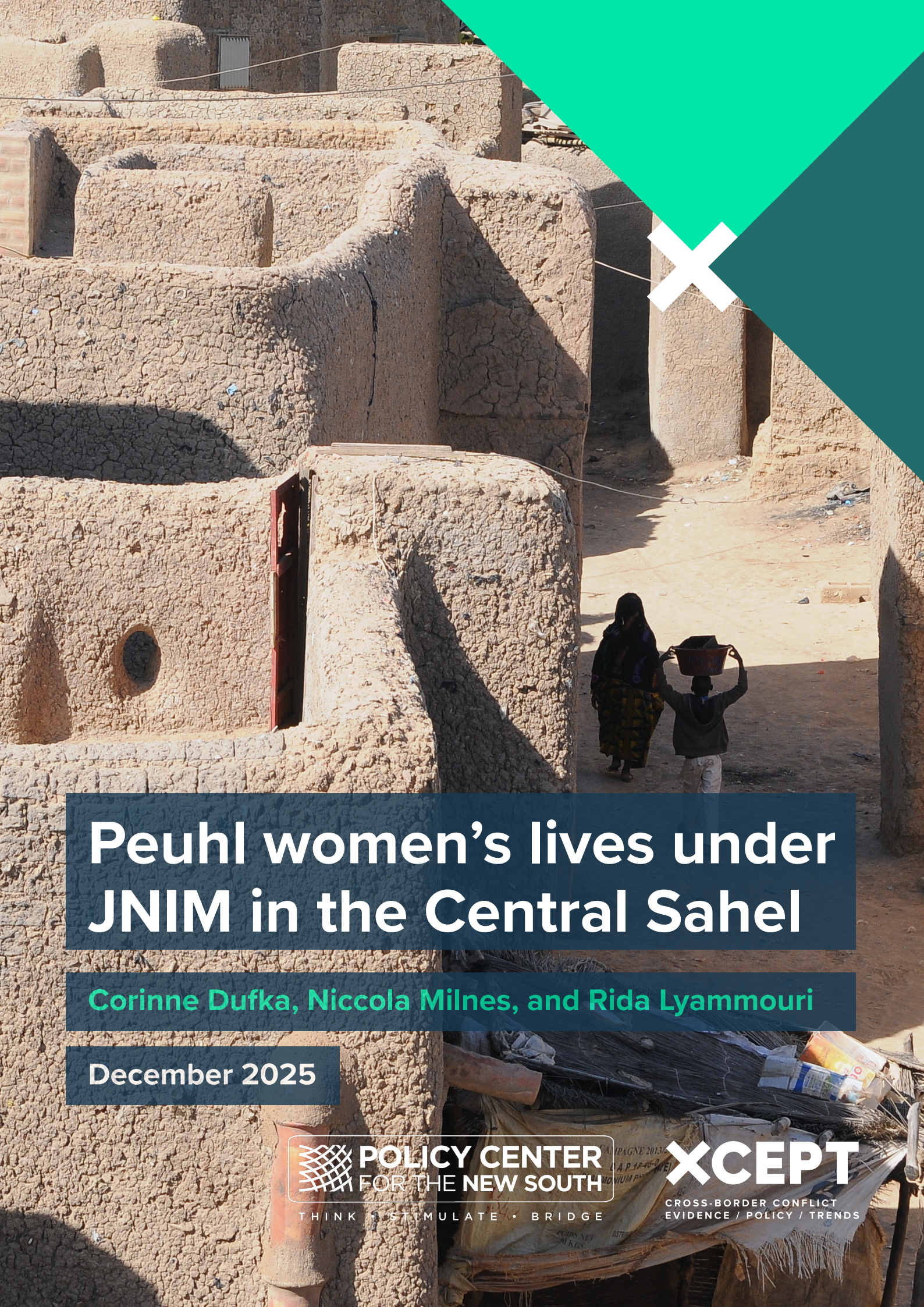

Peuhl women's lives under JNIM in the Central Sahel

Corinne Dufka, Niccola Milnes, and Rida Lyammouri

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About XCEPT

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Abbreviations

AES	Alliance of Sahel States
AQ	al-Qaeda
Civ–mil	Civil–military
CT	Counterterrorism
CWA	Coastal West Africa
FDS	Burkinabè Defence and Security Forces (Force de défense et de sécurité)
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
FAMA	Malian Armed Forces (Forces Armées Maliennes)
FET	Female Engagement Team
IED	Improvised explosive device
ISSP	Islamic State Sahel Province
JNIM	Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin
KII	Key informant interview
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
VDP	Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie)

