



Exploring the Linkages between Violent Extremism and the Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons in Burkina Faso



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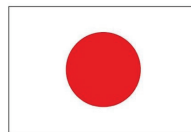


Naila Salihu and Victor K. A. Doke
Occasional Paper 61

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by
Naila Salihu & Victor K. A. Doke

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Acronyms

| | |
|----------|---|
| ATT | Arms Trade Treaty |
| CNCA | National Commission for the Control of Arms |
| CNLPAL | National Commission for the Fight against the Illicit Proliferation of Small Arms |
| ECOWAS | Economic Community of West African States |
| EU | European Union |
| FLM | Macina Liberation Front |
| G5 Sahel | Group of Five for the Sahel |
| HACIAU | High Authority on Arms Imports Control and Their Use |
| HDI | Human Development Index |
| ISGS | The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara |
| JNIM | Jama'at Nasrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin |
| NSP | National Security Policy |
| SALW | Small arms and light weapons |
| USD | United States Dollar |
| VDPs | Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie |
| WAEMU | West African Economic and Monetary Union |

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Abstract

Burkina Faso is one of the least developed countries in West Africa. It's political history has been very turbulent with records of mutinies and coups d'états. Since 2016, the country has become unstable and exposed to increasing threats and attacks by violent armed groups, especially in northern and eastern parts. Attacks by armed groups have been on the rise leading to several casualties and internal displacements of people. The country is located along some of the most notable small arms and light weapons (SALW) trafficking routes in West Africa. Despite the existence of a relatively well-established regulatory regime for SALW control, the proliferation of illicit SALW fuels violent extremism and insecurity in the country. This paper examines the proliferation of SALW and how this contributes to violent extremism and radicalisation in Burkina Faso. It also teases the gendered dimensions of violent extremism and SALW proliferation, and identifies the roles of women. It argues that the proliferation of SALW in the midst of increasing extremist violence and radicalisation, undermines efforts by a weak State to maintain its territorial integrity and ensure the security of people.

Introduction

Burkina Faso is one of the least developed countries in West Africa,¹ ranked 184th out of 191 countries on the Human Development Index (HDI).² The “political history of the country has been very turbulent with records of mutinies and coups d’état[s].”³ Efforts at institutionalising democratic governance after the departure of the country’s longest serving ruler Blaise Compaore in 2014, have produced mixed outcomes. “Since 2016, the country has become unstable and exposed to threats and attacks by violent armed groups, especially in northern and eastern parts of Burkina Faso.”⁴ Attacks by armed groups have been on the rise leading to several casualties and internal displacements of people.⁵ For instance, in 2022, Burkina Faso was ranked as the fourth most terrorism-affected country globally, following Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia, with a 50 per cent surge in terrorism-related fatalities.⁶ Violent extremist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, as well as the Burkinabe group—Ansarul Islam—continue to reign terror on the State and its people. These groups as well as non-identifiable armed groups, principally target state and public institutions, including the defence and security forces and civilians.⁷ The country has faced severe repercussions from the broader insecurity in the Sahel region, with armed groups playing a role in the escalation of intercommunal violence. Violent extremism has affected nearly all thirteen administrative regions of the country.⁸ Like most countries in the Sahel region, Burkina Faso has been exposed to violence since 2017.⁹ With the country straddling coastal states,

this phenomenon is progressing towards the border towns of neighbouring countries like Benin, Ghana, Togo, and Côte d’Ivoire.¹⁰

This paper examines the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) and how this contributes to violent extremism and radicalisation in Burkina Faso. It also teases the gendered dimensions of violent extremism and SALW proliferation, and identifies the roles of women. Following this introduction, the paper analyses the triggers of violent extremism and radicalisation in section two. In section three, the extent of SALW proliferation in Burkina Faso is discussed. In section four, the role of women in violent extremism, radicalisation and SALW proliferation is also analysed. The various approaches to preventing violent extremism, radicalisation and SALW proliferation, are also investigated in section five. Section six concludes and offers some recommendations. The paper is based on a field study conducted in June 2023 with various stakeholders in Ouagadougou. The paper argues that the proliferation of SALW in the midst of increasing extremist violence and radicalisation, undermines efforts by a weak State to maintain its territorial integrity and ensure the security of people.

Triggers of Violent Extremism and Radicalisation in Burkina Faso.

Burkina Faso is one of the world’s poorest countries with a majority of the population subsisting on less than USD 2 a day.¹¹ Approximately 80 per cent of the people live in this traditionally agrarian economy and work in the farming and forestry industries.¹² The rate of poverty has remained mostly constant despite

¹Salihu, N. & Agbevi, A. A. (2022). *Engagement of Youth Formerly Associated with Armed Groups and Armed Groups and Youth Participation in Peacebuilding Processes: A Call to Action: Burkina Faso*. Accra: KAIPTC and Save the Children International.

