

## Terrorism and Violations of Women's Rights in Mali (2015–2020)

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### Abstract

Globally, terrorism has constituted a threat to human rights in different dimensions. Mali is no exception, and women have become more vulnerable to this threat. Drawing from desktop research and feminist security theory as its explanatory framework, this article argues that terrorism in Mali exacerbates women's vulnerabilities, limiting their access to fundamental rights and services. Under siege of terrorism, women are reportedly subjected to sexual assault, enslaved and used as instruments of suicide bombing and weapons of war. Equally, terrorism has affected fundamental comforts of life such as access to good health care, education, and employment opportunities, thus subjecting women to the violent extremist Islamic ideologies perpetuated by the terrorist groups. From the unfolding, the article concludes that failure in combating terrorism risks sustained infringement on women's rights. It recommends gender-based counter-terrorism strategies in addition to enhancing ongoing government efforts to combat terrorism in the country.

### Keywords

Gender, Women's Rights, Counter-terrorism, Peace Building, Vulnerabilities

### 1. Introduction

Terrorism is one of the global threats ravaging the world, particularly in developing countries, where it is causing destruction to lives and properties and a cycle of displacement. According to the Global Terrorism Index 2024 (GTI), terrorism remains a major concern for the world, with 8,352 terrorist-related deaths in 2023, which is the highest since 2017, with a 22% increase. As GTI (2024) notes, the terrorism hotbed has shifted from the Middle East to the Sahel region in Africa, and accounts for more than half of all deaths reported. As a result, Africa is characterised as home to some of the deadliest terrorist groups in the world, like Al Qaeda in the Islamic

Maghreb (AQIM), Boko Haram, Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP) and Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) (GTI, 2024). Thus, as Amina (2025) has recently argued, terrorism remains the most challenging threat to the security, peace, stability and sustainable development of Africa, where in Burkina Faso, it has a startling 68% increase in death tolls, being the highest in the world. To speak the least, the terrorist groups are well known for their ruthless killings, bombings, assassinations, and kidnappings all over the African continent to achieve their purpose (Amina, 2025).

Globally, terrorism constitutes a security threat but manifests in different forms and at varying magnitudes. In Africa, particularly in East and West Africa, Al-Shabaab has consistently launched attacks and wreaked great havoc on several countries such as Djibouti, Kenya and Ethiopia, in Eastern Africa, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria, in Western Africa and in Cameroon and Chad in Central Africa. These countries have been ravaged by persistent terrorist attacks, causing loss of lives and property.

Terrorism in Mali can be traced to the 1960s, but it became more pronounced and gained international attention in the 2000s (Sanjo & Nyadi, 2024). Mali is reported to be ravaged by terrorists, most particularly the Tuareg rebels who joined the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA). They have allied themselves with various extremist Islamist organisations, such as Ansar Dine, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), in an effort to drive out government forces from the north and demand an independent state (Heide et al., 2023; Mensah, 2023). Mali now ranks third among African nations with ruthless terrorist groups because of these activities (Saifaddin, 2024). Central Mali has become the hotbed of terrorist activities in Mali (Heide, 2023).

As a matter of fact, in Northern and Central Mali, ethnic and militant groups are coupled with Islamic extremism. The terrorist groups have taken advantage of the ethnic and political grievances to promote different agendas through violence. The rise of extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in the Sahel region, including Mali, poses a serious threat to regional stability, making the country the 3rd in terrorism in African countries (Heide, 2023). The various terrorist groups have capitalised on existing instability in Mali to establish safe havens and launch attacks both within the country and beyond its borders. In Central and Northern Mali, Al-Qaeda and Islamic State (ISIS) had expanded their operations, killing civilians and destroying public and private property. Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM led by Iyad Al Galy) and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) carried out steady attacks on the non-adherents of their teachings in Mali (Heide, 2023). The JNIM coordinated the activities of other terrorist groups, such as Al Mourabitoun, Ansar Dine and Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA), which carried out heinous attacks on civilians.

