesting to note that such comments were rarely made in focus groups, but often emerged during interviews with various people from the region.

155. Various focus groups (men and women) in Mali.

156. Focus group (women), Mopti region.

the violent extremist groups are often marked by suspicion, and references to threats and coercion are made in explanation of the rare examples of collusion.<sup>157</sup>

In any event, these observations cannot downplay the contribution women may make in support of the actions of violent extremist groups. Even when they are not involved in fighting and stay away from the bases and frontlines, women's actions can ensure the fulfilment of key functions in contribution to the war effort, just as they ensure the social order through their household tasks during peacetime.

### **4.1.3 The escalation of violence and the conundrum of armed women**

The vast majority of people the researchers spoke to for this study were of the opinion that it is extremely rare to find women involved in violent extremist groups as armed combatants in the central Sahel. This kind of involvement would be out of step both with the observations of the majority of security experts and with the practices and customs that underpin Fulani culture. However, in recent months, military actions carried out by violent extremist groups in the region, as deadly as they were spectacular, have increasingly raised questions about the types of engagement of women, including in combat roles.

On 14 April 2018, a terrorist attack targeted the Timbuktu military camp housing the regional headquarters of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and a detachment of the French Operation Barkhane force. At the time the attack was the largest to be launched against the UN mission since its deployment in Mali in 2013. The attackers employed a complex mode of operation, with heavy gunfire, rockets and explosions of suicide vehicles laden with explosives. Among the international forces one person was killed and 15 were wounded. Responsibility for the attack was later claimed by GSIM.<sup>158</sup>

General Bruno Guibert, Operation Barkhane commander at the time, mentioned the involvement of a female suicide bomber who he said had driven one of the vehicles that exploded.<sup>159</sup> Two weeks later, GSIM issued a communiqué denying this allegation and restating the doctrinal approach of the al-Qaeda network, according to which women are prohibited from participating in combat operations. The statement went on to say that the 'Muslim nation' still had enough courageous men who were prepared to fight.<sup>160</sup>

The strategic involvement of women in military action by extremist groups was also mentioned in relation to the terrorist attack on the Boulikessi military camp in the Mopti region of Mali on 30 September 2019, for which GSIM claimed responsibility. The attack left at least 40 soldiers dead, the heaviest loss suffered by the Malian military since the defeat of Kidal in May 2014.

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157. Various focus groups (men and women) in Burkina Faso.

158. M. Le Cam, *Attaque à Tombouctou contre les casques bleus et les soldats français* [Attack in Timbuktu against the Blue Helmets and French soldiers], *Le Monde*, 14 April 2018.

159. V. Hugué, *Face à Barkhane, un ennemi aux abois* [Faced with Barkhane, an enemy in disarray], *L'Express*, 20 April 2018. According to some local sources, the person driving the suicide vehicle in question was not just a woman but was also European. She is said to have entered Mali through Mauritania from Syria, following the rout of the Daesh Caliphate, where she had been active as a foreign fighter. This detail, although unconfirmed, may help to explain the inconsistency with the official ideology of GSIM.

160. E.J. Abatan, 2018, Op. cit.

The camp was home to the ‘red berets’, an elite unit of the Malian armed forces (FAMA) who are also part of the G5 Sahel regional force. According to an investigation by MINUSMA, this same detachment had been responsible for the summary execution of 12 civilians at the local market in May 2018. This important detail helps to explain the attack in the context of the dynamics of vengeance, reprisals and protection that contribute to legitimising armed non-state actors, including extremists, against a background of a strongly gendered narrative. According to corroborating sources, women were mobilised by GSIM to help with plotting the attack. They apparently infiltrated the camp as soldiers’ concubines and then passed information to the attackers.<sup>161</sup> This allegation leaves some doubt as to whether these women would have been exposed to targeted military training.

However, during the Indélimane attack of 1 November 2019 the taboo surrounding women’s participation in frontline fighting was clearly violated. The attack targeted a military camp in Ansongo Cercle, on the border between Mali and Niger. There were at least 49 victims among the FAMA, and ISGS subsequently claimed responsibility. A video circulating on social networks and seemingly filmed during the attack shows what appears to be a girl soldier among the attackers. However, this interpretation is not undisputed – some observers think it is actually a young boy. Meanwhile, security sources from Malian counter-terrorism say they are sure that the participation of at least one woman in the attack has been “definitively proved”.<sup>162</sup> ISGS has made no official statement to confirm or deny this claim.

The episodes that reveal the willing engagement and militancy of certain women in support of violent extremist groups, including in combat operations, appear to highlight the importance of the ideological differences between GSIM and ISGS. They reflect at the local level the doctrinal positions of the jihadist constellations to which the violent extremist groups of the central Sahel are affiliated, namely al-Qaeda and Daesh. On the one hand, during the Timbuktu attack, GSIM took care to clarify immediately that participation in jihad is a collective duty but that women’s tasks are not the same as those undertaken by men and, in particular, women are excluded from taking part in combat actions.<sup>163</sup> This closely reflects the position taken by the al-Qaeda network on this issue.<sup>164</sup> On the other hand, the ambiguous response from ISGS on the possible participation of a woman in the Indélimane attack might indicate a resonance with the ideology of Daesh (of which ISGS is a member, as are Boko Haram and ISWAP), which encourages women’s involvement in military action.

