

A decorative map of Burkina Faso composed of a grid of grey dots, with several dots highlighted in red to represent specific locations or regions.

## Supporting the role of women in peacebuilding in Burkina Faso

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### INTRODUCTION

The security situation in Burkina Faso has steadily deteriorated since 2015, posing multidimensional challenges for the country.

In addition to the catastrophic human toll in terms of soldiers and civilians killed, the conflict has created an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, with a massive flow of people fleeing their homes for more secure areas and in need of emergency aid.

The crisis has had a disproportionate impact on women and children, who make up more than 80% of internally displaced persons, according to data from the Burkinabè National Council for Emergency Relief and Rehabilitation (CONASUR). They have also been targets of kidnappings and sexual violence, particularly in the Sahel and Centre-North regions.

The country has undertaken a number of multi-sector initiatives to put an end to the conflict. In addition to

military operations, it has developed a number of political, legislative, and institutional mechanisms, as well as development programmes in the worst-affected areas.

A number of community initiatives have also been set up to help resolve the conflict, strengthen social cohesion, and build peace. Women are involved in these initiatives at different levels of society. They work as actors for peace, sometimes far from the spotlight and in difficult socio-cultural contexts, to promote social cohesion, living together, and the return of peace to Burkina Faso.

However, women's contribution remains marginal and their visibility remains low, despite a context brimming with opportunities for them to play an active and meaningful role in the quest for peace. They also continue to be less represented than men in government bodies and mechanisms set up to promote national reconciliation and cohesion.



The aim of this policy paper is to define the roles and contributions of women in social cohesion and peacebuilding in Burkina Faso. Specifically, it will analyse the main features of the crisis in Burkina Faso and its impact on Burkinabè society, particularly on women. It will also explore the roles and contributions of women in social cohesion and peacebuilding, and how they develop over time. It further aims to analyse the challenges they face and to formulate practical recommendations for action targeting the country's socio-political players, with a view to ensuring that women are better taken into account in the social cohesion and peacebuilding process.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CURRENT CRISIS

### **A security context facing a multidimensional crisis**

The current security crisis in Burkina Faso is multidimensional, characterised mainly by community conflicts, terrorist attacks, and transnational crime. These challenges have appeared in an environment marked by poverty, unemployment, and the inadequacy or even the total absence of basic social services in some parts of the country. In addition to tensions over resources, daily attacks take place alongside trafficking of all kinds, particularly in the tri-border area (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger), and they all feed off each other. Various forms of trafficking, such as cigarette smuggling, trafficking in drugs, firearms, gold, and forest products, as well as cattle rustling, illegal financial flows, poaching and hostage-taking, fuel terrorism and vice versa.

The regular terrorist attacks and the eviction orders increasingly targeting civilians are evidence of the desire of terrorist groups not only to undermine the trust between civilians and their leaders, but also to put great pressure on the latter by exacerbating the humanitarian crisis resulting from the massive displacement of populations.

For some time, the terrorist threat was attributed to external actors, but it has gradually become endogenous, involving national actors within two groups reputed to be the most active in the country. These include the Group to Support Islam and Muslims (GSIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).

Terrorist attacks mainly target the Defence and Security Forces (DSFs), civilians, military bases, places frequented by expatriates, markets, gold-panning sites, public infrastructure (bridges, pylons), authorities (administrative, religious, and customary), and people suspected of collaborating with the DSFs.

These challenges are compounded by political and institutional instability, with two successive coups d'état in January and September 2022 slowing down the country's socio-political and economic development efforts and plunging it into an endlessly repeating cycle.

In recent months, by increasing the defence and security budget to nearly 29% of the national budget, purchasing equipment, and conducting military interventions, the country appears to have gained a relative ascendancy over the armed terrorist groups. The authorities have announced that several occupied territories have been recaptured and secured, resulting in the return of internally displaced persons. On 23 May 2023, the Ministry for Gender and Humanitarian Action announced that more than 20,000 households had been able to return to their homes.