For instance, Al Mourabitoun attacked the Radisson Blue Hotel in Bamako, Mali, killing 170 guests, and attacks have been consistently carried out since the occurrence (Heide, 2023). Over the years, terrorism has had significant negative impacts on Mali, ranging from large-scale population displacement to humanitarian crises. It has caused severe economic upheaval, a collapse in essential services like healthcare and education, a terrible rise in poverty, social divisions, and a substantial psychological toll on the populace, particularly women. In all these, girls and women have disproportionately been on the receiving end. This is because terrorist groups arbitrarily target and use women as tools for terrorist acts, such as suicide bombing. An equally large number of girls and women are forcefully raped, forced to endure sexual assault and are made to procreate for terrorists. Often, girls and women are ordered to wear a chador (Islamic veil) and flogged and publicly stoned for wrong conviction of breaching the law, and their rights to life, liberty and physical integrity are heavily violated (MINUSMA, 2025; Stimson, 2024; US Department of State, 2022a).

Notwithstanding the international community's and the Malian government's attempts to stop terrorism in Mali, blatant human rights abuses, especially those directed at girls and women, have persisted. As a matter of fact, the situation worsened in 2012, when Islamist terrorist groups, such as AQIM and Ansar Dine, took control of a Tuareg uprising in northern Mali, occupying major cities and declaring an independent state (Mensah, 2023). It took the intervention of French forces (Operation Serval) to restore order, stability and peace to the nation. Although the insurgents were driven from urban areas by French military intervention, the underlying political and social problems in Mali were not resolved. Persistent insecurity and intermittent bloodshed have continued to plague the subsequent peace effort, and women's rights have been violated (Lorentzen, 2021).

It is against this backdrop that the study examined terrorism and women's rights in Mali, paying attention to the historical trends of terrorism, women's rights violations by terrorist organisations, and efforts by stakeholders in combating the menace. The article consists of an introduction, conceptual clarifications, theoretical underpinnings, the development of terrorism in Mali and its effects on women's rights, and a conclusion.

## **2. Conceptualising Terrorism and Women's Rights**

### **2.1. Terrorism**

Terrorism is one of the highly contested concepts in security, peace, and conflict studies. As a global phenomenon, it has attracted different connotations among scholars based on their ideological orientations and is fraught with definitional problems (Alao et al., 2023). Hence, engaging in the trajectory of conceptualisation might be difficult to achieve successfully, as one man's terrorist is another's freedom fighter. However, it is necessary to look at a few conceptions of terrorism. Opafofa (2008) conceived terrorism as the calculated use of unlawful violence to inculcate fear, intended to coerce or to intimidate governments' societies in the pursuit of political, religious or ideological goals. This implies terrorism is not just accidental in nature but orchestrated to achieve some desirable goals to benefit the religious, political, ideological and even economic intrinsic values considered paramount to the existence of a group or individual.

Jackson (2018) views terrorism as a violent strategy or tactic that actors employ in pursuing political goals. As argued by Ogundiwin (2023), terrorism is a political action directed toward certain strategic goals rather than a broad ideology or movement. Terrorism is further conceptualised as an anxiety-inspiring method of repeated violent action, employed by semi-clandestine individual, group or state actors for idiosyncratic, criminal or political reasons (Alao et al, 2023). However, Stepanova (2008) accentuated terrorism as a form of violence that mostly integrates one-sided violence against civilians with asymmetrical violent confrontation against a stronger opponent, whether a state or a group of states. Akowe and Adeyemi (2012) perceived terrorism to be a deliberate and systematic destruction in whole or in part of an ethnic, racial, religious, nation, or group. In all these, the basic attributes of terrorism include and are not limited to motives or objectives driven, which might be political or religious. Terrorism targets are mostly civilians or members of certain religious or ethnic groups. At the same time, actors may be non-state, which could be supported by state actors who have special interests to protect, making strategic and calculative use of suicide bombings, kidnappings, shootings and hostage takings (Ogundiwin, 2023). There is no doubt that terrorism is characterised by the infusion of fear, targeted at an individual, group or state and orchestrated to destroy human and material resources. Merari (1978) classified terrorist organisations into four major groups, including domestic-based xeno-fighters, foreign-based xeno-fighters, and foreign-based homofighters. Examples of terrorist organisations include Abu Sayyaf Group, Afghan Taliban, Al-

Shabaab, Al-Nusrah, Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda, Lukawaram, Haaqqani Network (National Counter Terrorism Centre, 2025), among others

That said, the most widely acceptable definition of terrorism is that by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) (2019a) which conceived it as offences committed against civilians, with the intent to cause death or serious bodily injury, or the taking of hostages, with the intention of inciting a state of terror in the general public, in a group of people and are never justified by political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious, or other similar considerations. In the context of this study, terrorism refers to the premeditated attack, use of threat and violence on an unharmed person or group of individuals to harm or destroy for religious, ideological, political and ethnic reasons.

