

WOMEN IN PEACE MEDIATION IN MALI: A CASE STUDY OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN RECENT AND ONGOING PEACE PROCESSES

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Utilizing formal and informal strategies is vital for ensuring women's participation in peace and peace mediation processes.



Despite inclusivity commitments, women face challenges accessing negotiation tables due to political, economic, and cultural barriers. It underscores the importance of valuing women's contributions in traditional spheres.



To improve women's engagement, it is essential to invest in their education and training, advocate for increased participation, create supportive environments, recognize the crucial role of women peace mediators, and establish a regional mediators network.

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List of Acronyms

ADD	Aide au Développement Durable (Aid for Sustainable Development)
ADC	Alliance Démocratique pour le Changement du 23 Mai (Democratic Alliance for Change on May 23)
ADEMA	Alliance pour la Démocratie au Mali (Alliance for Democracy in Mali)
AEEM	Association des Elèves et Etudiants du Mali (Association of Mali's Students)
AEN	Aide de l'Eglise Norvegienne (Norwegian Church Aid)
APR	Accord pour la paix et la réconciliation au Mali issu du processus d'Alger (Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, resulting from the Algiers process)
ASFIA	Association Solidarité Femmes d'Ici et d'Ailleurs (Solidarity Association of Women from here and abroad)
ATNM	L'Alliance Touareg Niger-Mali (The Alliance Tuareg Niger-Mali)
ATT	Amadou Toumani Touré
AU	African Union
CAD-Mali	Coalition des Alternatives Africains Dettes et Développement (Coalition of African Alternatives Debts and Development)
CAFO	Coordination des Associations et ONG Féminines du Mali (CAFO Coordination of Women's Associations and NGOs in Mali)
CARESS	Centre d'Analyse et de Recherche de l'Espace Sahélo-Saharien (Centre for Analysis and Research of the Sahelo-Saharan Space)
CMFPR	Coordination des Mouvements et Front Patriotique de Résistance (Coordination of Patriotic Resistance Movements and Front)
COFO	Commission Foncière (Land commission)
CRA	Comité d'Appui à la Réconciliation (Reconciliation Support Committee)
CMA	Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad (Coordination of Azawad Movements)
CMLN	Comité Militaire de Libération Nationale (Military Committee for National Liberation)
CNRDRE	National Committee for the Recovery of the State and the Restoration of Democracy (Comité national pour le redressement de l'État et le rétablissement de la démocratie)
CNJ	Conseil National de la Jeunesse (National Youth Council)
CPA	Coalition du Peuple pour l'Azawad (People's Coalition for Azawad)
CTSP	Comité Transitoire pour le Salut du Peuple (Transitional Committee for the Salvation of the People)
CRC	Committee on the Rights of the Child (Commission des droits de l'enfant)
CSA	Comité de Suivi de l'Accord (Agreement Monitoring Committee)
CSW	Commission on the Status of Women (Commission de la condition de la femme)
CVJR	Commission Vérité, Justice et Réconciliation (Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission)
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EMP-ABB	École de Maintien de la Paix Alioune Blondin Beye (Alioune Blondin Beye Peacekeeping School)
ERAR	Équipes Régionale d'Appui à la Réconciliation (Regional Support Teams for Reconciliation)
EU	European Union

FES	Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
FPA	Front Populaire de l’Azawad (Popular Front of Azawad)
FPLA	Front Populaire pour la Libération de l’Azawad (Popular Front for the Liberation of Azawad)
GATIA	Groupe Autodéfense Touareg Imghad et Alliés (Tuareg Imghad and Allied Self-Defence Group)
GREFFA	Groupe de Recherche, d’Etude, et de Formation, Femme-Action (Research, Study and Training Group, Femme-Action)
HCUA	Haut Conseil pour l’Unité de l’Azawad (High Council for the Unity of Azawad)
IBK	Ibrahim Boubacar Keita
ICDO	International Criminal Police Organisation
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDDH	Institut Danois des Droits de l’Homme (Danish Institute for Human Rights)
IMRAP	Institut Malien de Recherche-Action pour la Paix (Malian Institute of Research-Action for Peace)
MAA	Mouvement Arabe de l’Azawad (Arab Movement of the Azawad)
MAECI	Ministère des Affaires Étrangères et de la Coopération Internationale (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation)
MDP	Mouvement pour la Défense de la Patrie (Movement for the Defence of the Fatherland)
MINUSMA	Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali
MNA	Mouvement National de l’Azawad (the National Movement of the Azawad)
MNLA	Mouvement National de Libération de l’Azawad (National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad)
MPGK	Mouvement Patriotique Ganda Koi (Ganda Koi Patriotic Movement)
MPSA	Mouvement Populaire pour le Salut de l’Azawad (Popular Movement for the Salvation of Azawad)
MSA	Mouvement pour le Salut de l’Azawad (Movement for the Salvation of Azawad)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PAN	Plan D’Action Nation (Nation Action Plan)
PNG	Politique Nationale Genre (National Gender Policy)
RECs	Regional Economic Communities
UN WOMEN	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
UTG	Unité Technique de Gestion (Technical Management Unit)
WILDAF	Women in Law and Development in Africa
WPS	Women Peace and Security

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Executive Summary

This study examines women's participation in peace mediation processes in Mali, and focuses on the formal and informal mechanisms that foster their inclusion in these processes. Although the existing literature offers a limited perspective on the role of women in conflict prevention and resolution in Mali, it is notable that Mali has a wide range of legal and policy instruments that support their participation, including a quota law. This important legal and policy framework is the result of decades of consistent work by civil society organisations, progress in the international framework, and receptive government officials. The ongoing crisis in Mali since 2012 has provided additional opportunities to consolidate this legal and policy framework.

Paradoxically though, women still struggle to gain access to the negotiation room. This was demonstrated by the recent Ouagadougou and Algiers talks, and even by the initial absence of women in the APR monitoring committee (CSA). This is a situation where commitments are made but little is done to translate them into actual deeds. It is particularly challenging for women to be present in, and to contribute to high level political talks (Track I mediation). Women are more active at community levels and are able to voice their views and contribute within spaces that pertain to Track II and Track III mediation. In addition to political, financial and economic restrictions as well as a lack of mediation skills, this is a reflection of cultural norms in the Malian and Sahel society, where women and men do not traditionally sit together to discuss certain topics.

To move forward, it is imperative to value the contribution of women in their traditional spaces more, and to intentionally draw connections between this contribution and high-level mediation processes. To some extent, this approach was used by the international mediation coalition during the Algiers talks. The latter combined a traditional advocacy and pressure posture with a more culture-sensitive strategy. This approach should be reinforced, while more structural efforts should be made to allow

women to access Track I mediation processes. Based on our research findings, additional recommendations include the need to document women's significant contributions, and to recognise the efforts of female peace mediators. Encouraging the active participation of trained mediators requires long-term investments, a holistic approach, and heightened cultural sensitivity. Priority should be given to personal development and to educating women on how national and international processes work, to enable them to make meaningful contributions to decision-making platforms. To ensure a greater inclusion of women, lobbying and advocacy efforts must also be directed towards the top, and should include building solidarity and organising dedicated "blocks". Women should be encouraged to step out of their comfort zones, by taking an active role in areas such as governance, SRR, DDR, the environment, etc. We further emphasise that existing political will must be put to practice, i.e. women need to be in decision-making positions and to take a leading role in mediation processes. It is crucial to create an enabling environment for women's participation, by providing financial, technical, and political support for training and leadership. In this regard, our recommendations include the creation of a special fund, support for the establishment of a regional network of women mediators, periodic forums, and the inclusion of provisions for women's participation in peace and security agreements. Finally, possibly as part of the ECOWAS regional women's network for peace and security and the African Union's FemWise initiative, the establishment of a regional network of women mediators and negotiators would serve as a means to strengthen national efforts while drawing on Africa-wide strategies and action plans.

Keywords:

Mediation, Women, Peace, Mali, Conflict, Centre for Analysis and Research for the Sahelo-Saharan Space, Alioune Blondin Beye Peacekeeping School, CARESS, EMP-ABB, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, African Union.

Introduction

Mali has experienced various forms of internal conflict since the early years of its independence in 1960. The country has recorded no less than six rebellions and five coups d'état. This unstable situation has also made Mali a fertile land for peace mediation processes and peace agreements. At a national political level (Track I mediation), peace processes have led to six peace agreements.

Women's involvement in peace mediation and conflict resolution processes in Mali reaches back to women's activism in the context of the struggle for independence and the pan-African unity movement. The struggle for Mali's independence was led by women such as Aoua Keïta (1912–1980), who was a midwife and a political and trade union activist during the time of Mali's decolonisation, and became independent Mali's first female member of parliament. Aoua Keïta is widely revered as the embodiment of women's participation in Mali's struggle for independence, and as a role model for Malian women and feminist associations. Mali, therefore, is both a site of conflict and a place where several peace mediation processes have taken place, and it is a space where women

have been already been active in claiming their seats around negotiation tables for a long time.

This study analyses how women have participated in peace mediation and conflict resolution processes in Mali. The study takes stock of how peace mediation and conflict resolution processes in the country have evolved at all levels, and considers Track I, II and III mediation.¹ The research presented here was carried out by the Centre for Analysis and Research of the Sahelo-Saharan Space (CARESS) of the Alioune Blondin Beye Peacekeeping School (EMP-ABB) at the request of, and with funding from, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung African Union Cooperation Office (FES-AU). It is part of a larger research effort that involves three countries, including Mali and South Sudan. The findings of the case studies, as well as joint conclusions and recommendations from the three countries, will be presented at a conference to enhance the study, stimulate the exchange of country experiences, and inform the policies of continental (AU), regional (RECs), and national bodies with the objective to improve the strategic inclusion of women in peace mediation processes.

¹ Track I mediation refers to high-level political mediation involving government officials and military leaders. It aims to generate cease-fires and high-level political agreements. Track II mediation refers to unofficial exchanges and problem-solving initiatives that aim to establish links between civil society leaders and influential individuals capable of influencing Track I mediation processes. These individuals are sometimes also invited to participate in formal negotiations. When government representatives engage in informal non-governmental dialogue, this is referred to as "Track 1.5". Track III mediation involves interpersonal interactions at a local level to foster understanding between different communities. It includes meetings, media exposure, and political and legal advocacy on behalf of marginalized people and communities (see ECOWAS 2017, p. 13).

Background

Over the last decade, the Sahel region has faced a major security crisis that involves jihadist insurgencies, rebellions, armed self-defence militias, military coups, as well as the illicit trafficking of drugs, arms, and migrants. While Mali has a history of rebellion and armed violence that reaches back to the country's independence, terrorist networks operating on its territory is a relatively recent phenomenon. The fall of the Libyan regime in 2011 led to a loosening of border controls and an influx of a considerable number of weapons into other states in the region. Together with the breakup of the Malian state, this triggered a latent security crisis in the entire Sahel region.

One facet of this multidimensional crisis is that the state has lost control over certain parts of its territory, to a combination of separatist movements and jihadist groups. Other aspects of this multifaceted crisis include the consolidation of the aforementioned jihadist groups in other parts of the country, the emergence of self-defence militias, the proliferation of weapons, the increasing number of terrorist acts and of inter and intra-community conflicts in areas usually spared, and an increase in cross-border trafficking and organised crime. Mali has also seen a dramatic increase in forced displacement. The number of internally displaced people (IDP) and refugees has risen rapidly, and the number of civilian casualties has increased notably as well (Assanvo et al. 2019; Cissé et al. 2022; McGregor 2017; MINUSMA 2022a; Nsaibia & Weiss 2020; Oxford Analytica 2022; Pollichieni 2021; Tobie & Sangaré 2019; Weiss 2019). The aspects highlighted here are not exhaustive, which indicates that the current crisis is one of the worst that the country has experienced since it gained independence.

Following a rebellion in the northern part of the country and a coup in 2012, an internationally supported peace process was launched in 2013 to aid a political transition in Mali.² After the preliminary Ouagadougou Agreement that was signed in 2013, further peace negotiations were held in Algiers between 2014 and 2015. They culminated in the signing of the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation (APR) in Mali, itself a result of the Algiers Process, in which the

government and armed groups took part in May and June 2015.³ This process aimed to consolidate the achievements of the preliminary Ouagadougou Agreement, with the objective to achieve a comprehensive and lasting peace. The agreement was originally supposed to be implemented between 2015 and 2017, but it faced delays. However, the APR allowed for a cessation of hostilities and enabled offices of public administration, as well as defence and security forces, to gradually return to some of the northern parts of the country.

It is worth noting that before the APR, numerous peace agreements were signed to resolve conflicts in Mali. Notably, the 1991 Tamanrasset Agreement, the 1992 National Pact, and the 2006 Algiers Agreement. All these agreements failed to satisfy the demands of armed groups in northern Mali. Despite the Malian state's efforts to invest in development and national unity, the problem persists. This is what led to a new rebellion in 2012 that was to be resolved through the signing of the APR. The latter was welcomed by the entire political class, partners, and the international community.⁴

In Mali, like in most conflict situations around the world, the meaningful participation of women in peace mediation processes is seen as an essential condition for inclusive and sustainable peace and reconciliation (UN Women 2020). Women must not just be present, but their concerns must be heard and addressed too. They must have the opportunity to lend their expertise to ensure that gender perspectives and gender analyses inform and influence mediation and peace processes (Lorentzen, Toure & Gaye 2019). Citing Tripp (2015), Lorentzen has emphasised that conflicts and their aftermath may provide opportunities to reshape gender dynamics and promote women's rights (Lorentzen 2017, p. 1).⁵ Accordingly, international frameworks such as the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) on Women, Peace and Security engage stakeholders to promote women's participation in conflict resolution and peacebuilding processes. Moreover, in order to promote the protection of women's rights and gender equality, and to ensure gender mainstreaming and women's

² Mali has a history of rebellions in the northern part of the country, which have allegedly been a response to the way in which the people of this region have been marginalised and excluded from governance structures by the majority of Mali's population that lives in the south of the country. A timeline of these rebellions is provided below.

