



**Conflict-Related Sexual Violence in
Localised Conflicts in Niger**

Naila Salihu

Country Report

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Abstract

Niger has a long history of political instability from coups and insurrections. Since the early 1990s, the democratic process has been challenged by recurrent political cleavages, armed insurgencies, and intercommunal conflicts for access and control of natural resources. The nature of localised conflicts in Niger is multifaceted and is found in different parts of the country, such as Diffa, Tahoua, Dosso, Tillaberie, Dogondoutchi, and Maradi. The paper discusses localised conflicts in Niger and the manifestations of conflict related sexual violence in the country. It argues that as conflicts and insecurity continue to increase in Niger, conflict-related sexual violence is on the rise, despite the existence of regulatory provisions. There are areas in the country where the state is absent and thus unable to provide security thereby increasing the vulnerability of local populations who have become pawns to gender-based violence and conflict-related sexual violence.

Introduction

The term conflict-related sexual violence refers to rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, enforced sterilization, forced marriage, and any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity perpetrated against women, men, girls, or boys that is directly or indirectly linked to a conflict. This link may be evident in the profile of the perpetrator, who is often affiliated with a state or non-state armed group, which includes terrorist entities or networks. The profile of the victim is frequently an actual or perceived member of a persecuted political, ethnic, or religious minority, or targeted based on actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. The climate of impunity is generally associated with State collapse; cross-border consequences, such as displacement or trafficking; and/or violations of the provisions of a ceasefire agreement. The term also encompasses trafficking in persons for sexual violence and/or exploitation, when committed in situations of conflict. Several parties to the armed conflict continued to use sexual violence as a cruel tactic of war, terror, torture, and political repression to advance their strategic objectives, including those of propelling population flight and controlling contested territory and natural resources. As the pandemic raged on, many armed actors seized the opportunity to strike and gained ground while the scrutiny and attention of the international community and the media were diverted.

CRSV was formally recognised by the Security Council as a peace and security issue in Security Council Resolutions 2467 (2019), 1820 (2008), 1888 (2009), 1960 (2010), and 2106 (2013). With all of these resolutions, the Security Council mandated new mechanisms and tools such as the Monitoring, Analysis, and Reporting Arrangements (MARA), Women Protection Advisors (WPA), the appointment of a Special Representative of Sexual Violence in Conflict, a team of experts on rule of law and sexual violence and a victim's advocate. There has also

been the creation of the conflict-related sexual violence multi-partner trust fund. Conflict-related sexual violence does not occur in a vacuum; rather, it is linked with wider security factors such as economic hardship, social tensions, impunity, and institutional weakness, many of which have been exacerbated by the advent and consequences of coronavirus disease (COVID-19). Limitations on the availability and capacity of law enforcement and judicial authorities to receive and process reports of sexual violence, the stalling of legislative reform, the suspension of training for judicial and security actors, and, in some cases, the release from custody of perpetrators of sexual violence, as part of efforts to curb viral transmission in crowded detention facilities, all contributed to a climate conducive to impunity.

Sexual violence continues to be rampant in countries where conflicts exist. Localised conflicts, violent extremism, and political violence have led to new forms of violence against women in West Africa and the Sahel region. Local conflicts are often perceived as intractable, deeply rooted in ancestral antagonisms, and beyond the reach of the international community's policies and solutions. They take place at the subnational level, often without the direct involvement of governments or formal, organised armed groups, and yet they have far-reaching consequences. They not only cause significant insecurity to civilians and communities at large, but they also have the capacity of derailing peace processes. Local conflicts tear away the social fabric of a community and undermine a community's resilience, further reducing the feasibility of a sustainable peace process.

The term "local conflict" is used in this study to describe conflicts that are inter-communal and intra-communal. Broadly defined, local conflict "[involves] violence or the risk of violence centered at the subnational level."¹ Such conflicts do not usually feature significant direct involvement from state actors. Governments may ultimately enable such conflicts or indirectly support the sub-national

¹Fourati, M., Girard, V., & Laurent-Lucchetti, J. (2021). Sexual violence as a weapon of war (No. wp2103). Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Nova School of Business and Economics, NOVAFRICA.