## ***2.2. Women's Rights***

Women's rights are an inalienable and indivisible component of universal human rights. They are the rights and privileges asserted for girls and women worldwide. The United Nations established women's rights about 70 years ago as essential human rights for all women worldwide. These include freedom from slavery, discrimination, and violence; the rights to property, education, and the vote and to be elected; and the right to equal pay (Global Fund for Women, 2023). From another perspective, women's rights are the privileges and protections that women and girls worldwide enjoy. These rights were articulated during the 19th-century feminist movement and the 20th- and 21st-century women's rights movements to ensure that women are not subject to discrimination. According to Herre (2023), women's rights are those that are expected to be enjoyed by women. These rights include economic rights (property and employment), political rights (voting and holding public office), and physical integrity rights (the right not to be subjected to violence when making decisions about their own bodies) (Herre, Samborska, Arriagada, & Ritchie, 2023).

Rosenfeld (2007) argued that women's rights is one of the most challenging areas to describe, especially in law, as it covers so many diverse topics. The rights of women are most frequently linked to job discrimination, sexual and domestic abuse, and reproductive rights. However, women's rights also cover issues related to immigration and refugees, child custody, civil rights, human rights, sports law, LGBT rights, criminal justice, health care, housing, social security and public benefits, and international law. According to the International Human Rights Treaties (2006), women's rights encompass civil, political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions, guaranteeing justice, equality, freedom, and participation in decision-making processes (Walter, 2012). Women's rights are the privileges and entitlements that girls and women assert in societies across the world. Some nations have laws, local conventions, and customs that support or institutionalise certain rights, while others ignore and suppress them. By asserting an innate historical and customary prejudice against girls' and women's exercise of rights in favour of boys' and men's rights, they diverge from broader human rights principles (Strategic Advocacy for Human Rights, 2025).

According to UNOHCHR (2016), women's rights are the liberties, freedoms, and opportunities that enable women to be treated equally to men, with similar legal status. However, women's rights are considered inferior to men's, thereby justifying practices that do not accord women full and equal status (Bunch, 1990). Also, the Global Fund for Women (2023) conceptualised women's rights as fundamental human rights, which the United Nations enshrined over 70 years ago for every human being on earth; these rights include the right to education, fair and equal income, the vote, and freedom from slavery, violence, and discrimination. Strategic Advocacy for Human Rights (2025) expresses women's rights as the rights and entitlements claimed by women and girls in societies worldwide, which are

institutionalised and supported by local laws and customs, yet suppressed in some countries. The Council of Europe (2025) conceived of women's rights as human rights enshrined in international human rights treaties, including freedom from discrimination, torture, and the rights to life, privacy, health, decent living conditions, and safety. In the same vein, Herre et al. (2023) define women's rights as human rights encompassing physical integrity and social, economic, and political rights.

It is important to note that women's rights are part of the liberal democratic political agenda, recognised and enshrined in the constitutions of countries globally, but they are still being violated, most especially in violent conflict-related situations. Hence, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) advocates both executive and legislative measures to ensure that national laws comply with the treaty, thereby protecting women's rights globally (Miranga, Namilonga & Mutsalani, 2022).

Often, women are subjected to a series of human rights violations, such as terrorism, political repression, torture, mutilation, humiliation, sexual assault and even death, while the female victims remain invisible because the political actors are dominantly men (Bunch, 1990). So, many violations of women's rights are because they are females. Despite various abuses perpetrated against the female gender, women's rights are not treated as human rights (*van Leeuwen, 2013*). Similarly, Chhibber (2018) posited that women's rights are violated both in public and private domains as women are deprived of personal liberty and are bound by rules made by men perceived to be superior in society.

