



## CONFLICT-RELATED SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN LOCALISED CONFLICTS IN BURKINA FASO

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Country Report

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## Abstract

In Burkina Faso, factors such as terrorists' activities, political instabilities, governance challenges, scramble for resources and intercommunal violence sets the context for localized conflicts. Conflict Related Sexual Violence (CRSV) occurs within these conflicts, especially when the conflicts results in displacements. In displacements, women and girls are mostly the victims of CRSV and suffer consequences such as such rapes, pregnancies, forced marriages with terrorists, loss of livelihoods, and truncation of education as well as stigmatizations. Boys and men are not noted for sexual abuse, but largely, they experience, physical abuse, injuries and even death. Apart from the global and regional provisions that address the broad spectrum of conflict related sexual violence, there are no tailored legislations even at the national level to tackle CRSV issues in localized conflicts. National data on CRSV and adequate provision to support victims are lacking. As such, CRSV issues have been left in the domain of International and local NGOs whose prime focus in on addressing issues of displacements. Thus, key suggestions include the development of a centralized database for CRSV victims and the institution of feasible interventions and provision of resources at the grassroots level as part the national action plan against sexual violence. In a broader perspective, good governance and accountability in addition to tackling terrorism and other related communal battles will reduce the potential for conflicts and its consequences on sexual violence.

## Introduction

Sexual violence occurs in all human societies. However, within conflict settings, sexual violence and other forms of abuse are often rampant as with provides the conduit for the perpetration of all kinds of cruelty and atrocities. Also in conflict, sexual violence has become a major weapon used by feuding parties to intimidate, afflict, and extinct enemies.<sup>1</sup> Due to the stigmatisation associated with sexual violence in most cultures, its reality is often shrouded in secrecy. For some time now, the discourse on conflict-related sexual violence is focused on major conflicts which could be intra or interstate. However, sexual violence is bound to equally occur in localised conflicts within countries. some countries in West Africa such as Liberia and Sierra Leone have had protracted conflicts which have lasted for more than a decade in which gross sexual violence has occurred. According to a UN report (2013),<sup>2</sup> Sexual violence during the conflicts affected 60,000 females in Sierra Leone and 40,000 in Liberia.

In West Africa, major wars within countries seem to have dwindled, however, localized internal conflicts continue to occur due to some political, religious, economic, and social factors. The Sahel region of West Africa has become a theater for violent attacks and conflicts. Due to the existence of large and ungoverned spaces and weak state security presence, major terrorist groups such as the al-Qaeda-linked Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahel (ISGS) have found the location a haven for their activities.

Conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) refers to all forms of sexual abuse inflicted on all categories of gender which are instigated by conflict. According to Nordås and Cohen (2021)<sup>3</sup>, in the literature, there is no consensus on the definition of conflict-related sexual violence due to the contention on what constitutes sexual violence. However, most definitions consider rape, coerced undressing, and non-penetrating sexual assault. In addition, there are non-violent forms such as humiliation and improper

sexual assault.

From a policy and advocacy point of view, the United Nations (UN) which serves as an advocate against CRSV includes in its definition all sexual violence that is directly or indirectly associated with conflict (UN,2009)<sup>4</sup>. The ramifications of conflict-related sexual violence on the fundamental human rights of its victims as well as the socio-economic development of a community can be dire. The devastating and long-term impact of CRSV on individuals and communities undermines peace and security. Currently, there is little attention on conflict-related sexual violence in localized conflicts in West Africa due to a lack of information and research. Most often, the focus has been on international conflicts.

To bridge that knowledge gap, specific zones within West Africa were identified for detailed research. This includes the Mano River Union, The Sahel, and the Gulf of Guinea. The research aims to identify the potential nature of conflict-related sexual violence in localized conflicts in these regions.

The following are the key objectives of the study

- Examine the causes of CRSV in localized conflicts;
- Assess the threshold of listing. (suspected patterns of sexual violence. For listing purposes isolated offences should be distinguished from those forming part of a pattern);
- Identify the categories of violence associated with these localized conflicts;
- Conduct a mapping of perpetrators as well as a mapping of knowledge/ information gaps (e.g. sex-age disaggregated statistical information);
- Evaluate the effects of this violence on women and girls, boys and men; and
- Proffer several clear tangible suggestions for dealing with the phenomenon in localized conflicts.

