



# Women's Lives under Islamic State in Niger's Tillabery

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**What's new?** Deep inequality between men and women is a longstanding norm in the north of Niger's Tillabery region, but the local Islamic State affiliate's actions are worsening the divide. The militant group enforces strict gender rules, hampering women's livelihoods and restricting their participation in civic life.

**Why does it matter?** The burdens and hardships imposed and deepened by the jihadist group, known as IS Sahel, are further exacerbated by political changes in Niamey. The 2023 coup and the withdrawal of some donors have undermined previous government efforts to improve the societal position of women and girls.

**What should be done?** Niamey and international partners should work together to provide basic services that better meet the needs of women and girls in IS Sahel-influenced zones – particularly in the domains of health care, livelihood support and education. Donors should back efforts to help rural women move toward greater political participation.

## I. Overview

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Over the past five years, the Islamist insurgency Islamic State Sahel Province, commonly known as IS Sahel, has strengthened its hold on the north of Niger's Tillabery region, including its rural Abala department. The militant group – one of two major jihadist groups in this part of the country – imposes different rules on men and women and metes out punishments to those who do not abide by its strict interpretation of Islamic law. While men tend to receive the most brutal treatment, the jihadists have placed additional constraints and burdens on women, who were already suffering from unequal treatment long before IS Sahel emerged. A 2023 coup and the withdrawal of some donors had the further effect of stymying progress toward improving women's opportunities, upending previous government efforts to reduce Niger's exceptionally high birth rate and improve girls' education. Niamey and international donors should take steps to better meet women's needs by enhancing basic service provision and exploring ways to increase women's incomes and participation in local governance.

Abala department, home to some 215,000 people, sits in Niger's restive Tillabery region, which has suffered from spillover of insurgencies based in neighbouring Mali for years. Security forces have largely vacated rural Abala but kept a permanent base in

Abala town, which has thus far guaranteed a minimum of state services, including for the large number of people who have fled there from the countryside. IS Sahel wields influence in the rest of the department, especially in isolated villages close to the Malian border, using sudden incursions, a network of informers and often deadly violence to enforce its rules and punish transgressors.

Beyond the hardships that IS Sahel's influence creates for Abala, the department confronts many of the challenges that afflict Niger writ large. The coup prompted important donors like the European Union to suspend budget support and halt most development cooperation. Niger's traditional partners (including the EU) are continuing to provide humanitarian assistance, but the new authorities have made it much harder by imposing stricter rules on aid agencies and NGOs, for instance mandating that their convoys have military escorts. This requirement has made aid deliveries costlier and more difficult. A border dispute with Benin, whose Cotonou port is a vital trade corridor for landlocked Niger, has compounded these supply problems.

That is particularly unfortunate because the humanitarian need in the region is only becoming more pronounced. IS Sahel has physically attacked civilians, especially boys and men, for supposed infractions like refusing to join their ranks or sharing information with state representatives. Requirements that women and girls be confined to their homes have made it extremely difficult for them to find ways to earn a living. More broadly, insecurity has deepened existing discriminatory practices. Amid violence and destitution, the risk that girls leave school and get married very young is growing. Meanwhile, women widowed in the fighting must live with social norms that often deprive them of the means of getting by. Intercommunal relations, which have been characterised by tensions since well before IS Sahel emerged, have worsened further amid the conflict.

Women in Abala and its surrounds are not uniformly opposed to jihadist strictures. Patriarchal norms were deeply ingrained in this region well before IS Sahel took root, and some women say they welcome the strict codes for dress and behaviour. Others hope the group's focus on secluding women at home may offer them a reprieve from arduous labour. Some have stayed in their villages despite worsening insecurity, preferring a life under varying degrees of jihadist coercion over the uncertainty of displacement.

Gender shapes the experiences of those under IS Sahel influence, and analysis of gender dynamics – such as in this briefing based on interviews with women from Abala – can shed valuable light on how the group mobilises support and exerts its power. It may also help authorities and donors focus their interventions to help this population in northern Tillabery, recognising that these will not be able to resolve all of the human security challenges that women living in Abala, or elsewhere in the region, face as a consequence of the IS Sahel presence there. Efforts to accelerate the provision of certain basic services, particularly in health and education, could make a difference, as could initiatives that attempt to foster more cross-communal links among women in the region. Finally, donors and NGOs that still have the access and capacity to do so should look to involve women in dispute resolution in their communities, as a step toward a greater role in governance.

## II. Jihadist Influence in Abala

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Abala is one of thirteen departments that form the Tillabery region.<sup>1</sup> Its *chef-lieu*, referred to as Abala town, is 50km south of Mali and 250km north east of the capital Niamey. The department has another small town, Sanam, as well as over one hundred villages and various ethnic Peul and Tuareg nomadic camps, with the total population estimated at 215,000 people.<sup>2</sup> Abala department has long been a hub for cross-border trade and transhumance. Pastoralists routinely move their herds across the border in both directions. Animal husbandry and agriculture are the mainstays of the region's economy.<sup>3</sup> Women traditionally have specific roles in both, such as raising young animals and selling foodstuffs.<sup>4</sup>

### A. Violence and Displacement

Over the course of the twentieth century, Tillabery's Djerma and Hausa farming communities migrated north in search of arable land as their populations expanded.<sup>5</sup> Settlements such as Abala, and the markets and amenities they offered, also attracted semi-nomadic Peul and Tuareg herders. A steadily growing population then gave rise to competing land claims, which sometimes spiralled into armed clashes. Land disputes typically pitted nomadic pastoral communities, notably Peul and Daosahak, against one another, but herders and Djerma and Hausa farmers came to blows as well.

From the late 1990s, intercommunal disputes grew deadlier as the emergence of armed groups on both sides of the Niger-Mali border meant that firearms became easily available. Young men, especially from nomadic communities, learned how to handle modern firearms. Some were recruited by political entrepreneurs into community-based militias purporting to defend the interests of marginalised nomadic populations.<sup>6</sup>

In 2012, mostly Tuareg rebels in the towns of Kidal and Ménaka took up arms against the government to demand northern Mali's secession, creating a wave of instability that affected the Nigerien communities across the border as well. While it succeeded in capturing several towns in the region, the separatist movement was quickly overtaken by jihadist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda, with which it had briefly allied before confronting them for control of northern Mali.

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<sup>1</sup> This briefing presents Crisis Group's findings from interviews with 35 women from the Peul, Tuareg, Hausa and Djerma communities in northern Abala department between April 2023 and March 2024.