From an African perspective, women's rights are a broad set of human, civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights recognised by regional and international frameworks, such as the Maputo Protocol.<sup>1</sup> Women's rights focus on protecting women from violence and discrimination, ensuring equal opportunities, and safeguarding their autonomy, health, and dignity (*ibid*). Key areas include the right to life, security, education, and political participation, as well as protection from harmful practices, with a strong emphasis on legal and institutional reform to achieve gender equality (Amnesty International, 2004; African Union, 2025; Ankut, 2025). As it applies to this study, women's rights encompass all fundamental human rights for the enjoyment and protection of girls and women in any society, including rights to physical, economic, political, religious, sexual, reproductive, mental, and emotional integrity. All these rights are violated in the absence of violence, but become aggravated in violent conflict and terrorist attacks.

### 3. Theoretical Underpinning

Works that embody women's perspectives and experiences have appeared throughout history, informed mainly by liberal Western feminist theory, which can be traced to the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797). However, significant feminist theorisation occurred during the 1970s and 1980s, with contributions from Stiehm (1983), Elshtain & Tobias (1990), Enloe (2000), and Eric Blanchard (2003). These, and others, have copiously contributed to the expansion of the feminist theory over the years.

Feminist security theory explains the relationship between security, gender and power dynamics by analysing how women's rights are abused and neglected during conflict and post-conflict circumstances, including terrorism (Lorentzen, 2021). Furthermore, women's protection concerns during violent and intense conflict scenarios are mostly neglected by traditional security systems (Enloe, 2000). Feminist security theory also criticises conventional security narratives that accord credence to military techniques and state-centric perspectives without

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<sup>1</sup> <https://au.int/en/treaties/protocol-african-charter-human-and-peoples-rights-rights-women-africa>

considering women's status. In this way, it promotes a gender-sensitive and inclusive view of security that acknowledges the various ways that violence, especially terrorism, affects women.

Women's rights are essential to establishing lasting peace and security. It advocates women's empowerment as proactive participants in conflict prevention, resolution, and peace building (Blanchard, 2003). The theory, however, is not without criticism. For scholars such as Vijay (2021), Ebrahimi and Resaii (2023), feminist security theory is frequently criticised for oversimplifying women's experiences, ignoring the varied realities of women of various races, classes, and sexual orientations, occasionally encouraging a victim mentality, and possibly ignoring the positive aspects of gender roles or male experiences. Some critics contend that some feminist approaches to security can be unduly preoccupied with the concept of a monolithic patriarchy and neglect to consider the complex social dynamics that affect women's lives.

The application of a feminist security theory to the study of terrorism helps to highlight the suffering that women endure because of terrorism, giving practitioners and policymakers a greater understanding of the intricate relationships between gender, insecurity, and violence. It emphasises the significance of attending to the requirements and concerns of women impacted by terrorism, such as chances for social and economic empowerment, access to justice, and safety from gender-based violence. Ultimately, feminist security theory offers a vital framework for comprehending the intricate dynamics of terrorism and its consequences for women's rights. By incorporating gender perspectives into security analysis and policymaking, stakeholders can develop more equitable, inclusive, and durable counterterrorism strategies that prioritise women's protection and empowerment.

#### **4. Research Methodology**

The desk research method was used to collect secondary data. Hence, books, reports, journal articles, bulletins, and databases were used to obtain the required information. The author reviewed existing documents and data rather than conducting in-person research or interviews. The method was used to obtain an overview of the subject matter under discussion and is cost-effective and time-efficient.

#### **5. Development of Terrorism in Mali: A Historical Overview**

Terrorism in Mali has multifarious causes that can be traced back to the 1960s, which was also shaped by the global events in the post-Cold War era (Sunjo & Nyadi, 2024). Historically, the development of terrorism in Mali can be traced to factors such as Tuareg revolts, Islamic fundamentalism, the 1992 Algerian civil war, Libyan crisis and Fulani insurrection (Camara, 2019). To start with, the major cause of terrorism can be traced to rebellion of the Tuaregs against perceived marginalisation, leading to agitation for the creation of the state of Azawad in Northern Mali, which would constitute Kidal, Tessalit, Gao, Mopti, Menaka and Tombouctou (Atallah, 2013; Sunjo & Nyadi, 2024). As a matter of fact, historical grievances and ethnic tensions have also played a significant role in fueling terrorism in Mali. The marginalisation of certain ethnic groups, particularly the Tuaregs, has led to feelings of exclusion and resentment, which terrorist organisations have exploited to garner support and recruit fighters. As noted by Keita and Diallo (2022), unresolved historical grievances, such as the Tuareg rebellions and lack of inclusive governance, have contributed to the radicalisation of disaffected groups and the emergence of terrorist movements in Mali.

