



Report on:

Women and armed conflicts on the African Coast

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Introduction

Women in the African coast live in the worst conditions among the women of the African continent as armed conflicts is spread on the African coast with the constant state of instability and war against extremist groups or even wars between them. The region also suffers from extreme poverty and lack of natural resources due to theft by these groups, which negatively affects the right to life and human security of the coastal citizen.

This results in the weakness of state institutions and their inability to play their main roles, and maintain state sovereignty. Despite, extensive interventions and international efforts in the fight against the spread of terrorist groups in the African Coast, there has been no end to the authoritarian abuse of women.

Although women's rights are often treated as a factor of minor importance in the analysis of violent extremism in the Sahel, it is important to acknowledge the significant efforts that violent extremist groups make to control women and ensure that they comply with the behavioral norms of jihadist ideology. Thus, the common perception that women are merely victims of violence and the rules imposed by violent extremist groups, deserves further in-depth analysis.

This report aims to explore the political and security situation in the Sahel and its impact on human rights. Accordingly, the report seeks to understand the extent of the violations that occur to women in that region, which are linked to violent extremism, as evidenced by some statistics. Finally, the report outlines some regional and international efforts to curb these violations and raise women's levels of social and economic equality.

First: Political and Security Effects on Human Rights in the African Coast

The countries of the African Sahel face many political, economic and security challenges that are reflected in social life and affects most of the human rights that an individual should enjoy. One of the most serious threats to human security in the region is the spread of insurgency and terrorist groups and their penetration into internal affairs. The countries of this region have not been able, since their independence, to build a nation-state with stable political institutions, and therefore remain vulnerable to chronic political and security crises.

Terrorist groups have spread since 2012. Terrorist attacks have become daily in the countries of the African Sahel, threatening the safety and security of citizens and negatively reflecting on their right to life. The region is classified as the most fragile region in the world due to the inability of its countries to address the problems of poverty, food shortages, climate change, illegal immigration, human trafficking, and drug trafficking. Forcing the locals to flee across the borders. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), nearly 7,000 people have been displaced from the Tillaberi region of western Niger as a result of the terrorist attacks. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC) report for the year 2020 also indicated that the number of internally displaced people in Burkina Faso rose to 838,548 in 2020, in Mali to 218,536, and in Niger to 226,700 displaced people.

Moreover, a large number of young people may have to join terrorist groups. Statistics show that there are 41 million desperate young people under the age of 25 in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger who are at risk of being recruited by radical extremists or forced to emigrate. About 60% of young

people suffer from unemployment, which pushes them to engage in arms and drug smuggling networks linked to terrorism.

Many terrorist groups are active in this region (particularly in the border triangle between Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso) that owe their allegiance to the al-Qaeda, ISIS and Boko Haram organizations and take on many names for themselves, such as: (Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, and the Movement for Unity and Jihad. These groups failed to fight in the Middle East and has, since 2014, moved to the African coast. At the same time, these groups are competing with each other to extend their influence, control resources, and attract young people. The first half of the year 2020 witnessed an all-out war between the Islamic State and the Nusrat al-Islam Group, and the Armed Conflict and Events Data website (ACLED) recorded 34 armed clashes between the two groups, which led to the killing of more than 300 fighters in light of the differences between these groups over the distribution of the ransom of the hostages, and about doctrinal and ideological differences.

During the year 2020, terrorists in the African Sahel launched 7,108 armed attacks against national armies and civilians, resulting in the loss of 12,519 lives. The fight against terrorism and rebel movements also resulted in the killing of Chadian President Idriss Dabi in April of this year 2021 after his participation in clashes near the capital, N'Djamena.

In the middle of this year, France decided to withdraw from the operations it led to combat terrorism in the African Sahel for several reasons, including the continuous increase of terrorist groups in the African Sahel, as well as the locals' unwillingness to have the French forces present, which places many conditions as if they are under its tutelage. French President Emmanuel Macron has

rejected the two coups in Mali, and has threatened to withdraw his forces from the region if the coup leaders make a deal with the Islamist rebels facing France.

Second: The humanitarian situation of women in the African Sahel

The African Sahel region contains a large proportion of young men and women, who are exposed to pressures and fears as a result of the armed attacks carried out by the rebels. The United Nations has warned that about 29 million people in the African Sahel need protection and humanitarian assistance, about five million more than previous year 2020.

During an armed conflict, the rule of law collapses, and freedom of movement is restricted. Moreover, institutions and services weaken, resulting in a lack of access to social services, information, food and livelihoods. These conditions disproportionately affect women, especially female-headed households, who are more vulnerable to stress and less able to absorb shocks as a result of the prevailing gender inequality, cultural constraints, and feminization of poverty. Conflict affects women and men differently, and existing gender inequalities are exacerbated in times of conflict.

The conflict in the Sahel increases women's vulnerability to gender-based and sexual violence as Islamist organizations and militias deliberately target women.

Women in the Sahel are victims of systematic attacks and kidnappings. They are also forced into slavery as sex slaves, informants and even fighters. In addition, women in conflict are victims of rape, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, sterilization, forced marriage, as well as many other forms of sexual violence. High risks and exposure to gender-based and sexual violence

during conflict lead to an increase in reproductive health problems, which are exacerbated especially with the lack of access to health services.

