

Overlooked or Muted? Conflict-Related Sexual Violence in Niger

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Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is a feature of the generalised insecurity in Niger's Tillabéri region. However, it has failed to attract much attention from local, national and international actors working in the fields of gender equality, stabilisation and humanitarian relief. Based on qualitative interviews conducted during several research trips to Niger during the period 2023–25, this paper argues that despite knowing that the problem exists, local, national and international actors have a common strategic interest in not declaring conflict-related SGBV to be an issue that demands a policy response. This contributes to an incomplete and detached (inter)national reading of the security crisis in the region and prevents mitigation measures from being implemented. (Inter)national actors dealing with the security crisis in Tillabéri and beyond should invest in documenting conflict-related SGBV, raising awareness of the problem and providing assistance to survivors.

In early 2023, some 20 armed men on motorcycles arrived at a camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs) located in the north of Niger's Tillabéri region, close to the border with Mali.¹ They kidnapped a dozen women and held them captive for around 24 hours. Three of the women later stated that they had been sexually abused; one was admitted to a nearby health centre. All the other women kept silent about what had happened to them during their abduction. Just four days later, there was a similar attack on a village close by. One woman reportedly died as a result of the violence she had suffered.² When humanitarian organisations operating in Tillabéri alerted the national authorities to the attacks – saying that specifically targeting women constituted a new, deliberate strategy of non-state armed groups operating in the region – the latter not only downplayed their concerns; they also claimed that sexual violence as a means of warfare did not exist in Niger.³

There are no comprehensive data on conflict-related sexual violence in Niger. And in contrast with other conflict regions, including those in the Sahel (e.g., Mali and northern Nigeria), sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) has barely been tackled in analysis of the conflict dynamics in Niger. Accordingly, donor-funded projects addressing the problem in the country are rare.

Given that SGBV has been internationally recognised as a weapon of war ever since feminist thinking entered humanitarian action and security policy in the late 1990s, it is astonishing

¹ For reasons of confidentiality, neither the exact dates nor the places of the attacks are given in this study.

² Internal report of an international humanitarian organisation.

³ Interview with employee of international humanitarian organisation, Niamey, February 2023.

that the subject remains shrouded in silence in Niger. With the adoption of the UN Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda in 2000, SGBV prevention and mitigation measures began to be mainstreamed in international interventions in conflict zones around the globe. UN Security Council Resolution 1820 (2008) named sexual violence as a “tactic of war to humiliate, dominate, instil fear in, disperse and/or forcibly relocate civilian members of a community or ethnic group” and called for appropriate protection and criminal prosecution,⁴ while Resolution 2467 (2019) emphasised sexual violence as a tactic of terrorism.⁵

SGBV is a problem that exists in every society. Its root causes – whether in conflict or non-conflict settings – are to be found in unequal power relations that foster environments in which violence is used to reinforce notions of masculinity. However, it is important to understand the specificity of SGBV in conflict contexts, including Niger’s Tillabéri region – for several reasons. First, zooming into the repertoire of armed actors’ violent practices allows a more comprehensive analysis of the respective security crisis. Second, the impact of the crisis on the local population can be better assessed. And third, it enables the development of context-specific prevention and mitigation measures that focus on the protection of civilians in areas affected by armed conflict.

In Niger, like everywhere else, SGBV is an extremely sensitive subject. Out of fear of stigmatisation and re-traumatisation, most survivors remain silent about the violence they have endured. But there are other challenges to researching the scope and patterns of SGBV in the Tillabéri region. Even though the region, which borders Mali and Burkina Faso, became the main intervention site of international attempts to stabilise the country before the coup d’état in July 2023, everyday life continues to be marked by a high degree of armed violence. For more than a decade, it has been the main battle ground for insurgent groups affiliated with Islamic State (IS) and Al Qaida that are operating in Niger. At the same time, self-defence groups that emerged from inter-communal conflicts have gained in importance while armed banditry has become more widespread.⁶ As a consequence, vast areas of the Tillabéri region remain inaccessible for humanitarian and development organisations, including those working on gender-related questions.⁷ Most of these actors restrict their physical presence to the larger towns of selected districts, where security forces are present. Thus, the experiences of people in rural areas are often under-reported.⁸