Introduction

Although the crises affecting the Sahel have been widely analysed through the lenses of armed groups, state fragility and geopolitics, much less is known about how women experience insurgent governance in their everyday lives. This is particularly pertinent to members of the pastoralist Peuhl ethnic group, which has been strategically targeted for recruitment by the Central Sahel's dominant Islamist armed group, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), as a means of facilitating both local entrenchment and territorial expansion.[1] JNIM's attempts to regulate mobility and economic activity, as well as social, cultural and religious practices, affect women in profound ways. Understanding these dynamics is not simply a matter of documenting hardship. Rather, it is essential to grasp how legitimacy is constructed, how communities adapt, and how conflict dynamics extend across porous borders.

Drawing on 77 in-person interviews conducted between May and August 2025 with women from Mali and Burkina Faso, backed up by 24 key informant interviews (KIIs) with village elders, West African security force members, policymakers, and local civil society actors (see Annex 1 and 2 for further details), this study reveals that women's adaptation to JNIM's governance model more often reflects a survival strategy than radicalisation.

The women's perspectives provide critical insights into both the attraction and limits of JNIM's governance model, revealing a nuanced picture of life under the group. The accounts highlight how coercion is partially counterbalanced by service provision; how women navigate imposed constraints through adaptation and agency; and how state abuses often enhance insurgent legitimacy. Here it is worth noting that the women with the most positive perceptions of JNIM governance hailed from areas that had been under the group's effective control the longest, specifically areas in Central Mali (especially north of the Niger River, known as the flooded zone, or '*zone inondée*') and northern Burkina Faso.

The respondents were drawn from different generations and walks of life, encompassing recent brides, family matriarchs, housewives, artisanal gold miners, entrepreneurs, and women affiliated with JNIM fighters. Many were grieving for loved ones killed by government soldiers, ethnic militia or JNIM fighters. Some loathed JNIM and had fled into exile to escape, while others supported the group and could not imagine living under the state again.

The testimonies illustrate JNIM's ability to both assert authority over and secure compliance from women. Building on this, the paper demonstrates how deeper understanding of JNIM's governance model in Mali and Burkina Faso – where it is more advanced than in neighbouring states – can help inform cross-border conflict and counterterrorism (CT) responses and prevention efforts across the Central Sahel and Coastal West Africa (CWA). In particular, it points to the danger of such strategies inadvertently reinforcing the extremist dynamics they seek to address should women's lived realities continue to be overlooked.

1 This report uses 'Peuhl' to refer to the West African ethnic group also known as Fulani or Fulbe, as it is the term most commonly used by the communities themselves. All women respondents selected for this research were Peuhl, in order to capture the views of less represented members of an ethnic group targeted by JNIM for recruitment and territorial expansion, as well as by state counterterrorism operations.

Key findings

- **Peuhl women have long existed on the margins of the state, which they view as a benevolent, if largely absent, provider of basic services (such as healthcare and education).** Peuhl women cite limited interaction with state actors, from which they have few expectations. Instead, they primarily rely on traditional leaders and customary authorities to address challenges and resolve conflicts. Respondents, particularly those in Mali, expressed longstanding dissatisfaction with perceived government corruption (e.g. solicitation of bribes) and the failure to protect communities from banditry. Thus far, however, such grievances have fallen far short of motivating widespread communal support for an armed insurgency (whether led by JNIM or any other group).

- **JNIM's expansion and consolidation have wrought profound changes – most of them negative – in all spheres of women's lives.** JNIM's rules and dictates – anchored in the group's strict interpretation of Islam and views on morality, gender norms, and the role of the state – have severely restricted women's mobility, work, healthcare access, and social and cultural life. Respondents describe JNIM regulations as economically devastating and deeply detrimental to their physical and mental health. In particular, they railed against the requirement to wear the black hijab and abaya (head scarf and robe); prohibitions on work; and bans on traditional practices and ceremonies. Some JNIM policies have exacerbated gender inequalities (e.g. access to education, healthcare, and microcredit) that central states had been trying to address.

- **Some of JNIM's policies and services resonate with rural Peuhl women.** In offering praise for JNIM, respondents cite, among other benefits: the provision of humanitarian assistance; prevention of banditry; reduced bribe payments; increased access to justice; resolution of longstanding inter-community disputes over natural resource access; and reduced domestic abuse. Many women perceive JNIM's service provision to be less corrupt, more immediate, and broadly consistent with their religious values. In some cases, JNIM's policies – and messaging – have exposed gaps in state service provision, thereby bolstering its legitimacy.