This interpretation tends to be corroborated by reports from certain sources (albeit unconfirmed) of other episodes said to have taken place in 2019. In Timbuktu GSIM apparently blocked an attempt by a woman to commit a suicide attack because this went against its ideology.<sup>165</sup> In contrast, ISGS claimed responsibility for a failed suicide attack by a woman in Gao.<sup>166</sup> Similarly, Nigerian soldiers reported having been the target of an armed attack by women in the Tongo Tongo area where ISGS is active.<sup>167</sup> Furthermore, humanitarian actors believe that Fulani women in the Tillabéry region have been joining the extremist groups in the area for years.<sup>168</sup> The results of the village mini surveys presented above appear

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161. Interviews with researchers and journalists specialising in the region, Bamako.

162. Interview with a Malian counter-terrorism actor (male), Bamako.

163. N. Rupesinghe and Y. Diall, 2019, Op. cit.

164. N. Lahoud, 2014, Op. cit.

165. Interview with a Malian counter-terrorism actor (male), Bamako.

166. Interview with a Malian researcher (male), Bamako.

167. Interview with a specialist journalist from Liptako-Gourma (male), Bamako.

168. Interview with a humanitarian actor (male) working in Liptako-Gourma, Bamako.



to confirm this. There seems to be agreement that the involvement of women in the armed actions of violent extremist groups is a very marginal phenomenon. However, although the Malian respondents, living in the shadow of GSIM, are unanimous, those in Niger and Burkina Faso, who are closer to the ISGS zone of influence, are less categorical in their responses.

## 4.2 Women and violent extremism – reasons for engagement

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### 4.2.1 *Marital obedience and loyalty*

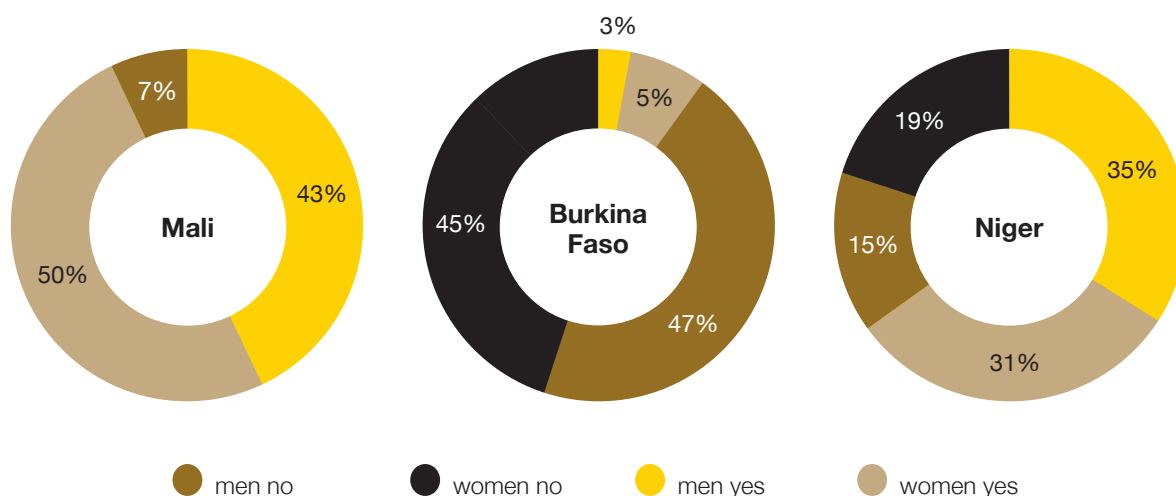
Many observers think that, where it exists, women's support for the violent extremist groups of the central Sahel can largely be explained in the light of the marital obedience and loyalty to their husbands, which define the role of women in society. It is believed that the decision to join an extremist group is made by men, and women then have to live with it. Thus, women's willingness to support violent extremist groups is an automatic rather than an autonomous response: if the husband decides to become involved, his wife automatically supports him. The social ties and the legitimacy often enjoyed by the combatants allow this mechanism to be normalised, rooted in the constructs and socialisation inherent in gender roles and relations between women and men. The theory may also be advanced that women's ability to look at their husbands' involvement with a critical eye is limited by the lack of education and religious training experienced by the majority of women in rural areas. Once again, therefore, women's relationships with violent extremist groups are essentially an extension of their everyday lives.

The results of the village mini surveys corroborate this interpretation. The majority of respondents believe it is a woman's duty to join her husband if he decides to become a member of a violent extremist group. This is the opinion of almost all the Malian respondents (93% in total and 100% of the women surveyed) and two thirds of the Nigerien respondents. In Burkina Faso, in contrast, the vast majority of respondents (92%) disagree with this statement. Some Burkinabe women would go so far as to question their marriages if their husbands wanted to join violent extremist groups. "If my husband joins the guys in the bush, I'll be looking for a new husband." "If my husband joins the guys in the bush, it'll be the end of our marriage."<sup>169</sup>

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169. Focus group (women), Arbinda.

