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DOGMATISM OR PRAGMATISM?

Violent extremism and gender in the central Sahel

LUCA RAINERI
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Acknowledgements

Author: Luca Raineri, researcher at Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies (Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna), Pisa (Italy)

Research assistants: Amadou Bello, Laura Berlingozzi, Flavie Bertouille, Pascaline Compaoré, Yida Diall, Nafissatou Ide Sadou, Fanta Kone and Cheickna Yaranangore.

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Translation: Heather Stacey

Design: www.NickPurserDesign.com

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

Abbreviations

- DSF** Defence and security forces
- GBV** Gender-based violence
- NAP** National action plan
- NGO** Non-governmental organisation
- UN** United Nations

Map of western Sahel





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

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 (GBV) 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 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.

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 and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara. 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.



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 United Nations (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.

Recommendations

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 the 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



International Alert

346 Clapham Road, London, SW9 9AP, UK

Tel: +44 (0)20 7627 6800

info@international-alert.org

www.international-alert.org



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