²United Nations Development Programme (2022). Human Development Index 2021-2022. Available at <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/human-development-index#/indicies/HDI>

³Salihu, N. (2015). Burkina Faso: An Unforeseen Crisis? *Conflict Trends*, (3), 34-40.

⁴Salihu & Agbevi (2021). Op. cit.

⁵Abdallah, M. & Owusu, A. (2020). *Youth and Radicalization in Burkina Faso*. (Unpublished Report for KAIPTC-SIDA Project). KAIPTC, Accra.

⁶Institute for Economics & Peace. (2022). *Global Terrorism Index 2022: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*. Sydney: Institute for Economics & Peace.

⁷Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF). (2021). *Critical Human Security Issues in Burkina Faso*. Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF).

⁸Interview with Officials of Civil Society Organisations. June 15, 2023.

⁹Willeme, A., Schmauder, A. & de Bruijne, K. (2021). *Customary Characters in Uncustomary Circumstances: The Case of Burkina Faso’s Sahel Region*. Netherlands Institute of International Relations ‘Clingendael’ and The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT).

¹⁰Interview with Officials Civil Society Organizations. June 19, 2023.

¹¹World Bank. (2023, June 12). Burkina Faso: Recent Trends and Outlook for the Economy and Poverty - Building Financial Resilience to Climate Risks. Press Release. Retrieved from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2023/06/12/burkina-faso-recent-trends-and-outlook-for-the-economy-and-poverty-building-financial-resilience-to-climate-risks>

¹²Ibid.

slight improvements in economic growth in the past. Economic growth slowed to 2.5 per cent in 2022, with the country posting the highest inflation rate in the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU).¹³

This is partially caused by recent climate shocks that have an impact on agriculture and food security, along with rates of population expansion. Urban areas exhibit a very high rate of unemployment; standing at 50 per cent.¹⁴ Where poverty and overburdened governmental machinery co-exist, there are major gaps in the public's access to security and justice services, which fosters social unrest and violence.¹⁵

The broader security landscape in the Sahel region needs to be taken into consideration when examining the worsening security situation in Burkina Faso.¹⁶ Deep-seated socio-political and economic relations have changed at the micro and macro levels, and uncover the underlying structural causes and driving forces that stand at the heart of various conflicts in the Sahel region generally.¹⁷ To this end, several mutually reinforcing factors have contributed to the growth of both insurgency and violent extremism in Burkina Faso and other countries in the Sahel Region. These include intercommunal tensions, governance deficits, structural socio-economic conditions, rising unemployment levels particularly among an energetic youthful population, historical grievances and rivalries between ethnic groups, and competition over scarce resources such as water and arable land¹⁸. Environmental factors such as climate change also have an impact on conflicts in the country. In addition, the State's absence in some communities, herder-farmer conflicts, prolonged and unresolved conflicts, and marginalisation of minority

groups have the propensity to drive and sustain violent extremism in West African states generally.¹⁹

The main extremist groups that are active in Burkina Faso are the homegrown Ansarul Islam, the al-Qaeda-linked and Mali-based Jama'at Nasrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM), and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).²⁰ Groups from Mali, like the Macina Liberation Front (FLM), ISGS, which started gaining a foothold in Burkina Faso in late 2015.²¹ Although these groups receive support from regional and international jihadist groups, most of them are involved in organised crime and exploit local criminal networks. Such activities include the smuggling of counterfeit cigarettes and pharmaceutical drugs as well as illicit gold mining, in areas where government control is non-existent.²² Criminal networks have been built around actors with transactional overlapping criminal relationships.²³

In Burkina Faso, contestation around land ownership contributes to conflicts between sedentary communities and herders.²⁴ For example, there is a law in the country that stipulates that after a piece of land has been inhabited by a settler for ten years, it becomes the property of the settler.²⁵ This has been a source of tensions between indigenous groups and settlers, on land use and ownership. In most cases, indigenes continue to question land ownership by migrants or settlers. There is often conflict between Fulani pastoralists—who are mostly seen as settlers—and sedentary agro-communities. Violent conflicts regularly erupt between the Foulse and Mossi communities on the one hand, supported by self-defence groups such as the Mossi-dominated Koglweogo, and the Fulani on the other hand.²⁶ Inter-communal tensions provide avenues

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF) (2021). Op. cit.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Bisson, L., Cottyn, I., de Bruijne, K. & Molenaar, F. (2021). Between Hope and Despair: Pastoralist Adaptation in Burkina Faso. *CRU Report*. The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael.'

