

A gendered analysis of the wave of coups and terrorism in the Sahel¹

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Abstract:

The prevalence of coups and terrorism in the Sahel raises serious human security concerns due to their devastating impacts on socio-economic stability, state fragility, and democratisation, among other serious issues. The current wave of coups and terrorism opens avenues for asking questions about the progress of democratisation in Africa, issues of human security, the protection of human rights, and, more specifically, how the prevalence of violence affects women's lives. Hence, it is imperative to interrogate the resultant impact that the prevalence of coups has on the protection of women's rights in the region. Therefore, this paper examines the gendered implications of the prevalence of coups and terrorism in the Sahel region. Using Nigeria and Burkina Faso as case studies, it argues for a gendered understanding of the differential impact that the increasing rate of terrorism, military coups, and worsening state fragility have on women, as well as their corresponding effects. This is in response to the prolonged Boko Haram insurgency in north-eastern Nigeria, which has resulted in a significant loss of life, intense political instability, including the kidnapping of over 300 schoolgirls, and the September 2022 military coup led by Captain Ibrahim Traoré in Burkina Faso, which suspended the constitution and showed no signs of progress towards democratisation. The paper employs qualitative methodology and a thematic analytical framework to interrogate the gendered implications of coups and terrorism for women in the Sahel region. It demonstrates that a gendered analysis of coups and terrorism in the Sahel enables relevant organisations to put in place preventive or mitigating measures to manage hostilities, protect human security, and promote gender equality.

Keywords:

Coups;
democratisation;
gendered analysis;
human security; Sahel;
terrorism; women.

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Introduction

The Sahel has become a region plagued with violent conflicts, coups, terrorism, and insurgencies. The prevalence of these conflicts is not a new phenomenon, as the first coup in the region dates to the 1960s, which created a massive contagion effect across the region. According to the Centre for Preventive Action (2024), a confluence of factors has plagued most of the Sahel region's countries with violent extremism since their independence in the 1960s, leading to intricate security and humanitarian issues. Ojoko (2022) highlights that these factors include declining economies, the climate change crisis, and an unstable political system, factors deeply connected to geopolitical analysis (Morgado, 2023).

Albert and Albert (2022) assert that over the past ten years there has been an increase in violence, war, and crime that crosses national borders and presents serious problems for countries inside and outside of the Sahel region. The Centre for Preventive Action (2024) adds that along with the Boko Haram insurgency in Northern Nigeria, violent extremism persists throughout the Lake Chad Basin, which is where Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria converge. They note further that the problem of terrorism has expanded from its original concentration in North Africa and the Maghreb region to encompass the entire African continent through the Sahel. Vanguard (2021) explains that due to the rising development in the Sahel, the focus on state terrorism and its connections to coups, security, and stability throughout Africa has become a topic of interest. The upsurge in coups in countries like the Republic of Guinea and Burkina Faso and the undying Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria have further deepened this interest.

The growing interest in the Sahel region is further consolidated by the increasing attacks on African Union (AU) member states, which appear to be expanding to new states due to concerns about terrorist attacks in previously safe havens such as Togo, Benin, Ghana, and Eswatini, among others (British Broadcasting Corporation, BBC, 2022). The violence in the area is causing a severe humanitarian crisis, jeopardising regional security, and leading to the loss of lives and property (Zuva & Ojo, 2023). Separate from the general consequences that the prevailing coups, terrorism, and violence have on the region, it is important to consider the human security dangers that the crises have. War particularly affects women, leading to a likely regression of women's rights in the region, restrictions on accessing sexual and reproductive healthcare, reduced economic autonomy, and a deterioration of political decision-making in the face of increased violence. This paper presents a gendered analysis of the increasing violence in the Sahel region.

The paper examines the gendered implications of the prevalence of coups and terrorism in the region. Using Nigeria and Burkina Faso as cases, it proposes a gendered understanding of the differential impact that the increasing rate of terrorism, military coups, and worsening state fragility have on women as well as their corresponding

effects. The paper acknowledges the devastating physical, financial, human, and economic consequences of violence while underscoring the need for an investigation into its differential impact on women. It argues that a gendered analysis of coups and terrorism in the Sahel enables relevant bodies to implement preventive or mitigating measures aimed at managing hostilities, safeguarding human security, and promoting gender equality.

The paper begins by probing the discourse on the prevalence of violent conflicts in the Sahel, with a specific focus on coups and terrorism. This section provides context for Burkina Faso and Nigeria as selected cases, as well as the general effects that violent conflicts have on afflicted regions. The second section elucidates the concept of gendered analysis and highlights the disproportionate impact of violent conflicts on women. The third section interrogates the gendered implications that the increasing violence in Nigeria and Burkina Faso have on women and women's rights. The final section concludes the paper while making some relevant recommendations.