²UN (2014). Sexual Violence: a Tool of War. United Nations background note.

³Nordås, R., & Cohen, D. K. (2021). Conflict-related sexual violence. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 24, 193-211.

⁴United Nations (2019). Conflict-related sexual violence: report of the United Nations Secretary-General. Rep. S/2019/280, Off. Spec. Represent. Secr. Gen. Sex. Violence Confl., United Nations, New York.

actors more directly involved in these disputes. However, governments are not the primary agents of local conflicts. Organised armed groups may not be primary actors in these local conflicts, either. Neither are individual people within a community who harbour a grievance against another individual. Instead, such violence typically occurs through informal or loosely-organised structures and social groupings at the community level. These structures may include local self-defense militias, for example, with relatively flexible in-group membership, more limited resources, and comparatively constrained offensive military capacities. This report analyses the conflict-related sexual violence in localized conflicts in Niger. It draws on primary data from fieldwork carried out in Niger in October 2021 and is complemented by secondary data. The paper discussed localized conflicts in Niger and the manifestations of conflict-related sexual violence.

Background

Niger is one of the least developed countries in the region, ranked 189th on the United Nations Human Development Index in 2022. It covers a vast arid and landlocked territory of 1,267,000 km² in the Sahelo-Saharan strip.² Alongside chronic food and nutritional insecurity, the country faces recurrent natural disasters including frequent floods, locusts, and epidemic outbreaks³. Niger is among the most poverty-stricken countries with most of its population facing difficult living conditions, which are even more difficult for women.⁴ For a long time, the country has been dealing with the Tuareg rebellion that cuts across the northern part of Mali and Niger.⁵ It shares borders with seven countries in both the Sahel and Saharan regions affected by security threats such as violent extremism, organized crime, and multi-nature localized conflicts. The country is faced with violent extremism and transboundary crimes which are cross-cutting security concerns shared with its neighbours including Mali, Nigeria, Libya, Algeria, Chad, Burkina Faso, and Benin. Growing cross-border security threats have worsened the fragility and insecurity in Niger country.⁶ The precarious security situation has

intertwined with cross-border criminality in the Sahel.

Niger has a long history of political instability from coups and insurrections. Since the early 1990s, the democratic process has been challenged by recurrent political cleavages, armed insurgencies, and inter-communal conflicts for access and control of natural resources.⁷ The nature of localized conflicts in Niger is multifaceted and is found in different parts of the country such as Diffa, Tahoua, Dosso, Tillaberie, Dogondoutchi, and Maradi.⁸ The country has been dealing with cross-border banditry, especially along the western part of the Maradi to Dogondoutchi strip. For decades, organized criminal networks continue to take advantage of these ungoverned spaces. The insecurity transformed in the early 2010s due to external dynamics, primarily the war in Libya. Particularly since 2011, the Libyan war economy has revolved around trafficking, which has facilitated illicit flows (notably of drugs and fuel) from Nigeria through Niger.⁹ Besides weapons from Qaddafi-era stocks are supplying criminals in countries to the south Niger. These gangs have become specialized in cattle rustling, kidnapping, sexual violence, and targeted killing. They have gradually exported their violence to the Nigerien side of the border: to Maradi in 2016, and then to Tahoua in 2019.¹⁰ The bandits have ties to the cross-border trafficking networks, and they are able to recruit from all the ethnic groups in the region (Hausa, Tuareg, and Fulani).¹¹

As conflicts and insecurity continue to increase in Niger, conflict-related sexual violence is on the rise. It is no surprise that Niger is one of the least-ranked countries for gender equity. The United Nations ranks Niger as one of the countries with the greatest gender inequities. It ranked 154 on Gender Inequality Index Rank in 2020 and 138 on Global Gender Gap Index Rank in 2021. Niger continues to register poor development indicators, especially those relating to women's and girls' welfare and well-being in rural areas including high rates of child marriage as well as high infant mortality and maternal mortality rates.¹² Despite the existence of regulatory provisions, gender-based violence persists in Niger.