¹⁸The NATO Strategic Direction-South Hub & African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism. (2022). *The Contagion of Violent Extremism in West African Coastal States*. The NATO Strategic Direction-South Hub and African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Kumar, R. (2023). Civilian Counterterrorism Forces and the Fight Against Extremism: A Review of Nigeria, Somalia, and Burkina Faso. Counter Extremism Project. Available at <https://www.counterextremism.com/news-free-tags/burkina-faso>

²¹Bisson et al. (2021). Op. cit., 11.

²²Enhancing Africa's Response to Transnational Organised Crime (ENACT). (2021). Africa Organised Crime Index 2021: Evolution of Crime in a Covid World: A Comparative Analysis of Organised Crime in Africa, 2019–2021. Enhancing Africa's Response to Transnational Organised Crime (ENACT).

²³Ibid.

²⁴Interview with Officials of Civil Society Organizations, June 19, 2023.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Willeme et al. (2021). Op. cit.

for radicalisation. Militants are largely motivated by local concerns, including farmers and herders who are victims of land-related injustices or racketeering, bandits, gold miners, or stigmatised populations seeking protection.²⁷

In some areas, existing inter-ethnic conflicts provide terrorists with opportunities to pitch one ethnic group against the other with their support.²⁸ The growing insecurity has strong regional and local dynamics. Long-standing ethnic and identity-based grievances are now being exploited by extremist groups in the Sahel region. Extremist groups have also targeted members of the Fulani ethnic group—a nomadic people in the Sahel, for recruitment. The Fulani have historically been a minority within Burkina Faso. This minority status and its associated grievance are being exploited by violent extremist groups. For example, Ansarul Islam has stoked ethnic tensions by directing violence at non-Fulani businesses aimed at forcing non-Fulani people out of their communities.²⁹ They have been able to attract a wide audience, especially among lower social status such as the Fulani Rimaibés, by tapping into their grievances with the social hierarchies in the provinces.³⁰

Another fault line is contesting governmental authority in the areas where extremist groups operate, which has translated into the targeting of security forces, civil servants, traditional authorities or community members who are seen as collaborating with government representatives to create a power and governance vacuum.³¹ In response, some military police and ethnic militias have raided and attacked Fulani villages because of their apparent association with the extremist groups.³² There are incidents of extrajudicial killings of suspected

collaborators by state security forces.³³ Destruction of villages believed to be harbouring extremists, in retaliation for insurgent violence, also occurs.³⁴ High-handedness and abusive tactics used by Burkina Faso's counterterrorism forces, have harmed the relationship between civilians and the Government; fuelling recruitment into terrorist groups.³⁵

In another instance, the absence of the State and a weak administrative system of local governance also pave the way for radicalisation. The deficiency in governance and the absence of a robust administrative system, particularly at the local government level, are intricately linked to the dearth of basic social services and rising youth unemployment,³⁶ which, in turn, exposes the youth to extremist recruitment. Violent extremist groups exploit the vulnerabilities of the youth by disseminating misinformation and enticing them to join their ranks with promises of fulfilling their basic needs. Youth unemployment is identified as a pivotal driver for radicalisation, with a confluence of factors such as rapid population growth, overpopulation, and inadequate planning exacerbating the challenge.³⁷ Most especially, the inability of states to effectively counter the advances of extremist groups further compounds the issue; giving rise to self-defence militias. These militias often perpetuate underlying ethnic divisions through recruitment strategies. For instance, the institutionalisation of *Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie*, or VDPs)³⁸ by the state is an attempt to address these challenges. However, there exists impediments related to the operational methods of VDPs. In some instances, VDPs have been accused of abuses committed against civilians.³⁹ In the longer term, militias also have the potential to destabilise, fuel crime, and weaken state authority.⁴⁰

²⁷International Crisis Group (2020). Burkina Faso: Stopping the Spiral of Violence. *Africa Reports*, 287. Brussels: ICG.

²⁸Interview with Officials of Civil Society Organisations. June 15, 2023.

²⁹Kumar (2023). Op. cit.

³⁰Assanvo, W., Dakono, B., Thérout-Bénoni, L.-A., & Maïga, I. (2019). Violent Extremism, Organised Crime and Local Conflicts in Liptako-Gourma. *West African Report*, 26. Dakar: Institute for Security Studies.

³¹Bisson et al. (2021). Op. cit., 11.

³²Assanvo et al. (2019). Op. cit.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Kumar (2023). Op. cit.

³⁶United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2023). *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement*. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (VDP)

³⁹Ibid

⁴⁰Tisseron, A. (2021). Pandora's Box. Burkina Faso, Self-Defence Militias and VDP Law in Fighting Jihadism. Dakar: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Peace and Security.

Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons in Burkina Faso

The proliferation of SALW in the Sahel region, in general, is attributable to multiple sources such as trafficking and local production. Burkina Faso is located along some of the most notable weapons-trafficking routes in West Africa. Illicit weapons mainly from Libya, Mali, and Niger, are trafficked through unapproved routes near border towns such as Nassoumbou and Soun, and other areas within the border routes in the Sahel region.⁴¹ Other sources of SALW emanate from 'legacy weapons' from conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, and the fall of Muammar Qaddafi's regime in Libya in 2011.⁴² Old stockpiles from neighbouring states, for example Côte d'Ivoire, have been smuggled into the country through illegal routes.⁴³ These weapons have, however, expanded to include newly manufactured assault rifles imported from other countries such as Türkiye and Brazil.⁴⁴ Türkiye has become the preferred supplier by most Burkinabe arm dealers. Formerly, European Union (EU) countries were the main suppliers. However, revised domestic regulations and licensing processes in EU countries have compelled arm dealers to turn to Türkiye and other places.⁴⁵

Further, the proliferation of SALW is caused by attacks on national armouries and theft of weapons by extremist groups.⁴⁶ It is believed that some security personnel illegally provide arms to violent extremists.⁴⁷ The weapons are also obtained from areas where inter-ethnic conflicts are prone.⁴⁸ SALW proliferation can also be blamed on the porous borders.⁴⁹ Weak border management creates avenues for arms trafficking.⁵⁰ As SALW are easy to carry and conceal, traffickers take advantage of poor surveillance at borders. The smuggled arms

are often sold cheaply on the black market, which also deals in locally manufactured weapons.⁵¹

Craft or artisanal firearm production has deep cultural and economic roots in most West African states, and serves different societal needs and different uses. Demand for craft-produced weapons depend on local dynamics.⁵² Yet, unlicensed artisanal production of firearms has been a recurrent challenge in most West African states. Unlike most of its neighbours, Burkina Faso has a regulated artisanal firearm production industry. Weapons manufactured locally are typically single-shot, break-action 12-gauge hunting rifles and pistols. These weapons are often referred to as 'locally made,' but such descriptions are rather misleading because these weapons often travel long distances from their point of production or initial point of sale and can cross, in some circumstances, international borders into neighbouring countries.⁵³ It is noteworthy that locally manufactured firearms, especially used by *dozos* or traditional hunters, are marked by manufacturers and people do require authorisation from authorities to purchase such weapons.⁵⁴ The hunters are often sensitised about proliferation of SALW. This notwithstanding, artisanal firearms manufactured in neighbouring countries like Ghana and Mali, are trafficked into Burkina Faso and other countries in the region.⁵⁵ Trafficked locally produced weapons are not marked, and often get mixed up with home-made artisanal firearms, which are already available on the black market.⁵⁶

There is also a high presence of industrially manufactured weapons, which are imported into the country.⁵⁷ These are mainly hunting single-shot guns intended for the civilian market. These weapons, while not manufactured locally, are legal to import, sell, and possess with proper authorisation. The prevalence of arms is often linked to hunting,

⁴¹Interview with Officials of the *Commission Nationale de Contrôle des Armes* or National Commission for the Control of Arms (CNCA). June 16, 2023.

⁴²Gramizzi, C. (2022). The Illicit Circulation of Small Arms and Light Weapons and their Ammunition in Burkina Faso. June. Briefing Paper. Saferworld.

⁴³Interview with officials of the *Commission Nationale de Contrôle des Armes* or National Commission for the Control of Arms (CNCA). Op. cit. .

⁴⁴United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). (2022). *Firearms Trafficking in the Sahel: Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment — Sahel*. Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) & New York: United Nations.

⁴⁵Interview with Arms Dealers Association-Ouagadougou.

⁴⁶Interview with Officials of the *Commission Nationale de Contrôle des Armes* or National Commission for the Control of Arms (CNCA). Op. cit.

⁴⁷Interview with Officials of Civil Society Organisations. June 15, 2023.

⁴⁸Ibid

⁴⁹Ibid

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Joly, J. & Shaban, A. (2023). Between Tradition and the Law: Artisanal Firearm Production in West Africa. November. Briefing Paper. Geneva: Small Arms Survey.

⁵³Gramizzi (2022). Op. cit.

⁵⁴Interviews with a Retired Police Officer. February 9, 2024.

⁵⁵Aning, K. (2010). Understanding the Nexus between Human Security and Small Arms in Africa: The Case of Ghana. In A. Abass, *Protecting Human Security in Africa*, (pp.63-80). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁵⁶Interview with Officials of the *Commission Nationale de Contrôle des Armes* or National Commission for the Control of Arms (CNCA) Op. cit.