Methodology

Qualitative methodology was employed to interrogate the gendered implications of coups and terrorism in the Sahel. This allows the paper to engage in an in-depth analysis of the differentiated impact that coups and terrorism have on women. The study uses Burkina Faso and Nigeria as cases to contextualise the discussion. Using Burkina Faso to represent countries that have recently experienced coups and Nigeria for terrorism due to the long-lived Boko Haram insurgency creates suitable ground to interrogate the human security implication of the prevailing violence in the Sahel. The paper makes use of secondary data primarily journal articles, official reports, news articles that have been written on the precarious situation in the Sahel. The use of secondary data allows the researcher to do an extractive data collection enabling it to provide a different lens to the discourse. Thematic analysis was used as the analysis tool to structure the paper's analysis on how coups and terrorism affect women differently. A thematic analytical framework allows for the paper to structure its discussion based on themes drawn from literature and available data.

A feminist perspective of violence

A feminist perspective on violence explains why women are more susceptible to it than men. Conway (2016) asserts that a theory of violence that lacks a feminist perspective and is gender-blind inherently presents the dominant patriarchal viewpoint. Therefore, the hypothesis only partially reflects how male subjects perceive and experience violence.

Cockburn (2004: 30) asserts that a feminist perspective offers a deeper comprehension of violence by examining its relationship to and integration into

patriarchal power structures. Olaitan (2020) explains that feminism specifically aims to address the underlying causes of patriarchy and gender inequality by attributing women's subjugation to deeply embedded institutions and cultural structures. In the process, it calls for a number of changes, including redefining security, women's inclusion, patriarchy, and a gendered view of violence. Hudson (2009: 67) posits that communities that view women as less valuable and have fewer rights than men inherently make them more vulnerable to violence and death. Olaitan (2023a) adds that a feminist analysis of violence centres women as subjects while understanding how patriarchal structures and norms exacerbate their experience of violence.

In applying a feminist perspective to the prevalent violence in the Sahel, we can recognise how patriarchal and restrictive gender norms make women more susceptible to dangers than men. (Olaitan, 2023b) notes that women's bodies are often weaponised during times of war, often manifesting in increased sexual and gender-based violence, being taken as prisoners of war, regression in women's rights, etc. Hence, a feminist perspective allows us to recognise the gendered impacts that war and violence have on women. Applying a feminist perspective to the Sahel region allows us to acknowledge the distinct effects of war on women. The argument is that in times of war, women are much more likely to suffer more than men due to restrictive patriarchal norms and the masculine form that war takes. Sjoberg (2004) argues in her work on gendering global conflict that understanding the causes and consequences of war requires a gendered analysis in line with the feminist tradition of International Relations (IR).

Coups and terrorism in the Sahel

Bøås (2019) posits that the Sahel represents a unique case in Africa due to the increasing number of coups, insurgencies, transnational organised crime, and violent conflicts. As a result of increased foreign intervention in the region, the issue of state stability in the Sahel is receiving more attention than ever before. Albert and Albert (2022) point out that states in the Sahel region struggle with varied degrees of fragility and inadequate state capacity. Bøås (2019) asserts that the region, despite its minimal contribution to global CO₂ emissions, suffers significant negative impacts due to the conflict situation. This unfortunate circumstance further exacerbates the precarious situation of the Sahel region.

The African Terrorism Database (2022) reports that the Sahel has been home to some of the deadliest terrorist groups in the world: Jama'a Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and they are the two most active groups in the area. Terrorist groups have claimed several lives through their attacks, forcing millions to flee their homes both domestically and internationally. The G-5 Sahel Force, Operation Barkhane, and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) are only a few of the several



foreign military missions that have taken place in the region. Apart from terrorism, the region has also seen a rise in banditry, communal violence, and violent extremism, all of which compromise human security in the region (ACRST 2022).

In 2019, there were 408 terrorist activities carried out in the Sahel; this indicates a 32.1% decrease as there were 277 attacks in 2020 (African Terrorism Database, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic, the counter-terrorism efforts by Operation Barkhane, the G-5 Sahel Joint Taskforce, and Malian forces, as well as the reported disagreement between JNIM and ISGS, are some of the reasons for the decline. The Russian Wagner Group assisted the Central African Republic, Mali, and Burkina Faso in addressing the external aspects of their issues (ACRST, 2022). Fasanotti (2022) argues that by involving the Wagner group, the afflicted countries gained the freedom to carry out counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations, free from obligations under human rights laws, enabling African governments to use force as ruthlessly as they please in their military campaigns.

Data from the African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT) indicate that there was an increase in attacks between 2018 and 2019. The attacks were specifically carried out by the Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP) in Nigeria and Niger, JNIM in Mali and Burkina Faso, ISGS in Burkina Faso and Niger, and Boko Haram and its breakaway faction (Apau & Ziblim 2019). As a result, West Africa reported the greatest number of terrorist incidents in Africa between January 2019 and December 2021. Additionally, the African Terrorism Database (2022) reports that during this period, the region saw 2,602 assaults that claimed 10,899 lives. The attacks hit Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, and Benin; during that time, Burkina Faso had a notable increase in the number of fatalities per incident.