¹Gorur, A. & Velturo, M. (2017). Local Conflict, Local Peacekeeping. Stimson Center, p. 7.

²Soumahoro, M. (2021). Niger Conflict Insights, Peace & Security Report, April, Institute for Peace and Security Studies, University of Addis Ababa.

³International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (2020) Niger Plan 2020.

⁴IMF, (nd) Gender Inequality in Niger.

⁵Aning, K. & Amedzrator, L., (2013). L'instabilita passa dal Salava: Il Fattora Tuareg. Aspenia, pp. 221-225.

⁶Soumahoro, M (2021). Niger Conflict Insights, Peace & Security Report, April, Institute for Peace and Security Studies, University of Addis Ababa.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Interviews in Niamey, October 2021.

⁹Crisis Group (2021). South-western Niger: Preventing a New Insurrection, Africa Report N°301, 29 April 2021.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Alidou, O. & Hima, H. (2021). Women in Niger. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History. Retrieved 8 Mar. 2023, from <https://oxfordre.com/africanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277734-e-524>

Notably, the 2017 National Gender Policy recognizes 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.¹³ Since 2019, the government of Niger, embarked on a series of reforms – including the establishment of child protection committees to accelerate the demographic transition and promote gender equality and economic growth.¹⁴ However as social norms are difficult to change, GBV remains high. More worrying is that victims/survivors are unaware of the remedies available to them.

Localised Conflicts in Niger

There are existing localised conflicts in the country especially in places such as Diffa, Tahoua, Dosso, Tillabéri, Dogondoutchi, and Maradi as shown on the map below.¹⁵ These are mostly communal conflicts which deeply rooted in multiple factors and social grievances including displaced persons as a result of insecurity, natural resource exploitation, occupation of land, poverty, delinquency among the youth and children, and lack of employment for the youth.¹⁶ Youth are recruited by armed groups due to a lack of economic opportunities. Terrorists take advantage of the state’s absence in local communities. In places, like Tillaberie there are intercommunal conflicts, between Peul and Tuareg.¹⁷



Map Sources: ESRI, UNCS. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. Map created in Nov 2011.

Armed groups operating from neighbouring countries and local dissidents have taken advantage of the

absence of the state in parts of the country to stage organised banditry in the south-western Niger, along a border strip between the towns of Maradi and Dogondoutchi.¹⁸ In this area, armed bandits often steal entire herds and kidnap hundreds of villagers. This phenomenon reinforces mistrust between ethnic groups, paving the way for the emergence of armed insurrection.¹⁹ Armed groups often exploit deep-seated social grievances and communal violence to enlist new fighters. In particular, nomads whose pastoral livelihoods are imperiled by farmland expansion have taken to arms to defend their families and property or to avenge injustices. Some bandits remain criminals, but others, notably among the Fulani, have become public figures respected as defenders of the community²⁰. Sedentary communities have been reacting by forming local self-defense groups. Members of local defence groups too have become parties to the conflicts and even abuse local populations.²¹

In conflict-afflicted regions such as Tillabéri the spread of violence is attributed to violent entrepreneurs—mostly non-state armed actors possessing some kind of political agenda, implemented in tandem with different types of income-generating activities.²² Since 2017, the Tillabéri region has faced increasing insecurity, affecting both the civilian population and the traditional and state authorities, including the defense 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. The precarious security situation has claimed over 2 495 lives in the region between 1 January 2017 and 31 July 2022.²³ Armed groups impose their rule on local communities through the use of force and violence. They also distribute resources, provide some level of order and offer protection to (at least parts of) the population in the areas they control, or attempt to control.²⁴

These groups carry out attacks against local and traditional chiefdoms. However, their *modi operandi* now includes attacks against the Nigerien defense and security forces deployed in the region.²⁵ Since

¹³Republic of Niger, Ministry for the Advancement of Women and Child Protection, National Gender Policy, www.promotionfemme.gouv.ne/uploads/documents/5c79193989b63.pdf, August 2017.

