

Women's Involvement in Sahel Jihadist Insurgency: Exploring Motivations and Roles

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Abstract

The involvement of women in jihadist insurgencies in the Sahel region is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. This paper investigates the various motivations that drive women to participate in these insurgencies, ranging from ideological commitment, social status, pursuit of security, marital obligation, and a sense of belonging in the midst of prolonged conflict. It also examines the diverse roles women undertake within these movements, including domestic support, recruitment, intelligence gathering, and inciting men to join the fight. Understanding these motivations and roles is crucial for developing effective strategies to prevent and counter women's involvement in jihadist activities, and for providing alternatives and empowerment opportunities for women in the region. The paper adopts the Feminist Security Theory as explanatory framework for the participation of women in jihadi organisations. Using a desktop review of secondary sources, it concludes that though women play diverse roles in jihadist organisations in the Sahel, they are more of supportive roles and less of combat.

Keywords: *Women, Sahel, Jihad, Motivation, Roles*

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Introduction

The Sahel region of West Africa has attracted global attention for its terrorism and jihadist violence and proliferation of non-state armed groups. This is in addition to the regions popularity as one of the poorest regions of the world accounting for some of the poorest and fragile countries in the world. Other factors for which the region has achieved global popularity include its chronic and multidimensional poverty, climate-related crisis, political instability and widespread humanitarian and governance challenges. However, a prominent challenge experienced in the region is its widespread terrorist and jihadi violence especially in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger and Northern Nigeria. These countries are faced with widespread jihadist organisations that exploit the political instability, weak governance and economic deprivation in the region to recruit people and entrench themselves in the region. However, as these groups thrive and expand in the region, women have increasingly become active members and stakeholders of these jihadi groups. Although women have traditionally been viewed solely as victims of political violence and terrorism, enduring displacement, sexual violence, and coercion; increasingly, their roles in violent extremism and jihadism in the region has morphed into more active and violent roles within the groups. In addition, membership of women in terrorist and jihadist organisations have continued to increase, with women representing about 30 percent of terrorist organisations globally (Nacos, 2016).

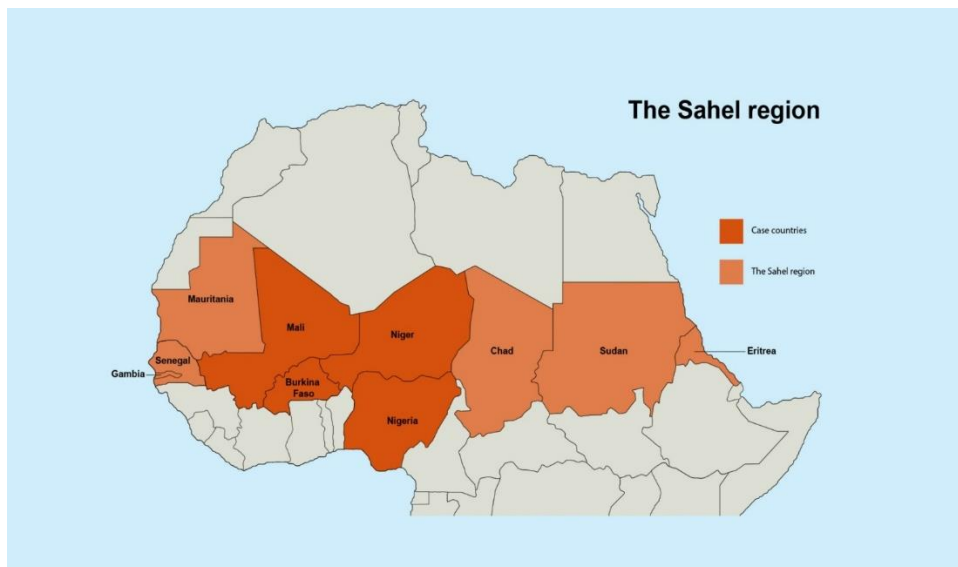
Women in terrorist groups in the Sahel occupy a unique and binary roles as victims— experiencing sexual violence, deaths and attacks, and as they also actively engage in the violence unleashed by the terrorist groups. Women thus experience dual roles of victimhood – and –agency within the groups. Although, essentialist notions of women as naturally peaceful and as victims of political violence and gender are awash in the literature. This fails to recognize the multiple roles women