In addition, since the July 2023 coup d’état, the Nigerien authorities have tightened control over communications about security-related issues. High levels of state repression and the prohibition on international organisations and local NGOs entering “military operation zones” have turned the independent documentation of violence by state and non-state actors into a risky endeavour.⁹

Ultimately, misinformation stemming from the intentional or unintentional spreading of rumours, self-censorship and omissions in the reporting of armed violence in the Sahel make it difficult to obtain reliable information on the security crisis in the Tillabéri region.¹⁰

⁴ United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 1820 (2008)*, S/RES/1820, June 19, 2008, (accessed April 28, 2026).

⁵ United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 2467 (2019)*, S/RES/2467, April 23, 2019, (accessed April 28, 2026).

⁶ Lisa Tschörner, *Jihadism as a Driver of Local Conflicts: Examining Non-State Violent Orders in Tillabéri, Niger*, Megatrends Afrika Working Paper 06 (Berlin: SWP, 2023); Lisa Goxho, *Self-Defense Militias in Niger: Risking a Time Bomb*, Megatrends Afrika Policy Brief 17 (Berlin: SWP, 2023).

⁷ Protection Cluster Niger, *Rapport analytique de protection: Régions Diffa, Maradi, Tahoua et Tillabéri (septembre à décembre 2022)* (Niamey: Protection Cluster, 2023); Protection Cluster Niger, *Protection Analysis Update: Niger, June 2025* (Global Protection Cluster, 2025), 12.

⁸ Interview with employee of international humanitarian organisation, Niamey, April 2025.

⁹ Melissa Chemam, “Niger Junta Bans UN Agencies and Global NGOs from ‘Military Zones’,” *RFI*, September 1, 2023 (accessed April 28, 2026); interview with member of women’s rights organisation, Niamey, April 2025.

¹⁰ Yvan Guichaoua and Ferdaous Bouhleb, *Interactions between Civilians and Jihadists in Mali and Niger. Project report*. (Canterbury: University of Kent, 2023), 29–33; “Au Niger, les thèses complotistes ne viennent pas que de Moscou,” *AfriqueXXI*, (accessed April 28, 2026).

The mode of operation of the jihadist groups and widespread incomprehension about the inability of the state and its former Western partners to respond effectively to the security crisis have fuelled speculation and conspiracy myths.¹¹ Moreover, not sharing information about armed violence is part of the survival strategy of the population in zones controlled by jihadist groups.

In sum, it is very difficult – if not impossible – to draw an accurate picture of the problem of conflict-related SGBV in the Tillabéri region owing to the sensitivity of the subject of SGBV, the inaccessibility of conflict zones, state repression and misinformation. However, confidential interviews and discussions conducted between February 2023 and December 2025 in Niamey and online¹² indicate that SGBV committed against women and girls by armed actors is an integral part of the security crisis in the region.

Characteristics and Patterns of Conflict-Related SGBV

Through the condensation and triangulation of anecdotes and experiences shared by interviewees and the comparison of the information obtained with academic literature and policy reports, it is possible to distil certain characteristics and patterns of conflict-related SGBV in the Tillabéri region.

Definition of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence

According to the definition of the United Nations (UN), the term “conflict-related sexual violence” refers to “rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, enforced sterilization, forced marriage, and any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity perpetrated against women, men, girls and boys that is directly or indirectly linked to a conflict. This link may become evident through the profile of the perpetrator, who may often be affiliated with a State or non-State armed group, including those designated as terrorist groups by the Security Council; through the profile of the victim, who may frequently be an actual or perceived member of a persecuted political, ethnic or religious minority, or targeted on the basis of actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity; or through other existing circumstances, such as a climate of impunity; cross-border consequences, such as displacement or trafficking; and/or violations of the provisions of a ceasefire agreement.”

Source: Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General On Sexual Violence in Conflict, *Conflict-Related Sexual Violence. Report of the United Nations Secretary General, S/2025/389 (15 July 2025)*, 3.