The honor of a community or family is closely linked to women and their bodies. Thus, it is believed that targeting women's bodies causes symbolic harm to the community or ethnic group of the women. The main motivation of sexual violence is societal stigmatization. Sexual violence is the only crime for which society often reacts by stigmatizing the victim rather than prosecuting the perpetrator. Many men have been accustomed to inflicting physical harm on women without punishment. Sometimes they even have the support of the community that stigmatizes the victim rather than offender, and even the law as there is no deterrent law in a large number of countries for the crime of physical violence and rape.

As a conclusion to what has been mentioned, it is expected that women will be deprived of political, civil and economic rights, excluded from education and public work, and being pushed into early marriage.

Third: The reality of violations of women's rights in numbers and statistics

Overall, it is estimated that 30% of women have experienced at least one form of gender-based violence in their lives since the age of fifteen. A multi-country study by the World Health Organization (WHO) among women of childbearing age revealed that the prevalence of overall sexual violence ranged from 15% in urban areas (ex: Japan) to 71% in rural provincial areas (ex: Sahel countries).

Within the Sahel, women and girls make up a large proportion of the internally displaced and refugee population. In Burkina Faso, 51% of the displaced are girls under the age of 14. Burkina Faso and Mali are also among the top six countries in terms of the prevalence of child, early and forced marriage.

Seventy per cent of women in Niger have been beaten or raped by their husbands, father or brother. Also in Niger, only one in ten girls completes secondary education. Girls in poor families are pulled out of school due to lack of necessary resources, and the need to take care of their children because they often marry and become mothers at a very young age.

In Mali, 1,443 cases of sexual violence were reported between January and August 2020, of which 13% were perpetrated by armed groups. Surveys have shown that sexual violence is the most common form of gender-based violence. It has increased on average by nearly 12% due to the coronavirus, with child marriage, female genital mutilation and sexual exploitation. This violence causes immediate harm and has intergenerational effects. For example, the gender-based violence sub-cluster in Mali reported that in the same cited period nearly 100 children were born as a result of rape.

In Burkina Faso, reports from this year indicate that FGM and child marriage have increased with increasing physical and food insecurity. Human Trafficking, violence by armed actors, and trauma from witnessing violence are also among the concerns identified by women, adolescent girls and organizations.

Overall data on humanitarian needs for 2020 and subsequent humanitarian response plans for Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger indicate that 2.3 million women and girls are in need of gender-based violence prevention, mitigation and response services. Only 1.2% of funding requests through the three countries'

humanitarian response plans were for social gender-based violence as well as economic and health needs.

Fourth: Mitigating Violations

Leaders of governments, governmental organizations, nonprofits, and international and local allies alike, need to unite in order to protect and empower women in the Sahel. The agenda of "Women, Peace and Security" adopted by the United Nations pays close attention to issues of gender equality. It also aims to push towards strengthening women's roles in African societies, and combating violence against women in its various forms.

The African Sahel group announced in July 2020 the creation of a regional body at the permanent secretariat of the Sahel group to follow up on women's issues. It also ensures the implementation of relevant international conventions and charters. The commission includes representatives of civil society, parliament and rural women

In July 2021, the first lady of Mauritania, Dr. Maryam Fadel, called for the right of women in the countries of the African Sahel to participate in the areas of security and justice. She urged on those in charge of the justice and security sectors, and commanders of the military and security staff to encourage the participation of women in these professions and work to overcome the obstacles that stand in their way. The Mauritanian initiative is a top priority for the Sahel countries, in light of the high rates of violations and gender inequality during the armed conflict that has prevailed in the region.

The Sahel and West Africa Club Secretariat and the OECD Development Center organized a "DevTalk" dialogue, which touched upon some strategies. Some of

which are: gender-awareness activities in the military, better cooperation, and integration of communities, religious leaders and faith-based organizations, a multi-sectoral response to sexual violence. It also included a set of comprehensive services for victims and survivors aimed at reducing the effects and consequences of harmful practices and preventing further trauma.

In addition, the World Bank is financing the "The Sahel Women's Empowerment and Demographic Dividend Project", which is implemented by the governments of Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. This project aims to enhance the empowerment of women and adolescent girls, and their access to quality services for education, reproductive health, and child and maternal health. This project is being implemented with technical support from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) with \$295 million in funding from the International Development Association (the arm of the World Bank that helps the world's poorest countries).

Finally, there is the Gender Equality and Development Initiative in Africa within the African Development Strategy 2063. It focuses on the development of feasible programs for implementation to put an end to the abuse of African women. This initiative aims to equalize and empower African women economically and socially. It also aspires to ensure their participation in issues of security and peace within their societies.

Conclusion

Perhaps these deliberate violations of women's rights in the African continent in general, and in the African Sahel in particular, are the product of gender-biased colonial-era policies. Women in the African Sahel countries face

human rights violations unparalleled to elsewhere in the world. Despite the region's diversity, its women have in common their experiences of sexual discrimination, abuse and violence, political marginalization, and economic deprivation.

In light of the coronavirus conditions, the humanitarian response in the central Sahel region still does not prioritize the prevention and mitigation of gender-based violence. Despite the numerous initiatives and activities in the field of gender equality, Sahel women lack safety and peace as a result of the military conflicts that dominate the region.

In the end, it is not possible to reduce these violations of women's rights, except by raising the levels of free education for them in that region. This results in producing generations that are aware of and reject violence and extremism. Thus, creating comprehensive awareness in environments where poverty is widespread.