Niger: Women's views on insecurity in the Tillabéri region

Ornella Moderan, Fatoumata Maïga and Boogu/Gayya Project

The security crisis in Niger's Tillabéri region is harming communities, especially women, who have little opportunity to speak out. This report is based on the testimonies of 52 of these women. It outlines the impacts of insecurity as experienced by them and highlights problems related to girls leaving school, early or forced marriages, domestic violence and widowhood. Recommendations presented reflect the concerns and priorities of the women consulted.

Key findings

▶ The crisis in the Tillabéri region is exacerbating women and girls' exposure to gender-based violence.

▶ This consultative study highlights women's concerns about the impact of insecurity on girls, who are at greater risk of being taken out of school and forced into early marriage. These unions are a coping mechanism sometimes used by families to reduce their expenses or establish protective alliances.

▶ The study highlights the impact of insecurity on women's family lives as wives, as they are at greater risk of domestic violence and widowhood.

▶ The situation facing civilian widows is particularly worrying. Because the family economy is traditionally male-dominated, the sudden loss of a husband exposes his wife (or wives) and their children to significant financial hardship. Carrying out economic activities and accessing dispersed extended family members and traditional family support mechanisms become difficult.

▶ The increase in violence hinders agricultural and commercial activities, which worsens economic risk and isolation in some areas. This negatively affects the entire population, leading to food insecurity and poverty. It has a major impact on traders, who can't restock or access weekly fairs, and on women, who generally manage the family's food basket.

Recommendations

▶ The government should introduce or improve mechanisms to identify and help the widows and orphans of civilians. Failure to do so could push them into poverty, leading to new grievances that create social divides, or opportunities for their recruitment by armed groups.

▶ National agencies, local authorities and non-governmental organisations dealing with forced displacement should increase women's access to essential health services, particularly for pregnant women, in order to improve maternity outcomes. These efforts should also benefit women in host communities to avoid a deterioration of relations between displaced populations and host communities.

▶ The women consulted in the study believe child marriage and maternal mortality have increased due to the security crisis. But recent official statistics at the regional level are scarce. National statistical surveys should be launched to assess the validity of these perceptions and inform public policy.

▶ Mechanisms for consultation with women in local communities, such as those tested in this study, should be officially adopted. This could help authorities understand the concerns of local people, both men and women, and maintain a constructive dialogue about responses being implemented.

▶ Similarly, non-governmental organisations that produce data on the security situation and its humanitarian, social or economic impacts, should disaggregate this data by gender. This would make it easier to analyse the needs and challenges faced by men, women, girls and boys.

Introduction

This report aims to contribute to the 'participation' pillar of the Women, Peace and Security agenda, under which Niger has adopted a national action plan for 2020–2024.[1] This is the second national action plan developed by Niger on this agenda, the first covering 2017–2019.

This report is the result of a collaboration between 10 women from five communes in the Tillabéri region affected by the consequences of violence and insecurity: Ayorou, Abala, Banibangou, Ouallam and Tillabéri. Over 14 months, the co-authors shared their personal experiences of the security crisis during dedicated workshops, and jointly analysed the impacts of this crisis on the girls and women around them. They broadened their perspective by talking to other women in their local areas to ensure their analysis was representative of a greater diversity of experiences.

The findings of this consultative study highlight impacts of the crisis on girls and women that are rarely discussed and that should be considered in public responses.

This work is part of a joint initiative by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) and the Niger office of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP Niger). It is called Boogu/Gayya: Women's Local Contribution to Conflict Analysis, and was launched in August 2021. The terms 'Boogu' in Zarma and 'Gayya' in Hausa, languages spoken in the Tillabéri region, refer to collective or community work.

Methodology

The project aimed to equip a group of women from the Tillabéri region, acting independently or as members of local and national women's organisations, to analyse the conflict with a focus on the perspectives of local women living in this region.

Participation was voluntary and unpaid. It relied on the participants' motivation to acquire tools to more effectively bring their concerns, as local women, to bear in discussions and advocacy on peace and security issues in their region. The project aimed to amplify their contribution to efforts to resolve the crisis and to mitigate its impact on people.

The project took a collaborative approach that incorporated co-learning, data collection and analysis,

and brought in diverse perspectives. From August to December 2021, a series of training workshops laid or strengthened the foundations for a shared understanding of the concepts of human security, gender, conflict and conflict analysis among the women participating in the project. Role-playing exercises such as conducting practice interviews with institutional staff[2] helped to ground this training in practice, and allowed participants to develop their basic observation and empirical data collection skills.

Of the 18 women involved in this co-learning process, 10 volunteered to pair up to conduct interviews in the target communes of Abala, Ayorou, Banibangou, Ouallam and Tillabéri, using guides developed for this purpose. They conducted 34 interviews from April to May 2022, targeting three specific interviewee profiles: 11 interviews were conducted with women widowed by the conflict, 11 with women whose economic activity had been affected by the insecurity, and 12 with internally displaced or refugee women.

This study sheds light on rarely discussed impacts of the crisis on girls and women

This report is based on analysis of the data collected, combined with the experiences shared by the 18 project participants, and therefore reflects the experiences and perceptions of 52 women from the Tillabéri region.

In addition to analysing the general insecurity context from these women's perspectives, the consultative study highlights three major areas of concern for women in relation to the impact of the security crisis on their lives, and on the lives of other girls and women:

- Worsening gender-based violence, including child marriage, girls being taken out of school and domestic violence

- Increasing levels of poverty among women and their households due to widowhood and economic downturns that hinder their access to resources

- Increased risk associated with women's general and maternal health, particularly for displaced women

Chart 1: Women, Peace and Security agenda

Adopted in October 2000 by the United Nations Security Council, Resolution 1325 (R1325) is an international framework that recognises the impact of armed conflict on women and the need for their participation in the prevention of armed conflict, peace processes and post-conflict reconstruction.

Niger is committed to implementing this UN resolution, and in 2016 adopted a three-year National Action Plan (NAP) (2017–2019). In 2019, a new NAP was adopted for a four-year period (2020–2024). This second action plan is based on 5 strategic axes:

1 PREVENTION The fundamental rights of women and girls are promoted and ensured in all circumstances and by all

2 PROTECTION Women and girls have enhanced access to basic social services, economic opportunities, social justice and are protected from violence

3 PARTICIPATION Obstacles are removed and women are meaningfully involved in lasting conflict prevention and strengthening social cohesion

4 PARTNERSHIP Intervention frameworks between public and private actors, women's and youth organisations are created to build a more resilient society

5 COORDINATION An inclusive, participatory and adequately resourced mechanism is operational to implement the objectives of the WPS agenda

The implementation of these action plans has contributed to key advancements in the promotion of gender equality in Niger, such as:

- Adoption of Law 2019-69 of 24 December 2019, which modifies and completes Law 2000-008 of 7 June 2000 by instituting a quota system in elective government offices and the state administration.
- Adoption of a new National Gender Policy in August 2017.
- Adoption of the National Strategy for the Economic Empowerment of Women, 2017–2021 and its 2018–2022 action plan.

- Adoption of the National Strategy for Prevention and Response to Gender-Based Violence in September 2017.
- Adoption in June 2020 of a new rural land policy based on a gender-sensitive approach with a focus on promoting women's access to productive and fertile land.
- Attachment of the National Observatory for Gender Promotion to the Prime Minister's Office in May 2017. It will play a decisive role in aligning Niger's public policies with the National Gender Policy and the strategies emerging from it.