³ The APR was signed between the Malian government, the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA, anti-government rebel groups including MNLA, HCUA, MAA, CMFPR and CPA), and the Platform of Self-defence Movements (including pro-government armed groups: GATIA, a dissident fraction of the CMFPR, a dissident fraction of MAA, MPSA, FPA, MDP and MSA).

⁴ Despite the APR, the situation in Mali has remained unstable until September 2023, with clashes between government forces and rebel groups.

⁵ According to the Carter Center (2020), the independent observer of the implementation of the APR, there is a growing recognition of women's role in peacebuilding and mediation processes thanks to the ongoing conflict in Mali.

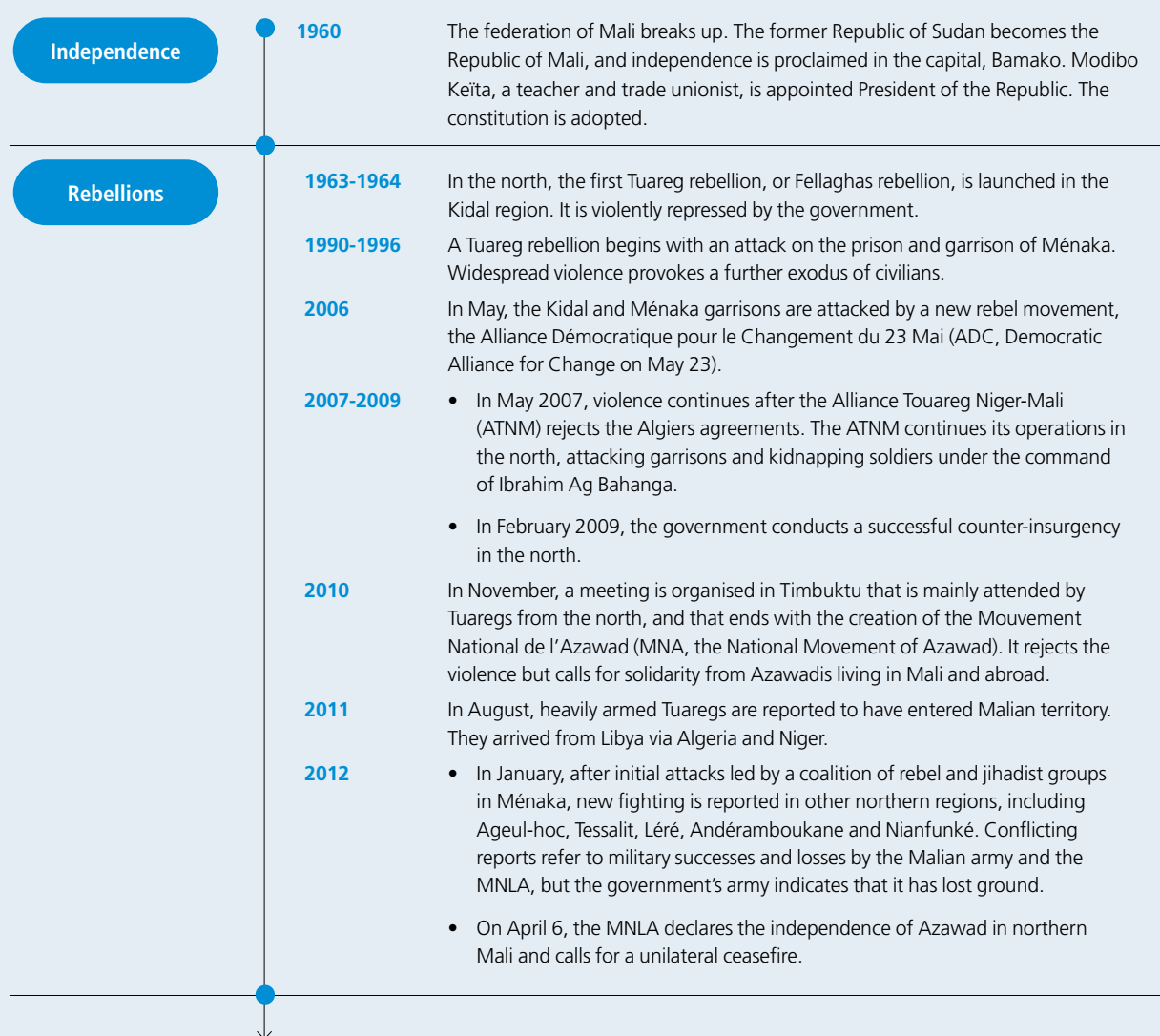
equal participation in peace processes, several policies, frameworks and mechanisms exist within the United Nations (UN) system, the African Union (AU), and the Economic Community for West African States (ECOWAS).

Yet, in the context of peace mediation in Mali, and despite the fact that Mali adopted a National Gender Policy (NGP-Mali) in 2011, and a National Action Plan for the implementation of the UNSCR 1325 (NAP), some experts argue that women were marginalised during the peace process and remain less involved in the implementation of the agreement (Lorentzen, Toure & Gaye 2019, p. 20). The underrepresentation of women in peace processes is suspected to contribute to their missing participation in

decision-making, and to the fragility of peacebuilding and stabilisation efforts. It is therefore useful to understand why women have participated in peace mediation processes in Mali, and how they have influenced these processes, based on stakeholders' perceptions.

In this regard, this research project aims to shed light on the dynamics of women's meaningful participation in peace processes in Mali at all levels, covering Tracks I, II and III of dialogue, negotiation and mediation. In doing so, our goal is to identify opportunities and make recommendations regarding how to enable a greater participation of women in these processes, and how to empower them to contribute to peace mediation and reconciliation processes in Mali.

Mali Timeline



Millitary coups

1968

Modibo Keita, who is imprisoned, is overthrown in a military coup. Moussa Traoré, an officer leading the Comité Militaire de Libération Nationale (CMLN), takes over the presidency.

1991

- On 26 March, Moussa Traoré is overthrown and a transitional government is set up: the *Comité Transitoire pour le Salut du Peuple* (CTSP) (the Transitional Committee for the Salvation of the People), led by the officer Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT).
- In July and August, a national conference held in Bamako brings together a large number of delegates as Mali attempts to establish a functioning democracy.

2012

On 22 March, in a programme broadcast at dawn, a group of soldiers that claims to belong to the National Committee for the Recovery of the State and the Restoration of Democracy (CNRDRE) announces a coup d'état, accusing Amadou Toumani Touré of the ineffective conduct of the war in the north.

2020

On 18 August, President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita is overthrown in a military coup led by a group of officers. This follows months of protests in response to his re-election in 2018 and his attempt to reform the constitution.

2021

On 24 May, the interim President Bah N'Daw and the interim Prime Minister Moctar Ouane are arrested by a group of military officers led by Colonel Assimi Goïta and forced to resign. Since then a new transitional government has been in place.

PEACE AGREEMENTS

Agreement

1991

The peace agreement negotiated by Algeria in Tamanrasset in the south of the country provides for the decentralisation of the north and the reintegration of Tuareg troops, but violence continues in some northern regions.

National Pact

1992

On 11 April, the government signs the National Pact and a Tuareg rebel coordination group is created. The Pact provides for the economic regeneration of the north, national reconciliation initiatives, decentralisation, and the integration of the Tuareg into military and civilian structures.

Agreement

1995

In January, the Bourem Accords are signed by the *Mouvement Patriotique Ganda Koi* (MPGK, Ganda Koi Patriotic Movement) and the *Front Populaire pour la Libération de l'Azawad* (FPLA, Popular Front for the Liberation of Azawad), which is mainly made up of Tuaregs. The Accords mark a significant breakthrough in defusing ethnic tensions.

Peace ceremony

1996

On 27 March, the Flame of Peace ceremony is held in Timbuktu. Hundreds of firearms are destroyed and the armed Tuareg movements and the MPGK are officially disbanded.

Agreement

2006

On 4 July, the government and the ADC sign the Algiers Accords. The peace agreement focuses on security and economic growth in Kidal, Mali's eighth-largest region, which is also furthest from the capital.

Agreement

2015

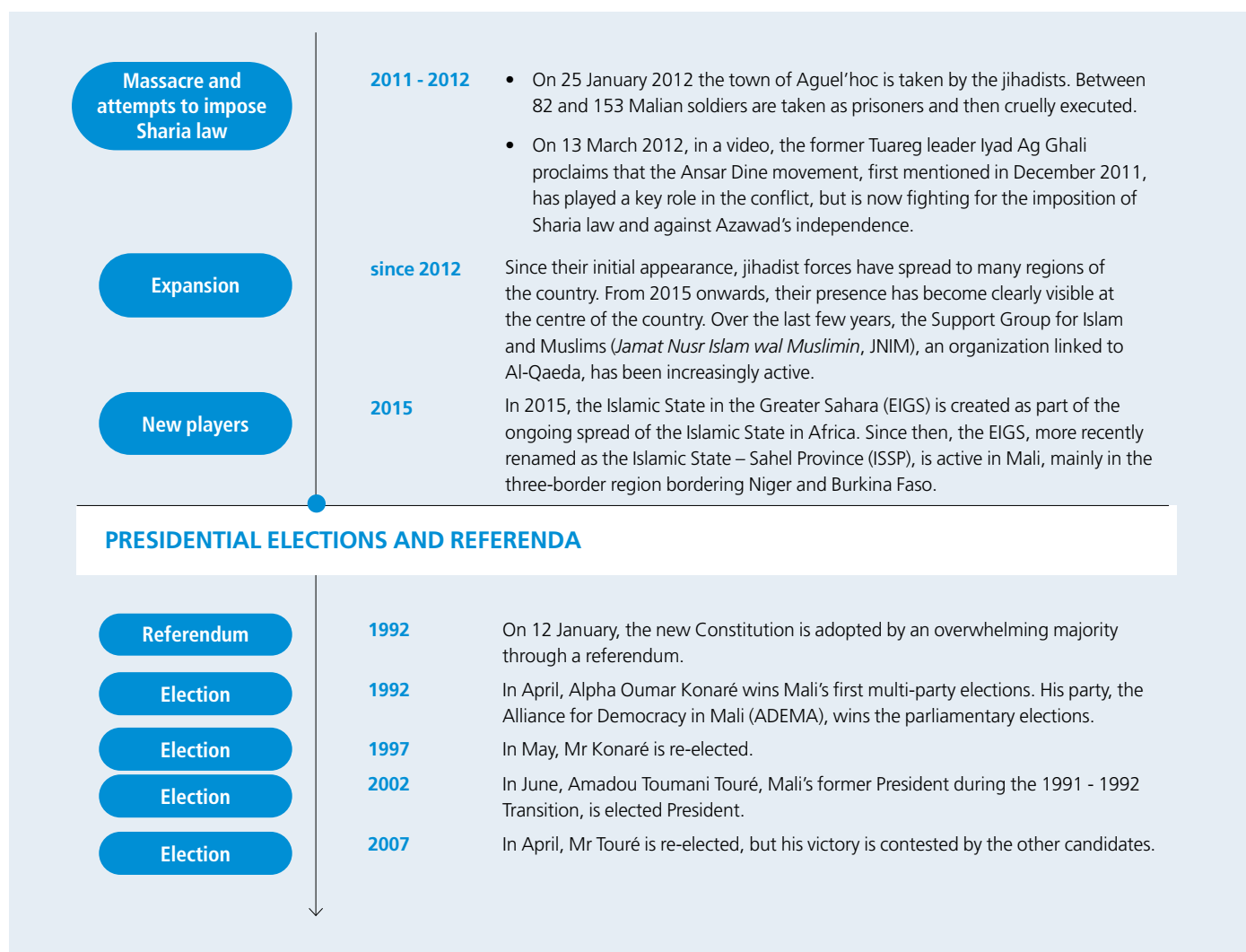
The Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali (APR) resulting from the Algiers process is signed on 15 May and 20 June, in Bamako. This agreement aims to end the Malian war, after negotiations conducted in Algiers between the Republic of Mali and the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA).

TERRORISM & JIHADISM

Alliance building and expansion

2008

Mokhtar Belmokhtar, the Algerian leader of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), visits northern Mali. He subsequently forges increasingly solid alliances with the region's nomadic groups, and marries the daughter of one of the chiefs of the Barabicha Arab tribe. These alliances strengthen his control over local trading routes used for various goods.



Next to moments of political change, unrest and jihadism, Mali has seen brutal massacres, some of which resulted in high numbers of casualties. In many cases these massacres were linked to the jihadist groups EIGS and JNIM. For example, a series of attacks by EIGS in July 2018 killed more than fifty people, and a massacre perpetrated by JNIM in 2022 resulted in more than 150 casualties. One of the saddest massacres in recent years took place in Ogossagou in March 2019. More than 161⁶ people belonging to the ethnic group of the Fulani/Peuhl were killed by a Dogon militia group. Given that inter-community clashes are less frequent in Mali than in other parts of Africa, this outburst of violence between different communities shocked Mali and leaves deep scars in the country.

6 According to the ICRC (2019). The reported number of casualties may vary depending on the source. Cold-Ravnkilde and Ba (2022) reported "at least 160 civilians massacred" (ibid., p. 32). A second massacre took place in Ogossagou in February 2020. According to the United Nations, both massacres resulted in "nearly 200 deaths" (MINUSMA 2021).

Objectives of the study

Main objective

The main objective of this research is to study women's participation in peace mediation and conflict resolution processes in Mali, and to identify inclusion strategies, challenges, lessons learned and best practices based on the perceptions of women mediators and members of women's groups and networks in Mali.

Specific objectives

This study specifically aims to:

- Investigate existing formal, structural, and consistent ways of engaging with women's groups in peace mediation processes at local and national levels, to explore their effectiveness, and to identify those phases in peace mediation processes in which women are engaged;
- Investigate existing policies, legal and institutional frameworks, commitments and approaches that are adequate to systematically and consistently ensure women's participation in peace mediation, and to explore their effectiveness;
- Document existing support mechanisms at the government level that intend to boost women's participation in peace mediation processes;
- Assess the strategies of engagement that women networks and groups use to inform mediation processes;
- Assess the impact of women's participation in peace mediation processes such as in setting the agenda, altering narratives, or incorporating gender-sensitive issues/ issues affecting women in peace agreements;
- Document challenges in the agenda of women in peace mediation in terms of social and cultural norms, institutional, policy, and legal frameworks, and administrative hurdles, both within regional and sub-regional organisations and in the national context;
- Identify lessons learned that may help devise workable strategies for women's engagement in peace mediation processes in other conflict-prone countries, and to inform the AU and REC's policies in this area.