- **Women's perceptions of JNIM are mixed, tending to evolve as they spend more time under the group's control.** Women who express more positive views of JNIM tend to have lived longer under the group's governance, have family members involved with the group, and/or reside in areas where JNIM's services provision is relatively well established. These women also describe lower levels of JNIM brutality. JNIM's strategic, often coercive, use of traditional leaders (notably village chiefs, imams, and *marabouts* – Muslim holy men often believed to have healing powers) to implement its policies and dictates contributes to the group's local legitimacy.

- **Women's tolerance or positive perceptions of JNIM largely reflect adaptation rather than religious radicalisation.** Most women who said they appreciated the group's provision of services did not equate this with support for its vision, although some did express support for JNIM's military operations and expansion, and several admitted to providing logistical, intelligence and other operational support. As large numbers of women marry fighters, and their children reach adolescence without having lived under the state, JNIM governance is altering social, generational, religious, behavioural and governance norms in ways that centre women in the group's expansion.

- **Violations committed by government-affiliated security forces in Mali and Burkina Faso are undermining state legitimacy.** Real or perceived collective punishment of the Peuhl community by soldiers, government-affiliated militias and foreign military partners is significantly eroding how wom-

en perceive the state. Many respondents who have spent years under JNIM control have only had contact with the state through CT operations, which have often resulted in unlawful civilian casualties. These violations fuel a narrative of discrimination, which JNIM uses to tout its role as protector and feed recruitment into the group. The women who have lived the longest under JNIM control, and thus been subject to repeated CT operations, are more inclined towards negative perceptions of the state. This has important implications for reasserting state authority in Mali and Burkina Faso, and for CWA states working to prevent JNIM's expansion.

Policy implications

The testimonies presented in this paper reveal that while many women are supportive of the state's role as an essential service provider, JNIM is proving increasingly successful at entrenching its own adaptive governance and service provision model. As such, the study findings challenge overly simplistic framings that see a return to prior approaches to state governance as the logical endpoint of regional CT efforts. Restraint, accountability and community engagement in security and governance provision is therefore needed if JNIM's expansion is to be countered.

With this in mind, the following six policy considerations in particular emerge from the research:

- **Rebuild trust and state legitimacy through civilian protection and service provision.** Unlawful killings, collective punishment and other repressive practices by government-affiliated forces not only undermine CT responses, but drive JNIM recruitment and support. Further negative effects of security operations include disruption to local livelihoods, cross-border trade and social ties. Governments should therefore practice restraint, investigate abuses transparently and reform units with poor records.

- **Embed inclusive civilian engagement from the earliest stages of CT responses.** Integrating women into outreach and coordination efforts can help foster positive relationships with security forces. Here, consistent, non-threatening contact can mitigate the negative perceptions that often arise when a community's only interaction with security forces occurs during active operations. It also serves to counter the perceived impunity of state security forces and any tendency to engage in extractive practices (e.g. bribery) – behaviours JNIM is quick to capitalise on in areas it controls or seeks to penetrate.

- **Counter JNIM's governance model by reinvigorating services.** JNIM is embedding its presence through an adaptive governance model that is responsive to the needs of communities under its control. In this context, a consultative process that empowers local authorities and involves consistent political engagement – beyond electoral cycles or crisis moments – could alter perceptions of government as absent or unreliable.

- **Reframe approaches to gender and ideology in CT strategies.** Many observant Muslim women interviewees reject JNIM's religious orthodoxy, citing its misalignment with local traditions. CT efforts should therefore avoid treating adherence to conservative Islam as a risk factor for radicalisation, and instead focus on restoring protective, service-oriented governance that meets local needs. JNIM's restrictions on traditional practices in ceremonies – marriages, baptisms, funerals – have caused grief and frustration. As such, supporting culturally relevant traditions offers an opportunity for reinforcing social cohesion and undermining JNIM's legitimacy.

- **Enhance regional and cross-border partnerships to strengthen CT responses.** Fragmented CT efforts across the Central Sahel and CWA states hinder strategic outcomes, particularly in the context of the recent split between the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). A light-touch, regionally owned coordination mechanism would provide a platform for aligning intelligence, lessons learned and civil–military engagement strategies. Amid donor withdrawals and funding cuts, ensuring women's priorities and participation remain at the centre of CT and stabilisation strategies is critical to countering JNIM's regional expansion.