Source: Republic of Niger, National Action Plan of the Second Generation Women, Peace and Security Agenda 2020-2024. ISS chart

These dimensions are neither exclusive nor exhaustive. Nevertheless, they do reflect the priorities proposed by the women participating in the Boogu/Gayya project to guide public policy responses to the specific impacts of the security crisis on girls and women.
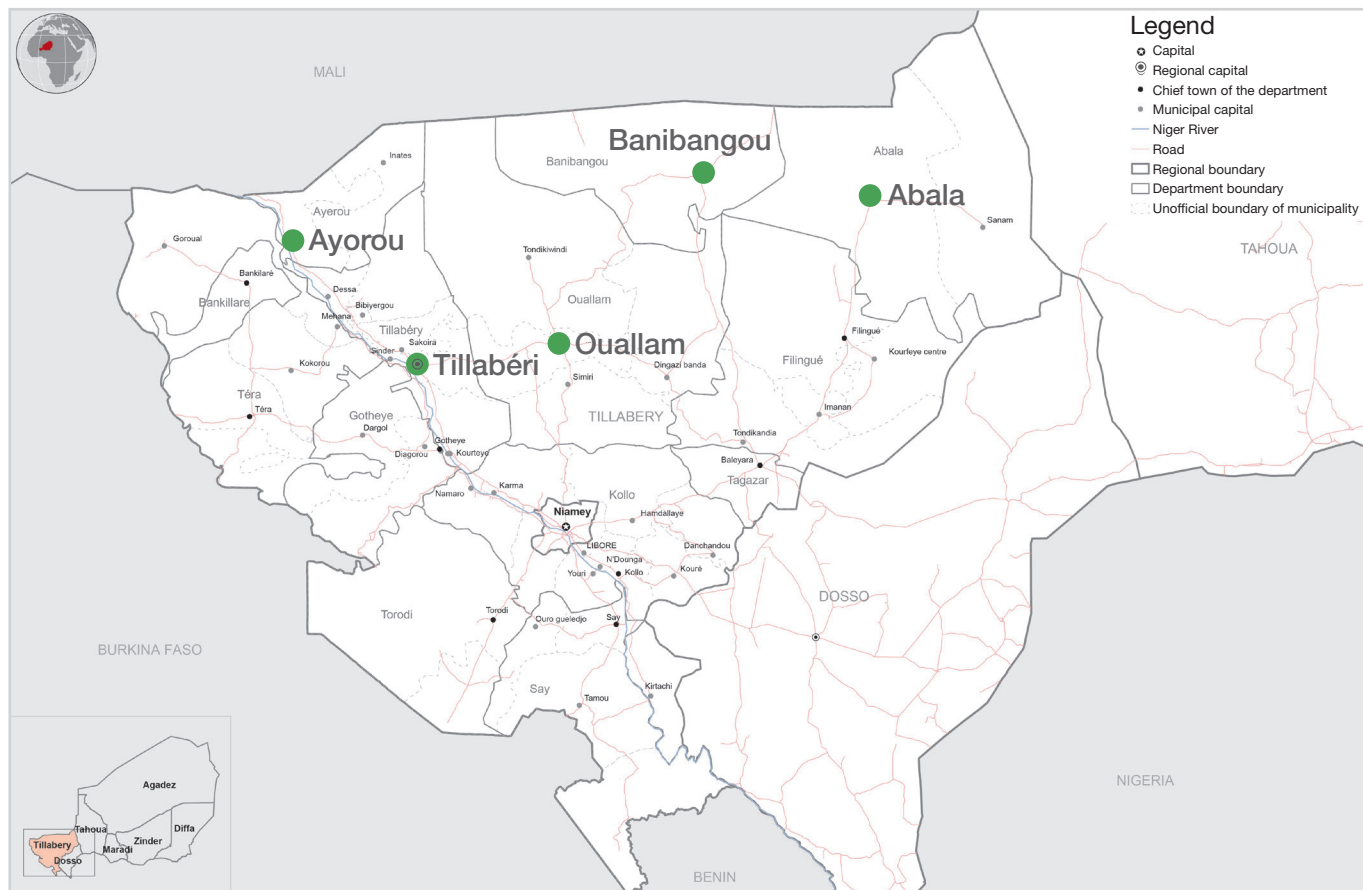
Security situation with severe humanitarian consequences

Since 2017, the Tillabéri region has faced increasing insecurity, which is affecting both the civilian population and the traditional and state authorities, including the defence and security forces and local government. Armed groups with various agendas are active in this part of western Niger and in bordering regions in Mali and Burkina Faso. This is causing a precarious security environment that claimed over 2 495 lives in the region between 1 January 2017 and 31 July 2022, according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data project (ACLED).[3] This violence has seriously destabilised local communities.

After a campaign of attacks in 2017 and 2018 against local and traditional chiefdoms, these groups have, especially from 2019 onwards, gradually turned their attention to the Nigerien defence and security forces deployed in the region.

Several large-scale attacks have been attributed to the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), the Sahel branch of Islamic State. In particular this includes the attacks in Inatès (10 December 2019,[4] 1 July 2020) and Chinegodar (9 January 2020),[5] which took a heavy toll on Nigerien forces. The al-Qaeda-affiliated Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM), which originated in neighbouring Mali, is also making incursions into the regions of Tillabéri and Tahoua in Niger, which border the regions of Gao and Ménaka in Mali. The security apparatus was subsequently restructured, strengthening the resilience of Nigerien forces in the face of these actors.