¹⁴Calimoutou, E. (2022). How new laws are protecting women and girls, and changing mindsets in Niger, January 26. Available at <https://blogs.worldbank.org/nasikiliza/how-new-laws-are-protecting-women-and-girls-and-changing-mindsets-niger>

¹⁵Interviews in Niamey, October 2021.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Crisis Group (2021).

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Interviews in Niamey, October, 2021.

²²Bøås, M., Cissé, AW. & Mahamane, L. (2020.) Explaining Violence in Tillabéri: Insurgent Appropriation of Local Grievances?, *The International Spectator*, 55:4, 118-132, DOI: 10.1080/03932729.2020.1833567

²³Armed Conflict Location & Event Data project (ACLED) <https://acleddata.com/dashboard/#/dashboard>

²⁴Bøås, et al (2020).

²⁵Moderan & Maiga, (2023).

the beginning of 2021, most attacks seem to have directly targeted civilians. For example on 2 January 2021, attacks on the villages of Tchomangou and Zaroumdareye (Tillabéri region) claimed the lives of about 100 civilians.²⁶ Again on 15 March 2021, an attack on civilians returning from the weekly market in Banibangou (Tillabéri region) claimed 58 lives. Another attack on 21 March, killed at least 137 people in the village of Tilia (Tahoua region, bordering Tillabérie.²⁷ Rising violence against civilians is evident in the increase in forced and internal displacement as a result of people leaving their homes to escape attacks. Extortion and even abductions have become a preferred tactic of certain armed groups in the region.²⁸ Many people 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 essential to their livelihoods.²⁹

Conflict-Related Sexual Violence in Localised Conflicts

There are manifestations of conflict-related sexual violence in Niger. Women in particular are victims of sexual violence by both armed gangs and security forces. There are abuses by members of the local population as well. Crimes such as rape are mainly perpetrated against women and girls. While boys and men are rather killed. Torture, brutality, and sexual slavery of girls are well-known in these regions. Girls return with pregnancies due to gang rape by armed men.³⁰ Since 2015, there have been attacks, and gender-based violence on girls, and women girls are forced into prostitution due to lack of opportunities. Women who were mainly farmers have been displaced. Efforts by authorities to curb the activities of armed groups such as the bans on the use of motorbikes because these are preferred means of transport by armed gangs. These measures have unintended consequences on local populations who also rely on motorbikes for their movements and businesses.³¹ Other measures such as the restrictions on movement and market closures under the state of emergency have at times negatively affected people's

livelihoods and businesses. This has worsened the already distressed economic situation of the majority of Nigeriens.

Some respondents argue that the armed groups often kill but they do not often rape or abuse women sexually, rather kidnap them for ransom.³² Others noted are girls leaving school to marry or forced marriages. Cases of domestic violence and forced widowhood as women lose their spouses to conflicts. The situation facing widows is particularly worrying. This is because the family structure and access to resources are traditionally male-dominated.³³ In some instances, the sudden loss of a spouse exposes women and their children to significant financial hardship. They are mostly unable to carry out economic activities. Accessing support from dispersed extended family members and traditional family mechanisms is difficult.³⁴

Women have higher illiteracy rates in Niger. Levels of education and economic insecurity are key factors in the likelihood of experiencing any form of violence. Forms of social tolerance have emerged as sources of legitimisation of gender-based violence, leading to a culture of impunity for perpetrators and enabling them to re-offend.³⁵ Rape, sexual exploitation, physical aggression, and sexual slavery exist.³⁶ Members of Chadian forces stationed in Tillaberie as part of the G5 Sahel Joint Force attacked local populations, and sexually assaulted and raped at least three people, including an 11-year-old girl and a 32-year-old pregnant woman.³⁷

Violent extremist groups use religious reasons. There are other reasons beyond religion. They take away girls from schools and marry them.³⁸ They aim to weaken the state and impose their rules in the areas they operate. Women are used as tools by armed groups in Diffa to harbor terrorists because of poverty.³⁹ Combatants of Boko Haram as well as youth in the local community who have been recruited know the communities better and how to attack. As noted by respondents the armed gangs collaborate with members of the local community.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Interviews in Niamey, October 2021.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid.