- **Invest in evidence to strengthen gender-sensitive CT responses.** Common assumptions about the sequencing or salience of factors shaping women's views of armed Islamists – such as governance, coercion, adaptation and religious radicalisation – should be re-examined. Further research on women in other CWA borderlands, and among other ethnic groups, can deepen understandings of the risk and resilience factors present in countries working to prevent JNIM's expansion, such as Ghana, Togo and Benin. It also is critical to assess the views of borderland communities living outside JNIM's control, to better understand how information is shared across lines of control and what CT adaptations are needed to counter the expansions and normalisation of JNIM's rule.

1. A landscape of conflict and extremism: Islamic insurgency and gender in the Central Sahel

West Africa's Central Sahel region has long suffered from overlapping security, political and humanitarian crises.[2] Nearly half of all terrorism deaths recorded in 2024 (armed group members and civilians) were in the Sahel, while the humanitarian crisis there is one of the world's most serious (see Figure 1, next page).[3] As of July 2025, the region was host to more than three million internally displaced people and almost one million refugees.[4] The entrenchment and expansion of armed Islamist insurgents across the Central Sahel poses a threat to the stability of neighbouring CWA states, which are deeply interconnected through trade, kinship and mobility.

The Sahel's most recent crisis was triggered by the January 2012 rebellion by separatist ethnic Tuaregs, who briefly fought alongside groups allied to al-Qaeda (AQ) when launching attacks in northern Mali.[5] Since then, the coalition of AQ-allied groups have expelled the state and its institutions from significant portions of the country's territory, gradually expanding into Mali's central and southern regions.[6] At the same time, they have managed to establish roots in Burkina Faso and, to a lesser extent, Niger.

In March 2017, four AQ-allied groups banded together to form JNIM, which had proceeded to consolidate its presence in the Central Sahel, while attempting to expand into the northern regions of Benin, Ghana and Togo.[7] A group known as the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP) – formed in 2015 and allied to the Islamic State – is also present in the Sahel, primarily in Niger and the tri-border region between Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger.[8]

Various regional and international stabilisation and military efforts have been deployed to Mali, the epicentre of instability, and elsewhere in the Sahel. These include a United Nations peacekeeping force from 2013 to 2023, two French-led military interventions from 2013 to 2022, the G5 Sahel

2 Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED), 'Conflict in the Sahel'.

3 Institute for Economics & Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2025: Measuring The Impact of Terrorism* (Sydney, 2025), p. 6; UNHCR, 'UNHCR urges global response to neglected humanitarian crisis in the Sahel', 7 June 2024.

4 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 'Platforme de Coordination des Déplacés Forcés au Sahel', 31 July 2025.

5 P. Cole and B. McQuinn, eds, *The Libyan revolution and its aftermath* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

6 S. M. Cold-Ravnkilde and B. Ba, 'Jihadist Ideological Conflict and Local Governance in Mali', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 48: 3, 2022, pp. 300–315.

7 The four groups were Ansar al-Din, al-Mourabitoun, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Macina Liberation Front; F. A. Afriyie, 'Weaving through the maze of terrorist marriages in Africa's Sahel region: Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) under review', *Cogent Social Sciences* 10: 1, 2024.

8 ISSP was originally known as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara. See: I. Achek, 'Territorial rivalry and jihadist strategy', AfroPolicy, 8 July 2025.