**Mini survey results 11:** Is it a woman's duty to join her husband if he decides to become a member of a violent extremist group?



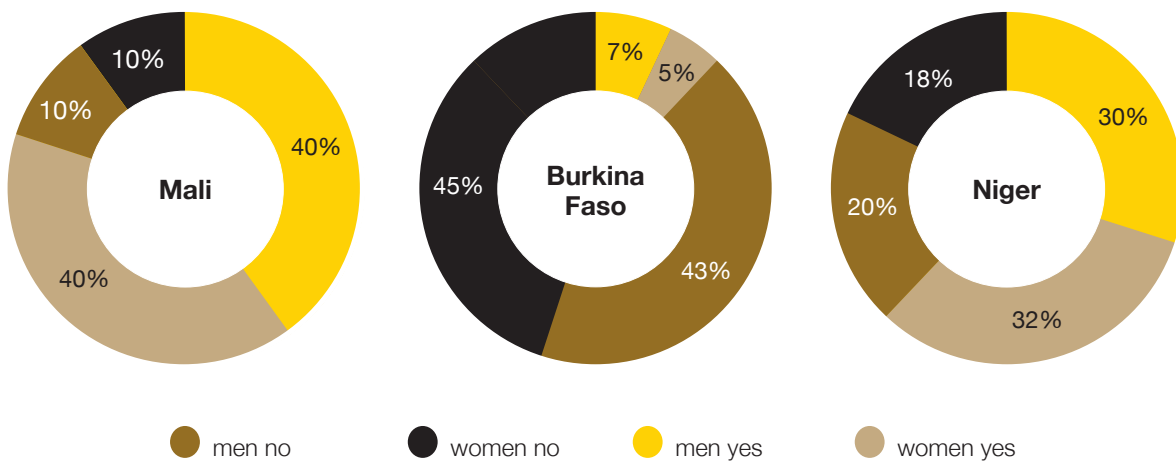
#### 4.2.2 Ideological support

The women of the central Sahel may also support violent extremist groups for reasons of ideological conviction. This motivation may support and reinforce the marital loyalty described above. In a context characterised by material deprivation and the absence of a competing ideological proposition, the motivational power of religious discourse should not be underestimated, especially when it is manipulated by the ideologues of the violent extremist groups with the intention of polarising identities. The mini surveys confirm that the majority of respondents in Mali and Niger, including the women, believe that there is a religious obligation for women to support jihad, even though the way this duty is actually fulfilled may vary. This suggests a certain correlation with the level of support and integration of the violent extremist groups throughout the central Sahel, giving weight to the theory that ideological support among women is a significant mobilising factor. This interpretation is borne out by some testimonies from the focus groups. Asked how women can contribute to Islam and fulfil their religious duty, some women didn't hesitate to reply that, "You have to give away your possessions to help the religion advance. You should encourage people who fight for religion and encourage others to join them."<sup>170</sup>

170. Focus group (women), Siniéré.

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**Mini survey results 12:** Does Islam command women to support jihad?



Women's ideological support is not based solely on the religious argument. In a static situation characterised by patriarchy and oppression, the rise in the power of violent extremist groups challenges existing power relations and may paradoxically offer women opportunities to advance their own agenda. Women may take a pragmatic approach, looking favourably on some specific measures of 'jihadist governance' that have progressive implications for gender issues, while not necessarily fully sharing the ideology of the extremist groups. Although the imposition of rigid rules on dress codes and the prohibition of festivities are almost unanimously deplored, the prospect of a (relative) liberalisation of the rules on marriage and the restriction of physical labour is greeted with enthusiasm by some women in the central Sahel, especially lower class women. At the same time, while the most repressive measures of 'jihadist governance' in relation to women, including restrictions on access to education and decision-making, may not inspire women's engagement, they also do not actually represent major changes in the everyday lives of women living in rural areas in the central Sahel.

Even beyond the gender perspective, women generally share the aspirations and concerns of the communities of the central Sahel of which they are members. In this respect men and women share the same motivations for supporting violent extremist groups, highlighting the ability of these groups to guarantee protection, the administration of justice and the management of natural resources in areas otherwise neglected by failing states.<sup>171</sup> The views on security held by the communities of the central Sahel and presented here confirm the fact that the violent extremist groups in the region are more often viewed as a source of protection than as a threat.

These observations therefore lead to the conclusion that religious faith, 'good' 'jihadist governance' and the stigmatisation of the state may help to explain in ideological terms the support provided by women in the central Sahel to violent extremist groups.

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171. Several studies have documented the extent of these views in the central Sahel. See, in particular: International Alert, 2018, Op. cit.; International Federation of Human Rights, 2018, Op. cit.