Most countries impacted by these recent coups between 2020 and 2022 are at the forefront of the conflict between violent extremism and terrorism. There is concern that terrorist organisations may benefit from the unstable political environment to strengthen their hold and spread to other regions of West Africa and beyond, given the unstable security environment already in place. The influence of illegitimate government changes in the fight against violent extremism and terrorism in Western Sahel, however, is still largely unexplored (ACRST, 2022).

ACRST (2022) reports that there have been roughly 200 military coups on the African continent. Togo successfully carried out the first military coup against Sylvanus Olympio in 1963. Sudan tops the list with seventeen coups. Burundi has witnessed eleven while Sierra Leone and Ghana have both experienced ten. Guinea-Bissau, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, and Comoros combined have reported nine coups, while Mali and the Republic of Benin have reported eight. There have been seven military takeovers in Niger and Chad. Ojoko (2022) confirms that West Africa is both the center of a violent crisis and the continent's hotspot for military takeovers. These coups serve as a constant reminder that autocracies and elected administrations alike are susceptible to military takeovers

(Ubi & Ibonye, 2019). Akufo-Addo (2022) stressed that certain African countries repeatedly undergo unconstitutional government changes due to a variety of factors, such as poor governance, political instability, a failure to grasp opportunities, marginalisation, violations of human rights, an inability to accept electoral defeat, and the manipulation of constitutions through unconstitutional means to further narrow personal interests.

The recent surge of violence in the Sahel is not a new phenomenon, as most of these states encountered political instability in one form or another following their independence in the early 1960s. McGowan and Johnson (1984) explicate that a military coup typically overthrew a democratically elected government, or a counter coup overthrew another military dictatorship. The resulting security conditions brought on by the guaranteed political instability adversely affected the states' overarching developmental goals. A movement for multi-party democracy in the late 1980s and early 1990s resulted in the adoption of multi-party democracy in several African countries, notably those in West Africa and the Sahel. However, numerous disruptions have plagued this movement, most recently in 2022.

Rizk (2021) reasons that the threat of terrorism has disproportionately affected most Sahel countries. He notes that factors such as poor governance, historical grievances, weak institutions, and porous borders, contribute to the increased violence. Additional factors include impunity, poverty, absence of the rule of law, injustice, corruption, and a lack of economic possibilities. At its 455th meeting³ the AU Peace and Security Council identified several factors that contribute to the spread of violent extremism and terrorism in the Sahel region. A number of factors contribute to the proliferation of violent extremism and terrorism in the Sahel, including the absence of the rule of law, violations of human rights, prolonged and unresolved wars, discrimination, political isolation, socioeconomic marginalisation, and poor governance. ACRST (2022) explains that these factors have served as stimulants for violent extremist and terrorist groups to broaden their goals, capacities, and geographic reach throughout Africa, with disastrous effects on both economic growth and public safety.

The international community has responded to the worsening security situation in the Western Sahel through numerous military deployments both internationally and regionally. Nonetheless, terrorist activities have persisted despite the deployments. ACRST 2022 notes that a resurgence of coups d'état around the region has threatened to exacerbate an already unstable situation, even as the AUC and its allies are devising creative strategies to curb the scourge.

³ See, 455th PSC Reports. <https://www.peaceau.org/en/article/455th-meeting-of-peace-and-securitycouncil-communique-and-report>

The Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria

Boko Haram gained international prominence with the kidnapping of 274 schoolgirls in Chibok, Nigeria, in April 2014 (NigerianEye, 2019). Prior to the kidnapping, the group had already killed hundreds, kidnapped tens of thousands, and displaced nearly two million people (Giplin, 2019).

Boko Haram, a name that roughly translates from Hausa as ‘Western Education is Evil/Forbidden’, stems from the belief that the Nigerian government is morally repugnant, motivated by greed, and reliant on the Christian West (Walker, 2016). This is due to the long-held narrative that, during and after colonisation, only a favoured ethnic elite had access to English and Christian schools, which allowed for access to power and the advancement of commercial and professional careers. They saw the ‘Western’ education system as fundamental to the exploitation, repression, inequality, and dominance that characterised colonialism during the colonial era (Buchanan-Clarke & Knoope, 2018).

Emanating from this radical rejection of Western education, Boko Haram developed into a notorious terrorist organisation. They have so far killed almost 26,000 civilians and forced millions to flee their homes in Northern Nigeria (Amnesty International, 2015). The group, now extending into the Lake Chad region, is carrying out attacks in Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. President Buhari restructured Nigeria’s counter-insurgency strategy and enhanced regional coordination through the Multinational Joint Task Force (Walker, 2016). These developments have significantly reduced Boko Haram’s capacity to maintain territory and launch cross-border attacks (Amnesty International, 2015).