Chart 2: Map of the Tillabéri region showing the communes targeted by the study

Sources: IGNN, RENALOC

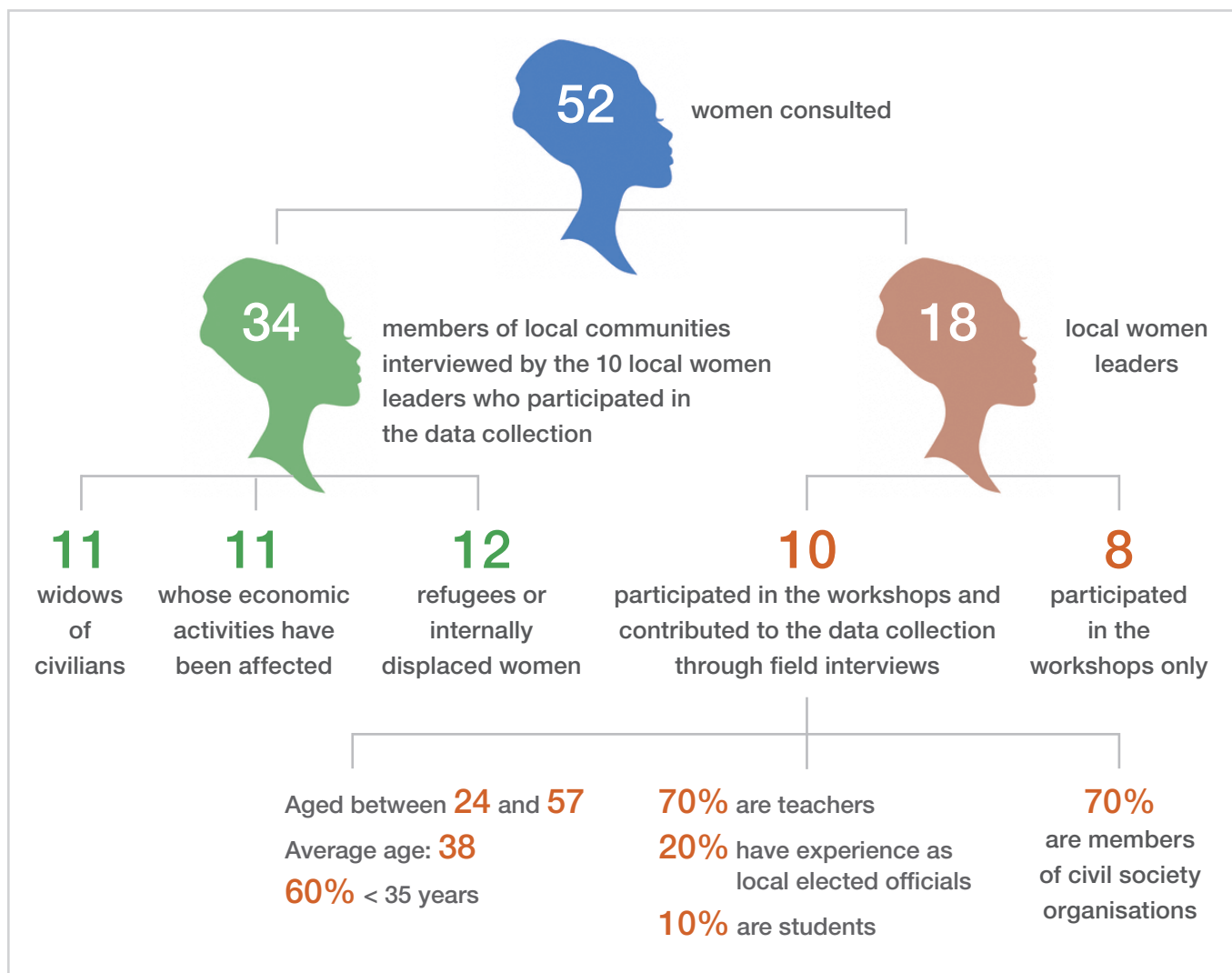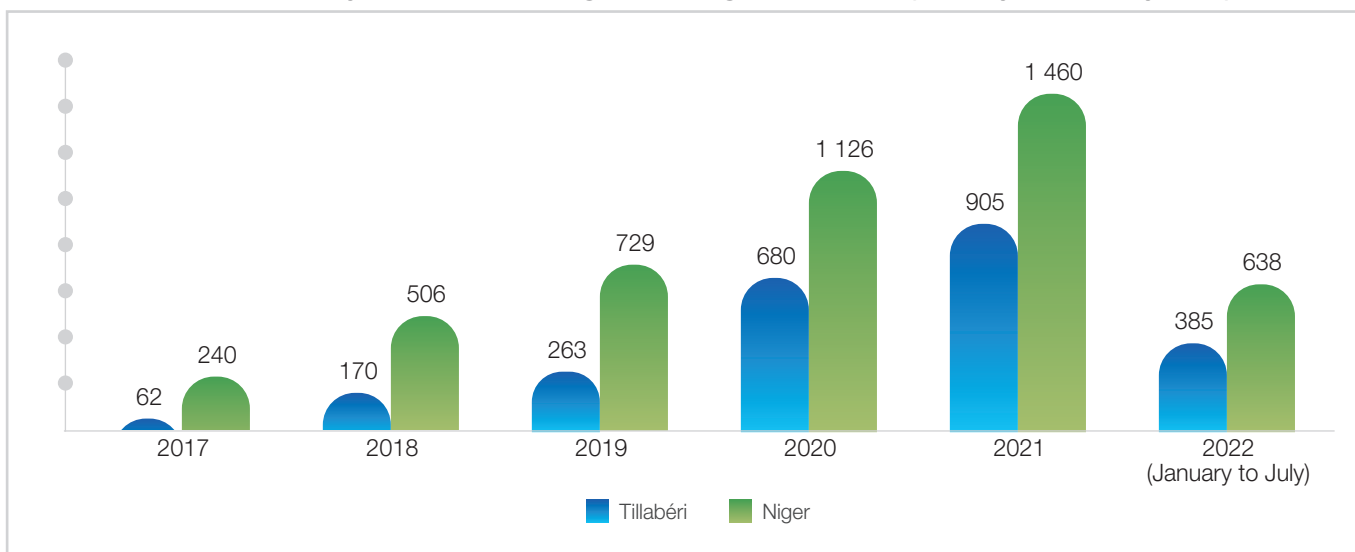**Chart 3: Participants in the Boogu/Gayya project**

52 women consulted

34 members of local communities interviewed by the 10 local women leaders who participated in the data collection

18 local women leaders

11 widows of civilians

11 whose economic activities have been affected

12 refugees or internally displaced women

10 participated in the workshops and contributed to the data collection through field interviews

8 participated in the workshops only

Aged between **24** and **57**
Average age: **38**
60% < 35 years

70% are teachers
20% have experience as local elected officials
10% are students

70% are members of civil society organisations

Chart 4: Victims of Insecurity in the Tillabéri Region and Niger as a whole (January 2017 – July 2022)

Year	Tillabéri	Niger
2017	62	240
2018	170	506
2019	263	729
2020	680	1 126
2021	905	1 460
2022 (January to July)	385	638

Sources: ACLED, accessed 16 August 2022; figure by ISS

However, since the beginning of 2021, most attacks seem to have directly targeted civilians. On 2 January 2021, the villages of Tchomangou and Zaroumdareye (Tillabéri region) were the scene of a massacre that claimed the lives of about 100 civilians. On 15 March, another attack on civilians returning from the weekly market in Banibangou (Tillabéri region) killed 58 people. A few days later, on 21 March, at least 137 people died following an attack on their village in Tillia (Tahoua region, bordering Tillabéri).[6]

The presence of armed groups heightens insecurity, and has resulted in over 2 495 victims in five years

While attacks specifically targeting civilians increased from 2021 onwards, this trend seemed even more prominent in the first half of 2022. This is evident in the increase in forced displacement and preventive displacement, due to people leaving their homes to evade attacks, extortion and even abductions – a preferred tactic of certain armed groups in the region.

Many are forced to flee from threats, ultimatums and abuse by non-state armed groups, who murder and extort local people and steal their animals, which are critical to their livelihoods. Cases of conflict-related gender-based violence and sexual violence such as rape are also reported. School and health centre staff are frequently threatened, reducing the availability of these essential services, especially outside the main towns.

In early 2022, the United Nations (UN) estimated that there were over 99 000 internally displaced people in Tillabéri[7] – a number that kept increasing afterwards. According to estimates by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), more than 16 000 people (over 2 600 households) were forced to flee in the communes of Torodi and Makalondi (Tillabéri region bordering Burkina Faso) in May and June 2022 alone. More than 17 000 people fled Mali to the Tillabéri and Tahoua regions of Niger in the same period.[8]

Most displaced people head for prefecture or regional capitals, which are considered more secure. As OCHA points out, these insecurity-driven displacements generate enormous needs in terms of water, food security, health, protection, shelter and education.[9]

Vulnerability worsened by forced displacement

In the context of the growing humanitarian crisis,[10] women in the Tillabéri region who were consulted for this study specifically mentioned the challenges faced by girls and women who are forced to leave their homes. Among