### 4.2.3 Opportunism

According to the data collected for this report, personal interest may also persuade some women to provide more or less active support to violent extremist groups. This may take different forms, depending on the individual's situation and standpoint. For example, approaching extremist groups may provide opportunities for economic gains that would otherwise be inaccessible. The extremists have a reputation for paying well for services that may motivate some women to offer their assistance as laundrywomen, cooks, nurses, traders or in the care of livestock. Sometimes it is more a case of the stick than the carrot and working for violent extremist groups may be the only way for a woman to keep earning.<sup>172</sup>

For women who are marginalised because of their status (such as slaves and low-caste women) or profession (such as sex workers), being connected with extremist groups may offer a chance of social recognition they could not previously have hoped for. Thus, the extremist groups' integration strategies coincide with the individual aspirations of women seeking social redemption. A good example of this is jihadists marrying low-caste women or orphans. This happened in the Gao region during the occupation in 2012,<sup>173</sup> and is being seen today in the Macina region in Mali.<sup>174</sup>

A similar logic operates in relation to the employment of sex workers by violent extremist groups as sources of information, as demonstrated again in Macina. Sex workers enjoy unparalleled access to soldiers deployed at military outposts and are therefore a source of tactical intelligence from the frontline (as probably happened in the case of the Boulikessi attack mentioned above). In exchange for their cooperation, these women receive financial remuneration from the extremist groups and also social legitimisation in the new order being established. It may also be assumed that they are further motivated and reassured by promises of access to paradise and social redemption in the hereafter for their support of the sacred cause after a life of sin. In this case too, involvement in violent extremist groups effectively means a continuation of existing behaviour, without any disruption to everyday life. However, a reorientation of the purpose of these behaviours means women's motivational framework has been completely transformed.

## 4.3 Gender relations and the mobilisation of men

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### 4.3.1 Galvanising the combatants

Even if they don't participate actively in the war effort themselves, women can encourage men to take part and fulfil the social duty they are deemed to have by virtue of the dominant ideals of masculinity. The village mini surveys confirm that women encouraging men to mobilise in support of violent extremist

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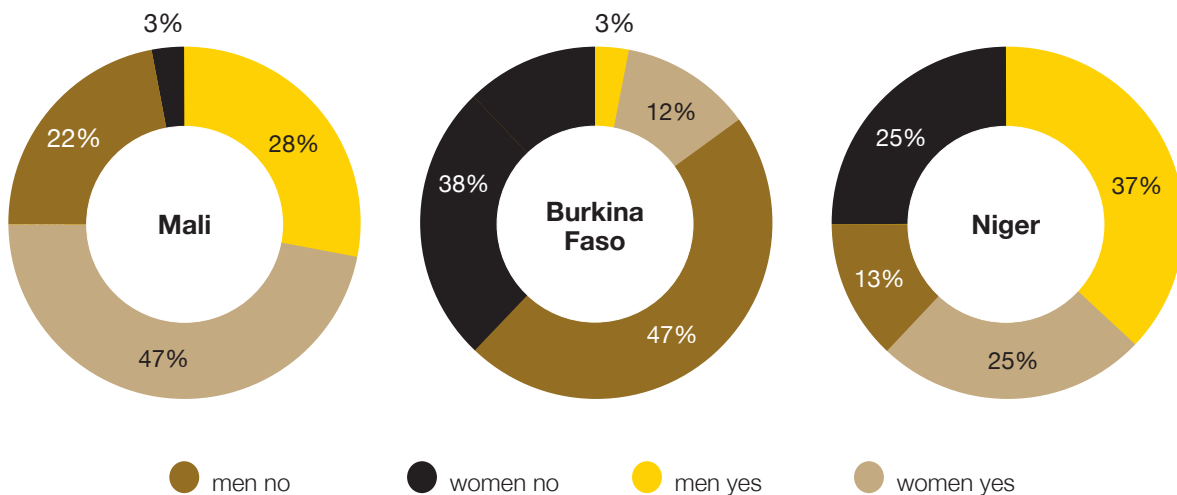
172. Interview with experts and people from the target regions.

173. G. Possémé-Rageau, 2013, Op. cit.

174. Interview with a research expert (male) from the Mopti region.

groups is a widespread phenomenon, reported by 75% of respondents in Mali, 15% in Burkina Faso and 62% in Niger. The national surveys conducted in Mali paint a similar picture, indicating that the individuals who exert the most influence on men deciding to join (or leave) an armed or jihadist group are primarily their wives and mothers.<sup>175</sup>

**Mini survey results 13:** Are there women who encourage men to mobilise in support of violent extremist groups (with songs and accolades etc.)?