⁵⁷Ibid

which is part of the culture of most rural Burkinabes.⁵⁸ Additionally, a perception of rising insecurity may also contribute to the general population's desire to acquire arms for self-defence purposes.⁵⁹ The arms trade is regulated and therefore, traders argue that they do not sell weapons to extremist groups because the type of weapons they are authorised to sell are mostly used by civilians not extremist groups.⁶⁰

Legal sale and illegal trafficking of SALW have contributed to creating black and grey markets to the benefit of violent actors.⁶¹ Most of the violent extremist groups in this context, require firearms and ammunition, and as their numbers multiply, so too do business opportunities for arms traffickers in the Sahelian countries. There is evidence that violent extremist groups are involved in some types of arms transfer. These transfers to other actors often occur in the form of in-kind contributions to actors whom they are trying to incorporate into their ranks, or to communities to whom they are offering protection.⁶² Expanded militant Islamist group activity combined with increased wealth from artisanal gold mining in the tri-border region between Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, and Burkina Faso, has heightened the risks of insecurity, fuelling demand for illicit small arms.⁶³

The Role of Women in Violent Extremism, Radicalisation, and Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons in Burkina Faso

Women and children are the most affected by violent extremism and attacks on communities, and they are affected in diverse ways. Although most acts of violence are targeted at men, women are often the indirect victims of the violence. Extremist groups in Burkina Faso initially targeted government installations and community leaders. However, December 24, 2019, became a watershed moment with respect to insecurity in Burkina Faso. A reported 31 women were directly targeted and killed in a terrorist attack on a military base in Arbinda,⁶⁴ and women have increasingly become among the key victims of violent

extremism.

The effects of violent extremist attacks are numerous and include the dissolution of families. To reiterate, men are mostly victims of such attacks, with some having been killed. Others have been compelled to seek refuge in neighbouring countries; leaving behind the women to fend for themselves and their families.⁶⁵ Due to the rise in violent extremism, women and children in affected communities have become internally displaced and often do not receive adequate humanitarian assistance.⁶⁶ This has led to an increase in poverty amongst those in dire need of humanitarian assistance.⁶⁷ Also, the rising number of violent attacks has resulted in the closure of schools and healthcare facilities. These have had severe consequences on people's lives.⁶⁸

Besides being victims, in Burkina Faso, like in many countries in the Sahel, women play diverse roles in violent extremism. It is argued that women do not engage in active combat but play other auxiliary roles to aid extremists in gathering intelligence and information.⁶⁹ Others serve as cooks and engage in sexual relationships with members of extremist groups.⁷⁰ Due to deteriorating security conditions, some women join armed groups as a coping mechanism and for survival. Other basic needs such as security, water, food, shelter, education, and the elimination of harassment, along with the increase in violence, may contribute to the radicalisation and recruitment of women.⁷¹ Women, therefore, may take a pragmatic approach, by looking favourably at certain measures introduced by these groups 'jihadist governance' that have progressive implications in terms of gender, without wholly sharing the ideology of the extremist groups.⁷² In some instances, especially among women, extremist groups are perceived more as a source of protection than as a threat because of the absence of the State. In Burkina Faso in particular and in the Sahel region in general, attacks against civilians form part of a deliberate strategy of intimidation employed by violent extremist groups to

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Interviews with Members of the Arms Traders Association- Ouagadougou. June 16, 2023.

⁶¹Jesse, G. (2021). Arms Trafficking: Fueling Conflict in the Sahel. *International Affairs Review*, 29(2), 62-75. .

⁶²United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (2022). Op. cit.

⁶³Sollazzo, R. & Nowak, M. (2020). Tri-Border Transit: Trafficking and Smuggling in the Burkina Faso–Côte d'Ivoire–Mali Region. October. SANA Briefing Paper. Geneva: Small Arms Survey

⁶⁴Campaore, P. (2022, November 5). The Role of Gender in Violent Extremism in Burkina Faso. Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition. Available at <https://www.imctc.org/en/eLibrary/Articles/Pages/article11052022.aspx>

⁶⁵Interview with Officials of Civil Society Organisations. June 19, 2023.

⁶⁶Ibid

⁶⁷Ibid

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Interviews with Officials of Civil Society Organisations. June 15, 2023

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Campaore (2022). Op. cit.