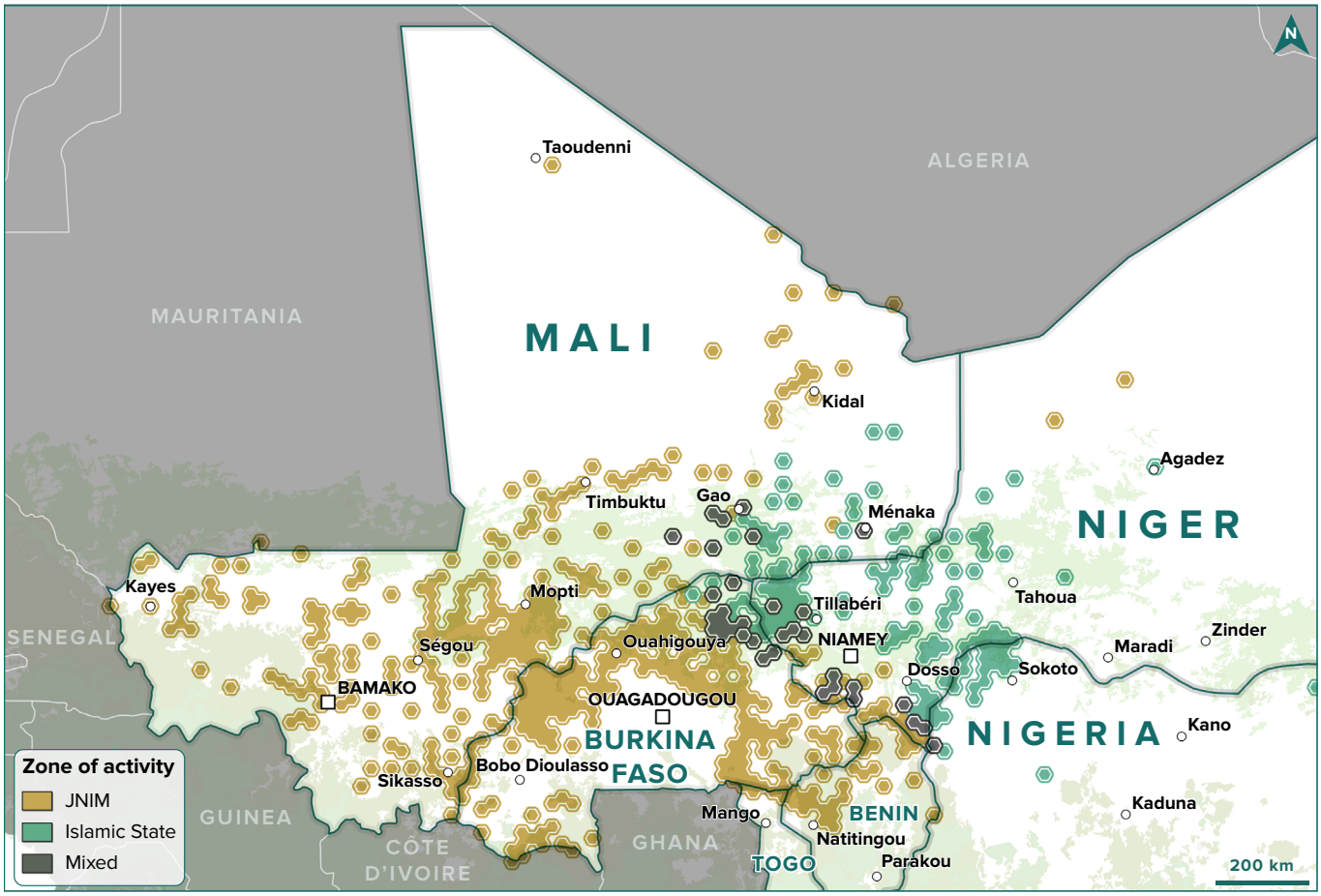

Figure 1. Activity of jihadist militant groups in the Central Sahel, from 1 January to 25 July 2025 (data from ACLED)

Regional force, and, from 2021, Russian-backed forces.[9] Despite helping to re-establish state control over key urban areas, these interventions have not only struggled to retain diplomatic support, but been largely unable to stop armed Islamist expansion across the region, particularly in rural areas.

The inability of democratically elected governments in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso to defeat armed Islamist groups contributed to a series of coups d'états between 2020 and 2022. At the time of writing, all three countries are governed by military regimes.[10] More generally, the Sahel conflicts have been characterised by gross violations of international humanitarian and human rights law by all armed

9 C. J. Matthijssen, 'Relevant lessons from Mali for the Future of Peacekeeping', *International Peacekeeping* 31: 5, 2024, pp. 541–52; M. Ricard, J. Antouly and Y. Guichaoua, 'Anatomy of a Fall: Understanding France's Reluctant Retreat from Central Sahel', *Geopolitics*, publ. online Jan 2025; A. Sandor, P. M. Frowd and J. Hönke, 'Productive failure, African agency, and security cooperation in West Africa: the case of the G5 Sahel', *European Journal of International Security*, publ. online Mar. 2025; C. Spearin, 'Russia's Wagner Group/Africa Corps: an authoritarian conflict management examination', *Conflict, Security & Development* 24: 5, 2024, pp. 479–99.