Chart 5: Forced displacement trend, Tillabéri region
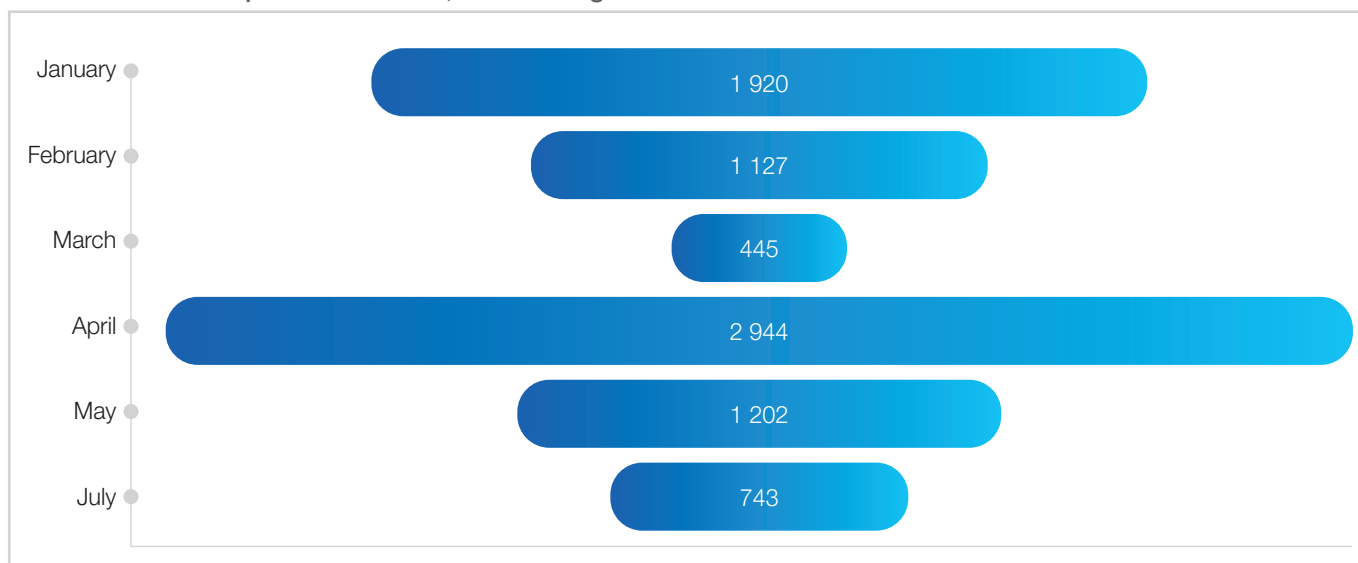
Source: Compilation of data from monitoring reports (Protection Cluster Niger) for Jan–May and July 2022. Data unavailable for June 2022
Table and graph: ISS

the communes covered by the study, this situation particularly affects those of Ayorou, Ouallam and Tillabéri, which host many displaced people.

Most of the displaced women interviewed reported that they had left their local area because of attacks on them and their families. These attacks have taken many lives. Many of those who survived lost their homes, the farmland that supported their families and other essential assets. While some fled with their loved ones, other families were separated by displacement:

'We left our home because of the insecurity. The "bandits" killed a relative right in front of us. When they left, they took another one with them and later slit his throat in the bush. They ordered us to leave by 10 o'clock the next morning.'

– *Internally displaced woman, Tillabéri, April 2022*

Displacement often occurs in a panic, which plays a part in families being split up, separated when they first flee or during their journey. The resulting isolation poses significant economic, psychosocial and safety challenges for those affected.

'Displacement splits up families. When they flee, some members might end up in Ayorou, others in Ouallam or somewhere else. Often there's no way to communicate. It is very difficult for family members who are not used to being separated. Some women even give birth or miscarry on the way, because of the endless walking, fatigue and trauma.'

– *Woman in Tillabéri, October 2022*

Some of the displaced women stay in camps, while others are hosted by extended family or acquaintances. This represents an additional burden that increases the risk of deprivation for all involved.

Most displaced women struggle to support themselves or to find work. Their situation is exacerbated by the difficulty in accessing basic social services. The lack of schools in the camps and the

pressure on those available in host towns hinder children's schooling and increase women's workloads as parents. Women are traditionally responsible for domestic tasks, including childcare.

Displaced women also find it hard to access health services. Although some women in the host communities challenge this perception, several displaced women report that health centres refuse to provide them with care, which they believe is reserved for local people. According to them, despite these goods and services officially being free or low-cost, displaced women are sometimes charged 'exorbitant fees' for the care and medicines provided, due to corruption. Some statements also recount the difficult experience of displaced women confronted with providers who pretend there is a shortage of medicines to avoid giving them to people from other places.

With the highest fertility rate in the world – 6.82 children per woman in 2019, according to World Bank figures[11] – Nigerien women are disadvantaged by barriers to accessing health services in general, and especially during pregnancy.[12] The context of crisis and displacement is considerably worsening this situation in the Tillabéri region. According to the women consulted, the efforts of local authorities have helped to mitigate these difficulties in some areas, such as Ayorou. But the situation remains unequal in the region.

Most of the displaced women interviewed attributed these difficulties to the social stigma attached to displaced populations. In particular, they highlight local communities' distrust of displaced people, who are suspected of colluding with terrorists or of wanting to stay in the area permanently to take advantage of its goods and resources:

'In Ayorou, even now, everyone is afraid. Some people think that there are terrorists among the refugees. Me? I don't know.'

– *Woman from Ayorou, March 2022*

'If we give land to the refugees, will they go home afterwards? That's what people are worried about.'

– *Woman from Ouallam, March 2022*

In light of the challenges posed by forced displacement, the women who participated in the consultative study recommended intensifying efforts to provide material and moral support to displaced people. Strengthening synergies between humanitarian organisations, public social services and local authorities should help to more fully address the massive needs of displaced people, paying specific attention to the health needs of girls and women.

They also recommended creating the conditions for displaced people to return safely to their homes. Recent experience shows both the difficulty and the importance of ensuring people can return home safely to reduce the risk of exposing returnees to further violence by armed groups.

Finally, they emphasise the need to invest in displaced children's schooling, which not only helps prepare them for their future, but also acts as a protection mechanism for them. Leaving school due to conflict increases the vulnerability of both boys and girls. These negative effects are exacerbated by the economic precariousness of their families.

Poverty and food insecurity

While the Tillabéri region is primarily rural and agrarian, the combined effects of insecurity and climate change have significantly hampered farming in recent years, increasing the economic vulnerability of households. In addition to droughts and floods, which weaken production capacity, threats from non-state armed groups have stopped many local producers from farming the land. These different factors have led to a series of poor harvests that have reduced the local availability of essential food items. As the World Bank states:

A combination of health, climate and security shocks and crises has hampered the growth of Niger's economy which, after growing by 5.8% in 2019, slowed to 3.6% in 2020 and fell once again below 1.5% in 2021. This was a significant deterioration compared to the initial projection of 5.5%. This poor performance is due to the slowdown in cereal production.[13]

Armed groups have ransacked fields and burnt granaries to deprive local populations of their means of subsistence, which has exacerbated the twin problems of economic poverty and food insecurity.[14] These groups also target farmers in their fields, executing some to deter others from returning to work the land.

'The harvests didn't happen this year, and sometimes when the armed men come, they burn the granaries. They want to force us to leave.'

– Woman from Ouallam, March 2022

'This year, we've harvested absolutely nothing in Ouallam. It's been a bad season. The beans sold at the market are from last year.'

– Woman from Ouallam, March 2022

'My field is only 10 km from the town, but we haven't been able to farm this rainy season because of the insecurity. If we go out, we risk being attacked, which is why we stayed home.'

– Woman from Banibangou, October 2022

'I know a lady who lost 12 members of her family in one day. They'd all gone to the fields. They were attacked and murdered on their way home. No one survived.'

– Woman from Banibangou, October 2022

At the same time, the increase in attacks on markets and on stallholders' vehicles, as well as the recurrent use of improvised explosive devices on key routes, have contributed to the economic isolation of some areas.

According to the women traders consulted for the study, the supply trucks that used to travel from Tillabéri to Niamey or other cities several times a week are now almost always attacked. As a result, few transporters still make the journey.

This results in food shortages and higher food costs, at a time when poverty is increasing. The nutritional consequences of this situation include a reduction in the diversity of diets. Several statements, such as the one below, bore witness to the difficulty of getting supplies:

> 'The transporter who was going between Ouallam and some of the surrounding areas stopped because he found out that the "bandits" were looking for him. He even sold his truck and chooses to be unemployed [rather than risk being intercepted on the road]. As for us, we have no more supply.'
>
> *– Woman from Ouallam, October 2022*

According to data from the Cadre Harmonisé,[15] a tool for assessing food security needs in a given area, 25% of the population of the Tillabéri region – more than 996 000 people – were at risk of food insecurity in 2022.[16] At the household level, the high cost of living[17] significantly affects the cost of the food basket, which is generally the responsibility of women. This situation was compounded by global inflation in 2022.