⁷²Raineri, L. (2020). *Dogmatism or Pragmatism? Violent Extremism and Gender in the Central Sahel*. London: International Alert.

progressively gain a stronger foothold.⁷³

The proliferation of SALW is contributing to the growing insecurity of women, including through an upsurge in gender-based violence in Burkina Faso. The roles of women in arms trafficking and proliferation have not attracted extensive investigation since this field has traditionally focused largely on women's roles as either victims or peacemakers.⁷⁵ Yet, increasingly, women are involved in the activities of violent extremism, radicalisation, human trafficking, and small arms proliferation. There is, thus, the need to interrogate further and better understand women's roles and motivations within these contexts, especially arms trafficking, beyond the victim paradigm. Nevertheless, there is evidence of women's engagement in SALW proliferation in Burkina Faso.⁷⁶ Some of them have been implicated, for example, in the Banfora attacks in January, 2023.⁷⁷ Women were noted to have aided and supported the acquisition and transporting of SALW.⁷⁸ What is more, a woman was arrested for concealing a weapon underneath her baby.⁷⁹

In another instance, a female trader concealed arms in her merchandise of boxes of water and drinks, which was uncovered by security officials.⁸⁰ There are also isolated cases of women identified to be assisting violent extremists by serving as their intelligence sources.⁸¹ In addition, there are recorded cases of some women being found out and killed due to their engagements with violent extremists.⁸² Furthermore, in the eastern part of the country, women fighters were identified alongside men carrying-out violent extremist activities.⁸³ Overall, evidence on women's roles in different types of trafficking undermines the notion of women as hapless and unwilling criminals.⁸⁴ Factors that drive women to participate in arms trafficking schemes, are, reportedly, often economic, familial, including intimate partners, and social, including grievances over lack of public policy and services.⁸⁵

Mechanisms for Preventing Violent Extremism and Radicalisation, and Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons in Burkina Faso

Several mechanisms have been implemented for the prevention of violent extremism, radicalisation, and SALW proliferation. The first initiatives started in 2017, which were geared towards the development of a national security strategy and national security policy. The National Security Policy (NSP) adopted in 2020 enshrines a strategic paradigm shift in security governance. The rationale lies in the belief that the nature of emerging threats and of security challenges, calls for diverse and coordinated responses.⁸⁶ The policy emphasised the restructuring of security institutions, personnel recruitment, training protocols, and fostering meaningful collaboration with international partners within the Sahel region's security apparatus.⁸⁷ The primary objective of this initiative is to align these efforts with the framework of the Group of Five for the Sahel (G5 Sahel) and Operation Barkhane.⁸⁸ The National Security Law, resulting from the NSP, also aimed at establishing a new national security architecture and breaks with the overly sectoral and compartmentalised concept of security was adopted in May 2023.⁸⁹

Another initiative has to do with re-structuring the security sector through a policy that drives coordination among security sector agencies, with strategies developed by the six key state institutions; namely—the ministries of Defence, Social Protection, Justice, Human Rights, and Territorial Administration. The aims of the National Security Policy include the re-organisation of the security sector to complement the preventive response to violent extremism.⁹⁰

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴National Action Plan of Burkina Faso for the Implementation of Resolutions 1325 and 1820 of the Security Council of the United Nations. (2012). (Unofficial Translation, funded by ARC DP160100212 (CI Shepherd)). Retrieved from <http://1325naps.peacewomen.org/index.php/burkina-faso>

⁷⁵Dungel, E. & Fabre, A.-S. (2022). Missing or Unseen? Exploring Women's Roles in Arms Trafficking. Geneva: Small Arms Survey.

⁷⁶Interview with Officials of the National Commission for the Control of Arms (CNCA). Op. cit.

⁷⁷Campaore (2022). Op. cit.

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹Interview with Officials of Civil Society Organizations on June 19, 2023.

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Dungel & Fabre (2022). Op. cit.

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶Simpore, A.B. (2020). National Security Strategy Development: Burkina Faso Case Study. Working Paper. Africa Center for Strategic Studies. The National Security Policy (NSP) was revised and re-adopted on March 10, 2023

⁸⁷Ibid.

⁸⁸Abdallah, M. & Lartey, E.A. (2022). Fighting the Enemy without the Community: Interrogating the Strategy of Countering Violent Extremism in Burkina Faso. Occasional Paper 48. Accra: KAIPTC.

⁸⁹UN Peacebuilding (2023). Burkina Faso: Peacebuilding Challenges. September. Available at https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org/peacebuilding/files/documents/country_brief_burkina_faso_2023-09-19.pdf

Furthermore, efforts have been made to establish VDPs—who have been trained by the military and equipped with weapons—within the security structure, to assist in the fight against violent extremism, radicalisation, and SALW proliferation.⁹¹ The VDPs work in collaboration with the security forces such as the police, the military, and the gendarmerie to prevent violent extremism, radicalisation, terrorism, and proliferation of SALW.⁹² Efforts have also been made by the military, the police, and the gendarmerie to enhance their visibility in communities.⁹³ Another important mechanism geared towards preventing violent extremism, radicalisation and terrorism, is the increasing presence of security forces. This mechanism ensures that facilities such as police and military camps and other vital security installations, are extended to areas without these, to protect the populace. These strategies were absent in the past.⁹⁴

Burkina Faso has established relatively strong legal frameworks and institutional mechanisms for regulating the production, possession, and trade of SALW. The country's regulatory regimes on conventional arms transfers, including its systems of import control and end use, are often described as a good model in West Africa.⁹⁵ The country may owe some of its success to its long tradition of artisanal production of hunting rifles and pistols, a regulated private market for firearms and related ammunition, and its recent efforts to support international and regional initiatives on SALW control. The country has domesticated regional frameworks like the 2006 ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms, Light Weapons, Their Ammunition and Other Related Materials, and has ratified the 2013 Arms Trade Treaty (ATT).