play in terrorism beyond victimhood and lacking agency. The failure to adopt a gender lens in deconstructing terrorism and violent extremism limits the understanding of the complex and diverse roles of women in jihadi groups and this has strategic implications to counterterrorism measures adopted by countries. This paper examines the motivations for women's participation and membership of jihadi organisations, and the roles they place in the groups with a view to understanding the implication for counterterrorism efforts in West Africa. Understanding this dynamic is crucial for designing effective counterterrorism strategies that can prevent further radicalization and facilitate the reintegration of female combatants. The Sahel region of West Africa has been designated as the hotbed of terrorism in the world (UNDP, 2023). Terrorist and Jihadi groups have in recent decades proliferated one of the poorest and conflict ridden areas of the world, starting with northern Mali and rapidly spreading to the neighbouring countries of Burkina Faso and Niger. Recently, there have been the gradual incursion of these terrorist groups into West Africa coastal states of Togo, Benin, and Ghana recently. (Haidara, 2023). We have also seen a proliferation of these groups in the region and varying types of objectives, governance models, ideologies, and characteristics. Terrorist groups all over the world exploit the unique nature of women and instrumentalise females in achieving their group objectives.

Consequently, the group dynamics of the jihadi groups differ in the roles women are allowed to play within the groups in terms of the level of violence women can perpetrate in frontline, and the senior positions they can occupy. From suicide bombers straddling explosive devices and blowing up themselves and others, to spies, informants, sex slaves, women play wide ranging roles depending on the gender ideology of the terrorist group. However, a large part of the problem is the tendency to fixate on terrorist violence against women, essentialising women only as victims of terrorist violence hereby denying their agency. Several scholars have conducted studies on the increasing and widespread activities of the Islamic based terrorist and jihadist organisations in the Sahel region to determine factors leading to the region fast becoming the global hotbed for terrorism and violent

extremism(Raineri, 2020; Miller, 2021; Pearson & Zenn, 2021). Majority of these studies overlook the role of gender relations, and the motivation and roles of women in jihadi organisations in the Sahel. It is important to understand the motivations of women participating in violent Islamist movements, and to recognize the vulnerabilities and factors that make them susceptible to radicalization. A better comprehension of this phenomenon helps policymakers and practitioners anticipate new and evolving threats concerning women in violent extremism, and will help to enhance the relevance and design of regional and national counterterrorism strategies.

The paper draws on multiple open sources that have published materials on terrorism and jihadist groups and women in the Sahel. Focusing mainly on Niger, Mali, Nigeria and Burkina Faso *the paper explores the following questions: what are the motivations of women participating in jihadi groups in the Sahel? What roles do women they play in such groups?* These questions are grounded in a desktop-based review of discourses on the role of women in jihadist organisations in the Sahel. As the number of female terrorists and suicide bomber rises, it becomes increasingly important to acknowledge and address this threat to societies. By understanding and addressing the root causes of women's involvement, stakeholders can work towards creating a more stable and secure environment in the Sahel, reducing the appeal of jihadist insurgencies and fostering long-term peace and development.



Map of Sahel region. Courtesy NUPI.

Conceptualisation: Sahel Jihadism

The concept of Jihad derives from the Holy Quran to mean ‘holy war’ embarked upon against the enemies of the Islamic religion (Makanda, 2019). The multifaceted meaning of the term for Muslims refers to the inner spiritual struggle to attain the life of a pious Muslims, and the external struggle to create a just and peaceful society undertaken by Muslims as encouraged in the Quran. However, the meaning of the term jihadism which is less explicit has been commonly referred to mean Islamic actors fighting in the name of Islam using armed combat and violent means to achieve strategic goals. The term Jihadism has generally been used to mean different Islamic militancy, and all forms of violence and militancy associated with Islam. However, in recent decades, jihadism which is a subset of Salafism, a revivalist Sunni movement is represented by jihadi organisations such as AL Qaeda and the

Islamic State and their successors and affiliates in various parts of the world. In the Sahel, jihadism is not new as jihadists movements can be traced to the 17th -19th centuries, although the contemporary form of jihadists differs significantly from the earlier forms (Rupesinghe, Naghizadeh & Cohen, 2021). The jihadists in the Sahel have developed a system of governance asserting administrative control over populations while leveraging on local grievances and conflicts to entrench themselves with the people.