<sup>2</sup> "Tillabéri en Chiffres. Edition 2023", République du Niger Ministère de l'Economie et des Finances, October 2023; and Ibrahim Harouna Ousmane, *Enjeux Sécuritaires et Mobilisation des Jeunes dans les Groupes Extrémistes Violents : Une Analyse par l'Exemple d'Abala (Tillabéri)*. Thèse de Doctorat en Sociologie et en Anthropologie (Niamey, 2023), p. 68.

<sup>3</sup> "Tillabéri en Chiffres. Edition 2023", op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> Crisis Group interview, Nigerien sociologist, Niamey, 3 February 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Rahmane Idrissa and Bethany McGann, "Mistrust and Imbalance: The Collapse of Intercommunal Relations and the Rise of Armed Community Mobilization on the Niger-Mali Border", RESOLVE Network, 21 April 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Crisis Group interviews, local authorities, Abala town, 26 April 2023.

The armed groups that were party to the crisis in northern Mali at first recruited along existing intercommunal divides. Young Daosahak and Tuareg joined the ranks of the secular Mouvement de libération nationale de l'Azawad, which clamoured for a separate state. Young Peul from both sides of the Mali-Niger border swelled the ranks of the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) to maintain a rough balance of power.<sup>7</sup> Over time, however, as Crisis Group has written previously, jihadists in the border area have drawn recruits and conscripts from an array of ethnic groups.<sup>8</sup> In 2017, four militant groups merged to form Jama'at Nusratul Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), which today is the largest jihadist force in the central Sahel.<sup>9</sup> Unlike JNIM, which is affiliated with al-Qaeda but largely run by leaders from central and northern Mali, the leaders of IS Sahel come from the Saharan region but are neither Malian nor Nigerien.

Islamic State's franchise in the Sahel emerged due to a schism within MUJAO. Initially known as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, the group gradually encroached on Tillabery from its base in Mali. From 2017 onward, the group mounted assaults on Nigerien security forces and began abducting or assassinating local chiefs seen as too friendly with the government.<sup>10</sup> By 2021, it had forged alliances beyond the Peul, targeting Tuareg, Daosahak and Djerma communities by positioning itself as a policing force that could protect locals from cattle rustling and other forms of crime, on one hand, while using intimidation and coercion on the other. In March 2022, IS central command gave the group so-called provincial status, awarding it the name of Islamic State Sahel Province.<sup>11</sup>

Until recently, IS Sahel's leadership was composed of foreigners, but the rank and file is mostly drawn from local Peul and Daosahak communities. Rather than occupying towns or villages, the affiliate tends to call upon fighters in the borderlands to gather on motorcycles when planning an attack, after which they melt back into the bush. Villagers who resist predation are punished or killed.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Peul leader, Niamey, 1 February 2023; local authorities, Abala town, 26 April 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Crisis Group Africa Report N°261, *The Niger-Mali Border: Subordinating Military Action to a Political Strategy*, 12 June 2018; "Violent Extremism, Organised Crime and Local Conflicts in Liptako-Gourma", Institute for Security Studies, December 2019.

<sup>9</sup> While IS Sahel is the dominant jihadist force in Abala department and along much of Niger's border with Mali, JNIM is also influential in parts of Tillabery, especially along the border with Burkina Faso. Compared to IS Sahel, more information is available on JNIM's approach to governing civilians, which is generally considered to be better developed and less predatory. See, for instance, Yvan Guichaoua and Ferdaous Bouhlel, "Interactions between Civilians and Jihadists in Mali and Niger", University of Kent, 2023. The nature of women's ties with JNIM, especially with the JNIM-affiliated Katiba Macina in central Mali, is also better known. Boubacar Sangaré and Jeannine Ella Abatan, "Katiba Macina and Boko Haram: Including Women to what End?", Institute for Security Studies, 31 March 2021; Natasja Rupesinghe and Yida Diall, "Women and the Katiba Macina in Central Mali", Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> In early 2023, for instance, militants killed the village chiefs of Badak and Abarey, located some 20km and 40km from Abala town. Crisis Group interview, local authorities, Abala town, 26 April 2023.

<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed genealogy, see "Actor Profile: The Islamic State Sahel Province", ACLED, January 2023.

<sup>12</sup> Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°172, *Murder in Tillabery: Calming Niger's Emerging Communal Crisis*, 28 May 2021.

## B. *State Presence and Jihadist Influence*

Because of the permanent presence of national security forces in Abala town, it is safer than the countryside and has attracted thousands of people who have fled their homes.<sup>13</sup> In 2012, the government opened a camp for Malian refugees. The department also hosts internally displaced people (IDPs), spread across Abala town, a location on its outskirts and other temporary sites throughout its territory. By mid-2023, Abala counted some 21,000 refugees and 16,000 IDPs, the largest uprooted population in all of Tillabery's thirteen departments.<sup>14</sup> The government and humanitarian groups try to provide shelter, food and other necessities to the displaced but struggle to meet all the needs. Schools and clinics in Abala town are functional but insufficiently equipped to meet local demand.<sup>15</sup>

Outside Abala town, however, the state is barely visible. Soldiers patrol the department but no longer have a permanent base outside the town, while most services, notably schools, have closed down.<sup>16</sup> Most aid organisations have also left the countryside, deeming it too complicated and too dangerous to venture beyond Abala town limits.<sup>17</sup> Shortly after the coup, the authorities announced that UN agencies and foreign NGOs would be barred from working in military operation zones, without specifying which areas they considered as such.<sup>18</sup> In April, they made military escorts mandatory for all humanitarian agency and NGO movements outside main towns, a requirement that is not new but that they – unlike previous authorities – are enforcing strictly. High-level advocacy efforts to carve out more room for manoeuvre for humanitarian workers have so far been unsuccessful.<sup>19</sup> Donors suspended most long-term development cooperation after the coup, in particular budget aid and activities in support of government structures, and they have only slowly and partially resumed it.<sup>20</sup>

IS Sahel wields influence throughout the department, including in the immediate vicinity of Abala town. One woman told Crisis Group that militants regularly came to levy *zakat* (Islamic tax) in her village, only 3km away.<sup>21</sup> It does not have visible bases, but its fighters regularly storm into villages to monitor adherence to its rules and

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<sup>13</sup> The security forces in Abala department include the army, National Guard, gendarmerie and police. Crisis Group interview, local authorities, Abala town, 26 April 2023. See also "Cartographie des Acteurs de la Sécurité dans les Régions de Maradi, Tahoua et Tillabéri", African Security Sector Network, May 2022.