> 'The markets are closed; and when by some chance a market is open [for a few hours], people are afraid to go. The few who do struggle to pay for things because they lack the resources and prices are rising.'
>
> *– Woman from Banibangou, March 2022*
>
> 'I'm 57. I knew what Ouallam was like before and I know what it's like today. And I can tell you that the cost of living is higher than ever. It's especially hard for us female heads of households. Before, I could buy a bag of corn for 12 000 CFA francs and now it is 30 000 CFA francs. Everything has changed.'
>
> *– Woman from Ouallam, March 2022*

Examining the impact of the economic downturn specifically on women highlights the situation of women working in local small businesses, whose activities have largely stalled. The consequences are particularly severe for female heads of households, who are usually widowed or divorced and have children to support. Many of those interviewed reported that the loss of this income made it difficult for them to meet household food needs and to pay for their children's schooling and their healthcare if they fell ill.

> 'I used to have a comfortable income from my business. But now life is expensive and I have nothing to sell.'
>
> *– Female trader from Ouallam, May 2022*
>
> '[Because of] the security situation, my business [is] slowing down and my income has fallen a lot. My life has changed, I've run out of savings. Before, I used to go abroad to get supplies for my business; things were going well. Now I live from day to day, and so does my family.'
>
> *– Female trader from Tillabéri, April 2022*

Given the disastrous economic impact of the crisis on already vulnerable households – especially in areas that are far from markets and have no local agricultural activity – the women consulted for the study recommended providing communities with long-term economic support.

Noting that the crisis is expected to last a long time, they emphasise the need to build the food and economic resilience of women and households through activities that can realistically be carried out close to where they live. For example, in the short term this could include investing in local capacity for agroecology, which uses methods that require little land or resources. In the long term, securing key roads must be a priority.

Early school leaving and child marriage

The statements gathered for the study show that in response to economic difficulties, some families struggling to provide for all family members are turning more readily to early marriage – or child marriage – as a way to reduce their expenses. This coping mechanism also allows them to access a dowry, however small, and sometimes to secure protection through family alliances. Culture and tradition are then used to justify a decision when the motivations are just as much financial:

> 'Sometimes parents do this [marry off their children] for money. When they see [an older man] who has a lot of money, they marry off their daughter to him.'
>
> *– Woman from Ayorou, March 2022*

Recourse to child marriage is not new in Niger. As stated in a 2021 study:

> Child marriage remains a concern in Niger. Among [respondents] aged 25-29 at the time of the survey, about one in four women (24.9%) had been married before the age of 15 [the legal age at which girls can marry in the country]. Nearly two in three women (63.6%) were already in a union at age 18. In comparison, men generally entered a union later than women. While almost half of all the women [surveyed] (41.9%) had been in a union before the age of 18, only 3.0% of the men had.[18]

The view of the women consulted is that while the crisis did not create the problem of child marriage, it seemed to exacerbate it. Families also see child marriage as preserving the honour of the girl and the entire household. This is because it protects the girl from the risk of sexual assault, which is seen as damaging to the reputation of everyone around her and is more common when there is insecurity.

The Humanitarian Needs Overview published by OCHA in February 2022, in the chapter on child protection, provides an explanation that corroborates this perception and makes the link to the crisis explicit:

> Children, especially girls, are at high risk of sexual abuse and exploitation by both community members [and] [non-state armed groups]. Forced marriage is a structural problem in Niger. The phenomenon is growing and worsening due to the perception that these marriages provide personal and economic protection for the girl, as well as a source of income for the poorest families. According to the results [of a multi-sectoral needs assessment conducted in 2021], all of the households [surveyed] in the areas [...] most affected by the conflict reported having at least one married child.[19]

This practice has a negative impact on the emotional health and physical safety of these young girls, who are not always prepared for the demands of married life. Early pregnancies pose an additional risk to their physical health and even their lives.

Moreover, there is an important link, both causal and consequential, between child marriage and girls' schooling.[20] Young girls who marry at an early age often drop out of school to take on domestic responsibilities. Conversely, those who are already failing academically are at greater risk of early marriage. On this point, the closure of 817 schools in the Tillabéri region alone, reported in August 2022 by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF),[21] not only hinders all children's enjoyment of their right to education, but also increases the risk of girls being forced to marry and of boys being recruited into armed groups.

> 'A girl in grade CM2 at our local school, who wasn't even 15 yet [the minimum age at which girls can marry under Nigerien law], was forced to marry by her parents and had to stop going to school.'
>
> *– Woman from Banibangou, March 2022*

However, it is worth noting that not all early marriages result from the conflict, nor are they always imposed by parents. Some girls, socialised in an environment that values marriage as an opportunity for social advancement, insist on marrying as early as possible. The desire to keep up with peers can also be a factor, leading some young girls to want to 'do what their friends are doing.' A woman from Ayorou explains:

> 'In Niger we think that getting married means you have succeeded in life [especially for a woman].'
>
> *– Woman from Ayorou, March 2022*

As the Humanitarian Needs Overview 2022 reminds us, however, the crisis is accentuating this existing phenomenon, especially for children affected by forced displacement, and young girls in particular:

Because they are out of school, among other things, refugee children are [particularly] vulnerable to early marriage. Fifty-nine percent of households have at least one minor child who has married and left home. The precariousness in which refugees and [internally displaced people] live could explain the very similar share of households that reported marriage as the main reason for minors leaving home.[22]

Given the centrality of marriage to the social experience of Nigerien girls and women, it is not surprising that the women who contributed to the consultative study also emphasised the impact of insecurity on wives, in two areas in particular: domestic violence and the vulnerability associated with the risk of being widowed.

Domestic violence

Despite improvements to the legal framework, the 2017 National Gender Policy[23] recognises the scale and persistence of gender-based violence in Niger. Sexual violence and physical assaults account for 28.8% of cases of gender-based violence against Nigerien girls and women, financial abuse for 22.1% and psychological and emotional abuse for 15.3%. Updated data from the *Study on the scale and determinants of gender-based violence in Niger* (United Nations Population Fund, UNFPA)[24] and the 2021 *Rapid Gender Analysis* (UNICEF)[25] confirm these trends.

The statements collected as part of the consultative study reveal that this form of abuse, which is relatively socially accepted in some quarters, tends to worsen in a climate of insecurity and violence. The overall increase in stress and emotional distress, as well as economic hardship, are cited among the reasons for this.

Men's sense of powerlessness and the shame some feel about their inability to fulfil their traditional role as protectors and economic providers for their family are reflected in an increase in domestic violence. In an interview conducted in May 2021, a woman said she experienced this after her husband, a transporter, lost most of his income due to COVID-19-related restrictions on movement. These exacerbated an economic context already seriously damaged by insecurity:

One evening during lockdown, Zaynab's husband arrived home after curfew. [...] After dinner, she

asked for some money to buy food for Ramadan. Zaynab said that:

He searched his pockets, put 750 francs (roughly $1.20) on the table and told me to go and top up the cash with money from my mother,' she says. 'I did not recognise my husband … Since he stopped working, he would sometimes scold me or threaten me, but his nervous energy took on another dimension.

He slapped me and beat me up. When I felt blood run down my face, I begged him to stop. I ran into the bedroom, picked up my sleeping baby, and left the house to go to my aunt's house. I didn't think about the curfew, I was just afraid to stay in the house with him.