Method

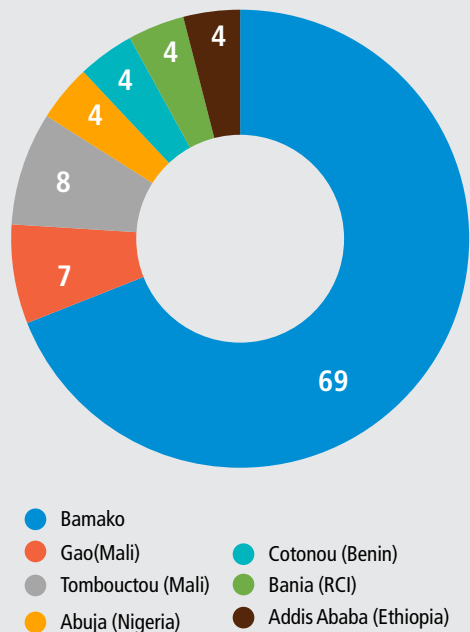
The research presented in this study was conducted using qualitative research methods. It is based on a review of available documents and primary data collected through key informant interviews and focus-group discussions.

The research team reviewed over fifty documents, which include legal instruments, policies, strategies, scientific publications and so-called grey literature. This review allowed the researchers to develop a meaningful understanding of the context in Mali, a historical perspective of women’s participation in mediation and peace processes, a broad assessment of the framework of such participation, and an assessment of whether their participation was perceived as impactful or not.

Collecting data from key informants was crucial for this study, which aimed to obtain first-hand information from actors involved in peace mediation processes in Mali. We first compiled a list of institutions and organisations relevant to our topic. We then made use of the “snowball approach” to identify key people within these institutions.

The research team then conducted thirty-two individual interviews, both in-person and online. This mixed methodological approach was selected to ensure that the research team could reach relevant interlocutors, irrespective of their physical location. Accordingly, some of the interviews were conducted in Mali (Bamako, Gao and Timbuktu), while others took place in Abuja (Nigeria), Cotonou (Benin), Bania (Côte d’Ivoire), and Addis Ababa (Ethiopia). The research team sometimes targeted former staff members of organisations. This was the case for individuals who had been highly involved at the peak of the recent peace processes, and were thus in a position to provide the most valuable insights. Senior officials from international and regional organisations were interviewed online. This enabled people in key positions within their organisations to participate in the study despite their busy schedules. Although these interviews were more succinct, they provided essential and complementary information on the topics covered in this study. The research team also had informal conversations with many stakeholders, including senior government representatives, and officials at the AU and ECOWAS commissions.

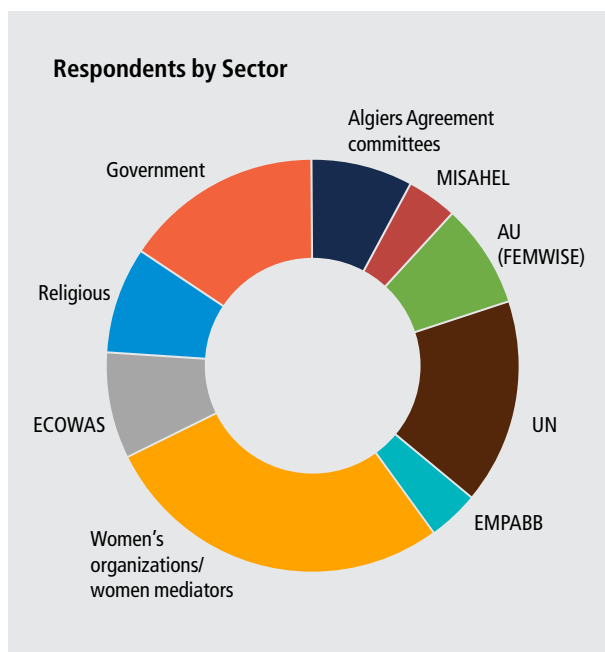
Respondents by Location



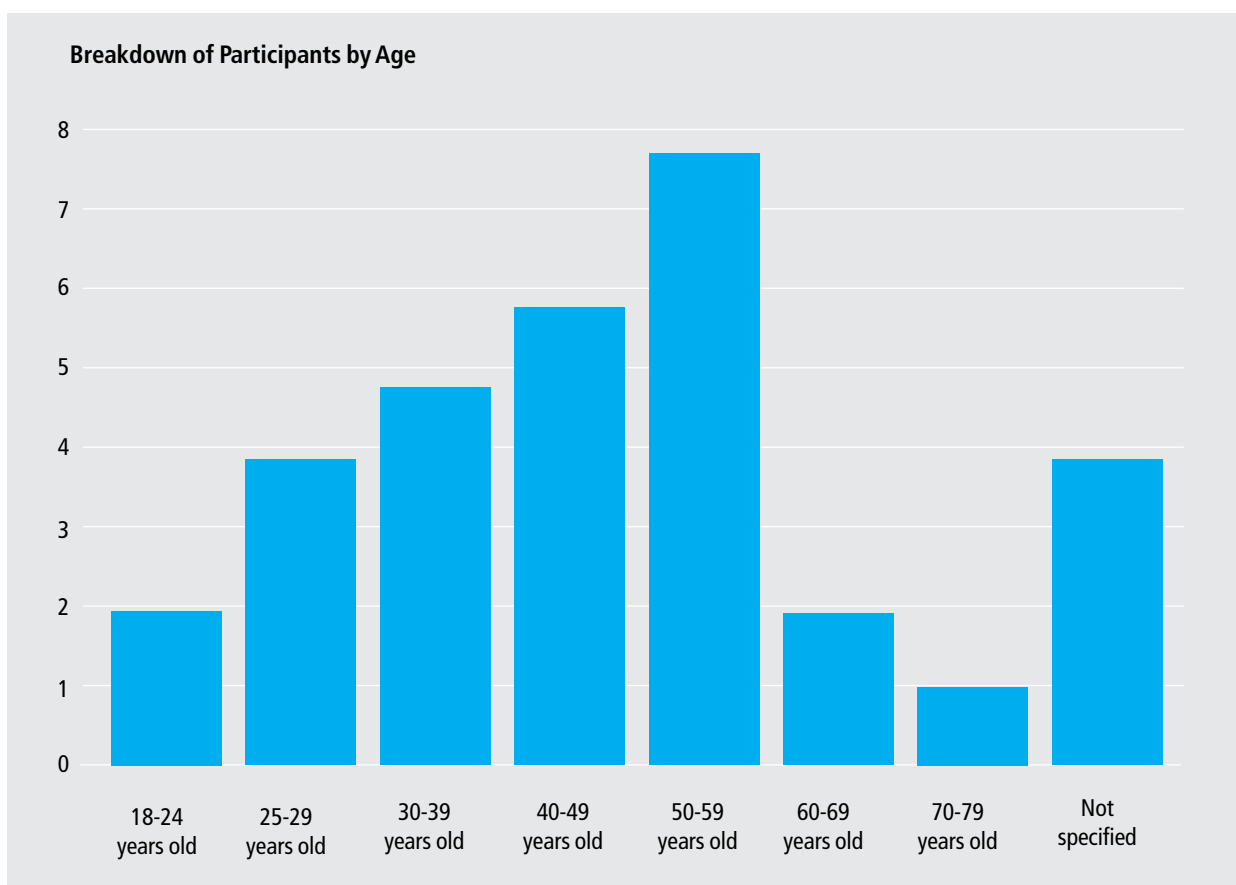
Breakdown of Participants by Gender



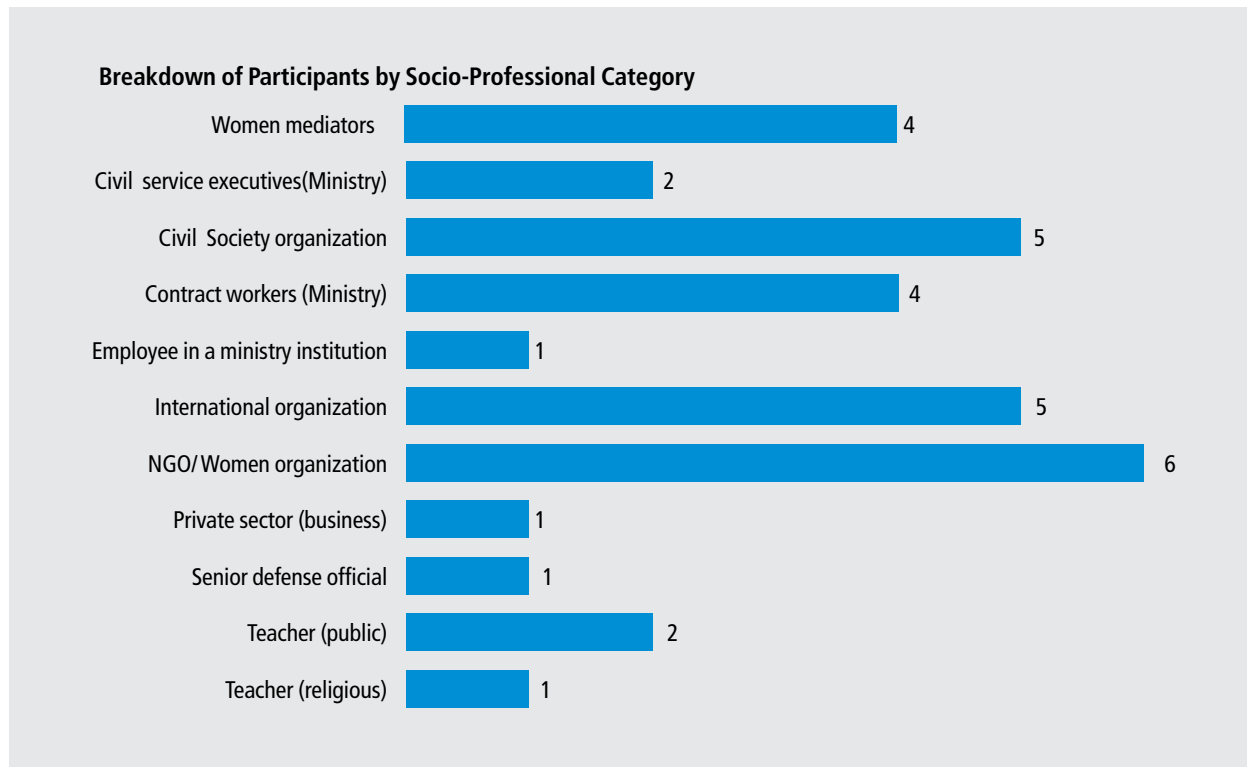
The face-to-face interviews focused on national institutions, especially those involved in the promotion of women, peacebuilding, national reconciliation and social cohesion. International organisations, NGOs, women's organisations and civil society organisations were also included in this field survey, as the graph below shows.



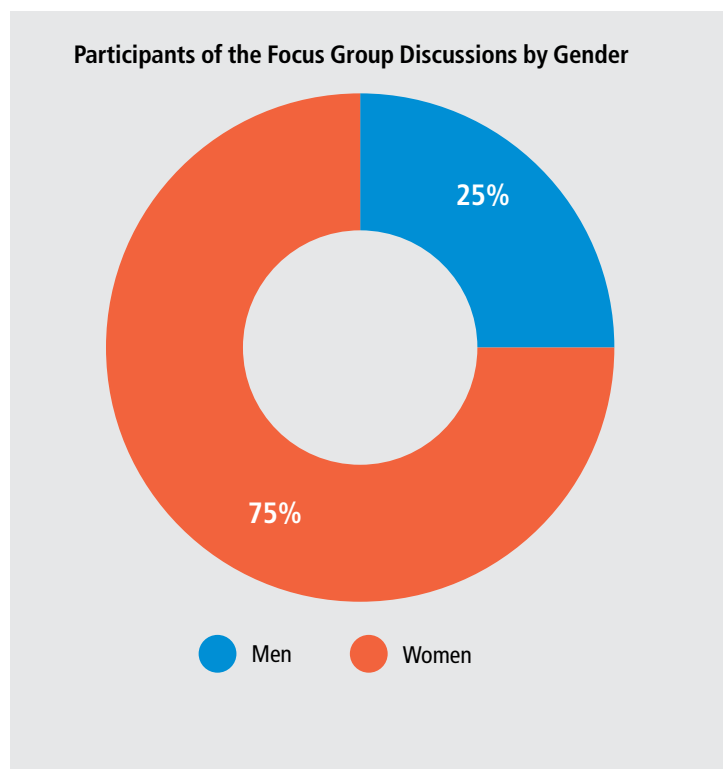
We collected interview data from thirty-two respondents, which provided a solid basis for our analysis. The age distribution of the respondents shows a significant representation of the youth, the elderly, as well as those who did not wish to disclose their age, offering an important perspective on the experience and vision of respondents with regard to women's involvement in mediation processes. This is illustrated in the graph below.



By including participants from different socio-professional categories, we hope to offer a balanced perspective. These individuals have diverse experiences regarding women's participation in peace mediation processes in Mali. This variety of participants has enabled us to obtain a richer and more nuanced understanding of our research topic. It has broadened the scope of our study, and enriched our understanding of the subject. Socio-professional diversity has also helped us to formulate more relevant and enlightened recommendations.



In addition to key informant interviews, the research team organised two focus group discussions in Gao and Timbuktu, which included a total of sixteen participants (twelve women and four men). The female participants were selected based on two criteria: a) a leadership position with an organisation that promotes women's rights, and b) their previous training and/ or involvement in peace mediation processes. These focus groups included women and young people to ensure a diverse representation. Men were selected on the basis that they had been initiators of conflict prevention and resolution organisations. Thanks to this approach, we were able to cover all social strata of the community.