<sup>14</sup> "Niger Tillabéry: Analyse situationnelle trimestrielle (Au 30 juin 2023)", UN OCHA, 8 September 2023.

<sup>15</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, women living in Abala town, March-April 2024.

<sup>16</sup> By early 2020, troops had vacated a border post at Ikarfane following attacks on military camps elsewhere in Tillabery's border zone that left dozens of soldiers dead. See Hannah Armstrong, "Behind the Jihadist Attack in Niger's Inates", Crisis Group Commentary, 13 December 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, women living in Abala town and villages throughout the department, March-April 2024; staff of international NGO, online, 27 March 2024.

<sup>18</sup> "Niger junta bans UN agencies and global NGOs from 'military zones'", RFI, 1 September 2023.

<sup>19</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, high-level UN official in Niger, 9 July 2024.

<sup>20</sup> Notably, the EU institutions are keeping suspended 80 per cent of long-term development cooperation, which for the period 2021-2024 was projected at €503 million. Crisis Group interviews, EU officials, Brussels, May 2024.

<sup>21</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Tuareg woman, 26 March 2024.

punish perceived transgressions.<sup>22</sup> These rules include forcible payment of *zakat* in cash or cattle, rigid dress codes, and bans on ostentatious ceremonies, theft or banditry, and tobacco. Militants often erect checkpoints at village entrances, screening cars and motorcycles in what villagers say is “standard procedure”.<sup>23</sup> IS Sahel also tries to bar gatherings where young men sit together while brewing a kettle of tea over a coal fire, a popular pastime in the area.<sup>24</sup>

Informants are vital to the group's ability to monitor and control people's behaviour. Many Crisis Group interviewees said fear and suspicion were rife, even among close relatives. In the words of a Hausa woman: “We are afraid of talking to strangers because the walls have ears in this community. It is easier to answer every question with ‘I don't know’, even if that is not true”.<sup>25</sup>

### III. Life under Jihadist Influence

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In imposing strictures on women and girls in the north of Tillabery region, IS Sahel was not writing on a blank canvas. Niger is a deeply patriarchal society, and gender inequalities are particularly acute in the poor and rural setting of northern Tillabery. These embedded norms have shaped the way in which IS Sahel asserts itself in the lives of the women and men living there.

#### A. Marriage, Family Ties and Recruitment

In Nigerien society, where marriage elevates young people to full-fledged adulthood, most women marry young. Around one in four girls is married before the age of fifteen, and by age eighteen, almost three quarters have a husband.<sup>26</sup> Roughly a third of married women are in polygamous unions. (Under these arrangements, men have several wives, which augments their social and economic status.<sup>27</sup>) Parental consent and community approval tend to be paramount in making decisions about marriage.<sup>28</sup>

Getting married requires money that many young men in the region simply do not have. By convention, when a man asks a girl or woman to marry him, he and his family will offer an amount of money, land or other possessions to the bride and her family, which helps pay for the wedding festivities and establishment of the new household.

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<sup>22</sup> Crisis Group interviews, women from Abala town and villages throughout the department, April 2023-March 2024. See also Guichaoua and Bouhlel, “Interactions between Civilians and Jihadists in Mali and Niger”, op. cit.

<sup>23</sup> Crisis Group interview, Peul woman, Niamey, 18 April 2023.

<sup>24</sup> Crisis Group interviews, 50-year-old Hausa woman, Niamey, 17 April 2023; 21-year-old Tuareg woman, Niamey, 15 April 2023.

<sup>25</sup> Crisis Group interview, Abala town, 28 April 2023.

<sup>26</sup> “Ending Child Marriage in Niger”, UNICEF Niger, March 2020.

<sup>27</sup> “Polygamy in West Africa: Impacts on Fertility, Fertility Intentions and Family Planning”, Population Reference Bureau, 19 April 2022.

<sup>28</sup> On decision-making on marriage, see Grace Saul, Aïssa Diarra, Andrea J. Melnikas and Sajeda Amin, “Voice Without Choice? Investigating Adolescent Girls' Agency in Marital Decision-making in Niger”, *Progress in Development Studies*, vol. 20, no. 4 (2020), p. 270.

The funds required used to be attainable for young men of limited means, but over time pressure on families to organise elaborate festivities in order to convey social status has led the bride price to skyrocket.<sup>29</sup> In 2023, the bride price was over \$500 in Abala town and surrounding villages – a fortune for young men who live hand to mouth if they manage to eke out a living at all.<sup>30</sup> Nor is the bride price anywhere near the full extent of a groom's financial commitment. Once married, men are responsible not just for their own household, but for a wider circle of relatives. Most women Crisis Group interviewed on the topic believe that such onerous expectations can make jihadism appealing to young men.<sup>31</sup> As discussed below, other viable means of earning income are few and far between, made worse by the IS Sahel conflict. Men get drawn into the group's orbit in various ways. For example, some join as fighters, while others ply militants with motorcycles or fuel. Still others help sell stolen cattle at markets.<sup>32</sup>

IS Sahel members might in theory use their status within the group to coerce women and girls into relationships with them, but in practice interviewees suggested that such circumvention of local norms generally does not happen; jihadist grooms will generally go the traditional route of making a marriage proposal to a prospective bride's parents and paying the bride price.<sup>33</sup> Although the jihadists largely observe these customs and may not resort to physical force in order to secure their marriages, these arrangements are not necessarily free from pressure. One woman explained:

It happens that they ask girls for marriage, especially in the camps around the grazing areas. The marriage will happen if the girl says yes. They also pay the bride price. But people are scared, [so] they don't dare say no.<sup>34</sup>

Such marriages get a mixed reception from families and neighbours. Many women object to the idea of jihadist fighters marrying girls from their families. Yet others feel that it might not be out of the ordinary for girls and young women living in rural areas close to the border who are already familiar with the men in question as they are from the same communities. Some women and girls also see marriage to a jihadist as a potential escape from hardship. Several interviewees pointed out that IS Sahel's focus on women's seclusion at home and men's responsibility to provide for them seems to attract girls who are used to back-breaking work to help their families make ends meet. One woman noted that "the jihadists' wives don't work. They are

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<sup>29</sup> "Niger : la dot et son évolution avec le temps", *Studio Kalangou*, 16 July 2020.