One of the characteristics of conflict-related SGBV in the Tillabéri region is the high level of **uncertainty about the identity of the perpetrators of conflict-related SGBV**. In most reported cases, neither survivors nor witnesses know or are willing to disclose who committed the violence – that is, to which armed group or force the perpetrators belonged or in whose name they acted.

Blurred narratives regarding the perpetrators of armed violence are a main feature of the contested information environment in the Sahel. It is often the case, especially in rural areas, that residents fail to make sense of the rapidly changing nature of the armed conflicts

¹¹ Denis M. Tull, “Contester la France: Rumeurs, intervention et politique de vérité au Mali,” *Politique étrangère* 90, no. 1 (2021): 151–71.

¹² The interviews were conducted with women’s rights activists, humanitarian and development workers, researchers, journalists, police officers and ordinary citizens from conflict hotspots in the Tillabéri region.

that are putting their lives on the line. They find themselves caught in the middle of competing factions of highly mobile gun holders from diverse, at times overlapping backgrounds (i.e., jihadists, community-based militia groups, illicit networks, the military forces of Niger or other countries) and do not know the identity of the group whose armed members are setting up road blocks, stealing cattle, imposing rules, burning down villages and assaulting and killing the village inhabitants before pulling back into the bush.¹³

Thus, when speaking about the perpetrators of conflict-related SGBV, interviewees often used the general term “GANE”, the French abbreviation for “non-state armed group” (*groupe armé non-étatique*) or the somewhat apolitical word “bandits” to describe the attackers. Many – though not explicitly asked – also commented that members of the state security forces might have committed the violence. They spoke of what they presumed were members of the army dressed in civilian clothes. Others mentioned “bandits” wearing army uniforms.

With regard to patterns of conflict-related SGBV, interviewees mentioned that non-state armed groups commit **rapes during attacks on villages** in which the civilian population is targeted.¹⁴ They said that the attackers often have accomplices in the villages who lead them to the houses where women are present. They also referred to the targeting of women and girls in the context of armed actors giving ultimatums to local populations to leave certain areas.

Another pattern of conflict-related SGBV that interviewees repeatedly described is the perpetration of **rape during the collection of “zakat”**, a tax imposed by armed groups on local populations. They said that it was especially the wives of men refusing to pay the tax who are singled out and raped in front of their husbands, relatives or communities. For this reason, interviewees viewed such rapes as acts of punishment.

Others mentioned rapes that had happened in the context of attacks linked to **communal conflicts** pitting socio-economic groups against one another over access to land and/or natural resources in the region.¹⁵ But because many young men from rural areas implicated in such conflicts are said to have close ties to jihadist groups, interlocutors were unable to situate the attacks in either of the two categories (intercommunal and jihadist violence). Nonetheless, these rapes were said to have contributed both to the destabilisation of communities and to forced displacement.

Another common feature of conflict-related SGBV appears to be the **abduction of women and girls** by non-state armed groups. Interviewees explained that in rural areas affected by insecurity – and especially in the northern Tillabéri region – many men have been killed or have left the villages either to join non-state armed groups or to escape the attacks. Women and girls tend to stay behind, which makes them more vulnerable to abduction by armed actors. A gender needs analysis on violent extremism in the Sahel published in November 2023 by the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) confirms that abductions are among the most common forms of SGBV committed in the Tillabéri region.¹⁶ The study identifies jihadist extremist groups and ethnic-based militias as the main perpetrators.

Interviewees described how women and girls who have been abducted are often subjected to **sexual slavery** and **forced marriage** to combatants of non-state armed groups.

¹³ Morten Bøås, Abdoul Wakhab Cissé, and Laouali Mahamane. 2020. “Explaining Violence in Tillabéri: Insurgent Appropriation of Local Grievances?” *The International Spectator* 55 (4): 118–32.

¹⁴ See also Ornella Moderan, Fatoumata Maïga, and Boogu/Gayya Project, Niger: Women’s Views on Insecurity in the Tillabéri Region, *West Africa Report 41* (Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, November 2022), 7.