³³Moderan, O. & Fatoumata Maïga, F. (2023), Niger: Women's views on insecurity in the Tillabéri region, West Africa Report 41, November, ISS and WANEP-Niger

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ndèye, A.(2021). Gender-Based Violence in West Africa: The Cases of Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Dakar: FES

³⁶Interviews

³⁷Moderan and Maiga (2023), op. cit.

³⁸Interviews in Niamey, October 2021.

³⁹Ibid.

Issues of fluid identity make it difficult to deal with the menace as some locals are involved. It is difficult to identify perpetrators and deal with them. Men and youth are the main perpetrators, due to drug abuse and lack of economic opportunities.⁴⁰

Effects of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence on Women and Girls

Conflict-related sexual violence has adverse effects on women and girls. Women are seen as the foundation of societies, if they are abused sexually, it affects them individually and the entire society.⁴¹ Women are targeted as a means to weaken and attack societies. A lot of women lose their spouses to conflict and violent attacks. Girls are forced into prostitution due to a lack of family support⁴². Women are forced to leave their families and become vulnerable people as they lose everything and are exposed to all forms of vices. Due to social stigma, where is it considered taboo for women to talk about and report gender-based violence? As a result, cases of sexual abuse are not often reported⁴³. Victims are left to deal with trauma on their own. Families of victims prefer to take care of them at home rather than reporting to hospitals and law enforcement agencies. There is an increase in HIV and AIDS and people do not have ready access to anti-retroviral medications.⁴⁴

Child marriage is a harmful and discriminatory practice robbing millions of girls of their human rights by hindering their health, development, and well-being.⁴⁵ Conflicts have exacerbated child marriages in Niger. Children, especially girls, are at high risk of sexual abuse and exploitation by both community members and armed groups. Niger, with about 76 per cent, is the country with the highest percentage of child marriages in the region.⁴⁶ While the legal age of marriage is 15 in Niger, forced marriage is a structural problem in the country. Some traditional practices and norms result in unequal gender status and power relations that contribute to the perpetual subjugation of girls and women.⁴⁷ The phenomenon of child and

forced marriage 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.⁴⁸ Some families struggling to provide for all family members are resorting to early and child marriages for economic reasons. This has become a coping mechanism to access socio-economic resources such as dowry, however small, and protection through family alliances.⁴⁹ Although culture and tradition are used as primary reasons for such practices, actual reasons are purely transactional. Also, some families 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.⁵⁰ Respondents argued that spousal rape is rampant as women do not have equal rights in marriage especially as most girls marry men who are far older than them.⁵¹

With regards to human trafficking, there are multiple smuggling and trafficking routes across the country, mostly converging in Agadez.⁵² Human trafficking remains a complex issue to tackle in Niger. On one hand, it is enabled by a lack of socio-economic opportunities that push people to migrate through channels that might become unsafe. On the other hand, it is facilitated by social and cultural practices.⁵³ Due to a lack of social safety nets and socio-economic opportunities, there is enormous pressure on youth to provide for their families. Women and girls appear to be most at risk, predominantly becoming the target of specific forms of exploitation in which traffickers seek to involve them through networks that can penetrate communities and households to deceive young women with promises of safe and dignified work abroad. Women and girls constitute 69 percent of victims and survivors of human trafficking in Niger.⁵⁴ Most of these persons are trafficked for sexual exploitation and forced prostitution. Others are also trafficked for labor exploitation and forced labor

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Interview with a judge in Niamey, October 2021.

⁴⁴Interviews in Niamey, October 2021.