<sup>30</sup> In Abala town, the prospective groom was expected to pay a woman's family around 320,000 CFA francs (\$550) in April 2023. The price is considerably lower when the woman is divorced or widowed. Crisis Group interview, 21-year-old Tuareg woman, Niamey, 15 April 2023.

<sup>31</sup> Local authorities shared this view. Crisis Group interview, Abala town, 26 April 2023.

<sup>32</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Ibrahim Harouna Ousmane, *Enjeux Sécuritaires et Mobilisation des Jeunes dans les Groupes Extrémistes Violents*, op. cit.

<sup>33</sup> Crisis Group interviews, women with family ties to IS Sahel, Niamey and Abala, April-May 2023.

<sup>34</sup> Crisis Group interview, Peul woman who is originally from a village close to the Malian border, Niamey, 18 April 2023. See also "Mali: Mounting Islamist Armed Group Killings, Rape", Human Rights Watch, 13 July 2023. Similar dynamics have been observed in areas under the influence of the JNIM-affiliated Katiba Macina in central Mali. Jeannine Ella Abatan and Boubacar Sangaré, "Katiba Macina and Boko Haram: Including Women to What End?", Institute for Security Studies, 2021.

always at home”.<sup>35</sup> She felt that the promise of less work and enough to eat could be a consideration for those who seek or accept marriage into the group. Another woman, who was fiercely opposed to her own four daughters becoming involved with jihadists, commented that “the girls in the bush like them a lot” because they do not need to work and always have plenty of food.<sup>36</sup>

Marriage and family ties are at the heart of the roles women play in the functioning of IS Sahel. In the central Sahel, unlike the Lake Chad basin, jihadists generally do not recruit women for armed or combat roles.<sup>37</sup> Instead, the support that women provide is usually an extension of their traditional activities as wives and mothers. They may, for instance, use their family networks to procure items, such as medication, that combatants themselves cannot obtain.<sup>38</sup>

Conversely, some women try to use these traditional roles within families to keep relatives, especially sons, from joining IS Sahel, though there are limits to their ability to do so. In some cases, intense social pressure is at play. A displaced Peul woman with a fifteen-year-old son said she would be powerless to prevent him from joining IS Sahel if they were to return to their home village. “If the whole village supports it, if everyone wants it, there would be nothing I could do”.<sup>39</sup> Outright coercion by IS Sahel, including by attacking family members of potential recruits, also comes into play. A woman who fled her village near the Malian border recounted how jihadists beat her husband because they wanted him to enrol their sons.<sup>40</sup> Finally, some men hide their activities with IS from their families, telling them their long absences and new income are from (licit) work abroad. In such cases, parents may only discover the truth when their son is killed in combat or recognised by an acquaintance temporarily held captive by the group.<sup>41</sup>

## B. *Behavioural Norms and Their Enforcement*

IS Sahel requires women and girls to observe behavioural norms that it ostensibly derives from its interpretation of Islamic tenets. The most visible of these involves regulation of women's appearance and presence in public spaces. In villages under

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<sup>35</sup> Crisis Group interview, Peul woman who is originally from a village close to the border, Abala town, 29 April 2023.

<sup>36</sup> Crisis Group interview, Peul woman who had recently left her village close to the Malian border, Abala town, 30 April 2023. The prospect of reduced labour outside the home has been identified as an important factor driving support for such an interpretation of Islamic law among Sahelian women. “Dogmatism or Pragmatism? Violent Extremism and Gender in the Central Sahel”, International Alert, July 2020; Laura Berlingozzi and Luca Raineri, “Reiteration or Reinvention? Jihadi Governance and Gender Practices in the Sahel”, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 2023.

<sup>37</sup> Abatan and Sangaré, “Katiba Macina and Boko Haram: Including Women to what End?”, op. cit.; Rupesinghe and Diall, “Women and the Katiba Macina in Central Mali”, op. cit.; and “Dogmatism or Pragmatism? Violent Extremism and Gender in the Central Sahel”, op. cit.

<sup>38</sup> Crisis Group interview, Peul woman, Niamey, 16 April 2023.

<sup>39</sup> Crisis Group interview, Peul woman, Niamey, 16 April 2023.

<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group interview, Peul woman, Niamey, 14 April 2023. On IS Sahel recruitment of children, including through indoctrination and violent coercion, see Guillaume Soto-Mayor and Boubacar Ba, “Generational Warfare in the Sahel: The Khilafa Cubs and the Dynamics of Violent Insurgency within the Islamic State Province”, Working Group on Children Recruited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups, November 2023.

<sup>41</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Niamey and Abala, April-May 2023.



jihadist influence, girls and women are required to wear a black hijab that leaves only the eyes visible, a full-length black robe (abaya) and black socks. Older women have slightly more leeway; they can choose the colour of their hijabs and leave their faces visible.<sup>42</sup>

IS Sahel communicates what it considers to be appropriate attire for women in various ways. Travelling Muslim preachers give instructions on dress codes; women are also put under pressure to copy the clothing style of jihadists' wives.<sup>43</sup> Even when dressed "appropriately", women say they have little freedom of movement. Jihadists have made it clear they prefer women to stay indoors and, in some villages, they have forbidden women from working in the fields or collecting firewood.<sup>44</sup> These constraints are particularly onerous for women who are heads of household and must provide for their families.

Interactions between unmarried men and young women are also severely restricted. That is partly because contact between genders can lead to pressure to make a life-long commitment: one woman told Crisis Group that jihadists force youngsters to marry if they are perceived as having a relationship.<sup>45</sup> While many women resent the boundaries imposed by IS Sahel, a handful voiced cautious approval of prescriptions that in their view had eliminated indecent dress and behaviour and, according to them, helped keep prostitution at bay.<sup>46</sup>

Men and women who are perceived as disobedient face different consequences. Men risk getting abducted if their behaviour is decreed as contravening Islamic law or if they are suspected of channelling information to the authorities. They are usually released after a period of time (seemingly ranging from one week to one month), but repeated transgressions may be punishable by death.<sup>47</sup> Other incidents include executions of bandits and maiming of thieves. In general, while testimonies recounting physical and often deadly punishments of men abound, there is considerable ambiguity regarding what happens to women who transgress IS Sahel's interpretation of Islamic law. Some said jihadists use corporal punishment against women, but, when pressed on the point, would clarify that they had merely heard of incidents where women were beaten or flogged, without having witnessed it personally. Others said women were exempt from physical punishment, while still others said the mere threat of violence deters women from disobeying.