However, Boko Haram’s insurgency has resulted in significant humanitarian losses. Buchanan-Clarke and Knoope (2018: 2) state that thousands of Nigerians have died since the start of the insurgency in 2010, with the majority of the population in north-east Nigeria displaced from their homes and communities. Boko Haram persisted in carrying out attacks throughout 2016 in northeastern Nigeria and the Lake Chad region, including suicide bombings, widespread sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), kidnappings, and forced recruitment, despite the Nigerian Armed Forces and Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNTJF) making significant progress against the insurgency (Zorthian, 2015).

Apart from the disturbance of economic activities and food production, this has led to a significant increase in poverty and deprivation (UNHCR, 2017). Amnesty International (2017) reported that the insurgency has internally displaced an estimated 2 million people in Northern Nigeria, with 80% residing in host communities and the remaining population in camps for internally displaced people (IDPs).

Military coups in Burkina Faso

Yeboah and Aikins (2024) highlight that two military coups occurred in Burkina Faso in 2022 as a part of an African wave of military takeovers. They note that Captain Ibrahim Traoré, who led the second coup, became the country's interim president and subsequently the country's leader. Sawo (2017) asserts that Burkina Faso is one of the few countries in West Africa with a history marred by coups. The first military coup, which took place in 1966, six years after independence, acted as a catalyst for subsequent coups, with military officials overthrowing each other to seize power.

In 1987, the nation's longest period without a coup d'état started. In this year, Blaise Compaoré succeeded in ousting Thomas Isidore Noël Sankara, a Burkinabé military commander, Marxist revolutionary, and pan-Africanist theorist (Murrey, 2018). He remained in power for 27 years, from 1987 to 2014, when he was forced to resign due to widespread public outcry (Ludicon, 2014). In 2015, Burkina Faso witnessed a protest demanding the removal of former President Blaise Compaoré, who had ruled the country for 27 years by 2013. Therefore, the constitution prohibited him from running for president in the 2015 election (Ludicon, 2014). However, Compaoré withstood popular protests and army mutinies demanding his resignation, having previously manipulated term restrictions. He intended to amend the constitution in October 2014 so that he could run for office once more. Since his party held two-thirds of the legislature, the strategy was successful. This triggered demonstrations, which quickly spread beyond the country's capital, Ouagadougou (Taylor, 2014). The protests forced Compaoré to resign from his position and leave the country. November 2015 saw the election of Roch Marc Christian Kaboré as president, and November 2020 saw another election (Sawo, 2017).

Moreover, anger mounted at the proliferation of violent jihadist acts that surfaced in the country in 2016 (Sawo, 2017). Attacks connected to the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda were becoming more frequent. Similar to what happened in Mali, discontent with the government's handling of the worsening security situation and the incapacity to stop Islamist violence was growing among the populace as well as among the security services. On January 11, 2022, the government arrested eight soldiers for allegedly organising a project to destabilise the country's institutions (Al Jazeera, 2022). Under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Damiba, elements of the army captured President Kaboré on January 24 and took control of the country. The leader of the coup condemned the president's tactics against terrorists who practice Islam. Administration after administration has failed to stop the insurgents linked to the Islamic State (IS) and Al Qaeda from spreading bloodshed. Abuses committed by state security forces and militias appear to have aided insurgency recruiting (Sawo, 2017). Due to a combination of frequent coups and jihadist attacks, the country is experiencing a worsening humanitarian crisis.

Numerous factors have contributed to the frequency of military coups that occurred in Burkina Faso between 1980 and 2015. The most significant factor is the military's financial interests being invaded (Sawo, 2017). Thomson (2010) adds that, as the keeper and manager of state violence, the military decided to turn violence against the state and seize political power, despite its obligation to remain obedient to political authorities. Entrusted with the responsibility of protecting the state from violence, the Burkina Faso military instead exploits this authority in reverse to incite military coups and counter coups, ultimately installing themselves as political leaders. Since independence, the Burkinabe army has operated in this manner, meddling in national politics. The military's frequent participation in politics has starved Burkina Faso's long road to democratisation, leaving its neutrality hazy and needle-like (Ludicon, 2015).

Terrorism and coups: Rise and impacts

There are a wide range of devastating effects that arise from violent conflict, such as worsening economic conditions, political instability, state fragility, and humanitarian crises. Mueller and Tobias (2016) emphasise that states experiencing violence often struggle to maintain resilience in the face of conflict, as poverty, instability, violence, and fragility often reinforce each other in a vicious cycle. This lack of resilience in the face of growing violence leads to state fragility such that the state is unable to protect itself from both internal and external threat as seen in most states in the Sahel. They add that the biggest danger to long-term growth and development in afflicted countries is the recurrence of violence (Mueller & Tobias, 2016).

The African Development Bank (ADB) (2009) notes that violent conflicts are one of the three main causes of death on the continent. Furthermore, wars continue to impact people's lives even after the cessation of hostilities. Wars also result in decapitation from sustained injuries and an increase in the prevalence of illnesses such as HIV/AIDS. Conflict-afflicted countries run the risk of increased HIV infections and deaths due to the demands of violence. Human rights violations against civilians and sexual assaults are some of the obvious effects of violent conflicts. Civilians make up the majority of the victims of violent conflict, which leaves them traumatised when they endure or witness horrific incidents such as shootings, killings, rape, torture, and the deaths of family members (ADB, 2009). Indirect impacts include the collapse of public services such as health, education, and political institutions, as well as effects that spread to other countries, such as refugee problems. Additionally, the resulting insecurity has the potential to impede economic activities.