Jihadist Insurgency in the West African Sahel

It is no longer news that the Sahel region of sub-Saharan Africa has become the epicenter of global jihadism and violent extremism in the world (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2023; UNDP 2023). Although these groups can be regarded as local franchises and affiliates of global jihadist namely the Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda (AQ) have proliferate the region (Cold-Ravnkilde & Boubacar, 2022), they are also increasing localized in nature(FHI 360 &USAID, 2020. Since the Mali crises in 2012, violent non state armed groups (NSAG) claiming to fight in the name of Islam known as jihadi groups have unleashed terror in a region already plagued with humanitarian condition and climate change crises. As the conflict in Syria subsided, IS and its affiliates have shifted their focus to sub-Saharan Africa, and specifically the Sahel region [Global Terrorism Index, 2023), resulting in the proliferation of the jihadist organizations in the Sahel states especially in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Indeed, the rising rate of jihadism and jihadist organisations in the West Africa Sahel and the violence these groups unleash has exacerbated one of the worst humanitarian crises in a conflict-based region in the world. The grave situation in the region has been attributed to several factors including political instability, climate change, and declining state capacity (Council for foreign Relations,

2024). While highlighting factors responsible for the dire security situation in the Sahel, Hadara (2023), asserts that:

“jihadist movements easily exploit a number of opportunities offered by the Sahelian region, including; the states’ difficulty to control their territories; the extreme porosity of the borders, meaning jihadists can carry out criminal activities without hindrance by moving easily from one country to another; demographics with an exponentially growing youth population (Ngom 2021), and lack of work, which represents an inexhaustible pool fighters for jihadist movements (Haidara and Tounkara 2021).

West African Sahel has been embroiled in more than a decade-long violence and attacks by jihadists which has resulted in the deaths and displacements of millions of people in the region. The region faces massive security and humanitarian challenges and has been identified as a hotbed of jihadist insurgencies and deadly conflicts. The region remains a major challenge to global policy makers as a region in dire crisis including political, economic, environmental challenges (Boas & Strazzari, 2021; Venturi & Toure, 2020). Geographically, the Sahel region- is a vast semi-arid region of Africa which stretches 500km from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the Red sea in the east has a population of over 150 million people from 10 countries including Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal (UNDP, 2018). The region is home to some of the poorest countries in the world with 10.5 million people in Mali, Mauritania, Burkina Faso and Chad facing starvation owing to climate change crisis amidst other challenges (Risi et.al, 2022). The region is also home to deep political turmoil, and instability, with the region experiencing rapid successive military coups in the past five years and more than 20 coups since 2010, including the recent coups in Mali (2021), Burkina Faso (2022) and Niger (2023) (Thurstun, 2024; Laanani et. al., 2023).

Although coups are not new to the Sahel, the recent coups which fit into a history of Sahelian coups (Elischer, 2021), among other factors was in response to the activities of jihadist insurgents and the failure of the political elites and Western security assistance programs to end the menace in the region. These recent coups which resulted in the expulsion of France and other Western countries security assistance has created opportunities for the proliferation of terrorist and violent extremist groups in the countries with dire consequences for the people and stability of the countries in the Sahel (Thurston, 2024).

Major jihadi groups in operating in the Sahel include the Islamic State in the Sahel-Province (ISS-P) formerly Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), operating in Niger (Tillaberi and Tahoua), Mali (Menaka and Gourma), and Burkina Faso (Seno and Oudalan) (Soto-Mayor & Ba (2023). Islamic state in the West Africa Province ISWAP operating in Northeast Nigeria and Southeast Niger; Jamaatu Nusrat al-Islam wa Muslimin (JNIM), and Boko Haram known also known as "**Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād**"), operating in Northeast Nigeria, Cameroun and Niger. Claiming to be fighting in the name of Islam, these groups consistently unleash terror and violence in the region and have become grave security risk in the region separating North Africa from sub-Saharan Africa- a region plagued by dire humanitarian challenges and one of the worst hit by climate change. According to Global terrorism index 2023, the Sahel region which is currently mired in multidimensional and complex economic, political, socio-economic and security challenges accounts for the most terrorism impacted area of the world, representing 43% of global terrorism, while 4 of the 10 most impacted countries for terrorism in 2022 are in the Sahel region including Burkina Faso and Mali. The region outpaced South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa combined in terrorism deaths in 2022, with terrorism deaths in the Sahel constituting 43 percent of the global total in 2022, compared to just 1 percent in 2007