Although the new authorities in place since September 2022 are implementing a strategy with a strong military focus, continuity can be seen in the dialogue approach officially begun under the regime of President Paul Henri Sandaogo Damiba with the issuing of a decree in April 2022 on the creation, composition, and remit of local dialogue committees for the restoration of peace. The current authorities have strengthened this mechanism by setting up a National Appeal Centre, that serves, among other things, to facilitate the demobilisation of repentant combatants.

## THE IMPACT OF THE CRISIS ON BURKINABÈ SOCIETY

The security situation in Burkina Faso has deteriorated dramatically from 2015 to the present day. The country has gone from a few sporadic attacks, mainly in the Sahel region, to almost daily attacks in different parts of the country, causing several thousand deaths. The regions most affected are the Sahel, the North, the Centre-North, the East and the Boucle du Mouhoun.



At community level, social cohesion has been undermined by community conflicts and the stigmatisation of certain communities, particularly the Peulh. As a result, some members of this community have deserted certain villages because of the difficulty of living with other ethnic communities.

There have also been targeted kidnappings, enforced disappearances, and summary and extrajudicial executions, for which the defence and security forces and the Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP) have been held responsible by some human rights organisations. This can lead to feelings of frustration and revenge within the communities.

At national level, there has been a rise in stigmatisation and hate speech, particularly via social networks. This situation, which does not spare journalists or opinion leaders, is an obstacle to freedom of expression and the press, as well as to building national cohesion and peace.

### **A security and humanitarian crisis that disproportionately affects women**

Women are particularly exposed to the current crisis in Burkina Faso and are experiencing a range of traumas linked to forced displacement, dependence on humanitarian aid, gender-based violence and the massacre of their relatives.

Women and children alone accounted for 82.96% of internally displaced persons at the end of March 2023, according to the National Council for Emergency Relief and Rehabilitation. They are accommodated in camps set up by the government and in host families in host regions. But their accommodation and sustenance poses enormous difficulties in a context where resources are limited for both the government and humanitarian actors. At the beginning of 2023, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) counted 4.7 million people in need of humanitarian aid, i.e. 1 in 5 Burkinabè. However, the 2023 Humanitarian Response Plan only prioritised 3.1 million people with acute and urgent needs. Of the \$876.7 million required for priority assistance based on the needs and vulnerabilities of the population, only \$178.6 million had been mobilised by 28 April 2023, representing 20% of funding requirements.

Many of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) are women who beg in the larger cities, particularly Ouagadougou and Bobo Dioulasso. Most of them are accompanied by one or more young children.

In addition, the closure of more than 6,300 schools as a result of the terrorist attacks has had an impact on more than a million children, according to OCHA in Burkina Faso. This situation exposes out-of-school girls to harmful practices such as female genital mutilation, rape, and child marriage. For many young girls, especially in rural areas, school is a unique protective environment.

A number of women have also been victims of sexual violence committed by members of armed terrorist groups in hard-hit areas. The resurgence of this phenomenon in recent years reflects the use of rape as a weapon of war in Burkina Faso.

For some years now, national and international media have been drawing attention to the phenomenon of “sex for food”, particularly in the Centre-North region, where some internally displaced women are “forced” to offer sexual favours in exchange for humanitarian aid. In response to these alerts, some media outlets have been criticised for disseminating false information aimed at “undermining the work of the government and humanitarian workers”, according to the former Minister for Women and Humanitarian Action.

## **OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN PEACEBUILDING**

### **An enabling legal and institutional environment for women's participation in peacebuilding**

Burkina Faso's legal and institutional environment offers various opportunities for women to play an active part in peacebuilding. The Constitution and the various legislative and regulatory instruments promote the principles of gender equality and non-discrimination.

At international and continental level, the country has ratified several conventions that encourage the participation of women in promoting and maintaining peace, such as the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the



Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa.

On the domestic front, the country has adopted national plans to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security and its related resolutions.

A Women, Peace and Security agenda has also been put in place to strengthen the role and contribution of women in building peace and social cohesion. It is based on 4 pillars, namely conflict prevention, women's participation in conflict management (gender mainstreaming in peace negotiations), protection of women's rights and the rehabilitation of women and girls who are victims of violence.