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<sup>42</sup> Crisis Group interviews, women from Abala town and villages in Abala department, April-May 2023.

<sup>43</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hausa woman living in village close to Malian border, Niamey, 17 April 2023.

<sup>44</sup> The practice of women's seclusion existed in Niger long before jihadism. It has been explained both as a strategic choice by women themselves and as a way for men to hoard scarce agricultural land. Barbara M. Cooper, "Reflections on Slavery, Seclusion and Female Labor in the Maradi Region of Niger in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries", *The Journal of African History*, vol. 35, no. 1 (1994), p. 61; Marie Monimart, "Sahel: Sécheresses, crises alimentaires et déféminisation des systèmes agraires", in Christine Verschuur (ed.), *Du grain à moudre : Genre, développement rural et alimentation* (Geneva, 2001), pp. 133-152.

<sup>45</sup> Crisis Group interview, Peul woman originally from village close to Malian border, Niamey, 14 April 2023.

<sup>46</sup> Crisis Group interviews, women living in Abala town, Abala town, April-May 2023.

<sup>47</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Peul woman living in village between Abala and Malian border, 29 March 2024.

More generally, it seems uncommon for jihadists in the Abala department to physically harm women in public – or even look at them directly – when compared to the terrible violence they regularly inflict on men and boys.<sup>48</sup> In massacres of civilians in Tillabery, IS Sahel militants have in at least one incident near Abala department targeted only men and boys, including children as young as eleven, while leaving women unharmed.<sup>49</sup>

Finally, while violence against men and boys was frequently mentioned by women as a reason to view IS Sahel negatively, the same often applied to perceptions of state security forces. Some women (primarily Peul) saw the jihadists as the lesser of two evils in this respect, saying they punish all who cross them, regardless of ethnicity, while accusing the security forces of mostly harassing Peul – who are associated by some within the security forces with jihadist insurgencies – on their patrols. According to a Peul woman in her fifties, people turn for protection either to jihadists or to security forces, depending on where they live:

Personally, living in Abala town, I have more confidence in the security forces. But at the same time, I am scared of them, because I have relatives in the bush who might at any moment become their victims. The security forces protect those who are in the towns but they commit violence against the rural population.<sup>50</sup>

### C. *Livelihoods*

The economy in Abala department and Tillabery more broadly – which has ramifications for everything from marriage and recruitment to education – mainly relies on farming, herding and cross-border trade. Widespread insecurity has made those traditional occupations dangerous. The few public-sector jobs that were previously available in the countryside have all but disappeared. On top of that, the government

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<sup>48</sup> As was the case before the current widespread insecurity, much of the violence against women and girls takes place within the home and as part of personal relationships. Conflict and displacement have exacerbated various risk factors for domestic violence: confinement of families to small, inadequate living quarters; increased economic stress in households; difficulties for both men and women in living up to gendered expectations (eg. bringing home an income or preparing food for the family); a breakdown in social mechanisms to mitigate tensions between spouses; and the normalisation of violence in society. See also Ornella Moderan, Fatoumata Maïga and Projet Boogu/Gayya, “Niger : Regards de Femmes sur l’Insécurité dans la Région de Tillabéri”, Institute for Security Studies, November 2022.

<sup>49</sup> See Crisis Group Briefing, *Murder in Tillabery: Calming Niger’s Emerging Communal Crisis*, op. cit.; “Niger: Surging Atrocities by Armed Islamist Groups”, Human Rights Watch, 11 August 2021; and “UNICEF condemns deadly Niger attack that left 58 dead”, CGTN, 18 March 2021. The jihadists may also be changing their tactics with respect to both men and women. IS Sahel has reportedly become less repressive in recent months. Nearly all the fifteen women Crisis Group spoke to in March to gauge the post-coup situation said incidents of corporal punishment, cattle theft, kidnappings and killings have declined since the second half of 2023. These observations align with reports of IS Sahel’s attempts to “normalise” its relationship with people in the Malian region of Ménaka, which borders Abala department, by reopening water points and markets, and protecting people from bandits. “Dans le nord-est du Mali, l’État islamique en voie de ‘normalisation’?”, *Afrique XXI*, 13 November 2023.

<sup>50</sup> Crisis Group interview, Peul woman residing in Abala but originally from a village close to the Malian border, Abala town, 29 April 2023.

has closed rural markets and prohibited the use of motorcycles in order to contain IS Sahel, inadvertently eroding people's livelihoods further.<sup>51</sup>

While both men and women have suffered hardship as a result of contracting economic prospects, there are differences in their experiences. One woman explained that even before IS Sahel appeared in her village, husbands would prohibit their wives from selling wares in the local market, which they considered inappropriate "wandering", leaving women to send their daughters instead.<sup>52</sup> Men also have long owned the vast majority of agricultural land in Niger. Still, before IS Sahel gained its current level of influence many women found ways to make money by collecting edible plants, raising small cattle or working the land. They used revenue from these activities to complement their husbands' income, giving them a measure of financial autonomy. One displaced woman recalled:

In the village, the women would collect edible plants and farm okra and sorrel, which we would sell in the surrounding markets. With the earnings, we could buy ourselves small animals and after some time cows. Even after my husband passed away from illness, I could easily support my family.<sup>53</sup>

Today, many women have lost these limited sources of income and autonomy. Those who remain in rural areas have often stopped working the land for fear of jihadist violence or sold their animals to make ends meet. On top of that, jihadists regularly seize cattle during incursions. Women who have sought refuge in Abala town have usually lost any animals they personally owned, in addition to the family herd, or access to their fields, or both. Many women have shown creativity and resilience in finding alternative activities that enable them to put food on the table.

Those who become widowed due to the conflict find themselves in a particularly precarious position, as patriarchal norms can cut off their access to their husbands' estates, including assets such as homes and land. One mother of three described how, after her husband disappeared in the border area, likely because of ties with IS Sahel, she and her children became entirely dependent on her brother for their survival, without whom, she noted, "I would have all the difficulties in the world".<sup>54</sup>

Some interviewees based in Abala town said they had benefited from aid distributions or income-generating activities developed by NGOs. But even before the 2023 coup complicated humanitarian efforts, many women indicated that they received only sporadic help or none at all. Several interviewees told Crisis Group that some young people, upon arriving in Abala town and seeing the dire situation of the displaced, had concluded it was preferable to go back to villages under IS Sahel's sway.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Crisis Group interview, 60-year-old Peul widow, Abala town, 27 April 2023. See also Crisis Group Report, *The Niger-Mali Border: Subordinating Military Action to a Political Strategy*, op. cit.