(Clarke & Zenn, 2023; Global Terrorism Index, 2023). The Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), Islamic State in the Sahel Province (ISS-P), Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), with other splinter groups have exploited the governance vacuum and the dire political, economic and conflict situation to establish themselves in the region (CFR, 2024). The Al Qaeda affiliated JNIM made up of four groups namely – Ansar Dine, Katiba Macina, al-Mourabitoun and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) was formed in 2017 (Abatan, 2018). These organisations have widely proliferated consolidating their presence in communities and exploiting the governance gaps in the communities to spread their extremist ideologies.

The report by FHI 360 (2020) identifies four major factors that contribute to individual and collective predisposition to violent extremist organisations in the Sahel namely;

- i. Weak or absent governance combined with negative experiences of government corruption and injustice;
- ii. Abuses by the security sector (in combination with communities' need for protection);
- iii. Desire for social status and recognition, especially in contexts of high unemployment and underemployment; and
- iv. Geographic factors: Regional variations — in economic development and prospects, in the proximity to conflict areas, and access to natural resources.

Feminist Security Perspectives on Women in Jihadism

Women's marginalization and sidelining in security and armed violence has long attracted scholarship and academic discourse. Scholars have brought to the fore the exclusion of women from armed conflict and security matters, the stereotypical depictions of women 'in need of protection', men as 'aggressors' and the implications on policy and practice (Enloe, 2001; Cockburn & Enloe, 2012; Elstain, 1987). Feminist Security Theory underpins this paper, as it builds on the work of scholars who have long pointed to the need to understand women's

involvement in conflict, and in a variety of roles, but also to understand gender as a social construction that work in enabling terrorist violence and organisational ideologies and norms (Sjoberg, 2013). Feminist Security Theory challenges traditional security paradigms and situates gender as an analytical tool in security issues. It critiques the stereotypical ascription of women in the victimhood category in situations of armed conflict and violence. FST scholars argues that women transcends beyond just victims but also possess agency participating in diverse ways including as active perpetrators of violence. (Yadav, 2021; Kaufman, 2016). Gender stereotypes that portray women as naturally peaceful, and therefore not capable of violence perceive of women as only victims of terrorism and not perpetrators. Hence, only ‘men are terrorists while women are victims of terrorist attacks’ (Banks, 2019). Paradoxically women have played active roles in terrorist organisations and political violence both in the past and in recent times (Gentry & Sjoberg, 2016). We have however seen a global increase in recent times, with women now accounting for 30% of the members of terrorist organisations worldwide, either as frontline combatants or in roles such as auxiliary or logistics staff, informants, recruiters and fundraisers (Raineri, 2020).

Jihadism have been largely viewed as a male only activity, however similar to other forms of violence, women have also been actively participated in jihadi groups globally. This is shown by women in AL Qaeda organisations and the Islamic State and its affiliates. The successful integration of women as suicide terrorists in secular groups resulted in jihadi groups’ usage of religious ideology to begin including women in their operations as well. (Jordan & Denov, 2007). The role women and girls play in armed conflict; terrorism and violent extremism include direct combat as perpetrators, commanders, suicide bombers and human shields, as well as in support roles such as domestic servants and sex slaves (Fox, 2004). In spite of society’s inability to

understand and acknowledging the phenomenon of women's participation in jihadist and terrorist organisations, the world has witnessed an increase in the participation of women in such groups (United Nations Office on Drug and Crime, 2019). A case in point is the involvement of women in the establishment of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. The world watched as young women from various parts of the world including western countries travelled to Syria to join the Islamic State and become 'Jihadi brides'. The phenomenon of women as terrorists and members of jihadist organisations have grown in frequency, proportion and sophistication worldwide bestriding different parts of the world and different forms of terrorist organizations including secular and religious ones. From Africa, to Europe to the Middle East, the world has seen a phenomenon that greatly contradicts the normative view of women as essentially peaceful¹ and nurturing.