Zaynab was shocked. It was the first time her husband had been violent with her.[26]
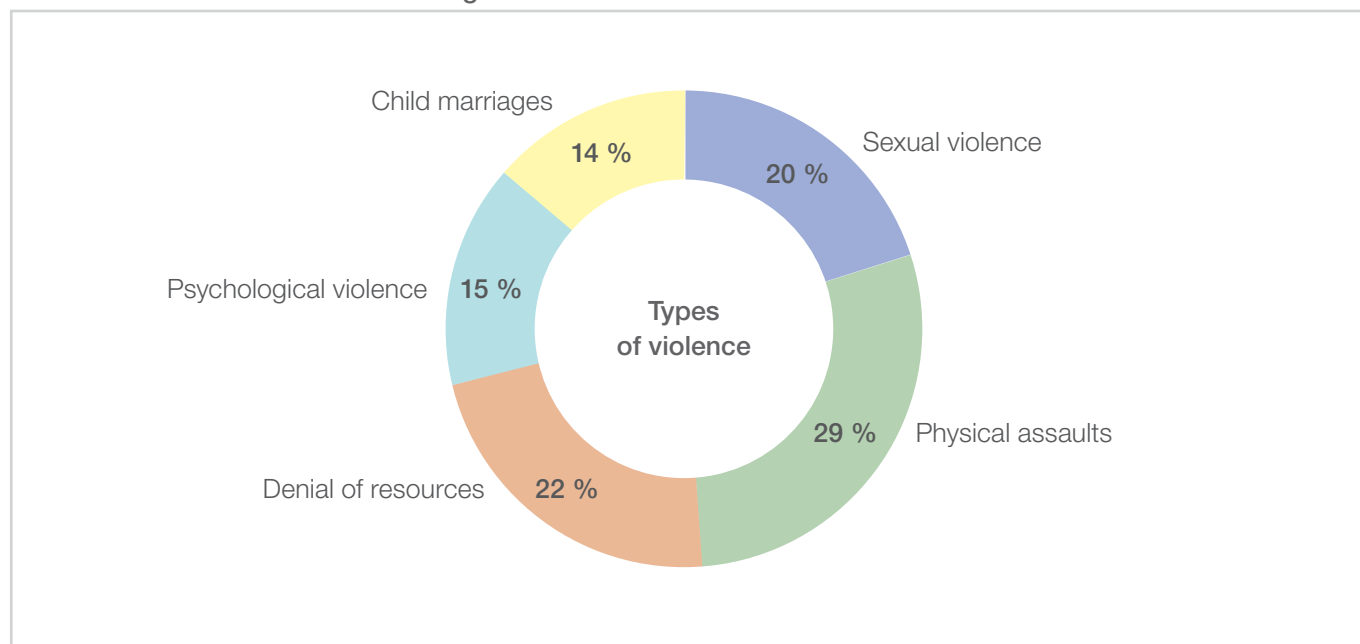
Although this case is related to the situation created by the health curfew, the women consulted for the study report that incidents like this are common, as men's worries about finances are worsened by the security crisis.

The culture of silence that surrounds intimate-partner and intra-family violence[27] is strengthened by the difficulty of accessing public services during the crisis. While filing a complaint is difficult and frowned on by society in normal times, it is more disapproved of in contexts of instability. Some women feel or are told by those around them that their 'personal' domestic violence problems are secondary to the insecurity and that they should not 'bother' the local authorities or security forces with it. As one participant in the Boogu/Gayya project explains:

'It is rare in our community [and] in our society [that women] seek outside help [in response to their husbands' violence]. Even if [there's a problem], they don't say anything. [It's only] when the situation gets out of control [that some go] to the village chief. [In our communities] the woman must put up with and [keep everything] secret.'

– Boogu/Gayya project participant,
Niamey, March 2022

Chart 6: Gender-based violence in Niger

Child marriages — 14 %
Sexual violence — 20 %
Psychological violence — 15 %
Physical assaults — 29 %
Denial of resources — 22 %

Types of violence

Source: Ndeye Amy N'Diaye, Gender-Based Violence in West Africa: Cases of Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, Friedrich Erbert Stiftung, 2021

Women who go to the police are often at risk of being abandoned, which can harm them in two ways. First, because divorce is synonymous with social disgrace and second, because the woman – and her parents – lose the economic protection offered by the husband:

'A woman in the city of Ouallam filed a police complaint against her husband. He had beaten her until she was visibly injured. At the trial, she said she filed a complaint so the authorities would tell her husband to stop beating her, but [insisted that] she still loved him and did not want to leave him. Everyone present begged the husband not to divorce her.'

– *Woman from Ouallam, March 2022*

Intimate-partner and intra-family violence is normalised to such an extent that it is reproduced across society and between generations, in a context of crisis dominated by pervasive violence. Statements collected during the consultative study revealed a tendency for young boys to replicate the violence against women they witness at home, among their peers.

In interviews conducted in March 2022, some project participants spoke of the increasingly violent attitude of

young boys who hit their female peers for no apparent reason, 'for fun', either at school or on the street. For some, this may be their way of copying what they see at home:

'We don't know why they hit them. Maybe it's the influence of [dads] on young boys.'

– *Woman from Ouallam, March 2022*

Despite the necessary intensity of the security response to the crisis, it is important that the police and gendarmerie remain mobilised to support people experiencing domestic violence. In this respect, the creation of specialised units within security institutions is an encouraging sign; this should be consolidated by providing the units with sufficient human and material resources. Other units within security forces must also be given basic training, to make survivor protection and support an institution-wide issue.

Moreover, work to combat domestic violence must continue to include raising awareness among men and communities to encourage behaviour change and build collective awareness of fundamental rights, including the right to physical integrity.

There is also a need to provide psychosocial care to women who have experienced domestic violence, whether or not related to the conflict, and to build capacity to detect and manage the forms of stress that increase the risk of men committing domestic violence. Expanding psychosocial support services to men could thus help improve prevention. Humanitarian organisations with proven psychosocial expertise can make an important contribution in this regard.

Widowhood and precariousness

Interviews with women living in rural areas in the Tillabéri region clearly highlighted the issue of widows of civilian victims of the conflict, who many feel have been left behind. Establishing mechanisms to identify and support these widows should be a public policy priority. Women's rights organisations could help civilian widows organise into groups or associations to build networks and garner influence.

As the main targets for abductions and summary executions, men often leave behind women who have to deal with the psychological, social and economic burden of their new status as the head of the household, in a cultural context where they are not remotely prepared for this.

The situation of civilian widows is therefore particularly worrying. The traditional division of gender roles in the areas studied assigns men exclusive responsibility for providing for the family and requires women to seek their husbands' approval to work. This is in a context where women's access to land ownership is restricted. The sudden disappearance of a husband exposes his wife or wives – polygyny remains widespread – and their children to significant risks of economic hardship and even insolvency. Older women who have already been widowed face a similar situation, where the loss of one or more adult sons can put them at risk of isolation and poverty.

As the crisis has also slowed down economic activities and dispersed extended families, the women consulted said widows were increasingly less able to access the family support mechanisms they traditionally relied on. While there are national programmes to support the widows of fallen soldiers, civilian widows are not eligible to access these mechanisms.

Unlike the number of widows and orphans of fallen members of the security and defence forces, it is difficult to estimate the number of widows and orphans of civilian casualties. In February 2022, an initiative by a community leader in Banibangou participating in the Boogu/Gayya project listed 352 affected women in this commune alone, based on municipal records. However, this data isn't necessarily available everywhere and compiling it is painstaking.

The scarcity of official data on the widows of civilian casualties of the conflict impedes the implementation of an appropriate public policy response. It also echoes the sentiment expressed by many widows interviewed for the study: a sense that they have been forgotten and abandoned. Most rely on the support of family, but the impact of insecurity on the local economy and the dispersal of extended families make it difficult for these solidarity mechanisms to operate consistently.

> 'The local authorities don't even know where we live.'
>
> – *Widow from Tillabéri, April 2022*

Some widows also reported receiving food and material support from non-governmental organisations, but expressed anxiety about the sustainability of this support and whether it would meet their needs.