The way women encourage men to join the fighting may take very different and often explicit forms: ranging from direct advice to preaching with a religious message, offering role models with an educational purpose, public accolades and mythologising. The arguments used are also very varied. Women may exhort men to avenge the death of a loved one, protect the community, fight for the honour of the family, demonstrate courage or aspire to a glorious death.<sup>176</sup>

This is in keeping with a deeply rooted tradition. Telling stories of warriors' exploits, glorifying the martial virtues of the hero and encouraging men to demonstrate their bravery are favourite subjects for popular songs and traditional poems in the communities of the central Sahel, and not only in Fulani milieu. They form a cultural repertoire related to the development of each community's creation myths. In the context of the asymmetrical conflict raging in the central Sahel, women can adapt this repertoire and update it to urge men to emulate and engage in similar feats.<sup>177</sup> Several testimonies confirm that this is a strategy often used to support violent extremist groups throughout the central Sahel. "Women often speak out during sermons in the villages to express their love for the jihadists."<sup>178</sup> "We [women] encourage our children to join [the violent extremist groups] so that they don't get left behind, so that they become the

175. Z. Gorman, and G. Chauzal, 2019, Op. cit.

176. Interviews with an NGO leader and a security expert (male) conducted in Bamako and Ouagadougou.

177. The observers noted that these types of encouragement serve the same social function as the exhortations directed at young Sahelians to demonstrate their worth by embarking on migration. Interview with a human rights expert (male), Niamey.

178. Interview with a villager (male), Abala.



bravest and the best.”<sup>179</sup> “I’ve talked to women who have given their children their blessing to go and avenge their dad who was killed by the DFS.”<sup>180</sup>

### **4.3.2 Access to women**

According to several observers, young men from the central Sahel may approach violent extremist groups, driven by the hope of obtaining the resources – prestige, status and income – that will facilitate their access to women and to marriage. The demonstration of fighting prowess may become an asset in gaining the recognition and respect of the bride’s family: “The combatant who returns to the village is seen as a powerful man and he is feared.”<sup>181</sup> Bearing arms confers a status that means social hierarchies can be reset or even overturned and men can claim the hands of women they would never have dared to hope they could marry: “If you were a nobody and couldn’t approach a girl, with this weapon you become all-powerful and maybe the girl will change her opinion of you.”<sup>182</sup> The spoils of war or the payments combatants receive can provide them with the capital to pay the bride price: “You are only seen as a man when you can pay the bride price for your wife. Once you reach a certain age, if you are not in a position to pay the bride price (and it’s expensive among the Fulanis), you can join these groups and commit acts of banditry and then pay the bride price.”<sup>183</sup>

On the other hand, in some communities in Liptako-Gourma it is not unusual for combatants to find themselves attracting girls’ affections. In comparison with other, older suitors, the fighters may well be seen as partners who are a closer match to the prevailing model of masculinity. In the words of a young man from Abala: “Lots of women who are in the villages where they [the members of violent extremist groups] live don’t like men apart from jihadists. By nature women like combatants. Today you have to be a jihadist to have an easy marriage.”<sup>184</sup> Such perceptions appear to be particularly widespread in the regions of Mopti and Tillabéry. The results of the mini surveys corroborate the impression that, in the villages of the central Sahel, the appeal of armed men is consistent with the level of control exerted by violent extremist groups in the different regions.

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179. Focus group (women), Siniré.

180. Interview with a security expert (male), Ouagadougou.

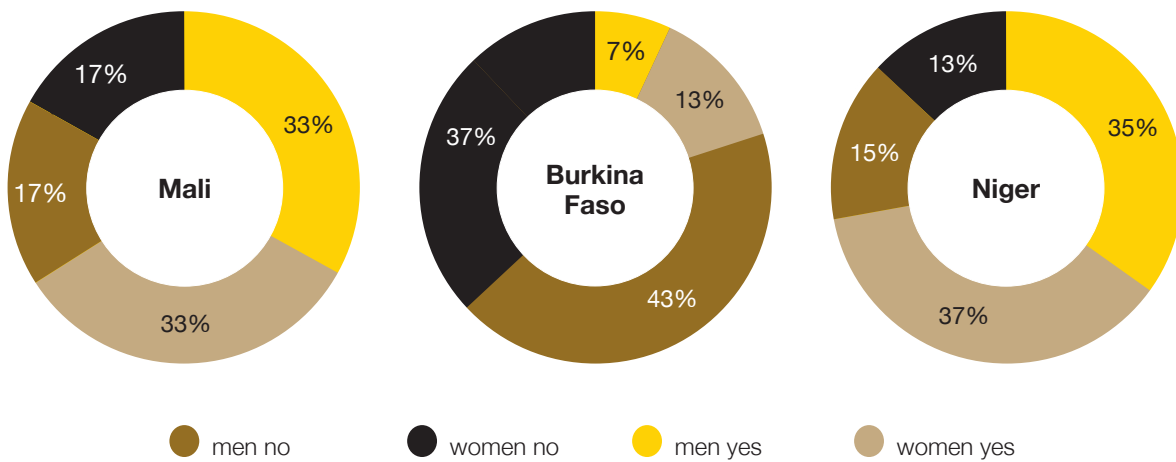
181. Interview with a Burkinabe member of the DSF (male), Dori.

182. Interview with a Burkinabe researcher (male), Ouagadougou. Similar comments were made during an interview with an NGO leader (male), Bamako.