The increasing violence and instability in the Sahel have led to a serious humanitarian crisis, with a large number of displaced individuals now dispersed across the continent. War and violent conflict in Africa exacerbate numerous issues, including poverty and food insecurity, as noted by Zuva and Ojo (2023). African countries experiencing conflict and warfare have a lower development index compared to countries without

wars, as most war-torn countries have the lowest development index and the highest rates of poverty when examining their social indicators (Mueller & Tobias, 2016).

Tankink et. al (2021) write that mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorder often affect 22% of population living in conflict-afflicted regions. They note that 9% of these populations have moderate-to-severe symptoms, demonstrating that violent conflict experiences and mental health are all correlated in a complicated way. Persistent structural violence prevalent in conflict environments can lead to considerable stress and consequently psychological issues that impact an individual's well-being.

What does a gender(ed) analysis entail?

According to Schob and LeBrun (2019), gender analysis is the cornerstone of any gender mainstreaming strategy because decisions must first assess the state of gender equality in a given context. 'Gender analysis involves acknowledging the historical and social inequalities faced by women and aims to inform the design of policies, programmes and projects to address these inequalities' (European Institute for Gender Equality, EIGE, 2019: 3).

To understand the state of gender disparities, gender analysis is useful as it adopts several methodologies and concepts (SIDA, 2015). It employs concepts like gender and sex to differentiate between socially constructed and biological disparities. This distinction is helpful despite criticism that gender is evolving and is dependent on society and norms. Sex denotes biological distinctions between men and women, independent of age, ethnicity, or other factors. When conducting a gender analysis, the disaggregation includes sex. Gender denotes socially constructed distinctions between sexes, the expectations and norms placed on men and women, as well as the definitions of femininity and masculinity. EIGE (2019) explains that, when examining how men and women—girls and boys—relate to one another in terms of their disparate access to opportunities in life, vulnerabilities, and methods for bringing about change, a gendered lens is essential.

Gender analysis provides the data and knowledge needed to incorporate a gender perspective into initiatives, programmes, and policies. It helps to establish the distinctions between and among men and women with regard to their respective roles in society and the allocation of opportunities, resources, limitations, and power within a particular setting. Gender analysis facilitates the creation of solutions that target gender disparities and cater to the distinct needs of both genders.⁴

To identify and address gender inequalities, gender analysis aims to:

⁴ For interesting discussions on these distinctions in IR, see, Kumar et al. (2001), Brittain (2003), Romaniuk and Wasylciw (2010), Romaniuk (2012), Vojdik (2014).

- Recognise that there are differences between and among men and women based on the unequal distribution of opportunities, resources, constraints, and power;
- Ensure that the distinct needs of men and women are identified and taken into consideration at every stage of the policy cycle;
- Acknowledge that policies, programmes, and projects may have differing effects on men and women.

A comprehensive gender analysis not only explains the status of contextual conditions based on gender but also explores the causes and effects of gender disparities on the target group; it helps policymakers comprehend gender inequalities in a given context or sector (Schob & LeBrun, 2019). Examining the root causes of discrimination and gender inequality can aid in setting pertinent and focused goals and actions to abolish gender inequality. Therefore, gender analysis lays the groundwork to ensure that the needs of both men and women are adequately satisfied, thereby enhancing the gender responsiveness of laws and policies (EIGE, 2019).

The impacts of violent conflict on women

The UN Platform for Action (UN, 1995) supports the notion that violent conflict particularly impacts women and girls due to their sex, gender, and associated social status. During conflict, women encounter various challenges, including forced displacement from their homes, property loss, poverty, family separation, and disintegration, as well as victimisation by terrorism, torture, involuntary disappearance, sexual slavery, rape, and abuse. The fact that they play crucial roles in the family system makes them tactical targets of particular significance during crisis situations (Seifert, 1993). The long-term social, economic, and psychologically traumatising repercussions of violence, armed conflict, and war exacerbate these gender-specific effects (UN, 1995).

Modern warfare has severely damaged the lives and dignity of women and girls, as well as the health and educational systems vital to the survival of families and communities. UNFPA (2001) adds that war significantly impacts women's reproductive health issues, rendering them more vulnerable than men due to the pervasiveness of intentional discrimination and gender-based violence in these environments. Conflict makes it difficult to ensure the safety of women and girls as a result of gender-specific risks. Women in conflict and post-conflict settings are a priority demographic; however, this has led to gaps in the design and delivery of support and protection (UNFPA, 2001). Buvé et. al. (2002) report that people are becoming embroiled in a destructive cycle of HIV-related poverty in many regions of Africa. Gender largely determines who is most likely to contract STIs, such as HIV/AIDS.