¹⁵ Tschörner, *Jihadism as a Driver of Local Conflicts* (see foot note 6).

¹⁶ United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI), *Voices of Resilience: A Gender Needs Analysis on Preventing Violent Extremism in the Sahel* (Turin: UNICRI, November 2023), 100.

Those practices were interpreted as means of creating loyalties to the armed groups among the families and communities of the victims and tightening the groups' grip on the local populations.¹⁷

Another pattern of violence repeatedly mentioned by interviewees was **forced prostitution and rape of IDPs** either during displacement or after arrival in camps and host communities.

Finally, conflict-related SGBV in the Tillabéri region can also be linked to **military counter-terrorism operations**. In 2021 the sexual assault and rape at gunpoint of several women and an 11-year-old girl by members of the 8th Chadian Battalion of the G5 Sahel Joint Force made international headlines.¹⁸ While the case was treated as an isolated incident, interviewees confirmed that the problem of SGBV perpetrated by security and defence forces is much more common than that. This, in turn, reinforces the widespread perception of those forces contributing to insecurity rather than providing protection.¹⁹ One interviewee said that “taking” women was seen as a reward within the security forces for the hardship they have to endure during deployment.

In addition, interviewees established an indirect link between counterterrorism operations and conflict-related SGBV by referring to the “leadership decapitation” approach that the Nigerien army, together with its former international allies, had adopted earlier.²⁰ That approach led to the deaths of many local jihadist commanders and – according to interviewees – the proliferation of decentralised armed groups consisting of local youths formerly associated with jihadist forces. Integrated neither into jihadist command structures nor into society, those groups were now being held responsible for spreading insecurity, including through SGBV.

Explaining the Silence on Conflict-Related SGBV in Niger

Despite SGBV apparently being perpetrated in the context of the armed conflicts that have progressively transformed the Tillabéri region into a hotspot of the broader Sahel crisis, the problem has failed to attract much attention – either at the national or international level. It is true that in collaboration with the Nigerien Ministry for the Promotion of Women and the Protection of Children and, following its closure by the military government, the responsible unit within the Ministry of Health, international organisations (such as the UN and NGOs) and Nigerien women's rights organisations have sought to address the issue of SGBV. However, there has been no real focus on the links between the problem and the armed conflict dynamics in Niger.

This is in sharp contrast with the situation in neighbouring countries, where the investigation into, and the mitigation of, conflict-related SGBV has been integrated into internationalised responses to the deteriorating security situation. In Mali, for example, measures aimed at preventing and responding to conflict-related SGBV were implemented by the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). Mandated to “address

¹⁷ See also “In der Falle,” *Amnesty Magazin*, March 2024, (accessed April 28, 2026).

¹⁸ André Kodmadjingar, “Indignation suite aux actes de viols des militaires tchadiens au Niger,” *VOA Afrique*, April 6, 2021, (accessed April 28, 2026); “Niger Body Urges Independent Probe into ‘Rapes’ by Chadian Troops,” *Al Jazeera*, April 3, 2021, (accessed April 28, 2026); Moderan, Maïga, and Boogu/Gayya Project, *Niger: Women's Views on Insecurity*, 16.

¹⁹ UNICRI, *Voices of Resilience: A Gender Needs Analysis on Preventing Violent Extremism in the Sahel*.

²⁰ International Crisis Group, *A Course Correction for the Sahel Stabilisation Strategy, Africa Report No. 299* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, February 1, 2021), (accessed April 28, 2026).

the needs of victims of sexual and gender-based violence in armed conflict”,²¹ the mission established early warning mechanisms, documented cases, raised awareness, trained stakeholders, pushed for legal reforms and provided assistance to survivors, among other things.