The research team prepared read-outs for each interview and for the focus group discussions. The diversified approach to data collection strengthens the validity and reliability of the data obtained, allowing a thorough and informed analysis of the results of this study.

Challenges and limitations

The team faced some challenges while collecting the data for this study. The first major constraint was to persuade high-level informants to participate, given their busy schedules and the sensitive nature of the subjects discussed. We had to enlist the assistance of well-established contacts to gain access to these senior officials. In addition, the data collection phase took longer than anticipated because of the challenges in securing appointments with high-level key informants just mentioned.

The second major challenge we encountered was the volatile security context in Gao and Timbuktu.

Thirdly, discussing women's participation in peace mediation processes appears to be a sensitive topic in some parts of Mali. This was noted both during individual interviews and the focus group discussions.

Lastly, the limited budget of the study did not permit the research team to visit the headquarters of pertinent regional and continental institutions. Such visits could have made access to key informants easier. This challenge was mitigated by conducting online interviews and holding informal conversations.

Despite these difficulties, the research team succeeded in collecting data from pertinent resource persons. The study resulted in findings that align with its research objectives.

Findings

The conflict in Mali has attracted the attention of scholars and many other experts who have produced diverse studies, documenting its origins, evolution and impact. According to Grégory Chauzal & Thibault van Damme (2015, pp. 9-10) the crises that have been agitating Mali for the past decades stems from long-standing distrust between different ethnic communities, economic frustration, political resentment and strategic opportunity-taking, all of them rooted in the fragmented nature of the country, aggravated by foreign interference that served to aid and abet tensions in the north. Despite their recurrence, Malian stakeholders have failed to resolve the rebellions in the northern part of the country. Aurelien Tobie and Boukary Sangaré (2019, p. 18) argue, for instance, that the government's strategy to encourage some militia to supplement the regular army, or to provide security in areas where the army cannot maintain an effective presence, has led to even more problems. Grégory Chauzal and Thibault van Damme (2015 p. 30) describe a situation of "ethnic divisions and lawlessness" in the aftermath of the rebellions, which presented a window of opportunity for terrorist groups to settle in the north and, since 2015, also in the centre of Mali (Tobie 2017, pp. 6-7).

1. The limited exploration of women's role in conflict prevention and resolution in Mali in the existing literature

Despite the abundant literature that analyses the situation in Mali, little emphasis has been placed on the role that women have played, or continue to play, in peace mediation processes. A few authors, though, have put this topic at the centre of their work. Irene Pujol Chica (2020), for example, recalls that in its resolution 2480 (2019), the Security Council called for the full, effective and meaningful participation of women in peace processes to be treated as a priority. She then examines the extent to which the requirements for inclusion have been fulfilled in Mali and how Malian women have contributed, both formally and informally, to the recent peace and conflict dynamics in the country. She notes that none of the mechanisms established by the APR achieved the thirty per cent quota for women's participation that was established by law in 2015, and argues that "even if Mali's officials and international partners seem to recognize the importance of women in peacebuilding process (sic), their words and commitments do not translate enough into deeds" (ibid., p. 14).

In the same light, Jenny Lorentzen (2020) reports that women often have to use pressure to be included in peace processes. This has also been the way through which women became part of various peace negotiations in Mali: they were only accepted after initial "widespread practices of resistance." Thus, Lorentzen also notes that there is a gap between the rhetorical commitment to and broad acceptance of an international norm to ensure the effective involvement of women, and how it is implemented in practice in the context of the Malian peace negotiations (ibid, p. 501).

The work of Lorentzen, Toure and Gaye (2019, p. 20) also indicates that women in Malian communities can play a key role for achieving peace, also in the case of war (see also UN Peacekeeping n.d; Pujol Chica 2020, p. 18). Various other studies also show that women's participation in peacebuilding and mediation processes can play a central role in resolving conflicts and reaching a sustainable peace (see e.g. OECD 2019). The literature outlined above suggests, however, that the participation of women in Malian peace processes does not, so far, capture their full potential to invest in peace. Arieff (2020) argues that women have consistently pushed to be included in peace dialogues, although they face difficulties in mediation circles. Their voices remain marginalised and undervalued, which limits their influence in decision-making processes. The Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development has explored women's participation in mediation processes in Mali, at both community and national levels. It reports that, based on women's initiatives and the influence that they had in previous peace negotiations, despite huge barriers, they would do well if the authorities adhered to their national and international commitments to promote women's rights and improve their conditions (ACORD & ONU FEMMES 2016). Women already play a crucial role in ensuring social cohesion in families and communities. Although they were virtually absent from formal peace processes at a national level, they strategized and used the means available to them to push their way to the negotiation table and gain influence there. It is generally established that women seem to have "broadened the agenda" of the negotiations both in Ouagadougou and Algiers, by convincing stakeholders to include items such as the management of internally displaced persons and refugees, and the prohibition of an amnesty for the perpetrators of sexual crimes (Lorentzen, Touré & Gaye 2019, p. 21).

This study offers a valuable contribution to the existing literature. It helps us expand a field of inquiry, and to draw attention to the role that women are playing to resolve

conflicts in Mali. At the same time, it openly advocates to recognise women's role in society, especially during conflicts. The key findings from the empirical data that we collected are structured as follows: we first discuss normative and policy frameworks, then the effective participation of women in ongoing and recent peace processes, and finally challenges that limit the involvement of women in peace mediation processes.

2. Legal instruments, policies and structures that support women's participation in peace mediation processes in Mali

Over the past two decades, the idea that women have the right to be included in peace processes has become recognised widely and has been formalised; it has become a global norm (Lorentzen 2020a, p. 547). In 2000, the United Nations Security Council adopted the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda in UNSCR 1325 (UNSC 2000). This resolution emphasises the inclusion of women in decision-making processes related to conflict prevention and resolution, and peacebuilding. Efforts at global and regional levels have led to the adoption of subsequent resolutions, national action plans, and organisational policies that affirm the commitment and the political will of leaders to ensure that women can participate in conflict prevention and conflict resolution processes. At a national level, this resolution has been translated into normative and institutional reforms.

2.1. A comprehensive legal framework

2.1.1. Commitments to the international legal framework supporting women's participation in peace mediation processes

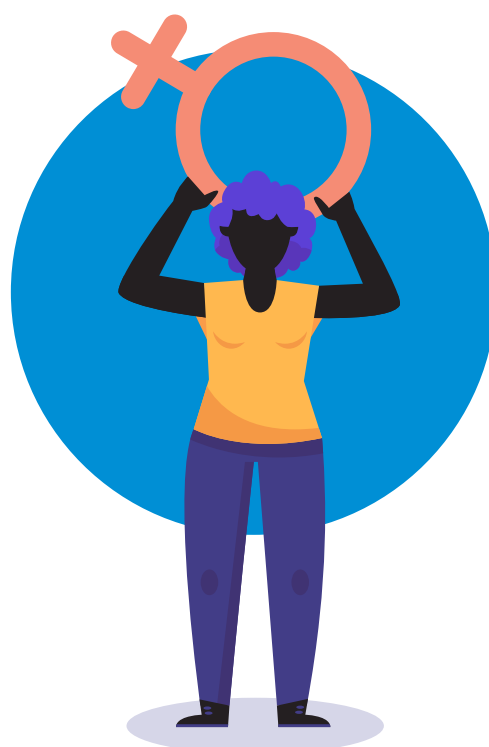
Mali has institutionalised legal and political mechanisms and structures to promote women's involvement in peace and security initiatives, and to ensure that gender-specific considerations are mainstreamed in their design, planning and implementation. The country ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Maputo Protocol, and its constitution guarantees equal rights to all citizens regardless of their sex. Mali has also adopted the Beijing Platform for Action, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the

Millennium Declaration, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights of 1981, and its Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa.

2.1.2. The gender quota law

Mali passed an important law in 2015 that defines quota for all official appointments and elected official positions. In article 1, Law n°2015-052 of 18 December 2015⁷ provides that, for all forms of appointments at all levels of the public administration, "the proportion of persons of either sex must not be less than 30%." According to article 3 of the same law, a political party, a group of political parties, or a group of independent candidates standing either for parliamentary elections or for elections at the national or regional councils, may not present a list of candidates (a list of at least three people) if it includes more than seventy per cent women or men. This proportion is also set at one third for elections in local councils. For such elections, "if two candidates of the same sex are registered, the third must be of the other sex" (article 3).

It is generally admitted that some progress was made in the two years that followed the promulgation of Law n°052. Women's representation increased by nine per cent in the 2016 municipal elections, which meant women constituted about twenty-six per cent of elected officials at the local level. This included the election of a dozen women as mayors. According to some female participants in this study, Law n° 052 serves as an important mechanism to advance women's participation and empower them to exercise decision-making authority at their discretion. This legislation allows women to assume roles in decision-making committees or commissions within the established legal framework.



⁷ Generally referred to as Law n°052.

However, over the years, women's organisations have noted a decline in the government's compliance with Law n° 052, which is a cause for concern. One of the female leaders interviewed in Timbuktu noted that they had to advocate strongly for women to be represented in any peace commission or delegation in the region.

*"I have observed that we have not been included in any peace commission or delegation committee for the region. We had to advocate vigorously to secure a minimum of two (2) seats for women in these entities."*⁸

Another participant highlighted that:

*"Our participation at the national level concerning the Algiers agreement (APR) is quite restricted, to be honest."*⁹

Some women deplored that they were often simply included to comply with legal requirements, rather than to ensure social inclusion and the effective participation of all social categories in the peace processes.

"We are often included on lists, primarily to adhere to laws 052 and UNSCR 1325."

The role of individuals in leadership positions in ensuring the effective implementation of the quota required by the law is key. Where the leadership is strong and gender sensitive, the quota could be implemented and even exceeded. A female participant in Bamako declared that:

"For our ministry, we are fifty per cent of each gender for the technical advisor role. It is always up to the head of each ministry to ensure the application of this law, as with all other laws."

Next to the important role that individuals in leadership positions can play, women themselves need to understand what this law means and how it can be put to practice, especially with regard to prerequisite steps that can ease women's access to decision-making positions.

*"I know that there is a United Nations resolution and Law 052 that exists to promote the participation of women in all instances of peace mediation and other legal and political frameworks, that [but] unfortunately we as women we ignore them. It is this ignorance that constitutes a handicap for us."*¹⁰

However, even in places where the quota is yet to be respected, stakeholders remain hopeful as they believe that Law n°052 is an essential instrument for peace.

*"Everyone continues to make efforts even if thirty per cent is not always reached. There are continuous and coordinated efforts between government actors and technical and financial partners. These are essential tools for establishing peace and the participation of women."*¹¹

In addition to the legislation just discussed, Mali's international commitments have also informed a range of national policies and structures, most of which address the participation of women in peace and security matters.

2.2. Policies and structures that support women's participation in peace mediation processes in Mali

In this section, we discuss various policy instruments and structures that have been established to empower women and promote their participation in various policy fields in Mali.

2.2.1. The Mali National Gender Policy

The Mali National Gender Policy (NGP-Mali) was adopted in 2011. It aims to be "a conceptual and operational framework that will ensure consistency, harmonization and better impact of actions related to equality between women and men through national reforms and sectoral policies" (NGP-Mali 2011, p. 2). This policy gave great impetus to the gender agenda in Mali. For example, it led to the adoption of the gender quota law discussed above. It also resulted in innovative mechanisms, such as gender-sensitive budgeting and the development of a budgetary annex relating to gender, the "Gender Report" (The Government of Mali 2020).

*"The NGP is the basis of everything that is done in terms of gender in Mali. It is this document that guides everything that we do for gender promotion, for the prevention of gender-based violence."*¹²

The implementation of the NGP-Mali is coordinated by a Permanent Secretariat (SP-NGP) at the Ministry for the Promotion of Women, Children and Families (MPFEF). This

8 Interview with female leader in Timbuktu, 10 August 2023.

9 Interview with female leader in Timbuktu, 10 August 2023.

10 Interview with female participant in Gao, 13 August 2023.

11 Interview with a female participant from a government institution in Bamako, 8 September 2023.

12 Interview with a gender expert in Bamako, 8 August 2023.

ministry was created in 1997 and has since been maintained by successive governments. It plays a central role in the empowerment and promotion of women in Mali. It helps achieve a high level of consistency in all matters that are related to the situation of women and their participation in all aspects of socio-economic and political life, and ensures that this is taken into account when national topics are discussed.

Originally, the plan was that the NGP-Mali should be implemented through three-year action plans. However, since adopting a plan for 2011-2013 (The Government of Mali n.d.), no plans have been issued. While it is unclear what has prevented an evaluation and the adoption of subsequent action plans to implement the NGP-Mali, it might be argued that the government's attention was diverted to other policies, notably the National Action Plan (NAP) for the implementation of UNSCR 1325. The latter seems to have become a higher priority and area of greater focus for major stakeholders (The Government of Mali 2019).

2.2.2. The National Action Plan for the implementation of UNSCR 1325

Mali adopted its first NAP to implement UNSCR 1325 in March 2012 (The Government of Mali 2012). The NAP is a commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment in relation to peace and security. It is a strategic framework that sets out objectives, results, and an outlook for the next five years. It also includes an operational plan that details actions to be prioritised, the stakeholders involved, and their responsibilities. This document is flexible, it is subject to annual updates and adjustments in line with local and contextual developments, but it still maintains an approach that focuses on long-term objectives. The actions in the operational plan were defined in collaboration with all pertinent sectoral stakeholders, and a substantial national budget has been allocated to implement the plan. In addition, a common fund is available to support other actors involved in its implementation, such as civil society organisations. The NAP is managed, coordinated and monitored by a Technical Management Unit at the MPFEF.

Mali is currently wrapping up the implementation of its third generation NAP (2019-2023). The successive NAPs adopted since 2012 received tremendous support from UN organisations including the UNFPA, UN Women, UNDP and MINUSMA, as well as from international and local NGOs.