The rate of new infections rises with armed conflict in all impacted populations, but women and girls are disproportionately more likely to contract the disease than men and boys. According to UNFPA 2008, teenage girls are four times more likely to contract HIV than teenage boys. Risks that have disproportionately affected women and girls include rape, high-risk behaviours, the inability to negotiate safe sex, and sexual exploitation. About 80% of refugees and internally displaced people globally are women and girls, while some women are living in extreme poverty (AU, 2006).

Prior to the early 2000s, rape was not considered a violation of international humanitarian law and was typically downplayed as an unpleasant but unavoidable aspect of war (Brownmiller 1975). Prostitution, forced pregnancy, mutilation of sexual organs, forced oral sex, rape, and other forms of sexual violence serve as an extension of warfare during times of armed conflict (Wilbers, 1994). However, women's activists have repeatedly advocated for the understanding of rape as a deliberate weapon of war, aimed at terrorising civilians, undermining the perceived enemy's morale, and driving them from the battlefield (McKay, 2006). Siefert (1993) argues that rape might be considered the greatest symbolic humiliation of the male opponent because it is a sexual manifestation of violence and a feature of excessive torture. For instance, Tutsi women who survived the Rwandan genocide assert that the perpetrators committed acts of rape and sexual mutilation with the aim of eradicating the Tutsi, rather than serving as an accessory to the slaughter (HRW, 1996).

According to El-Bushra and Lopez (1994), women in armed conflict areas constantly face the risk of intentional or unintentional attacks. Whether they are working in their fields, searching for food, water, or fuel, selling produce by the side of the road, or participating in communal activities, they face the risk of attack or becoming caught in the crossfire. Since women in Africa produce 80% of the continent's food, they are more likely to suffer injuries from land mines during or after armed conflict. As a result, they become incapable of working in the fields (Ashford & Huet-Vaughn, 1997). The tracing of the gendered impact of violent conflicts on women provides a background to the next section on how the prevalence of coups and terrorism in the Sahel leaves women worse off than men.

A gendered analysis of coups and terrorism in Nigeria and Burkina Faso

Gendered impact of terrorism in Nigeria

The whole population in Nigeria feels the effects of the Boko Haram insurgency, but this section focuses on how it affects women and girls. In addition to serving as reward wives and suicide bombers, women are vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence, as well as intimate partner violence.

Kidnap victims, 'reward wives' and suicide bombers

Existing patriarchal norms in the region contribute to the weaponisation of women as targets in war. Boko Haram insurgents frequently use women as weapons, either as kidnapping victims or as suicide bombers, to attract the attention of the government (Bloom & Matfess, 2016). They impose stringent restrictions on women, limit their access to formal education and their reproductive health, and push for women to focus on Islamic education instead. Olaitan (2018) argues that women in Northern Nigeria often face exclusion from public spheres due to restrictive patriarchal norms, poverty, corruption, early marriage, and other factors.

Boko Haram uses the kidnapping of women and girls for practical and political reasons, including to express disapproval at the detention of female members and certain leaders' relatives (Bloom & Matfess, 2016). The most famous of these kidnappings was the 2014 kidnapping of over 200 schoolgirls in Chibok. To achieve their goal, they abducted girls from various religious sects with the intention of causing harm to communities that did not align with their beliefs. They gifted these kidnapped women and girls to their members as 'wives'—a form of reward. The agency of women in the face of the Boko Haram Insurgency is nonexistent, as they do not acknowledge women's power and agency. Therefore, the terrorists either use the entrapped women as suicide bombers or forcefully marry them.

Displacement from homes

ICG (2016) notes that the Boko Haram insurgency has drastically altered the lives of thousands of women and girls, frequently forcing them into new responsibilities outside the home either voluntarily or against their will. The vast majority of the estimated 1.8 million internally displaced persons are women, despite the relatively higher number of male deaths. The gendered consequences of the insurgency stem from the significant debate surrounding women's status in the North-East, which explains why Boko Haram has specifically targeted women (Olaitan, 2018).

Worsened living conditions

The consequences that women suffer are not just the doing of the insurgents alone; the counter-terrorist activities of the government have also negatively impacted women. According to the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA, 2022), Boko Haram bombings, the military's prosecution of suspects, and its policy of clearing contested areas have forced more than a million women and girls to flee their homes. Hundreds of thousands of girls, living in government facilities with inadequate welfare services and healthcare facilities, are vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence. Additionally, women are now entirely responsible for the safety and financial stability

of their families after being separated from their husbands and sons who were either conscripted by force, killed by Boko Haram, or detained by security authorities (GCPEA, 2022).

Psychological element

Ali et al. (2018) report that numerous women and children have experienced psychological trauma due to the negative actions of Boko Haram, the military, police, and civilian JTF. Many women and children have witnessed the deaths of their relatives and the destruction of their homes and communities, leaving them either widowed or orphaned. Shehu Mohammed (2018) revealed that the Boko Haram conflict has left behind a significant number of widows and orphans. He argues that women and children make up 60% of all those living in the IDPs created because of the Boko Haram insurgency.