Moreover, with the support of international partners (including UN institutions and the EU), the authorities in Nigeria have declared the prevention and response to sexual violence in the context of armed violence in the northeast of the country to be a policy priority, with special focus on the prosecution of SGBV cases. This led to the conviction in December 2023 of a member of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) for having committed SGBV as an act of terrorism. The charges included forced marriage, forced pregnancy, rape and sexual slavery.²²

The Context-Specific Politicisation of Problems

In the academic literature on international interventions in development and conflict settings, the top-down nature of the process of deriving standardised policy solutions from international norms has been widely criticised for not taking context specificity into account.²³ However, an empirical comparison of more or less similar settings may reveal that whether and how international norms – such as the definition of SGBV as a problem of international security – are reflected in the priorities of governments and donor-funded programmes and projects in a specific context depends on a variety of factors.²⁴ Those factors include context-specific processes of politicisation that determine if and in what way particular problems such as conflict-related SGBV are attracting attention and appearing on the agendas of decision-makers. Processes of politicisation are shaped by individual or collective actors who offer specific solutions to specific problems in accordance with their political convictions, mandates and resources. In order to turn a problem into a political (and policy) issue, these actors use windows of opportunity – such as times of crisis – to draw the public’s attention to problems and to get the political will of decision-makers onto their side.²⁵

A good example of such context-specific processes is the successful politicisation of conflict-related sexual violence in Nigeria. In 2014 Boko Haram abducted 276 schoolgirls from the town of Chibok.²⁶ Women’s rights groups, international NGOs and humanitarian actors used the news about the abduction to raise their long-standing concerns about the impact of armed violence in Nigeria’s northeastern states on the lives of the local women and girls. The national and international outcry following the social media campaign “#BringBackOurGirls” (BBOG) put pressure on the Nigerian government, which, at that time, was already dealing with allegations of widespread human rights violations, including SGBV, in the context of its counterterrorism operations in the region. Interested in maintaining access to certain forms of security assistance from partners such as the United States

²¹ United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2100 (2013), S/RES/2100, April 25, 2013, 8.

²² United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), “Turning the Tide: The Prosecution of Sexual and Gender-Based Crimes as a Terrorist Offence in Nigeria,” 2024, (accessed April 28, 2026).

²³ James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: “Development,” Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Séverine Autesserre, *Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

²⁴ Anne Menzel and Lisa Tschörner. 2023. “Responding to Sexual Violence: How (De-) Politicization and Technicalization Shape Donor-Funded Interventions.” *International Peacekeeping* 30 (1): 128–54.

²⁵ John W. Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, 2nd ed. (New York: Pearson, 2010).

²⁶ “Nigeria Chibok Abductions: What We Know,” *BBC News*, May 8, 2017 (accessed April 28, 2026).

that required compliance with international human rights standards,²⁷ a political majority in Nigeria finally approved the adoption of formal policy and legal frameworks that recognised and addressed conflict-related SGBV in the country.

No Politicisation of Conflict-Related SGBV in Niger

In Niger, however, there has been no window of opportunity to politicise conflict-related sexual violence in the Tillabéri region for actors interested in tackling the problem, nor have (inter)national organisations or the state authorities mustered the political will – either voluntarily or involuntarily – to address it. On the contrary, despite being aware of the problem, most local, national and international actors shared a strategic interest in ensuring that conflict-related sexual violence would not become a policy issue that should be addressed as such.

In early 2023, humanitarian organisations tried to politicise the problem of conflict-related SGBV in the Tillabéri region by using the systematic attacks against women in IDP camps as an “emblematic case”. However, that attempt was quickly thwarted by the state authorities. One interviewee stated that at a meeting of representatives of national and decentralised authorities as well as of selected NGOs, information about the attacks was designated as classified (“histoire classé”) – an order that the interviewee insisted came from the highest political level.²⁸ For this reason, humanitarian actors refrained from openly denouncing the incidents. As a result, there was no national or international outrage that would have put political pressure on the state and its (international) partners to address the problem. The incidents remained – like so many others – largely in the personal sphere, while humanitarian actors trying to assist the survivors had to maintain a “low profile” in order to avoid triggering any political debate.