2.2.3. Regional Support Teams for Reconciliation

In 2018, the ministry in charge of national reconciliation established Regional Support Teams for Reconciliation (*Equipe Régionale d'Appui à la Réconciliation*, ERAR).¹³ Although this framework is recent and has not yet reached its full operational capacity, it embodies a bottom-up approach to conflict prevention and peace mediation. It includes communal reconciliation committees (CCR) at a local level, which play both an early warning and first response role in conflict prevention and resolution. Teams are also deployed in regional capitals to help mediate conflicts on an ad hoc basis. These teams conduct conflict analyses and deploy where they assess that peace is threatened. ERAR are coordinated and supported by the Support Mission for National Reconciliation (MARN), established by the Ministry of National Reconciliation and Social Cohesion. MARN and the ERAR have been supported by many stakeholders, including the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) and UNDP since 2020 (UNDP 2021).

The ERARs play an essential role in promoting peace and reconciliation in Mali. This is illustrated by a member of the ERAR of Kayes:

*"The ERAR of Kayes has been very successful in preventing and managing communal conflicts, where mediation has been particularly effective between the shoemakers and the chiefdom of Kenieba, as well as in resolving conflicts linked to descent-based slavery in Kontela, in the Cercle of Bafoulabé."*¹⁴

Women's representation and participation are perceived as important in these institutions. Their role is just as crucial as that of men. It is worth noting that in the Kayes ERAR team, of the nine members, four are women. These women play a significant and remarkable role in mediation processes. According to some of the participants in this study, it is often observed that reconciliation becomes easier and more lasting when women and young people are actively involved, in addition to men. This clearly demonstrates the central and indispensable role that women play in ERARs.

*"The active and influential presence of women within ERARs is a real asset, as it reinforces the diversity of perspectives and skills involved in conflict resolution. These women not only bring a unique perspective, but also make a significant contribution to building trust and creating an environment conducive to reconciliation."*¹⁵

¹³ The ERAR were established by Decree n° PR-M 0367 on 28 April 2017. The Decree institutionalised the Support Mission for National Reconciliation (MARN).

¹⁴ Interview with an ERAR member in Kayes, 25 September 2023.

¹⁵ Interview with an ERAR expert in Kayes, 23 September 2023.

Women's active involvement in these mediation processes demonstrates that their contribution to promoting peace and reconciliation in Mali is invaluable. It is vital to recognise and encourage the participation of women within ERARs, as it provides evidence that gender equality is not only desirable, but essential to achieving positive and lasting results in building national reconciliation.

2.2.4. Land commissions

The management of natural resources, including land, plays a central role in conflicts in Mali, particularly at a community level. As part of efforts to prevent the escalation of land disputes, Mali instituted land commissions (Commissions Foncières, COFO) in 2006, which are included in the Agricultural Orientation Law (Loi d'Orientation Agricole, LOA).¹⁶ According to article 79 of the LOA, COFO shall be introduced in all communes. According to article 2 of decree no. 09-011/P-RM of 19 January 2009, any agricultural land dispute at the commune or "cercle"¹⁷ level shall be presented to the land commission for conciliation, prior to any court case. Land commissions are therefore mandated to attempt conciliation for all agricultural land matters, before they become admissible to the court of law. As soon as the COFO's intervention is requested by the conflict parties, it meets under the chair of the sub-divisional officer.¹⁸ At the level of a commune, the COFO is made up of seventeen people. They include state representatives, representatives of pertinent government extension services, elected officials, representatives of farmers and herders organisations, a representative of women's associations from the commune and a representative of youth organisations.¹⁹ The membership structure is similar for COFOs at the Cercle level.²⁰

In most cases, the mediation provided by the Land Commission is decisive and effective in resolving conflicts. A concrete example of this form of mediation that was reported by MINUSMA occurred in the Bankass Cercle in the Kani Bonzon locality, where a land dispute that had pitted the representatives of two villages (Dogo-Doh and Dogo-Leye) against each other since 2020 was referred to the COFO (MINUSMA 2023). Thanks to the mediation of the Kani Bonzon COFO in January 2023, a conciliation report was signed by the conflict parties and was sent to the judge of Bankass for approval. Under the terms of the conciliation, "the defendant, recognized as the legitimate owner of the land, will allow the plaintiff to cultivate the plots for the rest of his life." To prevent future litigation, it

was recommended to determine the GPS coordinates of the land, to precisely delineate the boundaries of the plot in question.

Women's participation in COFOs remains poorly documented, even though it is generally known that women are underrepresented in the COFOs. UNDP reported that the PROSMED project contributed to the integration of 1'117 women in the COFOs (UNDP 2022). Other organisations such as Mercy Corps and AMEDD²¹ are also implementing programs that seek to improve inclusiveness and women's participation in land governance, as part of a comprehensive strategy to prevent and resolve conflicts. This approach is based on the assessment that marginalisation and a lack of inclusiveness in the management of natural resources fuel conflicts in Mali. Enhancing women's participation in COFOs will be a huge step in advancing women's ability to play a greater role in conflict prevention and peace mediation processes, both at community and national levels.

2.2.5. Multifaceted support to promote women's participation in peace mediation processes

Mali has recorded a large number of initiatives that directly aim to promote women's participation in peace mediation processes at all levels. In the following, we discuss a few striking examples that we could capture through this research project.

2.2.5.1. Coordination of Associations and NGOs for the Promotion of Women's Rights

The Coordination of Associations and NGOs for the Promotion of Women's Rights (CAFO) was created in October 1991, and was officially recognised by the Malian state on 24 March 1992. The organisation pools more than 2'222 women's organisations and brings together women leaders in Mali. This apex organisation is one of the



¹⁶ Law n°06-045, 5 September 2006.

¹⁷ Communes are the primary community level local governance echelon. Many Communes form a Cercle which is the next level, and many Cercles form a Region.

¹⁸ The state representative at the local level.

¹⁹ Article 6 of Decree No 09-011/P-RM, 19 January 2009.

²⁰ Article 4 of Decree No 09-011/P-RM, 19 January 2009.

²¹ Association Malienne d'Éveil au Développement Durable (ONG AMEDD Mali).

most powerful and decentralised women's rights advocacy entities in Mali (see CAFO n.d.). It is represented down to the commune level, with well-established processes. After facing some leadership issues in recent years, it is regaining strength. CAFO is one of the most effective entry points for any actor willing to pursue an agenda to promote women's participation in conflict prevention and peace mediation in Mali. The organisation offers technical support to its members, notably by strengthening their mediation skills, provides advice, and guides them in their search for funding.

During the Ouagadougou and Algiers peace processes, CAFO's efforts were remarkable with regard to bringing more women to the negotiation table and making sure that gender issues are included in the talks. As part of its commitment to peace, CAFO facilitated a delegation's meeting with Tamasheq women in refugee camps. The aim was to understand their views before participating in the Ouagadougou talks in 2013. In addition, and in collaboration with partners, meetings were organised with women from Kidal, which is located in northern Mali, following the Ouagadougou meetings. The outcomes of these discussions were manifest in the women's involvement in both the Ouagadougou talks and the Algiers negotiations. In Ouagadougou, women were not formally invited to participate in the negotiations. Nevertheless, through the initiative of CAFO, it was decided that four women would attend to assert their right to be seated at the negotiation table and to advocate for an end to the hostilities. Despite facing various challenges in accessing the talks, their persistence led to their active involvement in the discussions. Furthermore, their resolute efforts meant that many of their concerns were included in the peace agreement. In the Algiers negotiations, women's organisations were engaged and backed by international bodies, but the inclusion of women was not a primary focus. Of the one hundred delegates that were present during the negotiations, only five were women.

2.2.5.2. The Gao Peace Hut

The "Case de la Paix" in Gao (Gao Peace Hut) aims to strengthen women's capacities in the area of social cohesion through promoting joint activities. UN Women created many peace huts, in Gao, Timbuktu, Menaka and Berrah, localities that were identified as the epicentre of the crisis in 2012-2013 (UN Women 2018). The Peace Huts in Mali were created with financial assistance from the governments of Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden. They are venues where women from different ethnic communities can meet to discuss and address local conflicts, exchange experiences, and work towards strengthening social cohesion. These

women also provide or receive psychological counselling, as well as advice on how to improve their economic situation and their influence on local decision-making processes.

Since its creation in 2014, the Gao Peace Hut has stood out as being especially successful in bringing women together and encouraging them to grow in various ways. It has received technical and financial support from UN Women and MINUSMA. According to a member of the Gao office, it was initially made up of seven associations with 140 members, but now it includes seventy-six associations with 2' 200 members. The Gao region is currently home to three active Peace Huts, which are located in Gao itself, in Kagoye and in Soni Ali Ber. During the focus group discussion that we organised in Gao, women highlighted that the tense security environment is one of the key challenges that they face. They emphasised the importance of reinforcing security measures, restoring road infrastructures, and tackling the problem that many young people consume illicit substances, while advocating for greater support for women.

2.2.5.3. Peace Clubs

Peace Clubs exist in several cities in Mali, including Bamako, Kayes, Sikasso and Koulikoro. This initiative aims to mobilise adolescents aged twelve to seventeen, and young people aged eighteen to thirty-five, including boys/young men and girls/young women, to promote peace. The objective is to train young Malians to be able to analyse conflicts, develop effective listening and communication skills, and thus strengthen their resilience to conflicts and to discourses that lead to violence.

These clubs therefore bring individuals together who learn to live together despite their differences, and to promote peace. They are part of the project "Strengthening the resilience of young people in the regions of Mali in the face of conflicts and discourses leading to violence." The clubs are designed as a conflict prevention and management tool. They also communicate the principles and facilitate participatory exercises that youth need to lead workshops at the community level.

The clubs act as mediators, and support stakeholders in implementing peace and social cohesion initiatives. They organise community dialogues on conflicts, are committed to advocacy and to creating awareness of positive citizenship actions. When they are involved in mediation activities, these young people work in collaboration with all conflict parties involved, with the support of local authorities and municipal officials.

2.2.5.4. WiLDAF and Peace Circles

Women in Law & Development in Africa (WiLDAF) is a non-profit and non-governmental women's rights advocacy organisation and network with more than five-hundred affiliated organisations and 1' 200 individual members spread over twenty-seven countries. WiLDAF's sub-regional office for West Africa was established in April 1997.

Since 2010, well before the Malian crisis, WiLDAF has been working together with other organisations to train women in mediation. In Mali, it brings together some twenty women's organisations and associations defending women's rights. Its most famous training instrument is the Peace Circles training. The training targets only women, and embraces all women, regardless of their community or origin. Through a transformative process, the aim is to shape women as peacemakers. Many women view the Peace Circle as a space where they can express themselves, collaborate, and actively contribute to promoting peace within their community. It provides a platform where women can share their experiences, concerns and ideas for resolving conflicts peacefully. As such, the Peace Circle becomes a place for dialogue and action. It enables women to play an active role in peacebuilding, while strengthening their own ability to resolve conflicts constructively. According to one interviewee, "we have trained twenty trainers who, in turn, have trained one hundred and four paralegals in twenty one communes in northern Mali."²² As many stakeholders perceive the Peace Circles as highly effective, they have received strong support, for instance from MINUSMA (MINUSMA 2022b), and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation in Mali (Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs 2018).

However, a few participants in this research project observed that the programme could do better.

*"One of the mistakes (...) is to choose young people for this role, when older women are generally not inclined to entrust themselves to young people of the same age as their children or grandchildren. This creates an intergenerational problem and undermines trust."*²³

Another respondent explained that after her training, she found it difficult to play the role of a peacemaker due to certain limitations. She explained, for example, that her relatively young age was a key limitation, considering the cultural setting.

*"Once I tried to mediate between husband and wife but was reminded by the husband that he was the one who facilitated the wedding of my parents, and therefore that I was not legitimate to attempt mediation between him and his wife."*²⁴

Despite these limitations, the Peace Circles have been able to resolve several disputes and prevent many of them from turning into violent conflicts. One of the success stories shared is how women mediated between members of the leadership of CAFO in Timbuktu. The organisation had split due to a leadership conflict between groups of women. Through repeated mediation efforts by women who participated in the Peace Circles training, the conflict parties were brought to the negotiation table and were able to find a common ground to resolve their dispute and continue working as one organisation.

Ultimately, the Peace Circles demonstrate the power and importance of women as agents of change in building a peaceful and balanced society. Interestingly, by giving women the space to actively engage, an inclusive approach to mediation and peacebuilding does not just help resolve existing conflicts, but also to prevent future ones by fostering mutual understanding and collaboration among different communities.

2.2.5.5. Citizen Huts

The Case Citoyenne (Citizen hut) initiative has been implemented in different places in Mali, including Mopti, Timbuktu, Gao, Ménaka and Bamako. It aims to actively engage young people and women in the prevention and management of community conflicts.

This project involves selecting young leaders, men and women, in the different communities, with the objective to reach a balanced representation (what this means may vary though, depending on the geographical area). These young leaders are then trained in the Search For Common Ground (SFCG) approach, i.e. they acquire skills such as preventing and managing election-related tensions, mediation, leadership, and advocacy. Once trained, these young men and women become the spokespersons of their groups, associations or "tontines", where they exchange ideas and develop techniques to improve the daily life of their communities.

The young leaders identify issues within their communities and discuss them within the Citizen hut, where they interact with stakeholders. In addition, they can go to conflict zones

²² Interview with a female leader in Timbuktu, 10-08-2023.

²³ Focus-group discussion in Timbuktu, 12 August 2023.

²⁴ Ibid.

to identify specific problems faced by the community there and to help ease tensions. Trained youth can also be called upon by communities to intervene in conflicts, with the objective to resolve or reduce them.

Since the beginning of their involvement, these young people have actively participated in developing action plans for conflict management and in creating messages of pacification that are broadcast through partner radio-stations. As part of the “Case Citoyenne” initiative, SFCG provides financial support to allow meetings to be held in the usual meeting places or to rent spaces for activities. In addition, the project covers the costs of moving young people to areas where there are tensions.