As part of the measures to deal with the worsening security situation, the Government suspended the sale of firearms to the civilian population at the end of February 2019; but reversed this decision, after only a few months, in June 2019.⁹⁶ For, as armed groups recruit and arm civilians, the State is also trying to compensate for its shortcomings by widening the access to weapons for reasons of national civil defence.⁹⁷ As mentioned earlier, in early 2020, the

Government created the VDPs thereby, giving civilians access to weapons and legalising their use of force to supplement the security forces. This could heighten insecurity because arming civilians in a tense security context where government control is limited, could likely foster the proliferation of weapons and heighten the probability of inter-communal conflict.⁹⁸

The legal framework relative to small arms and ammunition in Burkina Faso is summarised in the table below.

Table 1: Burkina Faso: Legal Framework on Small Arms and Ammunition

| Name of Law/Decree | Date of Adoption | Key Provisions |
|--|------------------|--|
| Décret n° 2009-301 portant régime des armes et munitions civiles au Burkina Faso | May 8, 2009 | Relates to the production, transfer, sale, possession, import, transport and transformation of civilian firearms and ammunition—weapons of war and corresponding ammunition are excluded |
| Loi n° 014-2019/AN portant mise en œuvre du Traité sur le Commerce des Armes au Burkina Faso | April 30, 2019 | Seeks to implement the provisions of the ATT, with the stated goals of governing the transfer, preventing and eliminating the illicit trade and diversion of conventional weapons, contributing to peace, security, international, and regional stability, and reducing human suffering Specifically forbids non-state actors in Burkina Faso from being the end recipient or end user of a weapon or ammunition of war |
| Arrêté n° 2019-009PM/SG du 7 mai 2019 | May 7, 2019 | Establishes official standard operating procedures for the documentation, management, and tracing of illicit weapons and ammunition |
| Loi n° 030-2021/AN portant régime général des armes, de leurs pièces, éléments, munitions et autres matériels connexes au Burkina Faso | May 18, 2021 | Outlines strict penalties—in the form of imprisonment and fines—for illicit possession, production or trafficking of weapons or ammunition, as well as for producing unmarked weapons |

Source: Culled from Gramizzi, C. (2022). The Illicit Circulation of Small Arms and Light Weapons and their Ammunition in Burkina

⁹⁰Simpore (2020). Op. cit.

⁹¹Ibid.

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³Ibid.

⁹⁴Ibid.

⁹⁵Gramizzi (2022). Op. cit.

⁹⁶Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF) (2021). Op. cit.

⁹⁷Ibid.

⁹⁸Ibid.

Nonetheless, there are challenges with the control of arms and the issuance of certificates of SALW importation; making illegal markets the preferred choice to get these items.⁹⁹ As highlighted earlier in this paper, extremists attack military armouries and steal weapons for their use.¹⁰⁰ This contributes to the illicit circulation of SALW. Some illegal arms dealers are suspected of supplying and trading with violent extremists.¹⁰¹

In 2021, *Commission Nationale de Contrôle des Armes* or National Commission for the Control of Arms (CNCA) replaced the *Haute autorité de contrôle des importations d'armes et de leur utilisation* or High Authority on Arms Imports Control and Their Use (HACIAU) and the *Commission nationale de lutte contre la prolifération des armes légères* or National Commission for the Fight against the Illicit Proliferation of Small Arms (CNLPAL) to ensure that the national coordination mechanism regarding the control of SALW is strengthened.¹⁰² The CNCA also collaborates with the Ministry of Security and Defence to share ideas to curb SALW proliferation—the two agencies also take prior control of existing SALW in the country, including legally registered ones, to ensure effective monitoring.¹⁰³ In 2010, a weapons collection programme was implemented by the then CNLPAL consisting of voluntary disarmament and a separate activity to collect or remove, illegal and unwanted SALW and ammunition from communities. This programme was implemented through education and sensitisation towards formally registering SALW in the possession of members of these communities, as per the law.¹⁰⁴ There are also partnership and bilateral consultations between Burkina Faso, Mali, and Ghana to discuss SALW proliferation and to identify effective approaches to track down any SALW that may have been illegally acquired or transported

through shared borders.¹⁰⁵ Still, the lack of access to areas affected by extremist activities, presents challenges to the work of CNCA.¹⁰⁶