Aside from the Tuaregs' revolts, there was the emergence of another Islamic jihadist after the Algerian civil war, which occurred between 1992 and 2002 in Northern Mali. The violent Islamic group (the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (SGPC) emerged in 1998 and

established a strong link with Al Qaeda in 2006, and started recruiting members across the Sahel. Splinter violent Islamic groups like the Movement for Oneness of Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA), Katiba Macina, Ansarul Islam, Al-Morabitoum and Ansar Dine maintained a strong link with the Salafist group in carrying out terrorist attacks. As noted by Sunjo and Nyadi (2024), an alliance occurred between Tuareg extremists to establish an Islamic state in 2012, which was later recaptured by the French forces and Forces Armées Maliennes (FAMa) in 2013 and 2014. It is important to note that each of the terrorist groups wanted to revive the medieval version of religious tenets to maintain relevance in the Sahel and particularly in Mali.

Terrorism in Mali is not confined to Islamist extremist groups alone, as there are ethnic-based militias, such as the Fulani and Dogon, who carried out deadly attacks, aggravating the tense inter-communal insecurity, further threatening the corporate existence of Mali. As argued by Atallah (2013), the Tuaregs had been seeking to maintain their autonomy and control over their ancestral land, but the Mali government had marginalised the group, even during the colonial and post-colonial periods. So, Tuaregs have maintained regular rebellion against the Mali government to correct the perceived misgovernance against them. The proliferation of small arms and illicit trafficking networks in the Sahel region has fueled conflict and provided resources for various armed groups to sustain their activities. Mali's porous borders and vast, inhospitable terrain have presented significant challenges for the country's security forces and international peacekeeping missions, such as the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali. The country's porous borders extend to some 4,500 miles and touch seven neighbouring countries through which terrorists come into the country (U.S. Department of State, 2022b). The porous nature of borders in Mali allows for the free movement of militants, weapons, and illicit goods, creating a transnational challenge that requires a coordinated regional response. The vast and sparsely populated regions of Mali, particularly in the Sahel, provide a terrain conducive to the activities of terrorist groups. According to Debo and Traore (2023), the porous borders, weak governance, and lack of state presence in remote areas create breeding grounds for terrorist activities and extremist ideologies. The vast ungoverned spaces allow terrorist groups to operate, recruit members, and establish safe havens, contributing to the proliferation of terrorism in the country.

Although the Gendarmerie, the National Border Police and the Special Intervention Brigade provided security, terrorism still exists with loss of human lives and property. The complex nature of the conflict, with multiple actors and motives at play, has made it difficult to achieve a sustainable peace agreement. For instance, the Fulani crisis in central Mali is rooted in history traceable to ancient empires of Songhai, Mali and Macina, and still causes violence to date. Fulani pastoralists considered themselves exploited and marginalised by other ethnic groups during the colonial period and after independence. Through the leadership of Amadou Koufa in Mopti in Central Mali, the Fulani formed alliances with other violent Islamic groups in propagating Islamic doctrines considered to be anti-infidels (International Crisis Group, 2020). So, religious fundamentalism is a strong factor driving terrorism in Mali. As argued by Soares (2021), Islamic extremism acts as a driver of insurgency through violent actions perpetrated against non-adherents of their teachings. The Islamic extremists are strongly motivated and influenced by external connections to Al Qaeda and other terrorist organisations to promote their ideologies and religious doctrines. As noted by Sanneh (2016), the type of Islamic doctrine promoted by the terrorists is quite different from the Maliki version, which permitted co-existence of religion and cultural practices, unlike the violent Middle Ages version promoted by the jihadists. As posited by Sunjo and Nyadi (2024), the Middle Ages version of Islam believes in the pursuit of knowledge and the use of reason, which is perceived to be deeply rooted in radical rationalism. The terrorists believe in Salafism, which they consider to be the authentic or pure

form of Islam, and they promote it with all their might. Salafism has some basic tenets of rationalism, activism and Jihadism, making it violent unlike Sufism (Kane, 2021, cited in Sunjo & Nyadi, 2024: 39-49). The Islamic religion, rooted in Salafism, has been used as a weapon to unleash terror on the Malian people and other neighbouring nations.