<sup>52</sup> Crisis Group interview, 50-year-old Hausa woman living in village close to Malian border, Niamey, 17 April 2023.

<sup>53</sup> Crisis Group interview, 51-year-old Djerma woman, Niamey, 13 April 2023.

<sup>54</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tuareg woman, Niamey, 12 April 2023. See also Moderan et al., "Niger : Regards de Femmes sur l'Insécurité dans la Région de Tillabéri", op. cit.

<sup>55</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Peul IDPs originally from village close to Malian border, Niamey, April 2023.

#### D. Education

Many among the rising generation of children in Tillabery – boys and girls alike – are not getting an education. As of January, around one third of schools in the Tillabery region had closed their doors amid the constant threat of violence, depriving more than 70,000 children of instruction. The vast majority of these facilities are primary schools.<sup>56</sup> Militants have at times burst into classrooms to intimidate teachers and pupils before damaging equipment or buildings. “Our children haven’t been to school for two years”, said a Peul woman with five children. “The terrorists whipped them, set school supplies on fire and destroyed the school. The teachers were scared and left our village”.<sup>57</sup>

IS Sahel does not appear to target girls’ education specifically, yet its attacks on schools have an outsized effect on girls. Based on Crisis Group’s interviews, many families lack money to send all their children to school in Abala town, where education is still available. Given the higher value attached to sons’ education, as well as the competing demands on daughters’ time due to chores, families tend to use whatever means they have to continue boys’ schooling. Girls who are no longer in school due to the conflict are even more likely to marry young, especially when their families are struggling to make ends meet.

That said, even if they have the money, many parents consider it risky for a girl’s marriage prospects to keep her in school past a certain age. “Studying is good, but marriage is better”, said a displaced Tuareg woman who would not object to her twelve-year-old daughter getting married. “If a girl goes to school, there can be pregnancies”.<sup>58</sup>

The military authorities have acknowledged the need to reopen schools in Tillabery, touting plans in this regard as proof of having made the area marginally safer.<sup>59</sup> The Regional Directorate for National Education identified 122 of 900 closed schools that could resume classes without a garrison on site. In November 2023, the government instructed the directorate to equip these schools to reopen by mid-December 2023.<sup>60</sup> Yet few teachers seem willing to return to the area. By the end of June 2024, only one of the eleven schools meant to reopen in Abala department had done so.<sup>61</sup> Should schools reopen, the authorities, together with aid organisations, will need to exert efforts to encourage families to send their daughters to school and keep them there longer.

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<sup>56</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Coordination of the Education Cluster staff, 20 March 2024. Crisis Group correspondence, donor officials, 2 August 2024. See also “Niger: Multi-Crisis Map as of February 2024”, European Commission, 1 March 2024.

<sup>57</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Peul woman living in village between Abala and Malian border, 29 March 2024.

<sup>58</sup> Crisis Group interview, 33-year-old Tuareg woman, Niamey, 12 April 2023. On the impact of insecurity in Tillabery on early marriage, see also Moderan et al., “Niger : Regards de Femmes sur l’Insécurité dans la Région de Tillabéri”, op. cit.

<sup>59</sup> “La réouverture des écoles fermées à Tillabéri : Une autre prouesse du CNSP en faveur du droit à l’éducation”, Agence Nigérienne de Presse, 12 December 2023.

<sup>60</sup> “Niger – Tillabéri : des écoles fermées pour insécurité rouvrent leurs portes”, Air Info, 13 December 2023.

<sup>61</sup> Six others have been relocated. Crisis Group correspondence, Coordination of the Education Cluster staff, 1 July 2024.

### E. Health Care

IS Sahel largely tolerates health services in the Abala department and Tillabery more broadly, likely because they or their relatives occasionally require medical care.<sup>62</sup> For instance, the village of Tigézéfen, situated less than 20km from Mali, still has a public health post. One woman told Crisis Group that “wives of jihadists” regularly came from Mali to give birth or get medical treatment at these village health posts.<sup>63</sup>

While targeting by jihadists is not necessarily an impediment to health service delivery, women's access to health care in rural villages is constrained by a lack of facilities that predates the current insecurity and by the dearth of transport to towns. In Abala town, health services struggle to meet the needs of a rapidly increased population. A 26-year-old Peul woman explained: “When we go to the health centre for prenatal consultations, we may find 40 people waiting in line. In those cases, the health workers will accept twenty people and tell the other women to come back another day”.<sup>64</sup> Many Crisis Group interviewees also mentioned the prohibitive cost of appointments and medication.

With birth rates that are among the highest in the world, especially among poor rural women, as well as negligible access to modern contraception, health services are crucial to the wellbeing of Nigerien women across the board, including in Tillabery.<sup>65</sup> The tolerance that IS Sahel has shown to date suggests that there may be greater leeway to support the health needs of women and men in Abala and more broadly.

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## IV. Fraying Intercommunal Ties

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Tensions among ethnic groups have both aided IS Sahel's rise in northern Tillabery and further deteriorated as a result of it, as Crisis Group has written in the past.<sup>66</sup> While men have made up the majority of the direct perpetrators and casualties in clashes, women are shaping this evolution of intercommunal ties in their own ways.

Some women have encouraged the men around them to take up arms. They did so in the late 1990s and 2000s, when clashes between Peul and Daosahak pastoralists, as well as between Peul herders and Djerma farmers, instilled deep fear in communities. Men who fought back then, some of whom later joined jihadist groups, are still hailed by some women as protectors of their community, who “made people feel safe”.<sup>67</sup> More recently, women have at times tried to convince men resist IS Sahel by force. One 21-year-old woman recounted how, after repeated jihadist incursions into

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<sup>62</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, high-level UN official in Niger, 9 July 2024.

<sup>63</sup> Crisis Group interview, woman living in village close to Malian border, Niamey, 17 April 2023.

<sup>64</sup> Crisis Group interview, 26-year-old Peul woman living in Abala town, phone, 28 March 2024.

<sup>65</sup> The birth rate stands at around seven births per woman. See “Fertility rate, total (births per woman)”, World Bank, April 2024.

<sup>66</sup> Crisis Group Report, *The Niger-Mali Border: Subordinating Military Action to a Political Strategy*, op. cit.; Crisis Group Africa Briefing, *Murder in Tillabery: Calming Niger's Emerging Communal Crisis*, op. cit.