The focus of this study is on Burkina Faso which is among the countries sampled from the Sahel Region of West Africa for detailed findings on the nature of conflict-related sexual violence in localized conflicts.

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<sup>1</sup>Fourati, 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.

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

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

<sup>4</sup>United 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.

## Country Background

Burkina Faso is a landlocked country located within the Sahel region of West Africa. The country was colonized by the French administration and had its independence in 1960. The World Population Prospects of estimates the 2021 population of Burkina Faso at 21.50 million, with 50.1 per cent females and 49.9 per cent males.<sup>5</sup> The country is an agrarian economy with recurrent droughts. Also, the country is endowed with minerals such as gold, copper, zinc, manganese, and phosphates. Despite these significant mineral reserves, the country is regarded as one of the poorest countries in the African Region and the World. According to the 2019 rankings of the Human Development Report,<sup>6</sup> Burkina Faso is ranked 182<sup>nd</sup> out of 187 countries.

Though the state of security and the economy of Burkina Faso was not so resilient, the country had some level of political stability which can be described as fragile peace until 2014 when governance issues coupled with insurgence attacks compounded the security challenges in the country. Since 2015, Burkina Faso has been experiencing a series of terrorist attacks from major terrorist groups such as Islamic State West African Province (ISWA) and Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) who have found the ungoverned spaces in the Sahel a haven for their operations. Insurgence attacks are one of the top security issues in the country and remain a major challenge as it has resulted in the death of several civilians and security forces, and forced displacements in the country. The country is gabbling with multiple security threats and there has been growing concern about the security situation in Burkina Faso. The regional fight against terrorism seems to be undermined by the political instability in that country.

## Findings Causes of CRSV

In Burkina Faso, it was realized that several factors are responsible for CRSV. Within the broader context, gender inequalities and perceptions of gender relations seem to increase the occurrence of CRSV in conflicts, be they ethnic, religious, or ideological.

The female gender is oftentimes the target of sexual violence as they are at the subservience positions in issues of equality in both the public and the private spheres. These inequalities are enforced in their religious and cultural practices. According to the country's gender report of 2013,<sup>7</sup> the constitution of Burkina Faso indicates the equality of both males and females. But patriarchy structures reinforced by gender norms discriminate against women in social, economic, and political opportunities. This relegates the women to lower enclaves in the country.

Terrorist groups are known to have narrow perspectives of the values of women and children. The perception of women as commodities for the gratification of men fuels actions such as raids in villages to abuse and seize women and girls. There are also cases of forced enrollment of females into terrorist associations. And these females are used for the gratification of the armed groups. The inclusion of females in the terrorist groups also serves as a side attraction to lure other females into the groups.

Other factors such as weak state institutions, poor governance structures, the absence of the rule of law, and impunity also contribute to the likelihood of CRSV in conflict situations. However, the perception among the Burkinabe is that CRSV is not and must not be used as a weapon of war and that the concept of CRSV as a weapon of war is an introduction of a tactic associated with the terrorist incursion that Burkina Faso has to grapple with, due to the unstable conditions in neighbouring countries. In instances where CRSV is used as a tactic of war is believed to be a consideration deployed by armed groups or non-state actors as a way of life and generally linked to terrorist groups. However, at the community level, armed groups and other organized gangsters, and criminals use sexual violence to intimate their enemies to accomplish their motives.

Many respondents have noted that terrorist and violent extremist attacks are one of the main causes

<sup>5</sup>Demography's of Burkina Faso. UN (World Population Prospects2019).

@<https://statisticstimes.com/demographics/country/burkina-faso> demographics.php#:~:text=As%20of%202021%2C%20the%20population,in%20Burkina%20Faso%20in%202021. (Accessed 20/11/21).

<sup>6</sup>Least Developed Country Category: Burkina Faso Profile. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Economic Analysis @ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/least-developed-country-category-burkina-faso.html> (Accessed 10/11/2022).