183. Interview with a security expert (male), Ouagadougou.

184. Focus group (men), Abala.

**Mini survey results 14:** Do women prefer to have an armed man as a husband?



### 4.3.3 Social expectations and stigmatisation

It has been seen that the social norms associated with masculinity shape expectations in relation to the ability of men to fulfil their responsibilities as protectors, especially with regard to women and the community. Avoiding these expectations runs a real risk of stigmatisation, contempt and social sanction, as evidenced by focus group respondents, both men and women. “A man must defend his family and his community. Any man who doesn’t do that is a coward.”<sup>185</sup> “A man who doesn’t take up arms when his neighbours do brings shame on his family.”<sup>186</sup> “Men who refuse to take up arms are cowards, bad people and swindlers.”<sup>187</sup> The mini surveys carried out in the villages clearly show that this view is widely held. In addition, it is interesting to note that it is primarily women who believe that, in response to the insecurity they face in Liptako-Gourma, men who refuse to take up arms to protect their communities should be viewed as cowards.

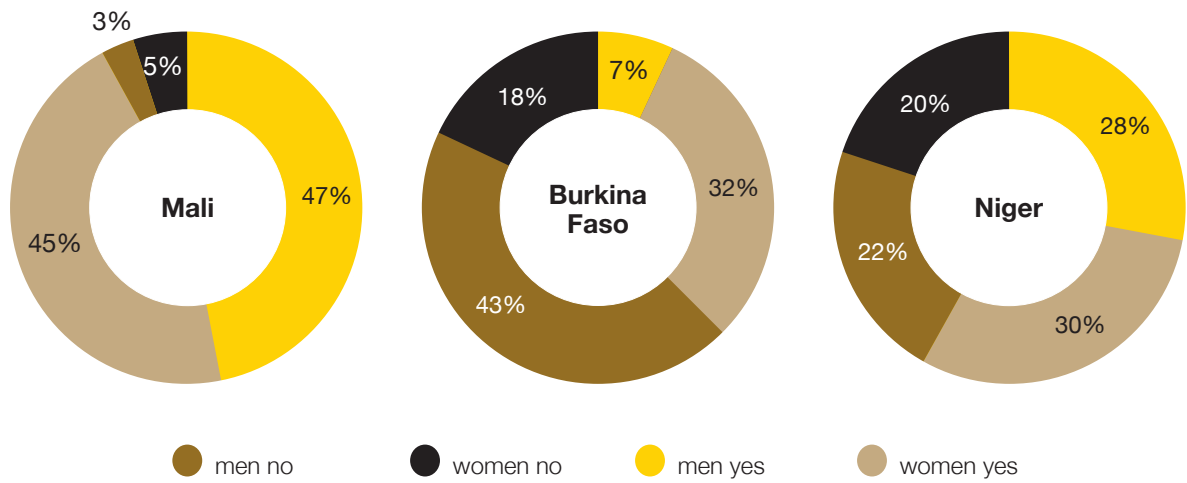
185. Focus group (men), Siniré.

186. Focus group (women), Sampara.

187. Focus group (women), Siniré.

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**Mini survey results 15:** In a situation of insecurity, are men who refuse to take up arms to protect their communities cowards?



In a context characterised by a growing demand for protection,<sup>188</sup> these observations corroborate the theory that the pressure to conform to the prevailing social norms, including those resulting from gender relations and expectations, may contribute to men enlisting in violent extremist groups in the central Sahel.

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188. As shown by various studies. See, in particular: Institute for Security Studies, 2016, Op. cit.; International Alert, 2016, Op. cit.; UNDP, 2017, Op. cit.; International Alert, 2018, Op. cit.

Armed police patrol the Goudebo refugee camp near the border with Mali, Burkina Faso.  
PHOTO: © JOERG BOETHLING/ALAMY



## 5. Conclusions

As the central Sahel faces an escalation in violence, this study has sought to clarify the relationship between violent extremism and gender relations in the region with the aim of contributing to the overall understanding of the causes, dynamics and consequences of the rise in violent extremism. Analysis of the data presented here suggests that the interactions between men, women and violent extremist groups, both passive (acts of violence and the imposition of gender norms) and active (voluntary participation in political and military action), are not uniform throughout the central Sahel.

The differences in perceptions of security are more marked in relation to nationality than to gender. This bears out the theory that violence against civilians, including women, is inversely proportional to the control exercised by the armed actors in a particular area. In the places where the extremist groups have a stronger hold, such as the regions of Mopti and Tillabéry, it would be counterproductive for them to support abuses against communities. However, in a contested area, such as in the Burkina Faso Sahel, attacks against civilians may form part of a deliberate strategy of intimidation to support the progressive integration of the armed groups. The level of management and coordination within the violent extremist groups and the different political courses of the countries concerned also help to explain the differences in the ways the armed groups operate and how they are perceived. In all cases, men rather than women seem to be the main targets of attacks perpetrated by the various armed entities throughout the Sahel, including violent extremist groups. The women in the region tend more often to be indirect victims who are not generally subjected to a deliberate campaign of military aggression, armed violence or systematic rape by the violent extremist groups active in the central Sahel.