The statements collected emphasise not only the economic precariousness and social isolation experienced by some civilian widows, but also the emotional distress they face. Most of these women receive no psychological support despite having lost loved ones, including their husbands, often witnessing violence or being attacked themselves. Many report feeling unsafe and living with high levels of fear and anxiety all the time.

> 'Security, in this context, we shouldn't even talk about … because [it] no longer exists. Food security is not fully guaranteed. You're not safe moving around [either] because you could be attacked at any moment. And on top of that, I'm a widow.'
>
> – *Widow from Tillabéri, April 2022*

> 'Life is difficult. I've lost my husband, my family has been separated, my children no longer live with me. They will be brought up differently from what I would want for them.'
>
> – *Widow from Tillabéri, April 2022*

Negative effects of responses to the insecurity

Beyond the manifestations and consequences of the insecurity, the participants in the consultative study noted the efforts made by the Nigerien authorities to restore security in the Tillabéri region and to protect people and their property. These efforts, which have taken many forms, sometimes produce encouraging results. However, their specific impact on girls and women would benefit from systematic evaluation.

In addition to deploying national defence and security forces and large military operations, sometimes in partnership with Burkina Faso, in 2017 the authorities declared a state of emergency[28] in the Tillabéri region to strengthen the government's control of the territory.

They stepped up efforts to implement initiatives to prevent local conflicts from escalating into inter-community violence, and considered opening a dialogue with members of non-state groups willing to lay down their arms.[29]

The deployment of G5 Sahel forces in the Tillabéri region and the presence of Western forces, particularly from France, complete the arsenal of responses mobilised to curb insecurity in the area.

While these responses have produced some results, they haven't been able to stop the threat. Moreover, they have generally not paid any attention to the specific challenges for girls and women.

As such, the restrictions on movement and market closures under the state of emergency have at times negatively affected households' livelihoods, traders' businesses and the availability of certain goods and staple food items. This has worsened the economic precariousness of households, which had already been hit by the climate of insecurity.

Moreover, incidents such as those that occurred in March 2021 in Téra reveal the danger to girls and

Chart 7: Responses to insecurity in the Tillabéri region

women in affected areas posed by deploying armed forces who don't respect international humanitarian law and lack military discipline. Members of Chadian forces stationed in the area as part of the G5 Sahel Joint Force attacked local populations, sexually assaulting and raping at least three people, including an 11-year-old girl and a 32-year-old pregnant woman.[30]

Some of the women consulted for the study reported that while the events in Téra made headlines, sexual abuse was also perpetrated by individual members of the national forces deployed in the region. They argue that the social stigma associated with sexual assault and the fear of retaliation by perpetrators leads to victims staying silent and to impunity.

Travel restrictions and closures of markets induced by the state of emergency have aggravated the economic precariousness of households

To address these failings, it is important to cover gender issues in the training of both domestic and foreign forces, including explicit training on zero-tolerance policies on sexual abuse and exploitation by defence and security forces. Moreover, establishing easy-to-access and secure complaint mechanisms could allow victims of such abuse to report the facts safely and get justice.

Improving availability of gender-disaggregated data

As this study shows, few analyses examine the impact of insecurity from the perspective of those who are directly affected, or give them a voice. Even fewer focus on the specific experiences of girls and women in this context. This is compounded by the limited availability of gender-disaggregated data, which is essential if responses are to be tailored to the specific needs of men, women, girls and boys. Each of these social categories faces specific risks and threats, in addition to a common core of risks.

These factors contribute to the lack of attention paid to women's concerns. When these needs are considered, there is often more focus on general assumptions than on direct consultation with women themselves or on disaggregated empirical data.

To address these shortcomings, public authorities should conduct regular statistical surveys to document the status of gender-specific as well as general needs. This would require the systematic production of gender-disaggregated quantitative data. Alongside this, it would also be beneficial to standardise the use of mechanisms for consulting women from local communities, such as those tested in this study. This would enable public authorities to learn directly about the concerns of local people, both men and women, and to hold a constructive dialogue about the responses implemented.
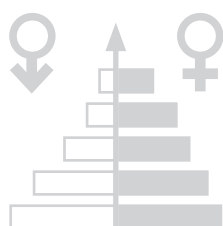
GENDER-DISAGGREGATED DATA IS NEEDED TO GUIDE PUBLIC ACTION

Conclusion

Conflict and insecurity are having a wide range of impacts on the women of Tillabéri, compounding the various forms of gender-based violence to which they are already exposed in peacetime. The perceptions and concerns expressed by the 52 women consulted for this study show that insecurity is increasing girls' exposure to the two mutually reinforcing risks of child marriage and early school leaving. It is also increasing wives' exposure to domestic violence on the one hand and widowhood on the other. In this context, population movements are a further factor increasing the risks faced by girls and women.

Civilian widows and female heads of households are at significant risk of isolation and poverty. They cannot always rely on traditional family support mechanisms, which have been disrupted by the security crisis, a situation with both economic and social consequences.

The drop in agricultural activity, the closure of markets and the high cost of living are contributing to food insecurity among men, women, girls and boys. However, the structural inequalities for women compared to men, such as their poor access to land ownership and low level of financial autonomy, make them even more vulnerable to precariousness. Women with businesses, especially traders, are also seeing business slow down due to the crisis.

The response to these challenges must be part of a broad strategy to support human security

In addition to improving the security situation in the region, the response to these challenges must form part of a wide-reaching strategy to bolster human security that recognises and mitigates the negative impact of insecurity on people. Such a response will only be possible if it considers the perceptions and concerns expressed by the people themselves, especially by women, including those living in rural areas, who are rarely heard on issues of insecurity, even though they bear the brunt of its effects.

Notes

1   Republic of Niger, second-generation National Action Plan for the Women, Peace and Security Agenda 2020-2024, http://1325naps. peacewomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Niger-2020-2024.pdf.

2   The High Authority for the Consolidation of Peace, the National Centre for Strategic and Security Studies, and the Niger office of UN Women participated in these exercises.

3   ACLED, https://acleddata.com/dashboard/#/dashboard.

4   Niger : 71 morts dans l'attaque d'un camp militaire (Niger: 71 dead in attack on military camp), *Le Monde with AFP*, www.lemonde.fr/afrique/ article/2019/12/11/niger-plus-de-60-morts-dans-l-attaque-d-un-camp-militaire_6022544_3212.html, 2019, accessed on 19 October 2022.

5   G5 Sahel, Attaque contre le Poste Militaire avancé de Chinagodrar au Niger : Le Gouvernement décrete un deuil national de trois jours (Attack on Chinagodrar Military Outpost in Niger: Government declares three days of national mourning), www.g5sahel.org/attaque-contre-le-poste-militaire-avance-de-chinagodrar-au-niger-le-gouvernement-decrete-un-deuil-national-de-trois-jours/, 13 January 2020, accessed on 19 October 2022.

6   Studio Kalangou, Tahoua: 137 villageois tués dans le département de Tillia (Tahoua: 137 villagers killed in Tillia department), www.studiokalangou.org/14102-tahoua-quarantaine-villageois-tues-departement-tillia, 22 March 2021, accessed 19 October 2022.

7   International Organization for Migration (IOM), Strengthening Resilience and Peace in Conflict-Hit Tillabéri: Women Team Up to Build a Better Future, https://rodakar.iom.int/stories/strengthening-resilience-and-peace-conflict-hit-tillaberi-women-team-build-better-future, 28 March 2022, accessed on 22 August 2022.

8   UN OCHA Niger, Highlights, www.unocha.org/niger, 23 June 2022.

9   Ibid.

10 The World Bank in Niger, Niger – Overview, www.worldbank.org/en/ country/niger/overview: 'As of August 31, 2022, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had identified 294,467 refugees and almost 350,000 displaced persons in the country.', 22 September 2022.