Weak governance, corruption, and ineffective state institutions have created fertile ground for the growth of terrorism in Mali. The terrorists took advantage of grievances, marginalisation, poverty, poor governance and ethnic tensions to execute their agenda. Corruption in the rank and file of the political leadership and security forces, coupled with a lack of resources and training, hinders the government's ability to combat terrorist threats effectively. According to Toure and Konate (2023), weak rule of law, lack of accountability, and governance challenges have allowed terrorist groups to exploit vulnerabilities, engage in illicit activities, and challenge the authority of the state, contributing to the perpetuation of terrorism in the country. Marginalisation of populations in rural areas, coupled with limited economic opportunities, has made vulnerable communities susceptible to recruitment by terrorist groups offering financial incentives and perceived social support. Alhassane and Diarra (2022) noted that economic disparities and social grievances have created conditions that terrorist organisations exploit to gain influence and recruit new members, perpetuating instability and insecurity.

External influences and regional dynamics have also shaped the country's terrorism landscape. The influx of weapons and fighters from conflict-ridden neighbouring countries, such as Libya and Nigeria, has fueled the violence and instability in Mali. As highlighted by Coulibaly and Sangare (2022), porous borders, regional conflicts, and the presence of transnational terrorist networks contribute to the cross-border flow of weapons, fighters, and extremist ideologies, exacerbating the security challenges faced by Mali. In a nutshell, the development of terrorism in Mali is a complex interplay of various factors, including governance challenges, historical grievances, socio-economic disparities and external influences. As a matter of fact, the human rights situation in Mali has further deteriorated in 2023 due to attacks by Islamist armed groups linked to Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).

The counter-terrorism operations by Malian armed forces (FAMA) and other foreign fighters further compounded the human rights violations affecting women in the country. Clashes still occur between the Malian armed forces and armed groups (Azawad Movements, constituting ethnic Tuareg rebels), further exacerbating the situation of women's rights. The violence exacerbated an already dire humanitarian crisis, with 8.8 million people requiring assistance and over 575,000 forced from their homes, including 375,000 internally displaced people and 205,000 refugees in neighbouring countries as of August 2023 (Hassan, 2024). The Wagner groups, the European Union Training Mission, the G5 Sahel forces and the European military task force have all been involved in the fight against terrorism in Mali. However, many of the soldiers of these joint forces have equally been accused of killing unharmed civilians, violating women's and young girls' rights while on the special mission to combat terrorism (Jessica, 2024). Terrorism in Mali has led to loss of several lives and properties, with Central Mali being the epicentre of terrorist attacks, accounting for 40% of attacks (International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), 2018). Over 500 people were killed between January and August 2018, while over 15,000 individuals were evacuated (FIDH, 2018). In June 2018, 75,000 people were displaced, and about 972,000 people required humanitarian assistance in the Mopti Region (FIDH, 2018). In 2022, the attacks increased by 56% in Mali, killing about 944 people (Burke, 2023). Also, Gift (2024) and Aurore (2023) reported that 844 people out of 1,044 died between January and June 30, 2023, due to attacks in Mali. As of August 2023, 8.8 million people were in

dire need of aid, over 575,000 were displaced, including 205,000 refugees in neighbouring countries, worsening the humanitarian crisis (Hassan, 2024).