In 2022, the government created a women, peace, and security directorate within the ministry responsible for gender issues.

All these initiatives aim to ensure that women are represented and that their needs are taken into account in the restoration of peace. They also promote gender equality and inclusion in the peace process.

### **Women who become actors in insecurity in Burkina Faso**

The complexity of the current interlocking threats has highlighted another form of participation by women, some of whom are becoming actors in the insecurity affecting Burkina Faso.

In August 2022, the Minister for Gender and the Family announced that terrorist groups operating in Burkina Faso included women who were used for intelligence, logistics (supplying food and fuel), enlisting new recruits, and restoring combatants' well-being. According to the Minister, it is a growing phenomenon.

It is quite possible that some of these women fighters were forcibly recruited by terrorist groups due to their vulnerability (following abduction or forced to cooperate after the occupation of their village, for example).

In this context, it is imperative to involve women in the search for a solution to the crisis by taking action to prevent their radicalisation and their voluntary or forced

membership in armed terrorist groups. These women, who have become actors in insecurity and parties to the conflict, should therefore be viewed as stakeholders with whom dialogue ought to be initiated.

Furthermore, the wives of combatants, if they are clearly identified, can be allies in disarmament and demobilisation. All of the foregoing actions can help to build peace. In a Friedrich Ebert Stiftung publication published in 2020 entitled *From a focus on security to diplomatic dialogue: should a negotiated stability be considered in the Sahel?*, one interviewee from Mali said that "[women] can also prevent their husbands from going into battle by threatening to divorce them". This type of psychological pressure can dissuade some men from joining terrorist groups.

## **ROLES AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF WOMEN IN SOCIAL COHESION AND PEACEBUILDING IN BURKINA FASO**

As mothers, wives, daughters, and citizens, women can bring a representative and sensitive perspective to conflict resolution. They are often essential mediators in resolving conflicts within families and communities.

As the primary custodians of their children's upbringing, they can make a major contribution to the prevention of violence and conflict by passing on the values of peace and non-violence to their offspring and to future generations.

Social organisation also provides a number of traditional mechanisms for peaceful conflict resolution that can be used by women. Joking kinship, which has been the foundation of social cohesion between families for generations, helps to defuse crises.

In several ethnic groups in Burkina Faso, such as the *Mossé* and *Peulh*, the paternal aunt (*pugdba* and *goggo*) and the niece/nephew play the role of conciliators in situations of conflict within the family. This recognised and accepted role in mediation and conciliation can be extended to community conflicts and national reconciliation.

Women from the griot and blacksmith castes also play a similar role in some communities in south-west Burkina



Faso. All of which helps to strengthen ties between communities.

Women also take part in dialogue forums to encourage community members to talk to each other, strengthen their ties and resolve their differences peacefully.

They also help to raise awareness among communities of the need to adopt behaviours conducive to peace and living together in peace.

Women are also at the forefront of community resilience, sometimes acting as the interface between the communities and the parties to the conflict. In some communities, they are often the only ones who can still move around “freely” to ensure the survival of their families by growing crops or fetching water or firewood. In most of the areas affected by insecurity, the men, who are very often targets of killings and kidnappings, flee the villages leaving only the women, children and elderly or vulnerable people behind. In some situations, women are in the best position to inform the authorities about the nature of the threats in their communities and the actors involved.

Politically committed women and girls mobilise other women around citizen movements and advocate for peace and living together. They make the voices of other women heard within socio-political and governmental bodies, ensuring that inclusive and equitable policies are put in place.

Women members of Defence and Security Forces (DSFs) also help to establish a climate of trust between the DSFs and the civilian population. They help to build peace by participating in security operations and, above all, in the prevention of violence in various parts of the country.

### **Women and girls at the heart of initiatives for peace and national cohesion**

In Burkina Faso, women are at the heart of a number of peace and social cohesion initiatives. These initiatives come from the government, civil society organisations, and international partners.