In the areas under their influence, the violent extremist groups strive to establish rules and institutions to discipline communities and institute power relations in accordance with their ideology. This 'jihadist governance' often takes a strongly gendered approach, combining elements of continuity and disruption of the social norms of rural communities in Liptako-Gourma. The accentuation of the differences in roles and rank within a society under Sharia law, which undermines equal rights, is not very different from the extreme and oppressive patriarchy experienced by women on a daily basis at home and in the rural communities of the central Sahel. Similarly, the violent extremists seek to appeal to the societal imagination rooted in Fulani tradition to present the domestic segregation of women as comparable to an aristocratic privilege, in contrast to the servile constraints of toil in the fields.

Some other measures of 'jihadist governance' may appear progressive with regard to gender. The violent extremists' challenging of non-Islamic traditions (hierarchical rankings, social prohibitions and enormous increases in the bride price) contributes in particular to reducing the restrictions on consensual marriage, including for previously marginalised categories of women who may pragmatically lend their support to the integration of violent extremist groups without fully subscribing to their ideology. These observations suggest that the apparent relative acceptance of the 'jihadist governance' of the violent extremist groups may also be explained by its capacity to resonate, albeit somewhat ambivalently, with the imagination and aspirations of certain fringes of rural communities, including women and young people.

The active participation of women in the combat activities of violent extremist groups in the central Sahel still appears to be extremely rare, even though the theory may be posited that the groups linked to Islamic State are less reluctant to allow the mobilisation of women in combat operations. Nevertheless, away from the forward bases and frontlines, women's actions can ensure the performance of the key roles that support the efforts of violent extremist groups in village communities. There are many women, especially in the Mopti region, who support violent extremist groups through auxiliary roles in the areas of logistics, supplies and collecting money and information. These observations once more suggest that, despite the disruption of the social order due to the advance of the violent extremist groups, for the women of Liptako-Gourma the prevailing experience is the continuity of everyday behaviours integrated into the dominant gender model. However, a reorientation of the purpose of these behaviours means women's actions are rooted in the prospect of a historic transformation, which helps to reinforce the motivational framework for women supporting violent extremism.



It should nevertheless be noted that the conflict in the central Sahel has the capacity to reshape gender relations in the region, although the complexity of the issues and the fluidity of the context means it is not possible at this stage to identify with any certainty the trends triggered by this transformation. On the one hand, the doctrinally justified segregationism and inequality of the violent extremist groups, implemented through coercive and intrusive governance, could serve to reinforce patriarchal absolutism and the marginalisation of the women of the Fulani communities in the central Sahel. On the other hand, the disruption caused by the conflict also opens up opportunities to question the traditional order. In this respect, for example, the women's contributions to the war effort – on the frontline and in the villages – as well as the additional responsibilities taken on by women in relation to household subsistence in response to the large-scale flight of men from their homes, demonstrate considerable potential for a transformation of social roles. This observation was made frequently during the interviews conducted for this report.

The exploratory approach adopted for the research means it is not possible to provide definitive answers to the questions raised. It is therefore essential to continue our research efforts and to seek greater understanding in order to better identify the causes, dynamics and consequences of the rise in violent extremism in the central Sahel. In this respect a gender-based analysis thus provides both a guiding principle and a concrete tool. In fact, it represents a human rights obligation, in accordance with the UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism. In addition, it provides an opportunity to highlight crucial, yet often overlooked, factors in the rise of violent extremism in the central Sahel. The identification of these factors could help in devising more relevant and better designed strategies for preventing and combating this phenomenon.

## 5.1 Recommendations

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### ***Governments of Sahel states***

- Guarantee and strengthen the link between: a) national policies on gender in the Sahel countries; b) national strategies for preventing and combating violent extremism; c) National Action Plans (NAPs) for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on the role of women in peacebuilding and security, especially the key priorities of prevention and protection (particularly against sexual and gender-based violence) and participation to ensure equal involvement of women in informal (community/local level) and formal (national level) peace and security processes.
- Improve the prioritisation and coordination of different national initiatives for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, including by: nominating a national representative in each country; involving all stakeholders working in peacebuilding, human security and governance in designing and monitoring the NAPs; and adopting an appropriate monitoring and evaluation mechanism.
- Guarantee the implementation of the NAPs by means of a holistic (whole-of-government) approach, involving all government ministries (and not just the ministries with a particular focus on women and/or the family) and the transfer of adequate resources into national budgets.