<sup>67</sup> Crisis Group interview, Peul woman originally from village close to Malian border, Niamey, 14 April 2023.

her village, she and several other young women demanded that the men take up arms to protect them, rather than flee.<sup>68</sup>

Women also play a role in perpetuating everyday acrimony among members of different groups. The presence of jihadist groups has sharpened animosity among communities, but particularly vis-à-vis the Peul, who carry the stigma of having provided the bulk of the fighters in the early days of Islamist militancy in Mali. Several interviewees voiced their distrust of Peul men and women. While many blamed jihadist violence on Peul young men, in the same breath women from other communities accused Peul women of backing their supposed militant sons. A Hausa woman said her village “would chase out all the Peul” if they had the means to do so.<sup>69</sup> A Djerma farmer in her fifties interpreted an IS Sahel massacre of civilians close to her village as the Peul taking revenge for violence the Djerma had inflicted upon them in the past.<sup>70</sup> As a result, distrust permeates many mundane encounters. A Peul woman told Crisis Group: “As soon as a Peul man or woman comes near, people stop talking”.<sup>71</sup>

As for the potential for women to play a role as peacemakers, few of those interviewed saw such openings. While the majority of the women Crisis Group interviewed believed dialogue between communities – and between the state and jihadists – could serve as a path to long-term stability, they found it extremely difficult to envisage a role for themselves in conflict resolution. “Women don’t have any power in this”, said one woman. “Power belongs to the men”.<sup>72</sup> Another remarked: “Our political role is limited to voting. When it comes to managing conflicts, women are not called upon. ... Our knowledge is underestimated”.<sup>73</sup>

Finally, insecurity has disrupted the everyday social settings in which women from different groups traditionally interacted.<sup>74</sup> Loss of land and animals, displacement and market closures have left many women unable to sell each other farming products or goods such as children’s clothes. Fewer social ceremonies around marriage or birth – whether because of jihadist bans, insecurity or lack of money – likewise mean that women from different communities spend less time together and forge fewer bonds that might in certain circumstances help defuse tensions.

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## V. The Way Forward

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There is no question that IS Sahel has caused tremendous suffering for women and girls, many of whom have lost male relatives to jihadist violence, and whose daily lives are marred by almost permanent insecurity. Still, the microcosm that is Abala department reveals a nuanced picture of cause and effect. Virtually all aspects of women’s lives are shaped by deep-seated gender inequalities that predate the arrival

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<sup>68</sup> She added that she would work in Abala town or sell a goat to chip in to buy the men weapons. Crisis Group interview, Tuareg woman, Niamey, 15 April 2023.

<sup>69</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hausa woman living in village close to Malian border, Niamey, 17 April 2023.

<sup>70</sup> Crisis Group interview, Djerma woman who fled her village, Niamey, 13 April 2023.

<sup>71</sup> Crisis Group interview, Peul woman living in Abala town, Niamey, 16 April 2023.

<sup>72</sup> Crisis Group interview, 51-year-old Djerma woman, Niamey, 13 April 2023.

<sup>73</sup> Crisis Group interview, 55-year-old Peul woman, Niamey, 19 April 2023.

<sup>74</sup> Crisis Group interview, Nigerien sociologist, Niamey, 3 February 2023.

of IS Sahel in the area. In some regards, including when it comes to marriage, jihadist practices merged with these norms. In areas like education, the outsized impact of the conflict on girls' options is due less to IS Sahel targeting them than to widely held views on suitable activities and aspirations for adolescent girls. Patterns of deeply ingrained gender inequality also help explain why some women express appreciation for IS Sahel's tenets, approving of the group's enforcement of "proper" dress and behaviour and hoping its insistence on secluding women at home might provide a reprieve from arduous labour.

An appreciation of structural gender inequality – as exacerbated by jihadist influence – can inform efforts to improve human security in the region, if only incrementally, and may present opportunities for Niamey to collaborate with Western donors at a moment when traditional counter-insurgency collaboration has dried up. For the new authorities in Niamey, who according to donors are aware of the need to ease the population's plight to maintain their support, investments along the following lines – pursued with donor and NGO support – can be a valuable part of wider efforts to make the state deliver for its citizens.<sup>75</sup> Opportunities to help women gain experience and confidence in governance and dispute resolution were never abundant, and are fewer now, but are still worth pursuing for those donors and organisations that have the access and capacity to do so.

#### A. *Making the State Work Better for Women*

Authorities should step up the delivery of basic services, notably health and education, in Abala department and Tillabery region more broadly, paying particular attention to the differentiated needs of women and girls. In safer areas like Abala town, the state – with the support of partners – should ensure that medical facilities have the personnel, medication and other basic supplies to meet the needs of both displaced and host populations. In zones under strong jihadist influence, the facilities that continue to operate should be better equipped to provide basic health services, particularly maternal health care, to surrounding communities. The use of mobile clinics, which offer important care such as check-ups for pregnant women in the department, could also be expanded.

Some among the authorities fear that such services, and humanitarian aid in general, will mainly benefit jihadist groups and their supporters. But this reasoning is somewhat inverted. The authorities will not weaken the jihadist groups by severely punishing the rural populations living in the areas under their influence. On the contrary, by demonstrating that the state can meet the basic needs of these rural communities, including by facilitating access to humanitarian aid, they stand to regain credibility.

As for education, donors should support efforts by the authorities to reopen schools where they can do so safely and without military involvement. All involved should pay particular attention to getting girls back into school, raising awareness among their parents and ensuring that parents consider facilities safe and appropriate for their daughters as well as their sons.

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<sup>75</sup> Crisis Group interview, donor officials, Brussels, 28 May 2024.

### B. *Supporting Women's Livelihoods*

Humanitarian aid is particularly vital for women heads of household who have lost their sources of income. The military authorities should do all they can to lift obstacles to humanitarian access, including the requirement for military escorts. Where access restrictions are required to guarantee the safety of humanitarian workers amid military operations, they should be as targeted as possible in both time and space; decentralising decision-making so that regional authorities make the call on these restrictions would be a positive step in this direction. Authorities should also share detailed and up-to-date information on access rules with humanitarians.