Increased rate of Intimate partner violence

Mobayode-Ekhaton et al. (2022) carried out a study to measure the increased or otherwise rate of intimate partner violence in Boko Haram affected regions in Nigeria. They narrate that when the insurgency started in 2013, the national rate of intimate partner violence (IPV) decreased from 18 to 16 percent. Nevertheless, this development was not uniform, with rising IPV prevalence rates in the North East (the hotspot of the insurgency). They argue that the concentration of the insurgency in north-eastern Nigeria could potentially link to the increased rates of IPV. During the insurgency, the percentage of women reporting controlling and abusive behaviour from their partners increased in the region affected by the insurgency. During the insurgency, the percentage of women reporting controlling and abusive behaviour from their partners increased in the region affected by the insurgency. Experienced the most significant increase, with women reporting controlling behaviours from their husbands or partners increasing from 60% to 70%.

In addition, women's ability to make independent decisions about their reproductive health decreased in afflicted regions (6 percent vs. no significant difference in non-affected areas). While a greater number of women report having autonomy over major household purchases in both areas, the non-conflict areas saw more growth in the proportion of women with authority over major household purchases than the afflicted areas. The above study shows that women's susceptibility to IPV increases when there is violent conflict, and their ability to make autonomous decisions about their bodies or households decreases. This susceptibility to IPV and loss of autonomy exacerbates the risks they face due to violent conflicts, frequently compounding the broader repercussions that the entire population faces.

Impact on girls' education

GCPEA (2018) reports that the insurgency has led to increased attacks on schools, educational facilities, and assaults on female students, as evident in the numerous kidnappings. They observe that the abduction of schoolgirls or their use as reward wives does not mark the end of the situation; even after their release, they continue to experience a variety of negative traumas. Attacks on educational facilities have had a cascading effect, leading to dire consequences for the possibility of girls continuing their education. These consequences include early marriage, pregnancy, stigma attached to sexual abuse, and loss of education. These attacks often exacerbate pre-existing instances of gender discrimination and harmful behaviour that negatively impact girls and women. Boko Haram's deliberate attacks on educational institutions and kidnappings of schoolgirls have harmed girls' access to education. Many female students recount that an attack on their institution forced them to either completely halt or suspend their education (GCPEA, 2018).

Increased rate of child marriage

Civil society organisations (CSOs), including women's rights advocates in Nigeria, have voiced the belief that instability has led to a surge in child and early marriage rates in the northeast. With an estimated 43% of girls getting married before becoming 18 and 17% before turning 15, Nigeria has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world even before the conflict started. GirlsnotBrides (2018) ranked Nigeria 11th in the world for the frequency of child marriage. The Location significantly influences the frequency of child marriage, with just 10% of girls in southern Nigeria marrying before turning 18, compared to 76% of girls in northern Niger. The trend of young females marrying is further accelerated by attacks on schools, which result in the dropout or expulsion of numerous girls. Studies regularly show that the likelihood of a girl marrying at a young age is substantially increased by the act of dropping out of school, even for brief periods (UNFPA, 2012).

Gendered impact of coups in Burkina Faso

According to Zuva and Ojo (2023), people assume that men bear the most brunt because they are more likely to plan coups, lead military forces, and hold governmental positions. However, both men and women experience the consequences of these coups in different ways, with women bearing an unfair share of the burden. They note that women bear an unfair share of the burden, facing unique challenges in the areas of healthcare, economy, education, social welfare, and security. Acho (2024) notes that beyond the immediate political changes they bring about, coups have far-reaching effects on women and girls.

Restricted access

In Burkina Faso, 50% of boys and only 39% of girls finish high school education. This restricted access to education diminishes women's chances of participating in the economy and sustains poverty cycles. The case of Nigeria is bolstered by the fact that girls who drop out of school are more likely to be coerced into early marriages, which puts them at risk of sexual assault (Zuva & Ojo, 2023). As a method of surviving, they might also consent to transactional sex. This exacerbates the substantial gender disparity, denying girls equal chances for academic and financial success as their peers.

Economic impacts

During times of political instability, the economy takes a huge hit, with most foreign investments leaving the country and small businesses closing (ADB, 2009). As the primary care provider in households, women frequently experience the greatest amount of insecurity since they are expected to care for the family even in the face of hostile circumstances and unstable economic conditions, despite the difficulties posed by increased levels of insecurity. Economic upheavals accompanying coups disproportionately affect women, particularly those employed in informal industries. Economic downturns following coups also severely impact women's livelihoods. Economic instability causes income loss and higher rates of poverty because many women work in small-scale enterprises and the unorganised sector (Acho, 2024).