A member of the Nigerien police force confirmed that while many cases of SGBV were filed with the police in the Tillabéri region, the figures were not made publicly available. The officer explained that in most cases, it was impossible to establish the “nature of the aggression” as this would require a medical expert report costing 30,000 CFA (around €45) – an expense that victims could not afford.²⁹

The apparent interest of the state in keeping the problem of conflict-related SGBV out of sight – and thus out of the political arena – could be linked to the patriarchal norms that are widely prevalent in Nigerien society. Another factor that might have played an even bigger role before the 2023 coup d’état was the strategy of the government under President Bazoum to signal that it was in control of the national territory and ensuring the provision of security to the Nigerien electorate. Through repeated, highly mediatised visits to parts of the country affected by jihadist violence and by calling upon IDPs to return to their homes, Bazoum tried to reinforce the image of the state successfully containing the security crisis.³⁰ Admitting that non-state armed groups were able to commit SGBV – and potentially use such violence as a war strategy on Nigerien territory, as humanitarian actors had been claiming – would have severely undermined that narrative. Moreover, it would have posed the significant risk of the government losing political capital and legitimacy amid growing political contestation, not least given the entrenched patriarchal notion whereby the (mili-

²⁷ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, “Leahy Law Fact Sheet,” January 20, 2025, (accessed April 28, 2026).

²⁸ Interview with employee of international humanitarian organisation, Niamey, April 2023.

²⁹ Interview with police officer, Niamey, April 2025.

³⁰ “Terrorisme au Niger: le président Bazoum à Tillabéry avec les personnes revenues au village,” *RFI*, September 12, 2021, (accessed April 28, 2026).

tarised) “protection” of women (considered to play passive roles in which they represent the homeland, among other things) is perceived as a core function of the state.³¹

For their part, international humanitarian actors, stabilisation missions and donors – all banking on Niger as the last pro-Western partner in the region – felt compelled to comply with government orders so that they could continue with their activities.³² Because of the strong focus of missions and donor-funded activities on “stabilisation” and the “prevention of violent extremism”, the UN’s WPS agenda was implemented mainly through the promotion of women’s inclusion in the country’s security and defence forces and the strengthening of the role of women in detecting and denouncing unlawful behaviour within communities.³³ As for international organisations specialising in the problem of SGBV – including those that have significantly contributed to putting conflict-related SGBV on the political agenda in other conflict contexts such as that of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) – their work in Niger focused mainly on domestic violence against women. According to some interviewees, situating the problem in the private sphere was deemed less “politically sensitive” and therefore more feasible in the Nigerien context.³⁴ Others referred to the perceived “dysfunctionality” of local women’s organisations and the lack of female experts as reasons for the non-engagement.

However, members of Nigerien women’s organisations explained that they refrained from politicising conflict-related SGBV in order to prevent further constraints on their already limited scope of action. Representatives of those organisations said that they had to struggle to navigate and circumvent patriarchal restrictions and armed violence in their everyday work and that they feared communities and local authorities would object to any attempt to draw attention to conflict-related SGBV. “NGOs don’t have the culture to document conflict-related sexual violence. We do self-censorship. When we talk about it, men no longer let their wives come to our activities”, the leader of one of the women’s organisations commented. Another, related concern expressed by women was that addressing the problem would increase the stigmatisation of survivors. “There are many cases of conflict-related sexual violence. People don’t talk about it. Girls won’t find husbands”, one female interviewee argued. Another interviewee said that when NGOs heard about cases of SGBV and tried to investigate, the family of the survivor would put up resistance. Very often survivors would flee, making it difficult to follow up on cases. Left to fend for themselves – and frequently pregnant as a result of having been raped, these women faced even more discrimination and social exclusion, according to interviewees.³⁵

To sum up, despite being aware of the problem, neither the state, nor international organisations nor local women’s organisations have had a strategic interest in conflict-related SGBV in the Tillabéri region being turned into an issue that should be addressed specifically. For this reason, there has been no window of opportunity for actors concerned about the problem to gain the support of a critical mass strong enough to exert pressure on policymakers and push for political solutions.

³¹ Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990)

³² Interviews with employees of international organisations, Niamey, October 2023 and April 2025.

³³ Laura Berlingozzi, “Gendered Insecurities: EU Practices in Countering Violent Extremism in Niger,” *European Security* 32, no. 3 (2023): 444–63.