2.2.5.6. Young/Youth Ambassadors for Peace

The Young Ambassadors for Peace initiative by SFCG aims to mobilise and train young people, women, and community leaders in the central and northern regions of Mali to promote peace. It recruits one hundred and twenty young people aged 15 to 29 from different communities, and trains them for twelve months. The young ambassadors learn about mediation and conflict transformation, and receive an introduction to the principles of peace, peaceful coexistence, and social cohesion. Workshops are organised to give them a better understanding of peace issues and communication techniques.

This training strengthens young people’s personal resilience and their ability to act, to communicate with other young people, and to establish links with diverse groups in order to encourage dialogue and collaboration, thus transcending divides. After their training, the young ambassadors for peace are encouraged to create spaces for dialogue in their local communities, to promote peace and to introduce more people to the concepts and benefits of peace. They work closely together with key community players to promote sustainable peace.

At the regional level, a similar initiative, the African Youth Ambassadors for Peace (AYAP) was launched as part of the Youth for Peace Program (Y4P) of the Peace and Security Department (PSD) of the African Union Commission (AUC) in 2018. For its first cohort, the program provided capacity building trainings and facilitated networking for five youths (two young women and three young men) selected from the regional economic communities (RECs). They included a male Malian. Their mandate was to include perspectives of the youth in the AU’s peace and security agenda, as stipulated in the Continental Framework on Youth Peace and Security (YPS) and its ten-year implementation plan. The first cohort’s tenure ended in February 2022. A review conducted by the Institute for Security Studies indicates that the delegates made modest contributions towards advancing the YPS agenda in Africa,

notably due to challenges associated with the Covid-19 crisis (Nkosi, Ako & Ukeje 2022, p. 6). A more structural limitation that would need to be addressed to create more impact through future cohorts is the narrow scope of the program; it only targets six youths per cohort.

2.2.5.7. EMP-ABB’s mediation training and capacity building programs

The École de Maintien de la Paix Alioune Blondin Beye (EMP-ABB, the Alioune Blondin Beye Peacekeeping School) offers several training courses and workshops that are designed to build women’s capacities, particularly in the fields of peace mediation and community conflict mediation. These training courses are organised regularly throughout the year, with national and international participants, and foster fruitful exchanges between the women involved. From interviews conducted with EMP-ABB and women who have benefited from their training, it is undeniable that EMP-ABB has played a crucial role in involving women in peace mediation processes in Mali. This is essential to encourage their participation in conflict resolution processes and peacebuilding. EMP-ABB has contributed in several ways:

- *Training women in political and community mediation:* EMP-ABB works in collaboration with women’s groups, notably the network of women community leaders. These women are trained as facilitators of mediation courses, which strengthens their skills to play an active role in conflict resolution. EMP-ABB has used two specific training courses to improve participant’s skills in high-level political mediation (with funding from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation), and to build the capacities of women community mediators (funded by UN Women and by the Norwegian Embassy in Bamako). These training courses have helped reinforce the capacities of more than five hundred and fifty peace and conflict resolution professionals, of which about forty five per cent are women. This includes a pool of thirty women community mediators. EMP-ABB is an organisation with the capacity and deliberate intent to move beyond raising awareness of the need to involve women, by giving them hands-on mediation skills. The trainings mainly target participants from the ECOWAS countries. In Mali, in addition to the core mediation trainings it provides, EMP-ABB has also provided sensitisation trainings to more than two thousand women, focusing on the APR and the ongoing reconciliation process. Women trained by EMP-ABB can also act as community mediators in their localities. They are thus able to facilitate communication and conflict resolution processes at the local level, and help to prevent and resolve tensions in this way.

- The provision of technical support for women's participation in peace mediation processes: Since 2020, EMP-ABB has supported women to take a more active role in the peace process in Mali. Following the coup d'état and the initiation of institutional reforms, EMP-ABB was approached by a group of women from the civil society, under the leadership of the CAFO and supported by a women-led consulting firm called Cabinet ESEN, to coach them in how to advocate for their participation in the transition process. EMP-ABB helped them review the draft roadmap for the transition and to secure more seats in various sub-commissions. This included ensuring that two women participated in the committee that selected the president of the transitional regime. The results achieved in this process encouraged both EMP-ABB and ESEN to design the RECAFEVEC²⁵ project, which is funded by the Norwegian embassy in Mali. This project runs from October 2022 until September 2024 and provides leadership, peace-related and project management training to women at national and community levels. It has specifically targeted women from the CSA, women from the armed groups, women from the civil society, and women that are elected officials of local councils. At the community level, the programme encourages women to become agents of change, to exercise assertive leadership, and to take initiatives that address problems that their communities face, including peace and security issues.

*"Women who participate in the program are able to take a more active role in bringing pertinent topics on (sic) the agenda of councils. They are more active in initiating socio-economic projects and step out of their comfort zone. For instance, women of the CSA have testified that before getting training from EMP-ABB, they believed that it was the sole responsibility of the government with technical and financial partners to initiate and fund programs. They now understand that they can also design project proposals, raise funds in various ways and address issues relevant to the reconciliation processes."*²⁶

- Structuring mediation: EMP-ABB has a database of female mediators, which enables it to mobilise competent women when needed. This structure strengthens the school's ability to respond quickly to mediation challenges and to actively involve women in the ensuing processes. However, this potential is not really utilised at the moment. There have

been no real efforts to involve those women that received the prerequisite training on peace mediation processes, neither within Mali nor at the ECOWAS regional level. It may be the case that some of the women who are involved in structures such as the ERAR have participated in an EMP-ABB training, but those responsible for identifying women leaders who can meaningfully contribute to the peace and reconciliation process did not make use of EMP-ABB's (or other structures) databases of trained women mediators.

In summary, EMP-ABB plays a crucial role in promoting women's participation in peace mediation processes in Mali: by providing trainings, by structuring mediation, and by raising awareness on gender issues. However, challenges remain to ensure women's full participation and that their voices are truly considered in conflict resolution processes.

Policies promoting gender equality and women's involvement in peace mediation efforts in Mali have made significant strides. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that challenges persist, particularly with regard to the implementation of established measures and the resistance to change. While national legislation that provides for women's participation in mediation processes has been enacted, actors seeking to realise it in practice often face hurdles. One prominent barrier stems from deeply ingrained cultural norms within Malian society. It is evident from our key informant interviews and focus group discussions conducted in the Gao and Timbuktu regions that certain individuals and groups vehemently oppose the inclusion of women in mediation activities.

The existing legal, institutional, and political frameworks have made a significant contribution to the advancement of gender-sensitive policies in Mali. UN Security Council Resolution 1325 laid out directives for integrating a gender perspective into UN peacekeeping operations and urged for an increased participation of women in all tiers of peace processes. Furthermore, several national laws and policies have included the gender dimension.

For instance, Law n°052, which stipulates quotas for women's representation in state institutions, has enabled women's involvement in almost all state structures, including Mali's Peace and Reconciliation Agreement committees. The National Strategy for the Advancement of Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Mali (2017-2032) was implemented to foster gender equality across all sectors of Malian society, particularly within

25 French acronym for a capacity building project to make women agents of change for sustainable peace and development in Mali.

26 Interview with a female participant in Bamako, 9 August 2023.

peace mediation processes. Through this strategy, women have secured a notable presence in peace negotiations, notwithstanding the challenges they encounter.

Looking at these legal instruments, as well as the policies and structures that support women's participation in mediation processes in Mali as discussed above, it is clear that Mali is equipped with a rich panel of tools that include ratified international laws, local legal instruments, and policies. That these tools are available is a result of relentless efforts by civil society organisations, international organisations, NGOs and the Malian government over the past three decades. The prevailing crisis since 2012 has, furthermore, provided a window of opportunity for activists and women organisations to advocate for more gender-sensitive policies and laws. Some of these tools could still be improved though, such as the low quota that only attributes fifteen per cent of agricultural land to women and the youth. This notwithstanding, public policies in Mali require that women should be involved in political processes, including peace mediation processes. Consistent with the literature review presented at the beginning of this study, we have found that the existing laws, policies and structures in Mali have created an environment where there is a broad awareness that women have to be involved in the processes just mentioned. None of the participants of this research study challenged that women need to be included.

3. Women's participation in ongoing and recent peace mediation processes in Mali

3.1. Women in the Ouagadougou peace mediation process

During the Ouagadougou negotiations in 2013, women's participation in the negotiations was not an official priority. According to some researchers, and key informants interviewed for this study, women were almost completely marginalised at the beginning of the formal peace process. However, that did not stop some women from taking action. Indeed, four women from the civil society (sponsored by UN Women) – Saran Keïta Diakité, Soyata Maiga, Diarra Afoussatou Thiero and Traoré Omou Touré – took the initiative to travel to Ouagadougou to claim their right to be present at the negotiating table, to demand an end to hostilities, as well as to demand the systematic inclusion of women in all future peace mediation processes. The decision that a group of four women should assert their right to a seat at the negotiating table and demand an end to hostilities was made through CAFO. The other

delegations had included two women, in a group of almost eighty men. Despite the challenges they faced in gaining access to the talks, women persevered and became active participants in the discussions. They managed to actively participate in the discussions. Their determination resulted in the inclusion of many of their concerns in the peace agreement (UN Women 2013).

Subsequently, during the negotiations that led to the Bamako Agreement, only five per cent of the negotiators and fifteen per cent of the signatories were women. Other women were given a limited opportunity to voice their opinions through representatives that the involved parties invited to participate in a week-long civil society "hearing" during the second phase of the negotiations. The resulting Bamako Agreement included eleven references to women, including a provision that denies amnesty to those who perpetrated violence against women. Three references are related to women's role in economic and social development in the northern regions. However, there was no explicit reference to how women could participate directly in the implementation mechanisms of the agreement, and their formal involvement in these mechanisms remains inadequate.

3.2. Women in the Algiers mediation process

This is not the first time that the Malian state has signed an agreement of/for peace (since independence, every rebellion has ended in an agreement). The "Accord pour la Paix et la Réconciliation Nationale au Mali issu du Processus d'Alger" was signed between the Republic of Mali and the Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA) in



2015.²⁷ The mediation process that led to the agreement took place in Algiers. Of the one hundred delegates, only five were women.

Since the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali was signed, international mediation has enabled several further meetings between the signatory parties to take place. But the implementation of this agreement is still difficult, for a variety of reasons on both sides. Malians are also divided over its actual implementation: for some, certain provisions of the agreement will result in territorial division; for others, it is urgent to implement the agreement in order to achieve reconciliation and lasting peace.

What place and role did women have in the mediation process and the negotiation of the Algiers Agreement for national reconciliation, the promotion of peace, social cohesion and rebuilding the state?

Both the women interviewed for this study and our focus group participants noted that women were largely marginalised throughout the peace process in Mali, and that their inclusion therein had not really been considered a priority. This situation motivated the women of Mali, through their various associations, to mobilise both individually and collectively. They organised declarations and marches, and approached the authorities, whether religious, administrative, military or traditional. They also turned to technical and financial partners.

At the time, thanks to these forms of mobilisation, women represented the most dynamic arm of Mali's civil society. They were present at all levels, supporting the government voluntarily, selflessly, and with great conviction and determination. Their aim was to make an active contribution to building peace in the country. This strong engagement testifies to the determination of Malian women to play a significant role in the search for stability and national reconciliation. It is also important to note that some of them were able to participate in the development of documents related to the agreement. This early involvement of women is encouraging and suggests an increased role for women in promoting peace and mediation in Mali. A woman leader highlighted the fact that women in Mali suffer the consequences of violence and insecurity on a daily basis. She asserted that the time has come to include them fully in the peace process, as they have a unique perspective and a direct experience of the situation on the ground.

However, some women also expressed their disappointment with regard to other women's involvement in the mediation

of the Algiers Agreement. They regretted that it did not achieve the desired results. In doing so, they highlighted several problems. These include a lack of diversity within mediation teams, the fact that initiatives involving women were not (sufficiently) monitored, a lack of knowledge of the field or of local specificities, and a lack of knowledge regarding the precise content of the agreement. These problems have hindered women's effective participation in the process.

In addition, one participant remarked that women's involvement in national issues has often focused on the capital, Bamako, to the detriment of the northern regions of Mali, where women's involvement has been much more limited. She also noted that sometimes women are simply added to lists to respond to quotas, but that this does not necessarily translate into women's active participation in peace and mediation processes. Many key informants shared the view that efforts to involve women are largely "cosmetic". Their inclusion is used to show that the process is inclusive, but does not ensure meaningful participation and contributions.

"The participation of women in all these mechanisms is just for the show, for pictures. This has always been the case, both in Ouagadougou and in Algiers."²⁸

Regional and international organisations (the international community or the international mediation coalition), including ECOWAS, the AU and the UN, have attempted to secure the presence of more women in peace processes, with modest achievements, as discussed above. Based on the principles of subsidiarity and complementarity, ECOWAS especially played a lead role throughout the negotiation process.

Although it was part of the international community's mandate "to create inclusivity" in the mediation process, a critical analysis of our data from key informants reveals that women were initially brought in as part of the engagement with the civil society. A key informant explained that this engagement was a response to the challenges that the international mediation coalition faced in bringing the conflict parties together.

"At the beginning of the process, the movements did not want to be in the same room with part of the government that was called 'movement associated to the government'. (...) As the key actors of the peace process refused to meet at the beginning,

²⁷ The CMA is an alliance of Tuareg and Arab armed rebel groups and includes the Mouvement National pour la Libération de l'Azawad (MNLA), the Haut Conseil pour l'Unité de l'Azawad (HCUA), a wing of the Mouvement Arabe de l'Azawad (MAA), the Coalition du Peuple pour l'Azawad (CPA), and a wing of the Coordination des Mouvements et Front Patriotique de Résistance (CM-FPR2).