War targets, displaced persons, abuse victims

Following the coup in 2022, a significant majority of the IDPs and refugees in Burkina Faso were women and girls (Acho, 2024). Girls under the age of 14 accounted for 51% of the IDPs. Women and girls become easy targets in the tumultuous combat environment (Keita, 2023). Coups raise the possibility of SGBV because they seriously destabilise institutions related to security and law enforcement. During these times, there is an increase in cases of sexual assault, intimate partner violence, teenage pregnancies, and sexually transmitted infections.

Burkina Faso's coup in 2022 made already-existing fears worse, further intensifying violence against women, especially in places impacted by the conflict. Amidst the commotion, there were more allegations of domestic abuse and sexual violence, leading to a surge in gender-based violence. The coup also shifted government attention away from social concerns, putting initiatives for women's rights on hold (Acho, 2024). Human trafficking and other forms of exploitation particularly target women and girls uprooted by coups.

Widened gender inequalities

Coups frequently exacerbate already-existing gender disparities by bolstering patriarchal systems that disadvantage women and girls. Instability exacerbates vulnerabilities by restricting women's access to basic services like healthcare and education. Coups force schools and other educational institutions to cease operations, leading to their closure. Unlike their male counterparts, girls experience a greater impact and are unable to complete their education. In Burkina Faso, gender disparity is evident in all aspects, with women consistently perceived as inferior to men (Acho, 2024). Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) widely acknowledge assets, employment, education, access to credit, and basic utilities. Zuva and Ojo (2023) assert that women's vulnerability intensifies due to their inability to secure employment and financial resources in an already challenging environment, even before the coup.

Psychological element

Coups have significant psychological effects on women and girls, as explained in the case of Nigeria. Survivors experience stigma, mental health problems, and physical and psychological trauma. The possibility of future coups is a persistent source of worry for women and children. The stigma associated with experiencing multiple coups perpetuates a persistent fear of future coups (UNSDG, 2024). Political unrest in Burkina Faso has put pressure on the healthcare system, making it challenging for women to get the essential maternity and reproductive health care (World Health Organization, WHO, 2023). Zuva and Ojo (2023) assert that the tumultuous landscape of conflict and political instability often muffles women's voices, concealing their struggles beneath power struggles and violence. Sadly, coups and crises have become the norm in the African context, often ignoring the gendered implications that impact women's agency and rights.

General reflection

The Boko Haram insurgency has disproportionately impacted women in Nigeria for various reasons. The prevalence of terrorist activities leaves them more susceptible to issues such as IPV, displacement from homes, lack of access to reproductive health, an increase in child marriages, an increase in sexual and gender-based violence, being used as suicide bombers, and rewarding wives. Like Nigeria, the coup-induced instability in Burkina Faso has exposed women to increased threats. The closure of educational institutions has exposed young girls to sexual assault and early marriages. The worsening economic conditions force women to shoulder household burdens, leading to a

widening gender gap, an increase in sexual and gender-based violence, and psychological trauma resulting from displacement from their homes and communities.

Conclusion

The prevalence of coups and terrorism in the Sahel raises many questions about the human security concerns and other devastating consequences they have. As discussed, the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria has resulted in the displacement of millions of people from their homes, and the ongoing insecurity has claimed thousands of lives over the years. Often, the major consequence that receives the most attention is the increased insecurity and instability that this violence causes.

Instability forms the base of most dire consequences that affect a region; however, it is not everything. Amid the insecurity, a specific group is more susceptible to the dangers that arise. Different policies and studies, notably the Beijing Platform for Action, highlight that women and girls suffer the consequences of violent conflict more than men. This paper aimed to validate this notion in the context of the increasing violence in the Sahel region. Using a qualitative methodology and a thematic framework, this paper interrogated the gendered implication of coups and terrorism in the Sahel. The paper concentrated on the disproportionate impacts of war and violence on women, using Nigeria and Burkina Faso as case studies. The paper adopted a feminist perspective on violence to guide its analysis, underscoring the significant impact of violent conflict on women's rights.

The paper shows that the coups in Burkina Faso have a differential impact on women, as they bear an unfair share of the unique challenges. In Nigeria, where the insurgency continues, women make up the highest number of internally displaced persons; they are forced to take charge of the household; girls are forced to drop out of school; and there is an increase in early childhood marriage. Furthermore, there is a surge in intimate partner violence, as well as sexual and gender-based violence, which significantly impacts women's reproductive health. The findings from the paper show that there is a gender differential impact of the coup in Burkina Faso and the Boko Haram Insurgency in Nigeria, which leaves women worse off. In these regions, violence erodes the political, socio-economic, and reproductive rights of women, leading to a holistic regression in their rights.

The paper emphasised that any efforts to improve the situation in the Sahel region must recognise the precarious position women find themselves in during conflict situations. The paper urges the Economic Community of West African States—the apex organisation in West Africa—to adopt a gender-responsive approach to resolving the different conflicts that are plaguing the region. This approach will address the unique consequences that women face to ensure a holistic and sustainable resolution to the conflict.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing or financial interests in the production and publication of this study. All disclosed information is correct to the authors' knowledge.

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