However, women's involvement in terrorist organisations is not a recent phenomenon. Since the emergence of terrorist organisations in the 1970s and 1980s, women have been involved majorly in the operations of terrorist organisations albeit majorly in supportive roles. However, the involvement of women as suicide bombers has assumed a heightened level and is increasing with time in non-conformity to established gender behavior, and in line with essentialist notions and stereotypes of women as propagators and lovers of peace. Women symbolise the guardian of tradition, a symbol of motherhood and life. How can she then, seemingly contradictory to this, give her life to violence and death?' Women in terrorist organisations engage not only domestic and supportive roles as cooks, spies and sex slaves but also in more active and operational roles as combatants and suicide bombers. Secular groups began using female suicide terrorism nearly three decades ago. Sana'a Youcef Mehaiddi, a member of the secular Syrian Social Nationalist Party, conducted the first known female suicide attack in April 1985 when she drove a truck filled with explosives into an Israeli Defense Force convoy, killing two soldiers and injuring

¹ It is instructive that women being peaceful and nurturing are the outcomes of the socialization process, and not that of nature.

another two (Sofer & Addison, 2012). This growing role of women in terrorism has caused new questions to surface and has elicited shock and dismay from the society as the women usually being the victims now become the perpetrators. Historically, direct combat operations in armed conflicts involved participation exclusively by men, with civilians, comprising mainly of women and children displaced and targeted. As a result, women are frequently victims of gender-based violence, as well as torture, forced disappearance and murder. In modern conflicts however, women are not only victims but also perpetrators of violence; they take up arms and commit violent acts, either voluntarily or under duress. Women actively participate in organised rebellion and warfare in several societies with a history of violent extremism and domestic terrorism, transgressing traditional gender roles and altering gender relations.

Women's Motivations for Joining Jihadist Organisations in West Africa Sahel

It is no longer news that women and girls are radicalized and become members of terrorist and jihadi organisations all over the world, as their participation in these violent extremist groups have been documented by scholars (Berlingozzi & Raineri. 2020; Lahoud, 2014; Miller, 2020; Pearson & Zenn, 2021). However, the literature is awash with men's involvement in terrorist and jihadi organisations and the factors that drive the radicalization of men into these groups. There is a dearth of studies on the factors that drive the radicalization and motivation of women into joining terrorist and jihadi groups in the Sahel region. As no one is born a violent extremist, there are a myriad of factors that may make individuals vulnerable to the pull of violent extremism. Although the participation of women in 'jihad' has acceptance by the Sunni and Shia traditions, their interpretation vary based on theological principles, historical interpretation and

contemporary practices. Prominent Sunni religious authorities at Al-Azhar University in Egypt assert that "jihad" is not required for women, however it may be mandated under three specific conditions: i. if the enemy invades Muslim land it becomes obligatory for everyone, both male and female, to fight for the Cause; ii. if Muslim leaders call upon the whole *ummah* to perform "jihad" or; iii. if Muslim leaders appoint women to do certain tasks such as monitoring the enemy, laying mines, etc. (Lahoud, 2014).

In determining the factors that drive women's radicalization and motivations for joining jihadist organisations, scholars have identified the 'push and pull' factors. Jacques and Taylor (2009) identifies 5 categories of motivational factors for joining these groups as social, personal, idealistic, key events and revenge. Women involvement in the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria have been attributed to several factors such as belief in the cause of the ISIS, desire to be considered a true believer, family ties, death, frustration with military presence minimal education marriage and xenophobia (Miller,2020). In a similar vein, (Saltman & Smith, 2014) provides pull factors that predispose women to join ISIS; including the notion of a religious duty to move to an Islamic country(hijir); the notion of belonging; sisterhood, and romance. While push factors include isolation, search for identity, a sense of belonging and notions of global oppression of Muslim communities). However, categorisations of push and pull factors regarding women participation in jihadi groups can be made on the consideration of voluntary membership of these groups. The phenomenon of push and pull factors can only happen when women voluntarily, of their own accord join these groups. Whereas in situations where women are forced to join such considerations do not apply. Women are forcefully recruited in these groups through abductions, and threats against their lives, families and communities (UNODC, 2019). For instance, in the Lake Chad region and parts of Niger where Boko Haram activities take place, women are abducted and forcefully recruited as members of the group to carry out operational duties including suicide attacks. (Pearson & Zenn, 2021; Abatan & Sangare, 2021).