There are steps donors can take as well. Funding of course is key. Current funding levels are not sufficient to meet the population's needs in Tillabery. Recognising that budgets are stretched, more support is nevertheless needed. Donors – especially those who are keeping long-term development support suspended – should find ways to provide multi-year humanitarian funding that allows for more structural and predictable interventions.<sup>76</sup> Confidence building should be another focus area. Restrictions on humanitarian activity also reflect the military authorities' misgivings about the motivations of Western NGOs, which they suspect of spying and sometimes even of supporting the insurgents. Despite the very challenging environment, donors and UN agencies should therefore double down on efforts to meet with military leaders to convey that NGOs respect principles of neutrality and impartiality.

Donors should also strengthen, and where necessary resume, their support for economic activities that enable women to earn money. Despite the difficult working environment, Nigerien NGOs like Action Pour le Bien Etre are creating opportunities for women in Abala town, for example fattening goats for sale, growing vegetables or restoring degraded land. Beyond allowing women to feed their families, these endeavours can provide them with more power within the household, a sense of individual purpose and social connection.

Activities should be organised in such a way that women from different communities interact and collaborate. While displaced women are in a particularly precarious position, support should also target women from host communities. Sustainability and predictability of financial support will be important to avoid both disappointed expectations and a loss of precious time and energy for the women who participate.

### C. *Enabling Women to Contribute to Dispute Resolution*

Across Niger, men dominate politics. There has been progress for women's representation at the national level: a 2000 law introducing a quota system for elected and appointed positions increased the number of women in the National Assembly. Women have also been active in demonstrations in Niamey, including in support of the military's 2023 power grab.<sup>77</sup> At the subnational level, however, very few women hold

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<sup>76</sup> A positive example is the recent announcement of a \$19 million, three-year program for education in crisis-affected regions of Niger by Education Cannot Wait, a global fund for education in emergencies and protracted crises that pools humanitarian funds from various donors, including the European Commission and France, both of which are keeping (most) development cooperation with Niger suspended. Crisis Group telephone interview, Education Cannot Wait staff, 31 July 2024.

<sup>77</sup> "Women Demonstrate in Niger's Niamey in Support of Military Council", Arab World Press, 31 August 2023.



public office, whether as regional governors, department prefects or mayors of communes. Women rarely occupy chieftaincy positions such as canton or village chief.<sup>78</sup> Strengthening women's roles in conflict resolution and politics more broadly is a long-term project that has made limited headway since the 2000 law came into effect. The military rulers have thus far shown no interest in combating gender inequality, scrapping the Ministry for the Promotion of Women and the Protection of Children when they put together a new cabinet.<sup>79</sup>

There are ways to bolster women's participation in governance, however. One area that deserves attention is supporting women's roles in mediating local disputes in their communities. Donors might help with capacity building or with psycho-social support for individual women mediators, but they should also focus on making influential personages – including local authorities and traditional chiefs – aware of the contributions that women can make if given the chance.

International NGOs with experience with such activities in Abala are facing new restraints since the 2023 coup. The dissolution of relevant counterparts in the central government (such as the Cabinet du Médiateur de la République) and at the local level, donor restrictions on funding that benefits government bodies following the coup, including the Haute Autorité à la Consolidation de la Paix, and the aforementioned requirement to use military escorts when travelling in Tillabery all constrain work in this vein. Some, however, have been able to continue their work, thanks to a network of local partners built up over the years.<sup>80</sup> Donors, including the EU, should continue their support long-term and provide flexibility as needed to help local and international organisations weather the difficulties.

Programs should involve women from all ethnic groups, as well as different ages and education levels. Organisers should follow the lead of local women: they are the ones who know whether and when they can safely travel and meet civil society actors, for example on weekly market days in Abala town. The disputes women are invited to resolve should include those at the household level and which affect women in specific ways, for instance those related to marriage agreements or domestic violence. Women should also have the opportunity to mediate conflicts that go beyond their doorsteps, such as over land ownership or between professional groups. Programs should avoid perpetuating simplistic gender stereotypes or saddling women with unrealistic responsibility for bringing peace to their communities.

In the short term, such activities can provide women with a way to overcome their sense of powerlessness and build their confidence in assuming a more public role.

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<sup>78</sup> On the increasing number of women in parliament, see “Women in Parliament in 2020”, Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2021. Even before the 2023 coup, all eight regional governors were men. Of the 63 prefects appointed in November 2021 to head up Niger's departments, three were women (4.8 per cent). “Communiqué du Conseil des Ministres du lundi 8 Novembre 2021”, Agence Nigérienne de Presse, 8 November 2021. In 2019, only 3 per cent of mayors were women. “L'Égalité du genre au Niger”, Agence Luxembourgeoise pour la Coopération au Développement, 2019. On chieftaincy positions, see “Universal Periodic Review of Niger”, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, May 2021.

<sup>79</sup> Kadiatou Hamadou M., “Échos tribune : pour le rétablissement du Ministère de la Promotion de la Femme et de la Protection de l'Enfant au Niger”, *Echos du Niger*, 16 August 2023.

<sup>80</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, staff of international NGO supporting community-level mediation, 27 March 2024; EU official, Brussels, 28 May 2024. See also “Au Niger, la junte au pouvoir dissout les conseils des collectivités territoriales”, *Le Monde*, 5 April 2024.

Having more women mediators can also help draw attention to disputes that affect women specifically and put the women who are parties to these disputes at ease to share their concerns. At the same time, such support can help lay the groundwork for women's participation in higher-level dialogues, once the time becomes ripe again to explore political solutions to the insecurity in the area.

## **VI. Conclusion**

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The influence of IS Sahel in Abala department, and northern Tillabery more broadly, has created new suffering and constraints for many women and girls. Yet a straightforward story of women's victimhood caused by jihadist oppression does not do justice to their experiences. Many of the main obstacles to women's wellbeing and autonomy, from early and unequal marriages to lack of education and unaccompanied pregnancies, predate jihadist influence and are linked instead to both patriarchal norms and the longstanding weakness of state services in the area. These have combined in pernicious ways with instability to further limit the options available to women and girls. Accustomed to deep-seated patriarchy and hardship, some see advantages in IS Sahel's presence in the area.

Despite the challenging security and political environment, the government, donors and civil society organisations can take steps that give women in Tillabery region more power over their lives. These should focus on making the state work better for women and setting up economic activities that allow them to provide for themselves and their families. They should also enable women to play a bigger role in mediating local disputes, to prepare them and society at large for women's contributions to political solutions to the region's insecurity down the line.

**Niamey/Dakar/Brussels, 29 August 2024**

Appendix A: Map of Niger



Map No. 4234 Rev. 1 UNITED NATIONS  
January 2018

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