³⁴ Interviews with employees of international organisations, Niamey, October 2023 and April 2025.

³⁵ Interviews with members of women’s organisations, Niamey, April 2025.

Military Rule and the (Inter)national Governance of Conflict-Related SGBV

Since the 2023 coup d'état in Niger and the rise of "strongman politics",³⁶ the chances of conflict-related SGBV gaining political visibility in Niger have shrunk even more. Through widespread state repression, the military government has established firm control over the public information space, allowing strict boundaries to be drawn between the political issues that may or may not be discussed.³⁷ Those areas subject to certain restrictions include not only state security but also women's affairs. Both the dissolution of the Ministry for the Promotion of Women and the Protection of Children by the military rulers (and the subsequent integration of its components into the Ministry of Health) and the exclusion of sexual education from school curricula clearly indicate the military government's opposition to gender equality and sexual rights.³⁸ The protection of "traditional values" from foreign interference has become a legitimising political slogan that the government and its supporters – including representatives of women's organisations – uphold to justify the restrictions.

While some women's organisations have sought dialogue with the new rulers about at least getting "their" ministry back, the government has made no concessions. On the contrary, new restrictions against international and local NGOs have hit organisations working in the area of SGBV. One Nigerien civil society organisation that plays a leading role in the field of SGBV even lost its operating licence in November 2024, albeit temporarily.³⁹

But it is not just the political landscape of Niger that is shaped by "strongman politics". Rather, there is a worldwide trend of pursuing such politics that has negative implications for feminist concerns. The rise of authoritarian rule, global power competition and the "interest-driven" foreign policies of governments worldwide are weakening the perception of conflict-related SGBV as an international security problem that requires an international solution. And this, in turn, translates into shrinking budgets for donor-funded programmes and projects.

Taken all together, these recent national and international developments make it highly unlikely that a window of opportunity to politicise conflict-related SGBV in Niger will open up in the near future. That does not mean, however, that individual or collective actors who are concerned about the problem have no room for manoeuvre.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

SGBV is a problem prevalent in every society around the world. But in contexts of armed conflict, it can take specific forms that influence conflict dynamics and thus have a long-lasting impact not only on the survivors but also on society at large.

Anecdotes and experiences shared by people living and working in the Tillabéri region allow the conclusion to be drawn that conflict-related SGBV is a problem encountered by

³⁶ Ornella Moderan, "Virility Politics in the Sahel," *ISPI*, February 12, 2026, (accessed April 28, 2026).

³⁷ Lisa Tschörner and Denis M. Tull, *Europäische Sahel-Politik: Zurück auf Start*, SWP-Studie 2026/S 08 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, March 20, 2026),

³⁸ Georges Ibrahim Tounkara, "Le Niger interdit d'aborder l'éducation sexuelle à l'école," *Deutsche Welle*, November 28, 2024, (accessed April 28, 2026).

³⁹ "Actions humanitaires: deux ONG, ACTED et APBE, interdites d'exercer sur le territoire nigérien," *ANIamey.com*, November 13, 2024, (accessed April 28, 2026); United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), "Vers une synergie d'actions contre les violences basées sur le genre au Niger," October 29, 2020, (accessed April 28, 2026). Following a decree issued by the Nigerien Ministry of Internal Affairs on 9 February 2026, the NGO has been authorised to operate once again.

women and girls in the region. However, owing to the lack of attention paid by inter(national) and local actors to conflict-related SGBV, it is impossible right now to make any statements about the extent of the violence or to establish whether SGBV is being used as a deliberate war strategy by armed actors, as humanitarian organisations argued in 2023. Further, based on the interviews conducted for this paper, it cannot be determined whether conflict-related SGBV in the Tillabéri region is a problem that also affects men and boys.