<sup>7</sup>Country Gender Profile: Burkina Faso. Japan International Cooperation Agency Mitsubishi UFJ Research and Consulting Co., Ltd. @[https://www.jica.go.jp/english/our\\_work/thematic\\_issues/gender/background/c8h0vm0000anjqj6-att/burkinafaso\\_2013.pdf](https://www.jica.go.jp/english/our_work/thematic_issues/gender/background/c8h0vm0000anjqj6-att/burkinafaso_2013.pdf) (Accessed 25/11/2021).



of conflict in Burkina Faso. These occurrences are rife in rural settings. According to the Global Terrorist Index (GTI) of 2020, Burkina Faso has the highest increase in terrorism in West Africa with deaths increasing from 590 to 593%.<sup>8</sup> Recently in the Yagha community close to the Niger border, there have been displacements and more than 80 deaths recorded due to terrorist attacks.

The current insecurities that permeate the Burkinabe society due to terrorist activities make way for sub-conflicts. Other sources of conflict gathered include farmer-herder conflicts and clashes between ethnic and religious groups and communities. Religious and ethnic conflicts between and among the Fulani, Funse, and Moshi groups have also taken complex dimensions with linkages to terrorist activities. These localised conflicts are usually underpinned by social injustices/ marginalisation's and fight for power at the community levels, scramble for scarce natural resources such as fertile land and water, and misunderstandings as a result of cultural and religious differences. At times these communal disputes are exploited by extremist groups to recruit more actors as well as expand their influence.

It was also established that CRSV occurs in the context of the displacement that is caused by these conflicts. Terrorist invasions usually cause the members of the communities to flee their homes for safety. In the other forms of conflict such as the farmer-herder - conflicts, and community disagreements, there are organized forms of raids and attacks from the opposing sides to cause their opponents/ targets to flee. Other self-defense and militia groups take sides with the feuding parties to intensify the conflicts. In the process, crops, animals, and properties are set ablaze as well as sexual assaults inflicted on women and girls.

The acute nature of these localized conflicts consequently engenders forced displacements due to the destruction of properties, a halt in

social activities, and livelihoods, and eventually the breakdown of law and order. According to the annual conflicts and disaster displacement figures, from December 2020- 2021, approximately 4,000 displacements occurred in Burkina Faso as a result of fears of attacks by non-state armed groups.<sup>9</sup> Displaced communities are also exposed to armed groups and inter-community violence. In periods of displacement, the vulnerability of the communities increases as people move out of their homes to seek safety and survival. In the process, they are caught up in inter-communal violence as well as exposed to armed groups bandits who take advantage of their vulnerable situations and subject them to sexual violence physical assaults/ in addition to other crimes such as injuries and killings. The displaced persons who find themselves within camps and temporary structures also experience sexual abuse from some state actors such as security officers and Aid workers in addition to other hooligans who take advantage of their plight. Mostly women and girls are targeted for sexual violence, as such, they become the victims. It is however believed that young girls and women aged between 12 -25 form the greater part of those who suffer CRSV. Respondents contend, however, that due to the rather challenging reporting situations, there is the likelihood of limited cases of boys and men who are victims of CRSV that may be unreported due to the stigma and lack of proper channels for reporting and redress. There is also the view that since men and boys form the greater population of perpetrators and create the problem, they are usually not at the receiving end of CRSV.

## Perpetrators of CRSV in Burkina Faso

Terrorist armed groups, security forces, camp and aid workers, foreign soldiers (Chadians), and non-state actors are generally pointed out as perpetrators of CRSV in Burkina Faso. However, State security forces according to the Ministry of Defense and Veteran Affairs do not have a record of CRSV violations. Many of

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<sup>9</sup>Global Reports on Internal Displacements. Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre @<https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/burkina-faso> (accessed on 10/1/2022).

<sup>8</sup>Global Terrorism Index 2020: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism. Institute for Economic and Peace. Sydney, November 2020 Available from [http//.visionofhumanity.org/](http://.visionofhumanity.org/) reports (22/11/2022).

the reports that come to them, come from the records of NGOs working in that space. It is also believed that many of the perpetrators who are presumed to be members of terrorist organizations are believed to be youthful and adult males. Women and girls are also believed to be used by these terrorist groups to attract other females into terrorism. Therefore, by extension, there exist different categories of perpetrators. Nonetheless, the motivation of CRSV in conflict remains unanswered.