## 6. Terrorism and Women's Rights Violations

Terrorism has affected the lives of Malian women by frequently violating their fundamental human rights and thus exacerbating already-existing gender inequality. One of the ways that women's rights were violated is through sexual violence, particularly rape by terrorists. The use of rape as a terrorist act has not only meant to perpetuate a culture of fear and insecurity for Malian women, but to instil fear across the whole Malian society. Consequently, as terrorists increasingly invade areas such as Mopti, Segou and Gao, acts of sexual violence against girls and women spread like wildfire, these acts are also getting the terrorists constantly and increasingly violating women's rights without recourse. In short, terrorists use rape as a tool for keeping Malian women in a state of fear and insecurity. As reported by Gorman and Chauzal (2019), a woman carrying out washing duties for the soldiers in Niono (Segou) was raped, a typical example that occurred in many of the terrorist infested areas. As that is not enough, Malian girls and women's rights are also grossly violated by Mali's troops and foreign security providers such as Russia's Wagner (Nichols, 2023). As Nichols (2023) further notes, both members of terrorist groups, Mali's troops and Wagner, are perpetrating sexual violence in a systematic way against the Malian girls and women; they also rob them of human dignity. As reported by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2020), women face human rights violations through sexual slavery, forced pregnancy, abortion and forced labour. Thus, as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2020) has reported, the experiences of violations of human rights against women in Mali confirm that women in conflict-affected areas are at a higher risk of experiencing sexual violence, forced marriage, and other forms of gender-based violence perpetrated by terrorist groups and armed forces. In almost similar ways, Philip (2024) also shared the ordeals of some women, mostly teenagers, fleeing Mali to neighbouring states as they were raped on their way. Most Malian women suffered in secret because they were constantly afraid that their abusers would kill them if they were discovered (UNSC, 2019b).

As reported by the U.S. Department of State (2024), there were cases of young women forced into marriage with members of the terrorist organisations, giving a cover of legitimacy to kidnappings and sexual slavery. Deployment of sexual violence against women constitutes a significant part of the political economy of terrorism, as such is used to raise funds when women are subjected to sexual slavery, such as forced prostitution and gifting to the terrorists for compensation. Relatedly, women were used as bargaining chips in enticing and drawing men as members to the violent group in order to increase membership. As argued by Hendricks and Macaringue (2023), women in terrorism infested countries and militarised operations are captured and used to entice men with promises of having access to wives to continue to fulfil the physical, social and ideological reproduction roles for terrorism to continue to grow. In addition, women were used as human shields or suicide bombers even against their consent. This is to show that women are not only victims, but they are also involved in perpetuating terrorism.

In Mali, terrorists also violate women's rights by forcing them to wear a veil (chador) and publicly flogging and stoning any woman perceived to have breached the sharia law. The various abuses women were subjected to had physical and psychological negative consequences for them. The women who suffer different forms of sexual violence are rejected by the communities, and worse still, they do not have access to justice to redress the inhumanity suffered. As a matter of fact, sexual violence in Mali is committed by all armed extreme groups, targeting women and girls from communities affected by terrorism (Nichols, 2023; Women

Leaders Network for Development, 2023). Resulting from such acts, Malian women have lived in perpetual fear of being killed by their violators after being exposed, hence, most of them suffer in silence. However, the more traumatising part is that the abusers are not prosecuted by the government (UNSC, 2019b). The United Nations Office of the Secretary General in 2023 reported on sexual violence perpetrated by the terrorists in Gao, Kayes, Ménaka, Mopti, Ségou and Timbuktu Regions in Mali against women and girls, and such sexual violence includes rape of 1,020 cases leading to 68 cases of unwanted pregnancies (Erdoardo & Silvia, 2023). Forced childbearing was used to spread terrorist ideology across generations and violated women's rights in Mali (UNSC, 2019b).

The dangers of terrorism on women's rights extend beyond direct acts of violence to encompass broader social and economic repercussions. It is important to note that the economic power of women is affected by terrorism as they lose their means of livelihood, therefore increasing the high poverty rate (National Counterterrorism Centre, 2024). Access to basic amenities of life has been disrupted due to attacks on public utilities by terrorists. As such, there have been disruptions to healthcare services, education systems and economic opportunities. Women bear more of the negative consequences of terrorism due to their multiple roles in society. The destabilisation caused by terrorist activities has further aggravated the existing socio-economic inequalities and further marginalised women, limiting their access to essential services and increasing their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. As in the case of women in Mali, terrorism restricts their freedom of movement to the markets for trading activities and religious gatherings (International Crisis Group ICG, 2021). Terrorism has also impeded progress towards gender equality by reinforcing traditional gender roles and norms that restrict women's autonomy and agency. The terrorist groups ravaging Mali also impose their self-seeking strict ideologies, curtailing women's rights to education, work, and political participation, further entrenching gender disparities.