11 World Bank Blogs, How new laws are protecting women and girls, and changing mindsets in Niger, https://blogs.worldbank.org/nasikiliza/how-new-laws-are-protecting-women-and-girls-and-changing-mindsets-niger, 26 January 2022, accessed on 19 October 2022.

12 World Bank Blogs, Can Niger escape the demographic trap?, https://blogs.worldbank.org/africacan/can-niger-escape-demographic-trap, 24 January 2020, accessed on 27 October 2022.

13 The World Bank in Niger, Niger – Overview, www.worldbank.org/en/ country/niger/overview, 22 September 2022.

14 Niger : à Tillabéri, la menace terroriste aggrave l'insécurité alimentaire (Niger: In Tillabéri, the terrorist threat worsens food insecurity), *Sahelien.com*, https://sahelien.com/niger-a-tillaberi-la-menace-terroriste-aggrave-linsecurite-alimentaire/, 7 July 2022, accessed on 19 October 2022.

15 CILSS/Agrhymet and partners, Cadre Harmonisé – Manual 2.0, http://agrhymet.cilss.int/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Manuel-CH-2.0_ En_FV.pdf, October 2019.

16 The Food Crisis Prevention Network, Food and nutrition situation / Niger: March-May 2022, Current Situation, www.food-security.net/en/ datas/niger/, accessed on 30 September 2022.

17 Several statements illustrated the high cost of living. The price of a litre of oil reportedly rose from 1 000 to 1 200 CFA francs; the price

of a bucket of potatoes from 2 000 to 3 500 CFA francs; the price of a measure of tomatoes from 1 000 to between 2 000 and 3 500 CFA francs; and the unit price of squash from 750 to between 2 000 and 3 000 CFA francs.

18 UNFPA, Étude sur l'ampleur et les déterminants des violences basées sur le genre au Niger (Study on the scale and determinants of gender-based violence in Niger), 2021.

19 OCHA, Aperçu des besoins humanitaires – Niger (Humanitarian Needs Overview – Niger), p. 93, www.humanitarianresponse.info/ en/operations/niger/document/niger-aper%C3%A7u-des-besoins-humanitaires-2022, February 2022.

20 A Diarra, Mariages d'enfants au Mali et au Niger: comment les comprendre? (Understanding child marriage in Mali and Niger), *Le Monde*, 29 November 2018, www.lemonde.fr/afrique/ article/2018/11/29/mariages-d-enfants-au-mali-et-au-niger-comment-les-comprendre_5390415_3212.html, accessed on 22 August 2022.

21 Niger : 890 écoles fermées pour insécurité (UNICEF) (Niger: 890 schools closed due to insecurity (UNICEF)), *AA News*, www.aa.com. tr/fr/afrique/niger-890-%C3%A9coles-ferm%C3%A9es-pour-ins%C3%A9curit%C3%A9-unicef/2669524, 25 August 2022.

22 OCHA, Aperçu des besoins humanitaires – Niger (Humanitarian Needs Overview – Niger], p. 48, www.humanitarianresponse.info/ en/operations/niger/document/niger-aper%C3%A7u-des-besoins-humanitaires-2022, February 2022.

23 Ministry for the Advancement of Women and Child Protection, National Gender Policy, www.promotionfemme.gouv.ne/uploads/ documents/5c79193989b63.pdf, August 2017.

24 Document consulted for the purposes of this study.

25 S Hall, Analyse rapide de genre – Niger (Rapid gender analysis – Niger), Final report prepared by UNICEF, www.unicef.org/wca/media/8356/ file/Analyse%20rapide%20de%20genre%20%E2%80%93Niger.pdf, November 2021.

26 United Nations Sustainable Development Group, Violence and control in lockdown: more support needed for women and girls in Niger, https://unsdg.un.org/latest/stories/violence-and-control-lockdown-more-support-needed-women-and-girls-niger, accessed on 28 September 2022, 27 May 2021.

27 This code of silence extends to other forms of violence, including sexual violence, committed in or outside the family.

28 UNHCR, Rapport de mission multisectorielle d'évaluation de la situation dans les zones sous état d'urgence – Région de Tillabéry (14 et 15 février 2019) (Report on multi-sectoral mission to assess the situation in the areas under state of emergency – Tillabéry region (14 and 15 February 2019)), https://reliefweb.int/report/niger/rapport-de-mission-multisectorielle-d-evaluation-de-la-situation-dans-les-zones-sous, 2019.

29 Niger : la stratégie de dialogue avec les groupes djihadistes enclenchée (Niger: Strategy of talking to jihadist groups launched), *Le Point Afrique*, www.lepoint.fr/afrique/niger-la-strategie-de-dialogue-avec-les-groupes-djihadistes-enclenchee-27-02-2022-2466369_3826.php, 27 February 2022, accessed on 23 August 2022.

30 Studio Kalangou, Niger : cas de viols perpétrés à Téra par les militaires tchadiens du 8e bataillon de la force conjointe du G5 Sahel (Niger: Chadian soldiers from the 8th battalion of the G5 Sahel Joint Forces commit rape in Téra), www.studiokalangou.org/14174-niger-cas-viols-perpetres-tera-militaires-tchadiens-8e-bataillon-force-conjointe-g5-sahel-niger, 9 April 2021, accessed on 21 October 2022.

Visit our website for the latest analysis, insight and news

The Institute for Security Studies partners to build knowledge and skills that secure Africa's future
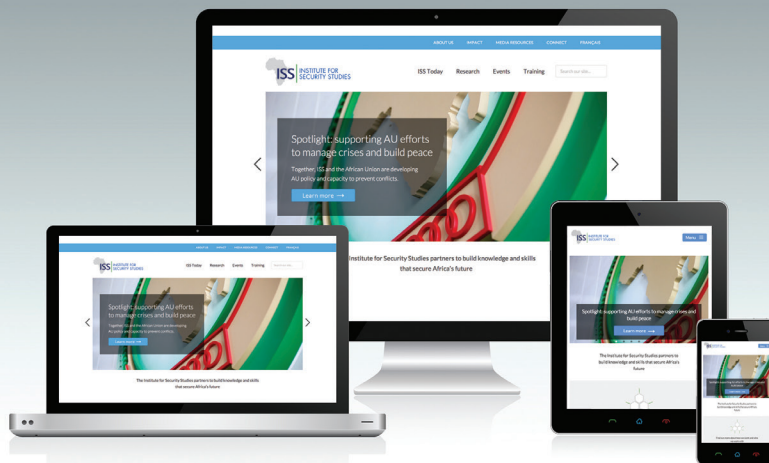
Step 1 Go to www.issafrica.org

Step 2 Go to bottom right of the ISS home page and provide your subscription details

About the authors

The empirical data used for this analysis was collected by a group of women from the target communes of Abala, Ayorou, Banibangou, Ouallam and Tillabéri. The report was drafted under the coordination of Ornella Moderan, with the support of Fatoumata Maïga.

Ornella Moderan is a Researcher specialising in security and governance issues in the Sahel, with a particular interest in gender inequalities. She was head of the Sahel programme at the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) from 2020 to 2022, and has written many publications on the situation in the region. Fatoumata Maïga is a Research Officer in the ISS Regional office for West Africa, the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin, Dakar.

The report was produced as part of a collaboration between the Niger office of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP Niger) and the ISS.

About ISS West Africa Reports

West Africa Reports provide the results of in-depth research on the latest human security challenges in the region. Some reports analyse broad conflict trends and threats to peace and security in specific West African countries. Others focus on challenges in the region such as electoral reform, corruption or intra-state conflict.

About the ISS

The Institute for Security Studies (ISS) partners to build knowledge and skills that secure Africa's future. The ISS is an African non-profit with offices in South Africa, Kenya, Ethiopia and Senegal. Using its networks and influence, the ISS provides timely and credible policy research, practical training and technical assistance to governments and civil society.

Development partners

9 772617 819009