The data management system of marking SALW manufactured locally and that of those legally acquired by the State, such as old and existing stocks, are not properly synchronised.¹⁰⁷

Furthermore, there is inadequate training for actors vis-à-vis the skills needed to embark on preventative approaches, and the unavailability of intelligence and information to counter these armed groups, hinders progress made.¹⁰⁸ Further, there needs to be enhanced capacity building and border security with requisite equipment for the security agencies to work with, and the involvement of the civilian population at border towns in support of border controls and management should be increased.¹⁰⁹ It is estimated that approximately 85 per cent of illicit arms seized do not present any marking code.¹¹⁰ Burkina Faso is noted to have challenges regarding SALW proliferation, poor physical storage facilities, ammunition management such as timely disposal or destruction of ammunition, inconsistent procedures in weapons, and a lack of trained personnel.¹¹¹ In addition, information obtained shows that some SALW in Burkina Faso can be traced to workshops in Ghana.¹¹² A shortage of funds to implement projects relating to SALW control, for example sensitisation and education, hampers prevention measures.¹¹³

Conclusion

Burkina Faso faces multiple security challenges, which, in turn, have been complicated by political instability. Efforts by the erstwhile Roch Marc Christian Kabore Government and the present military administration in dealing with rising violence, have produced mixed results. Despite the existence of a relatively well-established regulatory regime

⁹⁹Interview with officials of Civil Society organizations. June 19, 2023.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*

¹⁰²Gramizzi (2022). *Op. cit.*

¹⁰³Interview with Officials of the *Commission Nationale de Contrôle des Armes* or National Commission for the Control of Arms (CNCA). *Op. cit.*

¹⁰⁴United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR). (2020). *Op. cit.*

¹⁰⁵Interview with Officials of the National Commission for the Control of Arms (CNCA). *Op. cit.*

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR). (2020). *Op. cit.*

¹¹⁰Gramizzi (2022). *Op. cit.*

¹¹¹Mines Advisory Group. (n.d.). Burkina Faso. Available at <https://www.maginternational.org/what-we-do/where-we-work/burkina-faso/>

¹¹²*Ibid.*

¹¹³Interview with Officials of the National Commission for the Control of Arms (CNCA). *Op. cit.*

for SALW control, the proliferation of illicit SALW fuels violent extremism and insecurity in Burkina Faso. Essentialist arguments often portray women as mostly victims of violent extremism and general insecurity. Indeed, views from respondents of this study did highlight the effects on rising insecurity on women and children in Burkina Faso. However, increasingly women are involved in the activities of violent extremism, radicalisation, human trafficking, and small arms proliferation. There is evidence that women are actively involved in violent extremism, not necessarily as frontline fighters, but mostly in auxiliary roles, such as providing intelligence. Still, their active involvement in illegal arms trafficking contributes to worsening insecurity.

There are notable challenges in the fight against SALW proliferation. The rise in violent extremism and radicalisation also impedes development and results in high rates of unemployment. All these increase the vulnerability of the general population; particularly, the youth and women.

and regional institutions in preventing violent extremism and radicalisation, and on SALW control.

Recommendations

1. The Government should create sustainable jobs for youth and women in areas affected by activities of violent extremists, to reduce their vulnerability to these groups.
2. State agencies must ensure effective control of SALW and strengthen the monitoring system to ensure that SALW do not get into the hands of armed groups.
3. The State must enhance its presence in security provision across the country.
4. Continuous capacity building programmes should be provided for state agencies, civil society actors, and community leaders as these are essential to preventing violent extremism, radicalisation, and the proliferation of SALW.
5. Community engagement should be encouraged as this is useful in sensitising the general population, women and youth in particular, on the effects of the proliferation of SALW.
6. Effective collaboration and cooperation should be pursued among frontline national

About the Authors

Naila Salihu (PhD) is a Senior Lecturer and Senior Research Fellow with the Peace and Security Programme at the Faculty of Academic Affairs and Research, Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC). Her research interests include regional institutions, democratic processes, peacebuilding, and military-societal relations in West Africa.

Victor Kofi Afetorlom Doke (PhD) is a Research Fellow with the Faculty of Academic Affairs and Research (FAAR) at the KAIPTC. He holds a PhD in International Studies with special focus on Conflict Resolution from the Hiroshima City University (Japanese MEXT Scholar). His Research Interests include: Violent armed conflicts, Elections, Conflict Resolution [management, prevention], security, civil society organisation's role in Conflict Resolution, mediation, and negotiation.

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