Equally, the rights of the local community are infringed by members of terrorist groups that occupy areas of Northern Mali. More often, women's rights, particularly sexual and reproductive rights, are the most violated. This kind of violence is used by jihadists, rebels, or security forces to intimidate civilians, punish unfriendly communities, and enforce women's subservience (Ministry of Justice, 2021). As such, sexual violence in Mali is the responsibility of all armed factions, without making any distinction; they target women and girls from all communities (Nichols, 2023; Women Leaders Network for Development, 2023). Globally, the practice of female genital mutilation remains concentrated in a group of countries where prevalence exceeds 80%, while child marriage rates surpass 50% in several nations. These practices are perpetuated by systemic gender inequality and harmful social norms (UNICEF, 2023; UNFPA, 2022). Furthermore, even without their agreement, women have been deployed as suicide bombers or human shields. This demonstrates that women forcibly participate in the continuation of terrorism in addition to being its victims.

Largely due to intimidation and indoctrination with radical ideologies, women serve as terrorist assets. They are used by terrorists to arrange logistics for their activities. It is difficult to suspect and identify the criminal activities of women involved in violent extreme groups' deployments. This leads some women to engage in actions like setting off explosives in neighborhoods. Women who engage in this occupation are mostly those who collect and break stones for sale. These women are hired to dig holes and plant explosives and use Improved Explosive Devices (IEDs) to strike national and international forces under the guise of carrying out their economic activities. Some women are also found to be carrying weapons and ammunition. Women also provide intelligence and valuable information to terrorists. More often, these women are forced to carry out these acts as their family members might have been

kidnapped. Women are also coerced into taking on specific duties against their will due to pervasive cultural devaluation of women particularly in conflict areas where they are portrayed as slaves and sub-humans (Islamic Military Counterterrorism Coalition, 2022).

Destabilisation caused by terrorist attacks has exacerbated already-existing socioeconomic disparities and further marginalised women, reducing their access to basic services and making them more susceptible to abuse and exploitation (Nichols, 2023). Additionally, by upholding traditional gender roles and conventions that limit women's autonomy, terrorism has hampered the advancement of gender equality.

Conventional counterterrorism strategies in Mali have proven ineffective in protecting women's rights, despite the involvement of multiple forces, including Mali's security forces, France's Operation Barkhane, the Wagner Group, MINUSMA, and the G5 Sahel Joint Force (Kumar, 2025; De Angelo, 2025). Not only did these approaches fail to contain terrorism, but their operations were also characterised by widespread human rights violations (Cattani, 2022; Nichols, 2023). Women have been disproportionately victimised, with at least 500 documented cases of extrajudicial executions and sexual assaults committed by counter-terrorism actors, directly undermining their safety instead of guaranteeing it (Kumar, 2025).

## 7. Conclusion and Recommendations

Terrorism has greatly violated the rights of Malian girls and women. Many have been grossly raped, subjected to sexual slavery and used as tools for terrorist attacks. Equally, their livelihood has been destroyed. The failures in combating terrorism risks sustained infringement on women's rights, thus widening the existing gender inequality in the country. The devastating effects of terrorism and counter-terrorism on Malian women's rights underscore the importance of prioritising gender-sensitive approaches in counter-terrorism efforts and peacebuilding initiatives. Not only should the government combat terrorism with all its capacity and resources, but it should also adopt gender-sensitive counter-terrorism strategies.

To effectively protect women's rights in a terrorist context, the government must complement its counter-terrorism security operations with gender-sensitive strategies that prioritise the protection and inclusion of women. This requires integrating women into all levels of security planning and frontline community engagement to build trust and improve intelligence, while simultaneously adopting protection-centred operational protocols that safeguard women and girls from sexual violence and trauma during counter-terrorism actions. Furthermore, a sustainable approach must address the gendered drivers of radicalisation by investing in programs that provide women with economic alternatives, legal rights, and community-based counter-narratives, thereby undermining the very inequalities that extremist groups exploit. They may involve ensuring that women have access to justice, support services, and opportunities for economic and social empowerment. Priority should be given to the protection and promotion of women's rights by implementing policies and programs that recognise women's rights as fundamental human rights, while fostering more peaceful, secure, and inclusive societies that uphold the dignity of all individuals, regardless of gender.

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