At government level, the Ministry for Gender and the Ministry for National Reconciliation are the main institutions spearheading these initiatives. Through the creation of a Women, Peace, and Security Directorate within the

Ministry in charge of gender, the government is implementing several initiatives aimed at making women key players in peacebuilding.

The ministry responsible for reconciliation has involved women in its various national reconciliation initiatives. Consultations have been organised throughout the country, including with women’s organisations. However, their involvement remains insufficient. For example, the National Guidance and Monitoring Council (CNOS) for National Reconciliation and Social Cohesion, set up in January 2022 under President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, had only 34 women out of a total of 119 members.

Within civil society, a multitude of actions are also being implemented by women’s and mixed organisations to contribute to national cohesion and peacebuilding. Most of these initiatives are supported by international partners who are also running their own programmes to promote peace. These include the European Union, United Nations agencies and certain non-governmental organisations.

In the Sahel region of Burkina Faso, the NGO Mwangaza Action has been piloting a social cohesion project entitled “Promoting a culture of peace and social cohesion in the North and Sahel regions of Burkina Faso”. The project enables women to participate in community-based early warning, mediation, and monitoring mechanisms to prevent and combat violent extremism and radicalisation.

Local, religious and community leaders, in particular the President of the Regional Council, the Emir of Liptako, and customary and traditional chiefs of the Sahel, were called upon to help achieve the project’s objectives. This initiative makes local women fully-fledged stakeholders in peacebuilding.

The communities also organise activities to promote a culture of peace and living together.

In September 2022, the “*Women, Peace and Security in Burkina Faso*” initiative was launched, with the aim of making women and girls active players with key roles in mediation and peacebuilding in their regions. It is the brainchild of collaboration between the *Cadre de concertation des organisations et acteurs intervenant sur le genre et la participation citoyenne* (a consultation framework for organisations and actors working on



gender and citizen participation) and the ministry dealing with gender issues. It involves a number of activities, including a digital awareness-raising campaign on women's contribution to peace, national conferences, and the publication of a directory of profiles of women, girls, and boys active in the field of peace and security.

In the digital sphere, organisations and activists are initiating actions to promote peace through publications that advocate discourse promoting peace and cohesion. These initiatives encourage Internet users to avoid publishing fake news, violent speech, inciting hatred and reinforcing divisiveness and stigmatisation towards certain communities. Some women leaders in civil society use their influence to promote peace online.

## THE CHALLENGES OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN PEACEBUILDING

The various initiatives put in place at national and local levels aim to strengthen social cohesion, dialogue, and the promotion of peace in Burkina Faso. However, much remains to be done to effectively involve women in building a better way of living together in the country.

### **Women are under-represented in decision-making bodies concerning safety, especially at local level**

Although the legal and institutional framework is conducive to women's participation in peacebuilding in Burkina Faso, women still face a number of challenges in terms of their effective participation in peace initiatives.

Despite their recognised roles as mediators in certain communities, women are relatively less often consulted and under-represented in decision-making frameworks concerning safety, especially at local level (communes and villages). This is despite the fact that they are disproportionately affected by insecurity. Social and cultural constraints still keep many women out of the public spheres of speech and decision-making. Some of them censor themselves in this context by staying on the sidelines of mediation and peacebuilding frameworks.

In addition, women are still largely excluded from decision-making at national level. Only 28% of the members of

the National Guidance and Monitoring Council (CNOS) for National Reconciliation and Social Cohesion, set up in January 2022, were women.

Women who take a public stance on sensitive issues such as peace are sometimes poorly perceived by public opinion. This is even more the case when they address specific impacts of conflict on women and girls, such as sexual violence. They are sometimes targeted by online or offline threats or harassment due to their commitment to peace and women's rights. This situation limits their effective participation in decision-making on conflict resolution.

In addition, the lack of knowledge and understanding of the legal framework for action means that certain categories of women lose interest in peace and security issues, which they sometimes consider to be a matter for the state. This lack of interest is sometimes exacerbated by a lack of information on such frameworks and their inaccessibility in terms of language to illiterate women and the most vulnerable categories such as disabled women, whose school attendance rate remains low compared to that of disabled men according to a study conducted in Burkina Faso in 2020 by Handicap International/ Humanity & Inclusion.