In identifying the factors that motivate women to join jihadist organisations in the Sahel region of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, Raineri (2020) in the International Alert report linked their participation and support for jihadist organisations to several factors including marital obedience and loyalty to husband, ideological support for the jihadi organization and opportunistic reasons. Consequently, marriage and loyalty to husbands play crucial roles in women's support and participation in jihadist groups in the Sahel. According to the report, a wife automatically supports and participates in group activities as long as her husband becomes a member of the group. This however is more reflective of women in Mali and Niger than in Burkina Faso, and underscores the role of power relations and gender norms within families where leadership is provided by men and women support. Thus the influence of the family is a crucial factors shaping the women's decision to join jihadi organisations. Furthermore women in the Sahel may also be attracted to jihadi organisations due to their sympathy and support for the group's ideology. Rainer (2020) asserts that majority of women in the Sahel believe it's a woman's religious duty to support jihad and Islamic religion. However, crosscutting reasons for both men and women in joining these groups include protection and security reasons, and the administration of justice and resources resulting from state neglect (International Alert, 2018). Other pull factors motivating women joining jihadist groups include personal interest, economic gains obtained by working for the groups, and social recognition or redemption for marginalized women such as sex workers (Raineri, 2018). Conversely, the motivations for women exiting jihadist organisations have also been highlighted underscoring the role of push and pull factors. While push factors that may motivate women to leave these groups include dissatisfaction with extremist groups members, leaders, or ideology, pull factors include desire to live a normal life and

family obligations such as need to take of family and parenthood (Barrelle, 2015; Gielen, 2018).

In understanding female jihadi mobilization in the Sahel, there's a need to understand the social context in the Sahel and the prevailing social norms as key influences on women joining jihadi groups. Bouachrine(2019) asserts that jihadi violence is associated with a social repertoire of practices found in patriarchal-Muslims societies. Thus groups leveraging on religious narratives that align with the social context and social norms entrench themselves among the Sahelian people (Berlingozzi & Raineri 2023). According to Mayhew et. al (2022), the factors that enhance the radicalization of men and women in the Sahel are diverse. In north-eastern parts of Burkina Faso, northern Mali and eastern Niger, perceptions of ethnic discrimination, personal security concerns, and attitudes towards the military were the most important drivers of radicalization for women, while age, government performance, and corruption in state institutions were the factors that led to the radicalization of men (Katz, 2020). Women in particular are confronted with several layers of vulnerability in the region which makes them susceptible to radicalization into terrorist organisations, and jihadist groups exploit these vulnerabilities to recruit and coerce them. For instance, while unemployment, poverty, economic deprivation, defence of faith, revenge and search for a purpose in life were among the key reasons why men join jihadi groups in Mali and Niger, women were drawn to jihadi groups as a result of desire to protect children, subordination and marital ties (United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI), 2023).

Women's Role in the Jihadists Organisations

The different roles that women play in jihadi and terrorist organisations have been documented (Pearson & Zenn, 2021; Abatan, 2018). Studies have shown that women play multiple and diverse roles in these groups. These include; victims of terrorist violence, active fighters, sympathizers and mobilizers for terrorist groups, and agents of social change, helping to prevent acts of terrorism and violent extremism. However, in understanding the roles that women in the Sahel jihadist