Human rights watch has also documented that since 2016, Burkina Faso has been experiencing rapes of civilians and widespread pillaging from terrorists and security agencies and militias engaged in counter-terrorism operations. This has fueled the displacement of 1.8million people in the country<sup>10</sup>

## Impact of CRSV

Jose (2010)<sup>11</sup> has indicated that the socio-economic impact of sexual violence on women in conflicts psychologically affects their mental health. In Burkina Faso, the common types of CRSV mentioned include rape, forced pregnancies, forced marriages, forced prostitution, and abductions. These forms of CRSV have physical, emotional, and economic consequences on the victims. Physically they experience injuries and contract infections which leads to serious health implications. The experiences the victims encounter in sexual violence result in psychological problems such as fear and trauma. Also, some of the victims experience stigmatisation from the communities. According to one respondent, when some of the abducted return home, they are tagged as 'wife of the bush' implying marrying terrorists and bandits who live in the forest. The stigmatisation and the shame also compound their psychological problems when they are unable to get integrated into the communities. Economically, they inability to return to their farms, markets and due to fear and displacements.

The women and girls, who form the greater portion of the reported cases of CRSV, are noted to experience psychological traumas, loss of livelihoods, sexually transmitted diseases, stigmatisations, and expulsions

from the communities. For girls in particular their schooling/education is truncated.

In periods of displacement, the men and boys are often not targets for sexual violence, nonetheless, they are physically abused, injured, and even killed. At times, the terrorists capture/ kidnap the boys to recruit them into terrorism. However, the respondents contend that due to the rather challenging reporting situations, there is the likelihood of limited cases of boys and men who are victims of CRSV that may be unreported due to the stigma and lack of proper channels for reporting and redress. There is also the view that since men and boys form the greater population of perpetrators and create the problem, they are usually not at the receiving end of CRSV. Thus, in periods of displacement and conflicts men are noted to suffer from physical abuse whilst the women and girls become the victims of sexual violence.

## Interventions for CRSV in Burkina Faso

In terms of legal provisions to address CRSV in Burkina Faso, many efforts have not been in put place. At the global level, there are key United Nations (UN) resolutions that seek to address sexual violence in conflict situations; these include UN (Resolution 1820) adopted in 2008, (resolution 2106) in 2013 and (resolution 2467) adopted in 2019. In particular, the UN (Resolution 2019) focuses, on the aftermath of sexual violence for vulnerable victims. It calls for assistance to victims in terms of health, marginalisation, stigmatisation, and reintegration as well as issues of impunity and justice for victims.

The country has also acceded to the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Women (CEDAW) in 1984 and its Optional Protocol in 2005. African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa in 2009. Despite the country's ratification of these international instruments, at the national and local levels, where there are no specific laws in Burkina Faso directly related to CRSV in conflict. To make the international laws relevant in addressing issues of CRSV in the Country, will require the enactment and

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<sup>10</sup>Human rights watch Burkina Faso: Armed Islamists Kill, Rape Civilian May 16 2022.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/05/16/burkina-faso-armed-islamists-kill-rape-civilians>

<sup>11</sup>Josse, E. (2010). 'They came with two guns': The consequences of sexual violence for the mental health of women in armed conflicts. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 92(877), 177-195. doi:10.1017/S1816383110000251

implementation of comprehensive national and local laws that will deal with CRSV. Currently, most of the laws are outdated. As such, harmonization of the laws will be appropriate. It was indicated that strategic plans are being launched and undergoing reviews to strengthen the legal provisions but a range of factors such as financial, economic, and political constraints appear to be the stumbling block to its progress.

Also, the provisions and the mandate to protect women and children in cases of sexual violence lie in the domain of various ministries which include the Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Human Rights and Civil Protection, Ministry for the Advancement of Women and Gender Equality and the Ministry of Social Action and National Solidarity. The Ministry of Social Action and National Solidarity is responsible for displacements and the associated problems. In effect, it's supposed to have agencies/ in all the regions and communities however, their representation is weak or nonexistent in remote areas. In areas where they exist, they are unable to reach out to the displaced and victims of sexual violence due to the security, technical and logistical challenges they often encounter.

Most often, the measures and support for CRSV victims in displacements are initiated and supported by International Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) and other Humanitarian Organisations. The Agencies mentioned by respondents include United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (OXFAM), Handicap International, Plan Burkina, and Save the Children. In Burkina Faso, since sexual violence occurs more in displacements, these institutions that troop in to support focus more on the needs of the displaced. These include the provision of shelter, food, and clothing as such, the intervention efforts are oftentimes not tailored to the specific needs of CRSV victims. Appropriate desks or channels for reporting the incidents are most often not known. Most victims of CRSV are identified when they resort to seeking medical assistance for their conditions.