²⁸ Online Interview with a male key informant, 26 December 2023.

the mediation decided that to keep the process running, we are going to invite women, youth, other traditional leaders, all of them members of the civil society."²⁹

The involvement of the civil society was important for the process of preparing the first elements of the peace talks, which included agreeing on the process, the themes, the number of people that would attend the meetings, and the presence of women and the youth. Unfortunately, civil society members' contribution to this phase of the discussions did not get them into the actual peace talks. Different views were expressed as to why, after their initial role in developing the mediation framework, women and civil society at large were then left behind. One key informant indicated that:

*"When the movements started real discussions with the government, (...) women disappeared. Even within the government, we did not have a single woman represented. So during technical discussions either on constitutional aspects, on security aspects, socioeconomic aspects, or on reconciliation aspects, we could not have the presence of women."*³⁰

This key informant attributed the absence of women in the negotiations to the particular cultural context in which they took place, and in which it is not common for men and women to sit together and address certain issues:

*"Women have their circle, men have their circle and if you go to a simple wedding for instance, you will realise that women are sitting two hundred meters away from men, but that is the culture of the society. The international community had to bring in inclusivity."*³¹

Others described the absence of women in the technical part of the peace mediation process as a consequence of the international community's decision to focus solely on the conflict parties, with the aim to zero in on the matters of contention. This view would partly explain why so few women participated in both the Ouagadougou and Algiers mediation processes. The logic seems to be that as women were not at the forefront of the battle, they should naturally not be at the forefront of the peace talks either.

Nonetheless, one of the main points of the agreement mentions that women are also involved in "national construction". It calls for the "recognition and promotion of cultural and linguistic diversity, as well as the valorisation

of the contribution of all the components of the Malian people, in particular women and young people, to the work of national construction" (APR 2015, p. 42).

The women interviewed for this study generally recognise the positive aspects of the Algiers Agreement, especially its objective to bring peace in a time of crisis. However, they have concerns regarding the potential implications of the agreement for Mali's unity and national sovereignty. They believe that Malians should have the opportunity to come together independently of outside influence to redefine an agreement that is workable and that reflects the aspirations of the entire population. In its current form, the agreement could meet with resistance and is not accepted by all. Women stress that any agreement should be the result of a process that is developed and signed exclusively by the parties concerned, without any outside interference.

3.3. Women's contributions in the Agreement Monitoring Committee (CSA)

The Comité de Suivi de l'Accord (CSA) is made up of representatives of the Government of Mali, the movements signatory to the agreement, and the international mediation coalition. The latter is led by Algeria and includes Burkina-Faso, Mauritania, Niger, Chad, Nigeria, ECOWAS, the UN, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the African Union and the European Union. The permanent members of the UN Security Council – China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States – are also invited to the deliberations of the CSA. While Algeria chairs the CSA, MINUSMA has held the CSA Secretariat.³² The European Union is represented through its Special Representative for the Sahel (EUSR) and the European Union delegation in Mali.

The CSA is responsible for monitoring, controlling and coordinating the implementation of the peace agreement. Although the initial set-up of the CSA was difficult in the first months that followed the signing of the agreement, it was later able to meet on a more regular basis. However, there is a problem that threatens the continuity of these meetings: the financial allowances that are granted to the representatives of the signatory movements to enable their participation in the meetings and to continue their work in Bamako during the intersessions are not assured on a stable basis. Historically these are covered by the Malian government, Algeria or France, but this funding is

²⁹ Online interview with a key informant, 20 September 2023.

³⁰ Idem.

³¹ Idem.

³² With the withdrawal of MINUSMA and the current tensions between actors, it is unclear how the CSA will operate in future.

currently in jeopardy. On a more substantive note, it is not clear how the CSA will continue to perform its role given the tensions between the signatory parties. The Carter Center, which serves as the independent observer of Mali's peace agreement, reported an unprecedented impasse in the implementation of the agreement since 2022. This has since escalated amid controversies, a declaration of the suspension of activities, a halt of allowances and calls that the agreement should be revised (The Carter Center 2022).

With regard to women's participation, the CSA did not include a single woman between 2015 and 2020, but currently includes twenty-seven women, twelve of which are part of the main committee, and fifteen are part of the sub-committees. It has been a long struggle to bring women on board, which is also a reflection of their limited participation during the peace talks in Algiers. As discussed in the section on women's participation in the Algiers peace process above, women were not at the forefront of the conflicting parties and the agreement was finally concluded with little participation from the civil society. Recognising this limitation, the international mediation team requested the signatory parties to appoint women as their representatives in the CSA.

*"After the signing of the agreement, we requested the parties to make sure that in the follow-up committee and in the sub-committees women's presence was required. (...) Despite the request by the international community, the signatory parties, the government, they were all reluctant to include women. Apart from the government that maintained the presence of one lady, the rest came without ladies."*³³

The CSA operated for five years without a single female representative, as the woman within the government delegation did not play a "frontline role". This lack of representation is one of the main criticisms and demands that was reiterated by the Security Council in its resolution 2480 (2019). It urged for greater representation of women in the CSA. Nine women then attended the CSA meeting in November 2020, three each from the government, the Coordination of Azawad Movements, and the Platform (Mehari-consulting 2021).

In addition to the points discussed earlier, another reason why the parties were reluctant to appoint women was the financial remuneration that is attached to this appointment.

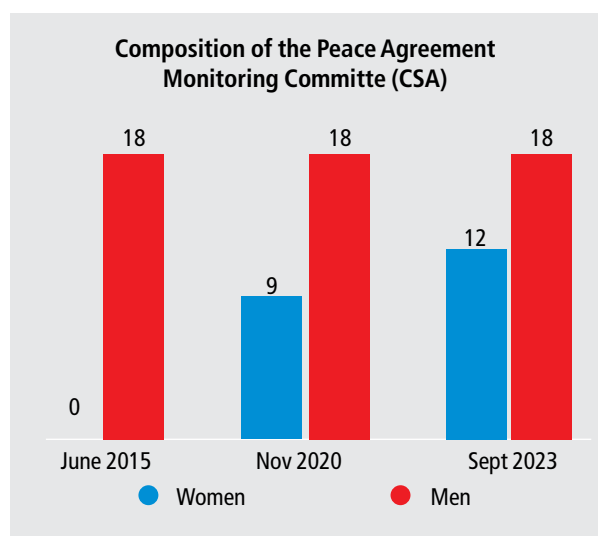
"We have to understand that it is not because they wanted to exclude women. (...) Beyond the

*culture (sic), there is this fact that sometimes peace discussions have a kind of financial aspect. (...) So for the movements, it was easier to give a stipend to their combatants, to people who fought, instead of giving it to women; so they excluded women mostly because they wanted to pay their combatants."*³⁴

This statement is consistent with data from our focus group discussions in Gao and Timbuktu, where women explained that they accepted that men should join the peace process on their behalf on condition that they would receive part of the stipend when the men return.

The donors' pledge to provide stipends was later used as an incentive to include more women in the CAS. This led to the appointment of fifteen more women, three civil society members who would sit on the main committee, and twelve who would be part of the sub-committees (UN Peacekeeping 2022). Due to the current tensions, these fifteen newly appointed members are yet to participate in a session.

The Carter Center has suggested that the new female members of the CSA could be great "allies" that could bring the reconciliation process closer to the population, and strengthen the understanding and buy-in of the population. The first women who were included were able to draw the CSA's attention to reopening schools and restoring basic services. They made innovative suggestions, for example, to extend the duration of CSA meetings to a full day in order to enable thorough deliberations and to enhance dialogue with local communities during sessions that take place in the regions (The Carter Center 2021). Against this background, it seems reasonable to suggest that involving women in the CSA earlier could have had a positive impact on the entire reconciliation process in Mali.



³³ Online interview with a key informant, 20 September 2023.

³⁴ Online interview with a key informant, 20 September 2023.

A timeline of women's rights and their participation in peace mediation processes in Mali

Before independence

- 1945** A women's march on Bamako's central prison was organised to free the director and editor-in-chief of the newspaper L'Essor. L'Essor was created by the Sudanese Union – African Democratic Rally (US-RDA), the first political party that called for the independence of French Sudan, which makes L'Essor the first newspaper in Malian history. The march led to the release of Mamadou Sangaré and Abdoulaye Singaré, the director and the editor-in-chief of L'Essor. It demonstrated that illiterate women are able to participate in the public sphere.
- 1946** The colonial constitution that was adopted in 1946 gave Malians, now part of the French Union, the same citizenship rights as citizens of mainland France. This meant that Sudanese women acquired the right to vote, as this right had been granted to women in mainland France on 21 April 1944 in an ordinance of the Comité Français de la Libération Nationale (CFLN), signed by Charles de Gaulle in Algiers. Women's right to vote was confirmed by a decree of the Provisional Government of the French Republic (GPRF) on 5 October 1944. Women outside mainland France were subsequently granted the right to vote by the ordinance of 20 November 1944 (Martinique, Guadeloupe and Réunion), the decree of 19 February 1945 (French Guiana and Madagascar), and the decree of 6 June 1945 (French citizens of Senegal).
- 1951** The women's network led by Aoua Keïta hand-delivered voting cards collected from Sudanese officials. This network also occupied polling stations to thwart electoral fraud by two military officers who were trying to force the vote in favour of the French Party. The Minister for Overseas France, Louis Jacquinot, issued a decree on 14 September 1951 (known as the "Jacquinot decree") that abolished the need for parental consent for the marriage of a girl over the age of twenty-one, as well as for a divorced or widowed woman. This decree also abolished dowries or made them optional, and the amount that could be asked as a dowry was capped. Finally, this decree aimed to combat polygamy by introducing a "monogamy option" at the time of marriage (i.e. the husband waives his right to take a second wife), a legal tradition that has been preserved in independent Mali.
- 1959-1960** The midwife, trade union and political activist Aoua Keïta was elected to the National Assembly of the Federation of Mali as its first woman deputy. On 22 September 1960, Mali gained independence from France. In 1962, Malian women won the right to consensual marriage, and rape became an offence punishable by up to twenty years of imprisonment. In the education sector, educational reform authorised mixed schooling for girls and boys. Malian women set up the Commission des Femmes Sociales au Mali. In 1968, Inna Sissoko Cissé became the first female minister in Mali's history. She was appointed as part of General Moussa Traoré's government.

Independence

- 1959-1960** The midwife, trade union and political activist Aoua Keïta was elected to the National Assembly of the Federation of Mali as its first woman deputy. On 22 September 1960, Mali gained independence from France. In 1962, Malian women won the right to consensual marriage, and rape became an offence punishable by up to twenty years of imprisonment. In the education sector, educational reform authorised mixed schooling for girls and boys. Malian women set up the Commission des Femmes Sociales au Mali. In 1968, Inna Sissoko Cissé became the first female minister in Mali's history. She was appointed as part of General Moussa Traoré's government.

WAVES OF DEMOCRATISATION

Protest movement
against the
military and
dictatorial regime

1990 – 1991

- Women played a central role in the popular protests that led to a transition to democracy in Mali in the early 1990s. The post-transition period has, since, seen an explosion in the number of women's associations working to promote women's rights and their empowerment.
- In March 1991, women actively participated in the protest movement against the military and dictatorial regime of General Moussa Traoré, and led protest marches. At the same time, since 1990, a Tuareg rebellion was raging in the north of the country. It was in this context that women formed the Collective des Femmes du Mali (COFEM) and played a key role in initiating talks between the government and the Tuareg rebels. This helped, in particular, to ease the situation of Malian and foreign hostages in Kidal.

Flame of Peace in
Timbuktu

1996

The women of Timbuktu played a decisive role in inaugurating the "Flame of Peace" ceremony in which weapons were burned. This event became an annual demonstration against the spread and use of small arms and light weapons.

Promote women's
rights

1997

The Ministry for the Promotion of Women, Children and the Family (MPFEF) was created to promote women's rights.

Women and peace
and reconciliation
strategies

2001

Women organised fifteen of fifty inter-community meetings to re-establish social links and implement long-term peace and reconciliation strategies.

Women at the
summit of power

2009 - 2011

- Proposals to revise the Family Code, which would have extended women's rights regarding the legal age of marriage, child custody and inheritance, were watered down due to religious protests.
- In 2011, Mrs Cissé Mariam Kaïdama Sidibé became the first female Prime Minister of Mali, and Mali adopted its first national gender policy.

SINCE THE CRISIS OF 2012

Ouagadougou
mediations

2013

Women were not invited to the Ouagadougou peace mediations. Without even knowing where the negotiations were taking place when they arrived, four women from civil society travelled to Ouagadougou to demand their place at the table and an end to the fighting. Although they had to force their way in, they managed to take part in the negotiations and to ensure that many of their concerns were included in the agreement.

Algiers
negotiations

2013 - 2015

In the Algiers negotiations the inclusion of women was never a priority, despite the efforts of women's organisations that had the support of UN Women and MINUSMA. The one hundred delegates from the three parties that took part in the negotiations only included five women.

Women in
nominative and
elective office

2014

On 30 July 2014, the Malian government adopted a bill that institutes new measures to promote gender equality in positions of nominative and elective office. This law promulgates a thirty per cent quota for women in government positions and on electoral lists.

2015

- The Bamako Agreement was signed in June 2015. Women's group representatives had to force their way into the negotiations to be able to influence them.
- In December 2015, a law was passed that guarantees a thirty per cent quota for women in appointments to national institutions and legislative bodies.

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE AGREEMENT ON PEACE AND RECONCILIATION IN MALI, WHICH RESULTED FROM THE ALGIERS PROCESS

Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission (CVJR)	2015	The CVJR is a mechanism where female representation is slightly better: four out of twenty-five commissioners are women (sixteen per cent).
Agreement Monitoring Committee (CSA)	2015	There are currently no women on the Comité de Suivi de l'Accord (Agreement Monitoring Committee), and only one woman has been appointed to the interim authorities.
DDR commission	2015	The DDR commission also includes one woman.
National SSR Council	2015	The National SSR Council has four female members.
The implementation of the APR	2015-2017	The NAP covers the period 2015-2017, which overlaps with the transition period described in the Bamako Accord. It is based on a list of priorities that were drawn up at a meeting of two hundred women in Bamako in June 2015.
Agreement Monitoring Committee (CSA)	2020	Nine women effectively participated in a CSA meeting for the first time.
Agreement Monitoring Committee (CSA)	2022	The CSA appoints fifteen additional female members, three to the main committee and twelve to sub-committees.