⁴⁵Tameshnie, D. (2021). *Marrying Young: Limiting the Impact of a Crisis on the High Prevalence of Child Marriages in Niger*. *Laws* 10: 61. <https://doi.org/10.3390/laws10030>

⁴⁶Sanni, Y., Odusina, EK & Bishwajit, G. (2019). Prevalence of Child Marriage and its Impact on Fertility Outcomes in 34 Sub-Saharan African Countries. *BMC International Health and Human Rights* 19: 33.

⁴⁷Davies, SE & Bennett, B. (2016). A Gendered Human Rights Analysis of Ebola and Zika: Locating Gender in Global Health Emergencies. *International Affairs* 92: 1041–60.

⁴⁸Interviews with a female judge, Niamey, October 2021.

⁴⁹Moderan & Maiga (2023), op cit.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Interview with a judge in Niamey, October 2021.

⁵²Rossetti, C. (2022). *An IOM Perspective on Human Trafficking in Niger: Profiles, Patterns, Progress*, Niger:IOM.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Ibid.

such as purposes of begging.⁵⁵ This situation has been aggravated by rising insecurity and localized conflicts in different parts of Niger.

These conflicts have also contributed to the displacement of many persons in Niger. Displaced women in particular experience difficulties in accessing health services. Although some women in the host communities challenge this perception, several displaced women face challenges in accessing that health care in host communities because there are perceptions that these facilities are reserved for local people.⁵⁶ Displaced women are charged exorbitant fees for healthcare and medicines due to corruption. Local health providers often create artificial shortages of medicines to avoid them for displaced persons.⁵⁷

Effects of this Violence on Boys and Men

Men and boys are recruited into criminal organizations. There is an increase in delinquency and revolt among young boys as a result of loss of livelihood. Men and boys are also affected because most of them use motorbikes for transportation to earn income and carry goods from farming areas. However, motorbikes have been banned because terrorists also use motorbikes. Men and boys have become targets of police harassment and torture. Men are also psychologically affected especially when their female partners and family members are abused. Some transfer aggression onto children and women. There are no known cases of sexual violence against boys and men.⁵⁸ In some communities, boys are being recruited into armed groups. Some armed groups forcefully take away boys and impose taxes on the local communities. It is difficult to identify indigenes from foreigners in border areas due to fluid identity. There is a lack of trust between the youth and security forces due to the absence of the state. This situation has led them to join terrorist groups where they can express themselves in the mosques for financial rewards, income. Parents try to stop their children from joining terrorist groups.⁵⁹

Conclusion

As localised conflicts and insecurity heightens in different parts of Niger, conflict-related sexual violence occurs. There are areas where the state is absent and thus unable to provide security thereby increasing the vulnerability of local populations who have become pawns to gender-based violence and conflict-related sexual violence. Response mechanisms used by the state include the deployment of national defence and security forces and large military operations, sometimes in partnership with neighbouring countries. In places like the Tillaberi, the deployment of G5 Sahel forces forms parts of military responses aimed at curbing insecurity in the area. These responses have produced some mixed results and have not been able to effectively deal with threats of localized conflicts. They have generally not paid any attention to the specific challenges for girls and women who are most victims of conflict-related sexual violence. For instance, women and girls in affected areas are bearing the brunt of the deployment of armed groups and security forces who have little respect for international humanitarian law and lack military discipline. Armed groups continue to outstrip the capacity of the state to respond.

Recommendations

- Niger should adopt a victim-centered criminal justice response to conflict-related sexual violence;
 - Establish easy-to-access and secured complaint mechanisms to enable victims of such abuse to report the facts safely;
 - Ensure effective prosecution of perpetrators; and
 - Reduce stigma associated with sexual violence to enable victims to report and access justice.
- to suppress terrorism in the Sahel region of West Africa.

⁵⁵bid.

⁵⁶Moderan & Maiga, (2023).

⁵⁷bid.

⁵⁸Interviews

⁵⁹Interviews

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