## Challenges of CRSV in Burkina Faso

Key among the challenges related to CRSV in Burkina Faso is the lack of information and data on victims. This is related to the challenges in identifying victims, the reporting situations, and the lack of coordination among the agencies that deal with them. Most often, norms and attitudes of the families towards victims of sexual violence render them powerless to report sexual violence as well as boldly seek support.

Lack of resources and infrastructure to adequately support victims of sexual violence. The impact of sexual violence is grave. As realized and indicated earlier, they require a range of support to meet their health, psychological, and physical needs. In Burkina Faso, health facilities and rehabilitation Centres are inadequate, especially in areas where conflicts and sexual violence occurs. At times some of the locations are difficult to reach by humanitarian agencies due to a lack of access routes and security reasons. The conditions within the temporary structures and shelters for the displaced victims also expose them to further risk of sexual violence. Some of the respondents mentioned that the women and girls who go out in search of food, water, and other needs are sexually abused. At times, they are forced to engage in sexual exploitation and prostitution in exchange for essential commodities they need.

Reintegration of victims of CRSV is also another challenge. According to Ragnhild and Finnbakk (2019)<sup>12</sup>, reintegration efforts must focus on the victims as well as the communities in which the victims settle to help address social exclusions and stigmatizations. From the respondents, when abducted victims return to the communities, they face stigmatizations from community members and families. There are no appropriate structures for the reintegration of victims. The institutions that provide these services are with the main ministries whose representations are weak in the communities and locations where CRSV occurs. Lack of punitive measures and redress. Multiple perpetrators have been cited for CRSV in Burkina Faso. These include terrorists, government forces, militias aid workers, and other hooligans in the communities who take advantage of the vulnerability

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<sup>12</sup>Ragnhild, N. & Finnbakk, I. (2019) Community Perspectives and Pathways to Reintegration of Survivors of Sexual Violence in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, *Human Rights Quarterly* 41(2): 236–282.

of the victims. Due to a lack of identifiable procedures and channels for reporting these incidents victims cannot be tracked and sanctioned. From the respondents, a more distressing part of the issue is where the personnel supposed to protect victims of displacement also inflict sexual violence on the vulnerable victims.

## Conclusion

The above report has focused on Burkina Faso, conflict-related sexual violence in localized conflicts. It has identified the causes, and perceptions underlying conflict-related sexual violence in localized conflicts in Burkina Faso. Also, the information gaps as well as the impact of CRSV on victims have been identified. Based on the discussions, the following are the suggestions /recommendations to help address conflict-related sexual violence in Burkina Faso.

## Recommendations

For CRSV to be effectively dealt with, calls for the understanding of the context of its occurrences and supported by adequate data. The subject appears to be relevant in the present context of the country whereas much information is lacking. Thus, more studies should be encouraged to attract policy decisions. , Also there should be structures in place and coordination between the agencies to keep data and information on the phenomenon in the country.

The victims of CRSV are identified during interventions for displacements. Thus, such interventions must come with the needed logistics and personnel to support CRSV victims. Institutions that focus on CRSV issues must have agencies/representationalism in all communities with identifiable desks for reporting as well as seeking help for victims.

National action plan for sexual violence issues should have community-driven initiatives for general education and sensitisation on the issues of CRSV. This should be implemented at the communities/ grass root levels to unravel the secrecy and mysteries that shroud it. This will enhance community collaborations for resilience and support for CRSV victims. In addition, it will help in reporting the incidents as well as suppress the negative perceptions and stigmatizations that affect the acceptance of victims in the communities. Personnel who protect and support victims of displacement should be given much training and education to remain professional. Adequate measures for the identification and

punishment of perpetrators should be instituted.

Generally, the state of security in the country serves as a precursor for CRSV. Thus, the government together with all stakeholders should work to quell issues of insecurity such as terrorist and violent extremism, farmer herder conflicts, and other forms of violence which in the long run will limit the opportunities for CRSV to occur. Good governance and accountability will reduce the potential for conflict and by extension the level of conflict in the country.

Terrorism is assuming a regional source of insecurity. It triggers displacements armed conflicts and sources of violence. Thus, national, regional, and international actors should identify the right and needed strategies to suppress terrorism in the Sahel region of West Africa.

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