On average, women's participation in the implementation mechanisms of the Bamako Agreement is around three per cent.

3.4. Women in community mediation

Traditionally, the role of women in community mediation processes in Mali depends on whether the matter is within a family or a few families, or whether it has to do with a major dispute within one community or a conflict between two communities.

Women are accepted or tolerated as mediators for family-level conflicts. In cases of major disputes within the community or a conflict between two communities, it is believed that the mediation process should be led by men and should mainly involve those men who make major political and economic decisions.

Our analysis of women's participation in recent and ongoing peace mediation processes in Mali shows that women are often involved in Track II and Track III mediation processes, but less so in Track I peace talks. There is a persistent gap between the laws and policies that should enable women to be included in these processes, and the political will

to include them, which is linked to how decision makers assess how women's participation in mediation processes could contribute to the prevention and resolution of violent conflicts. In other words, women's participation in peace processes in Mali remains a policy requirement that stakeholders do not hesitate to downplay when taking concrete decisions, because they do not believe in the benefits it may bring. Thus, getting women into Track I negotiation rooms remains a persisting challenge.

4. Challenges to women's participation in peace mediation processes in Mali

Women's involvement in peace mediation processes in Mali faces various socio-cultural challenges. These obstacles limit their participation and prevent them from realising their full potential in peacebuilding.

4.1. Socio-cultural and religious obstacles/barriers

The organisation of a society, including how responsibilities and power are distributed therein, plays a central role in determining whether women, and often young people too, are included or excluded in the political and public sphere. This social structure constitutes an obstacle to women's participation in public life when it is based on norms, customs and religious beliefs that restrict women's rights.

In Mali, traditional socio-cultural norms, while rich and diverse, have often restricted the role of women in political and decision-making arenas, particularly in conflict mediation. Women's involvement is thus often curtailed, and limited to the domestic and community spheres. The traditional division of roles between men and women is a major socio-cultural obstacle to women's participation in peace mediation initiatives. Women's involvement in resolving conflicts is curtailed, despite the fact that they are often the first victims of conflict.

In addition, women in Mali often face socio-economic constraints that limit their mobility and their access to education, information and resources. Family responsibilities, such as caring for children and the elderly, also restrict their active participation in mediation processes. Prevailing gender stereotypes reinforce the traditional view that women are not expected to play an active role in political and security issues, as these are "man issues". These socio-cultural factors pose a major challenge to women's involvement in peace mediation processes in Mali. To move towards greater gender equality and increase women's participation in these processes, it is essential to raise awareness, to educate and mobilise Malian society in favour of including women in peace mediation processes. This requires efforts to empower women economically, socially and politically, as well as measures to deconstruct gender stereotypes and create an environment that is conducive to women's active participation in peacebuilding and national reconciliation.

In the light of our field research, particularly in the northern and central regions of Mali, it is clear that cultural and religious values play a dominant role in regulating social interactions and power dynamics between the sexes. The division of their responsibilities is largely shaped by culture and religion, principally Islam and traditional religions, which forge social norms and contribute to gender inequalities.³⁵

In many communities in Mali, prevailing socio-cultural norms impose severe restrictions on women's participation

in peace mediation efforts. These norms, rooted in tradition and influenced by religious beliefs, establish a strict division between men's and women's roles and spheres of influence in society. In this context, women are often excluded from the spaces where peace negotiations take place, especially when these negotiations are dominated by men. This point was mentioned in almost every interview during our fieldwork, and by a few key informants:

*"Here we are dealing with a country where there are very few women that are public figures, especially within the armed movements. Culturally, in the Tuareg community and the Arab communities, the presence of women is more informal than public, in general; the Bambara or even the Sonrai societies are like that too. So, because of the culture, it was not easy to have women among the first people present for the peace talks."*³⁶

Also, in many Malian societies it is considered inappropriate for women to get involved in political or security discussions, which include peace negotiations. Excluding women in this way is often justified by restrictive interpretations of religion, which advocate separate roles for men and women.

As a result, women face significant obstacles in accessing peace mediations, despite their desire to contribute to conflict resolution and the search for lasting solutions. These socio-cultural and religious obstacles do not just hinder women's participation in mediation processes, but also limit the ways in which their perspectives and experiences can influence any final peace agreements. Understanding these socio-cultural realities is essential to design effective strategies to promote women's participation in peace mediation processes in Mali. These include, for example, providing support for alternative forums where women have more leeway to be present and to share their views without the usual barriers that they face if they are part of national political peace talks.

4.2. Political and economic restrictions

The lack of political will to involve women in peace mediation processes is also a major obstacle. Although Mali has adopted national and international resolutions and laws to promote the inclusion of women, their implementation often remains insufficient. Political authorities and key players involved in peace negotiations may not treat women's participation as a priority, which limits the latter's potential role as peace mediators. According to a woman

³⁵ Focus group discussion with women leaders in Timbuktu, 12 August 2023.

³⁶ Online interview with a key informant, 20 September 2023.

leader in Timbuktu, “even the Ministry for the Promotion of Women, Children and the Family does not support women in peace mediation. I had invited an organisation to organise a high-level seminar in Bamako on women’s capacity-building in peace mediation, then I went to request authorisation, my request for authorisation for the seminar was not approved, I tried to see the minister to no avail.”³⁷ Also, from the point of view of some of the people we met while conducting this study, as expressed in interviews and the focus group discussions, it is clear that there is no real political will to involve women in the peace mediation process in Mali.

“We had trained several women in community mediation and conflict management, who should be deployed in different localities, but unfortunately none of these trained women had the support of the authorities to be in the field.”³⁸

To overcome these obstacles, considerable efforts are needed to sensitise, educate and mobilise Malian society, including political leaders, in favour of including women in peace mediation processes. This also requires action to empower women economically, socially and politically, as well as a real commitment to enable their equal participation in peacebuilding and national reconciliation efforts.

In regions such as Timbuktu and Gao, women have less economic power than men, in both rural and urban areas.

However, as several women interviewed for this study pointed out, this disparity is more pronounced in rural areas and in more ecologically vulnerable regions, particularly in the rural areas of Timbuktu and Gao.

Some of the participants in this study believe that women’s limited participation in peace mediation processes in Mali is influenced more by women’s economic situation than by the lack of political will to include them.

“Women’s economic conditions are a predominant factor determining their participation in peace mediation, a participation considered essential to progress towards more gender-equitable conflict prevention and management.”³⁹

In other words, these participants suggest that the economic obstacles that women face have a greater impact on their involvement in peace mediation efforts than political engagement per se. From their perspective, women may be less inclined to participate in peace mediation processes due to their precarious economic situation, which can limit their ability to actively engage in these processes.⁴⁰

This point highlights how important it is to not just focus on generating political will, but to also focus on socio-economic factors in order to promote women’s participation in peace mediation processes, and to move towards greater gender equality in conflict prevention and management.

4.3. A lack of mediation skills and abilities

A Mediator’s Tears: The Failure to Resolve Conflict in Timbuktu

During a focus group discussion held in Timbuktu, in the presence of the members of the association “Femmes Artisanas de la Paix” and the Movement “Vivre Ensemble et Cohésion Sociale de Timbuktu”, a woman shared her experience of mediating between two women’s associations that had a conflict. This experience reveals further challenges that women may face when they engage in peace mediation.

The woman in question organised a mediation meeting between the two conflict parties. At the beginning, she gave the floor to each group to explain their points of view. However, over the course of the exchanges, the discussion degenerated into insults and fights between the two parties. The mediator then lost control of the situation and feared that the situation would escalate into serious aggression. She even felt guilty for the escalation of violence.

In a gesture of despair, she decided to sit and cry because of the fights between the women. This response created compassion on the part of the women, prompting them to pull themselves together and to give up fighting. Thereafter, each group returned home.

This experience highlights the lack of skills and capacity of women mediating between women, which partly explains the low involvement of women in this field in Mali. The complex realities of conflict often exceed their understanding and skills. The woman who lived this experience strongly recommends strengthening the capacity of women in Mali, especially in the northern regions, in mediation. Adequate mediation training could enable them to play a more active and effective role in conflict resolution within their communities.

³⁷ Interview with a woman leader in Timbuktu, 10 August 2023.

³⁸ Interview with a trainer and mediator in Timbuktu, 11 August 2023.

³⁹ Focus group discussion in Gao, 13 August 2023.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Ways to improve women's participation (recommendations)

All Stakeholders

- Promote research that documents the work and contributions of women in peace and mediation processes.
- Recognise and valorise the efforts and work of female peace mediators, and ensure that those women who participated in Mali's peace processes share their experience in order to inspire and engage more women.
- Promote the participation of trained female mediators, by tapping into the databases of training institutions such as EMP-ABB and CSO, such as WILDAF.
- In the long-term invest in a comprehensive approach, which addresses the structural obstacles that undermine the full implementation of existing legal policy instruments.
- Be more culturally sensitive when involving women in peace mediation processes.
- Value Track I.5, Track II and Track III mediation processes more in Mali, as they provide spaces where women have a greater say than during high level peace talks (Track I). In cultural contexts such as Mali and the Sahel in general, results from the other tracks should be able to "feed into" Track I mediation processes in a more formal way.

Women, women groups and women networks

- Prioritise self-capacity building/education on how national and international processes work, so that women can provide vital contributions to decision-making platforms.
- Much of the work on security and mediation agendas happens at the top level. As such, more lobbying and advocacy initiatives should be directed at the top, to enable a better inclusion of women at all levels of interventions.
- Build solidarity and organise blocs/structures to defend women's agenda more effectively.

- When participating in mediation processes, women should step out of their comfort zones by showing interest for subjects that go beyond humanitarian and local development agendas. Women should take a more active role in governance, Security Sector Reforms (SSR), Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) processes, addressing environmental issues, etc.

Government

- Operationalise existing political will by ensuring that women sit on decision-making panels and play primary roles in mediation processes.
- Accelerate efforts to create a conducive environment for women's participation in peace mediation processes, and hold all stakeholders to account.

Regional organisations, financial and technical partners, and civil society organisations

- Financial, technical and political support needs to be provided to encourage educational and leadership training for both women and girls.
- Financial support given to women's initiatives should not just focus on "soft" skills acquisition projects, the acquisition of "hard" skills should be emphasised too, in order to promote women's economic independence in a sustainable way.
- Create a trust fund to support women's participation in peace and security processes. This fund could be used to finance training, capacity building and awareness programs, to further women's understanding of the mechanisms through which peace agreements are implemented.
- Establish or support the establishment of a regional network of women mediators and negotiators, and/or a base of women mediators, while taking both their leadership abilities and actual core mediation training into account. This network could be part of the women's peace and security network established by ECOWAS, and could be coordinated together with the African Union FemWise-Africa network and leading Malian women's associations.

- Organise periodic meeting forums for women who are peace actors, to provide a space in which they can discuss challenges and share experiences made in different countries.
- Ensure that provisions for women's participation are included in peace and security agreements. This would ensure that women's rights and interests are taken into account when the agreements are implemented.
- While continuing to encourage and support the meaningful participation of women in Track I mediation processes, including through financial incentives, it is also important to provide technical and financial support for other spaces where women have a greater say.

Conclusion

This study has revealed that the role of women in peace mediation processes in Mali is multifaceted and evolving, and that it is marked both by significant achievements and persistent challenges. While women have made notable contributions to peace mediation efforts, particularly by influencing the agenda of negotiations and advocating for broader governance and development issues, their participation has faced substantial barriers that are rooted in socio-cultural norms, political and economic restrictions, and a lack of mediation skills.

The legal instruments, policies, and structures that support women's participation in peace mediation processes in Mali demonstrate a commitment to gender-inclusive peacebuilding. Initiatives like PAN 1325, PNG, the Plan décennal d'autonomisation des femmes, and the Peace Clubs serve as valuable platforms for women to engage in peace mediation and conflict resolution. Organisations such as CAFO and WiLDAF have played pivotal roles in promoting women's rights and their involvement in mediating conflicts.

However, despite these efforts, women's participation in ongoing and recent Malian peace mediation processes, such as those that led to the Ouagadougou and Algiers Agreements, has been limited and marred by exclusion. Women's networks and groups have strived to overcome this exclusion, by advocating for women's meaningful involvement. Still, challenges persist, including the patriarchal nature of Malian society, age-related barriers, and language disparities.

The impact that women can have when they participate in peace mediation processes is evident, particularly in terms

of influencing the agenda of negotiations. Women have pushed for broader discussions, in which governance and development issues are considered alongside traditional security matters. Their involvement at all levels of mediation processes is crucial for achieving lasting peace and social cohesion in Mali.

To enhance women's participation in peace mediation processes, we make several recommendations. There is a need to document and recognise women's contributions more, coupled with comprehensive mediation skills training. Women, women's groups and networks should build solidarity, organise blocs, and expand their roles to be able to address a wider range of issues. Government support, backed by political will, is vital to ensure that women hold decision-making positions and play primary roles in mediation processes. Regional organisations, financial and technical partners, and civil society organisations should provide both "soft" and "hard" support, work at the grassroots level, and engage men as allies in driving gender equality and inclusive peacebuilding efforts.

To summarise, the journey towards women's full participation in peace mediation processes in Mali is ongoing, and it is marked by determination, progress, and resilience. Overcoming existing challenges and implementing the recommendations outlined in this study can pave the way for a more inclusive and effective approach to peace mediation, which fosters stability, unity, and social cohesion in Mali.

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WOMEN IN PEACE MEDIATION IN MALI: A CASE STUDY OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN RECENT AND ONGOING PEACE PROCESSES

Policy Recommendations



It is essential to employ both formal and informal mechanisms to promote the inclusion of women in peace mediation processes.



Despite the commitments made towards inclusivity, women face challenges in gaining access to the negotiation table, primarily attributed to political and economic barriers, as well as cultural norms. This highlights the necessity to place greater value on women's contributions in traditional spheres.



Enhancing women's involvement necessitates long-term investments in their training and education, heightened advocacy for increased participation, fostering supportive environments, acknowledging the pivotal role of women peace mediators, and establishing a network of mediators at a regional level.

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