organisations play, it is crucial to understand the gender ideology and governance structures of the jihadist groups operating in the Sahel. Unlike Abubakar Shekau's Boko Haram that actively encouraged the participation of women and girls in active combat roles and suicide bombing, Boko Haram under Mohammed Yusuf the founder allowed women only to play roles as wives of Boko Haram fighters and mothers to the next generation of fighters, but that quickly changed under Shekau who strategically utilized women for the group's operations (Abatan, 2018). Women in jihadist groups in the Sahel namely JNIM and the ISS-P are less likely to engage in combat or armed actions unlike women in Boko Haram in the Lake Chad basin region. According to Chauzal (2019), female members generally played auxillary roles as cooks, laundry women and informants, showing that women in these groups played roles consistent with existing social norms regarding the gendered division of labour of women as housekeepers in the domestic front. Though not in active combat roles or in the frontlines, female members of jihadist groups in the Sahel nevertheless play supportive roles for the male fighters by ensuring the strategic goals of the jihadist organisations are achieved. These women also act as intelligence gatherers and informants, providing the group and fighters with information to achieve strategic goals and escape military arrest. In Mali, findings revealed that women in supporting and advancing the jihadi cause contribute money to purchase arms for their husbands and sons (Raineri, 2020). In addition, women in the Sahel actively encourage their husbands and sons to join jihadi organisations to achieve status, societal respect and recognition fulfilling dominants ideal of masculinity. In this regard, Gorman and Chazal (2019) maintains that mothers and wives are the ones with greatest influence on a man joining or leaving jihadi groups in the Sahel. According to their findings, women encourage men to join the groups for several reasons including 'to avenge the death of a loved one, protect the family

and community, fight for the honour of the family, demonstrate courage, and aspiration for a glorious death’.

However, the ideological differences and gender ideology between JNIM and ISS-P, the two dominant jihadi groups in the Sahel play a crucial role in determining what roles women in the Sahel. Abatan (2018) asserts that while the roles played by female members of the Boko Haram organization in the Lake Chad region is clear, the roles played by women in the Sahel states of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso is fluid. Unlike Boko Haram in the Lake Chad region, jihadi organisations in the Sahel especially JNIM do not seem to strategically employ women in the frontlines and in active combat in operations such as suicide attacks. According to Abatan (2018), this maybe as a strategic way of retaining the support of local populations by aligning with social and gender norms of the communities. To emphasis its gender ideology of not allowing women play combat roles, following attacks in Mali against the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in 2018 for which JNIM claimed responsibility, the group released a communique refuting allegations that a woman suicide attacker was involved in the operation. JNIM’s categorical statement underlined the groups gender ideology that women are excluded from combat roles even though both men and women have a collective religious duty to engage in jihad but their roles are different (Rupesinghe & Diall, 2019). However, unlike in the Mali and Burkina Faso where the JNIM activities are more concentrated. Boko Haram’s forceful recruitment and tactical use of women and girls to achieve the groups’ operational goals is well documented in the literature. The popularized April 2014 abduction of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok put the organization in the global limelight for its brutal force and usage of women. Indeed, between April 2011 and June 2017, of the 434 suicide attacks orchestrated by the group, women and girls carried out 244 attacks (Abatan, 2018). However, in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, the gender ideological differences between the JNIM and ISSP shows that while JNIM, a conglomerate of AL Qaeda groups in the Sahel allowed women in supportive roles, ISSP are more disposed to engaging women in more violent and combat roles (Raineri, 2020). Hence, both groups

are reflective of the global jihadist and parent organisations that they are affiliated to namely AL Qaeda and the Islamic State. Consequently, the gender ideologies of jihadist organisations in West Africa Sahel including the JNIM, ISSP and Boko Haram significantly determines whether women are confined to supportive roles or engage in more violent roles. While JNIM

Conclusion

The participation of women in jihadist insurgencies in the Sahel region underscores the need for a comprehensive understanding of their motivations and roles. Women's involvement is not monolithic; it is driven by a complex interplay of ideological, social, security, and personal factors. Recognizing this diversity is crucial for developing tailored and effective strategies to counter and prevent their involvement in jihadist activities. This paper highlights that women in these insurgencies often assume supportive rather than combat roles, such as providing domestic support, recruitment, and intelligence gathering. However, their contributions are indispensable to the functioning and sustainability of jihadist organizations. The gender ideology of these groups plays a significant role in determining the specific functions and limitations placed upon women, further complicating their involvement. To address the issue of women's participation in jihadist insurgencies, it is imperative to provide alternative pathways and empowerment opportunities for women in the Sahel region. This includes enhancing education, economic opportunities, and social inclusion, as well as challenging the ideological narratives that attract women to these movements. By understanding and addressing the root causes of women's involvement, stakeholders can work towards creating a more stable and secure environment in the Sahel, reducing the appeal of jihadist insurgencies and fostering long-term peace and development. This study contributes

to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the multifaceted nature of women's participation in jihadist insurgencies in the Sahel, paving the way for more informed policy-making and intervention strategies.

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