For civil society organisations, particularly women's organisations working on the ground to promote peace, the lack or inadequacy of funding, as well as difficulties in accessing or understanding certain funding procedures, limit their work in the field to help women deal with peace issues.

Moreover, low economic empowerment and limited access to resources such as land, seeds, and water hamper women's ability to implement sustainable economic development initiatives in their communities. All of which would contribute to peace and national cohesion.

## CONCLUSION

In Burkina Faso, there is tremendous potential for including women in peacebuilding. In addition to the enabling legal and institutional framework, women play an important mediating role at different levels in many communities. However, their important contributions to peace and



cohesion are not always visible, especially at local level, where they are even less involved than at national level.

In areas severely affected by the security crisis, women fulfil vital roles such as earning a living and caring for children, the elderly and the vulnerable. They embody resilience in a hostile environment, sometimes at the cost of their dignity and their lives.

Women also help to preserve social cohesion and prevent inter-community violence. They are the ones who raise children and pass on the values of peace within families. Certain traditional social mechanisms promote their role as mediators in crises within families and communities.

However, they continue to face challenges linked to socio-cultural constraints, a lack of knowledge about laws and regulations as well as the fact that they are not effectively enforced, the non-inclusive nature of certain frameworks, difficulties financing certain initiatives and a lack of economic empowerment.

It is therefore essential to take measures to enable every woman in Burkina Faso, wherever she may be and without discrimination, to play her part in national cohesion and the reconstruction of peace in the country.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **The government of Burkina Faso should:**

1. Facilitate the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs), the majority of whom are women and children, by securing their communities of origin and building or rehabilitating basic social infrastructure.
2. Strengthen women's inclusion and representation in all their diversity and at all levels (local, regional, national) in the development and implementation of all strategies, policies, and initiatives to combat insecurity, promote national reconciliation and build peace; by effectively implementing the relevant legislation. Women, who make up more than half of the total population, must be an integral part of the solution to insecurity and peacebuilding.
3. Raise awareness of the legal and institutional framework for women's participation in peacebuilding among all women, without discrimination, as well

as among men; and put in place mechanisms to enable women to become involved at all levels (local, regional, national) without discrimination.

4. Strengthen regulation of social networks to provide a safe digital space for women and girls who want to get involved in building peace online.
5. Design a research project aimed at understanding the underlying reasons for women's involvement in armed terrorist groups in order to limit their voluntary or forced recruitment.
6. Support, encourage and accompany all women's initiatives for peace and national cohesion.
7. Continue development initiatives throughout the country, particularly in areas affected by insecurity, in order to strengthen the resilience of the population, especially women, their economic and social empowerment, and the gradual return of displaced persons.

### **Civil society organisations should:**

1. Target national decision-makers with advocacy and lobbying for greater inclusion of women in peacebuilding initiatives.
2. Continue to raise awareness of the need to change behaviour in favour of social norms that are more conducive to women's participation in public life, in order to encourage communities to support initiatives involving women.
3. Strengthen human rights education specifically on women's rights in order to promote women's rights in times of peace and war, all of which will help to build lasting peace in the country.
4. Be actively involved in disseminating the legal and institutional framework for women's participation in peacebuilding to all women without discrimination.
5. Strengthen legal and judicial assistance for women survivors of sexual violence committed during the crisis, as well as psychological and social care and support in the light of their various traumas.
6. Encourage and support all women's initiatives for peace and national cohesion, especially in the affected communities.
7. Promote traditional mechanisms for conflict resolution by women and raise the profiles of women committed to peace.



### About the author

Fatimata Ouédraogo is currently youth and gender coordinator for an international human rights organisation. She is also a member of the steering committee of the WATHI Think Tank, which conducts and shares research on the major socio-political and economic challenges facing West and Central Africa. She is a former junior researcher at the regional office of the Institute for Security Studies (ISS Dakar) and has contributed to several research projects on security dynamics in the Sahel and the Gulf of Guinea. Fatimata Ouédraogo holds a master's degree in Public Law.

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