- Ensure, including through measurable criteria, the inclusion of women and their national and especially local representative bodies in the design and implementation of national and regional strategies to prevent and combat violent extremism. Ensure they participate in and have real ownership of these strategies.
- Guarantee strict respect for legislative positive discrimination measures that aim to promote women's leadership in the political and economic spheres, at the level both of central and of decentralised and regional institutions.
- Strengthen the legislative, institutional, medical and social measures to penalise GBV, protect the victims, ensure treatment for the psychosocial impacts and bring charges against the perpetrators.
- Ensure provisions for preventing, protecting and combating domestic violence are adopted and respected. Target the close links between the GBV perpetrated in private spaces (domestic violence) and in public spaces (militarised violence) in the context of conflict, to stop the trivialisation of violence against women that provides fertile ground for violent extremism to gain a foothold.
- Unequivocally condemn any form of GBV perpetrated by the DSF of the countries of the central Sahel and their allies in the context of the fight against violent extremism and adopt a robust legal framework that can gain the trust of survivors, taking into account the specific vulnerabilities and sensitivities of women and men in the region.
- Restrict, manage and rigorously monitor the use of self-defence militias in order to stem, if it cannot be stopped completely, the community drift that contributes significantly to violent extremist groups gaining hold in the central Sahel.
- Guarantee that marriage practices in the different countries conform strictly to the criteria for free consent by the spouses, including by prohibiting early and forced marriage and imposing legal limits on the amount of the bride price.

### ***Donors and international partners of the Sahel states***

- Ensure that the international and national strategies to combat violent extremism that are funded in the central Sahel systematically include a gender dimension, in accordance with the provisions of the UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism. In concrete terms, this means greater consideration of the specific needs of women and girls in a context of violent extremism; more in-depth analysis of the role of gender-related social relations and norms in violent extremism; and anticipation of the impact (positive and negative) of these strategies on women and girls.
- Avoid standardised responses that often reproduce the dominant point of view of urban settings. To this end, the gender policies and strategies to prevent and combat violent extremism in the countries of the central Sahel must be adapted to the specific needs, aspirations and demands of women from rural and marginalised areas in order to ensure the relevance of these policies in relation to the realities on the ground where the violent extremist groups have most control.
- Ensure monitoring, evaluation and sharing of lessons learned in relation to the strategies to prevent and combat violent extremism in the central Sahel, including through the systematic use of gender-specific indicators and by organising regional and national workshops where experience can be shared.
- Support empirical research and the dissemination of the results in relation to the roles women play in violent extremism. In particular, provide for better investigation and analysis of the factors that push some women into joining extremist groups.

- Promote mechanisms for oversight, monitoring and accountability in relation to resources acquired to fund the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 NAPs and associated activities.
- Encourage measures to strengthen the education systems in the countries of the central Sahel with the aim of ensuring access to good education for all and tackling school drop-out, especially among girls, including through the adoption of strategies and policies and adequate resource allocation.
- Employ culturally adapted strategies and adequate resources to support income-generating activities aimed particularly at women, to provide for their concrete needs, demonstrate practically the support of the international community and put forward an alternative model of emancipation to that offered by the extremists.
- Strengthen advocacy work aimed at the governments of the countries of the central Sahel so that they work resolutely to tackle the structural issues that enable violent extremist groups to become established and gain control, such as poor governance, corruption, marginalisation of certain communities and abusive practices on the part of DSF.
- Support the opening up of the border regions in the countries of the central Sahel through substantial investment in infrastructure that encourages rather than obstructs cross-border and inter-community contacts and contributes to fair regulation of access to natural resources.

### ***Local and international civil society stakeholders, NGOs and CSOs***

- Invest in building the capacity of women's organisations at all levels through regional advocacy platforms, exchanging and sharing good practice between women's organisations working on gender, peace and security issues in the three countries so that they can participate actively in the development, implementation and monitoring of strategies to raise awareness of, prevent and combat violent extremism.
- Ensure the involvement of male leaders at both the national and community levels in the activities to raise awareness of the role of women in preventing and combating violent extremism, in order to make clear the links between promoting gender equality and strengthening communities' resilience in the face of violence.
- Bring together female leaders from rural areas to develop, implement and monitor strategies to raise awareness about violent extremism and the fight against it. This will enable real benefits to be gained from the considerable influence female leaders have over the decisions made by men, including the decision to join violent extremist groups.
- Support legitimate actors at the local level (religious leaders, artists, models of social success) who can carry and reinforce a message that promotes women's rights, including through the use of tailored communication strategies and protection measures.
- Use tailored and creative communication activities (theatre, radio programmes, concerts and social networks) to encourage the promotion of models of masculinity and femininity that respect equal rights, political and religious freedom and non-violent conflict resolution.
- Strengthen communication and encourage the use at all levels of the provisions of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on the role of women in peacebuilding and security, including in the context of combating and preventing violent extremism.
- Guarantee the protection and strengthen humanitarian responses for civilian victims of the conflict in the central Sahel, and especially displaced persons and refugees. Particular attention should be focused on the material, social and psychological vulnerabilities that are specific to women/girls and men/boys, identified on the basis of a gender analysis.

- Promote progressively and in a culturally appropriate way the right of women to own sources of income and means of production, including land and livestock.
- Invest in the establishment and networking of community centres for women to encourage them to meet, develop their self-confidence, share experiences and develop solutions for women and to promote their social participation.
- Invest in activities to build trust between women from different groups and use the cross-cutting identity of gender to mitigate inter and intra-community tensions.



People travel to the weekly market,  
Burkina Faso.  
PHOTO: © IRÈNE ABDOU/ALAMY





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