Accounting for the characteristics and patterns of conflict-related SGBV in Tillabéri is crucial for a holistic understanding of the security crisis in the region. It paves the way not only for a nuanced understanding of the mode of operation of armed groups in the region but also for the adoption of adequate measures to protect the civilian population, deal with the long-term impact of armed violence on individuals and society and, potentially, bring the perpetrators to justice. Under international law, conflict-related SGBV is recognised variously as a war crime, a crime against humanity and an act of genocide. Charges include rape and sexual slavery as well as forced prostitution and pregnancy that can be linked to an armed conflict. As a deliberate tactic of war and terror, it is used to destroy communities and terrorise populations.⁴⁰ The anecdotes and experiences shared by interlocutors during research for this paper certainly point in this direction.

Therefore, it is recommended that policymakers and inter(national) and local organisations dealing with the nature and impact of the security crisis in Niger and throughout the entire Sahel region consider the measures outlined below.

Invest in research into, and the documentation of, conflict-related SGBV

So far, there has been only a handful of analyses that have given a voice to women and girls affected by insecurity in the Tillabéri region and assessed their lived realities.⁴¹ Investing in more gender-sensitive research that takes into account the different types of violence encountered both in the region and beyond would allow the dominant narratives and general assumptions about the security crisis in the Sahel – many of which tend to oversimplify complex realities by overlooking the localised nature of the conflicts – to be challenged. Such an investment would also facilitate the design of intervention approaches that take into account not only the specific needs of women and girls in areas affected by armed conflict but also those of men and boys.⁴²

Documenting the characteristics and patterns of conflict-related SGBV is especially important as it enables the better understanding and anticipation of security risks, allows targeted protection and mitigation measures to be taken and paves the way for accountability and legal pursuit. However, it should not detract attention from other forms of violence in areas affected by the security crisis, including SGBV perpetrated by civilians. Given the risks of the stigmatisation and re-traumatisation of survivors as well as the current restrictions on the civic space in Niger, research and documentation activities must be guided by strict ethical considerations to ensure that neither informants nor researchers are put at risk.

⁴⁰ United Nations, Conflict-Related Sexual Violence: Report of the Secretary-General, S/2025/389, July 15, 2025, (accessed April 28, 2026).

⁴¹ Moderan, Maïga, and Boogu/Gayya Project, *Niger: Women's Views on Insecurity*; International Crisis Group, *Women's Lives under Islamic State in Niger's Tillabery, Africa Briefing No. 200* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, August 29, 2024), (accessed April 28, 2026).

⁴² Moderan, Maïga, and Boogu/Gayya Project, *Niger: Women's Views on Insecurity*, 14.

Raise awareness of conflict-related SGBV

In order to address conflict-related SGBV in Niger and beyond, it is crucial that actors who are concerned about the problem seek to draw (inter)national attention to the topic. This could be achieved through awareness-raising campaigns or the dissemination of research and documentation results. In view of the military government's tight grip on the public information space, the limited political leverage of external actors and the risk of a gender backlash, it is advisable to adopt a more subtle approach for now in Niger and the broader Sahel region. That approach should build on local and informal negotiation and sensitisation strategies and involve decentralised and customary authorities as well as community leaders. The objective should be to create a discursive space in which the problem of conflict-related SGBV and its consequences receives visibility without the room for manoeuvre of women's organisations being further whittled away.

Given the highly volatile political context in Niger and the Sahel region as a whole, it cannot be ruled out that there will be new windows of opportunity for local and (inter)national actors to push more openly for policy changes with regard to conflict-related SGBV in Niger.

Develop and implement context-sensitive prevention and mitigation measures

In the meantime, (inter)national and local actors who are concerned about conflict-related SGBV should try to adopt a holistic, context-sensitive approach to the issue – one that integrates measures aimed at preventing and mitigating conflict-related SGBV into broader strategies whose goal is to improve local security and address humanitarian needs. Such measures should include promoting the establishment of supportive environments for women, including survivors of (conflict-related) SGBV. For example, actors could push for the creation of confidential and safe spaces in health care and law enforcement facilities, IDP camps and community centres, where women – including those who have survived (conflict-related) SGBV – can find protection, medical and psycho-social care, legal assistance and support to become financially independent, without facing the risk of re-traumatisation and stigmatisation.

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