10 In the face of significant security, diplomatic and security challenges, the three nations formed a new political grouping in 2024 called the Alliance of the Sahel States (AES). Al Jazeera, 'Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso military leaders sign new pact, rebuff ECOWAS', 6 July 2024; J. Watling and N. Wilén, 'Assessing the Causes of Strategic Realignment in Sahelian States', *The RUSI Journal* 169: 4, 2024, pp. 64–77.

groups, including those linked to AQ and the Islamic State; state security forces and government-affiliated militias; and foreign military partners, notably those supported by Russia.[11]

Understanding governance by armed Islamist insurgents

Several studies have highlighted that armed Islamist groups often attempt to build legitimacy through providing order and services. On jihadist governance in the Sahel more specifically, Rupesinghe et al. note that 'jihadist insurgents' tend to be portrayed as achieving their objectives through brute force against civilians, rather than through a 'variety of strategies to rule territory and populations'.[12] Guichaoua and Bouhlel, meanwhile, point to ISSP's and JNIM's ability to establish a 'social contract' with local populations.[13]

While JNIM and ISSP are both present in all three Central Sahel nations, experts agree that JNIM's methods – notably in Mali and Burkina Faso – are more effective, centralised and collaborative than those of ISSP, which favours territorial control through more rigid, authoritarian, and brutal tactics.[14]

Throughout the Central Sahel and its neighbouring borderlands, JNIM has systematically targeted the pastoralist Peuhl for recruitment and exposed their villages to its governance regime.[15] In this respect, Pellerin notes that the Peuhl have disproportionately suffered from state CT operations due to their perceived support for JNIM.[16] These abuses have, however, only served to drive recruitment into the group.[17]

Understanding gender, agency and violent extremism

Studies on women's interactions with armed Islamist insurgencies have primarily focused on recruitment trends, including vulnerability factors, women's motivation for joining, and the roles they play. When considering the scale of women's involvement in insurgencies, Bigio and Vogelstein note that 'women

11 For more information on the history, composition, and patterns of alleged violations of human rights and International humanitarian law in the two countries, see the web pages provided by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International (on Burkina Faso and Mali). Throughout this report, 'government-affiliated security forces' denotes the ensemble of state-backed forces engaged in CT operations, including the army, gendarmerie and (some) police units; state-supported or sponsored militia groups; and the Russian-backed Wagner Group/Africa Corp.

12 N. Rupesinghe, M. H. Naghizadeh and C. Cohen, *Reviewing Jihadist Governance in the Sahel*, Working Paper 984/2021 (Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2021). For the purpose of this report, 'governance' is defined as making, implementing, and ensuring compliance of laws, societal norms, and behavioural codes which the 'governed' are expected to follow, as well as having the ability to enforce, monitor, and mete out punishment for non-compliance.

13 Y. Guichaoua and F. Bouhlel, *Interactions between civilians, and jihadists in Mali and Niger* (University of Kent, 2023).

14 M. DeAngelo, 'Counterterrorism Shortcomings in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger', Foreign Policy Research Institute, 3 March 2025; L. Raafat, 'The schism of Jihadism in the Sahel: how Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are battling for legitimacy in the Sahelian context', Middle East Institute, Oct. 2021.

15 B. Sangaré, 'Le Centre du Mali: épicentre du djihadisme?', GRIP, 20 May 2016.

16 M. Pellerin, *'Armed violence in the Sahara. are we moving from jihadism to insurgency?'* (Paris: Etudes de L'ifri, 2019).

17 Non-Peuhl communities have also been recruited by JNIM. Furthermore, intra-Peuhl dynamics are complex, with some subaltern groups joining JNIM and others siding with regional governments. See, for example: Human Rights Watch, '"By Day We Fear the Army, By Night the Jihadists": Abuses by Armed Islamists and Security Forces in Burkina Faso', 21 May 2018; O. Türk, 'Al-Qaida's State-Building Potential in Africa through JNIM', *ORSAM*, 28 August 2025.

have been active participants in 60% of global violence involving non-state armed groups over the past several decades'.[18]

Expanding on this, Mia Bloom asserts that women play central, not peripheral, roles in global terrorist movements, including as active operatives, recruiters, propagandists and suicide bombers. Here, Bloom identifies five key factors driving women's recruitment into terrorist organisations worldwide: 1) revenge; 2) relationship; 3) respect; 4) redemption; and 5) rape.[19] Meanwhile, in her 2007 study, Von Knop explores the indispensable contribution women make to AQ's 'female jihad', from educating children in the ideology to providing operational and financial support.[20]

While studies examining women's involvement in JNIM are few, several useful insights can be gleaned from work on al-Shabaab and Boko Haram. On the former, Orly Stern shows how women both provide support to al-Shabaab and influence their sons, husbands and brothers to join the group.[21] On the latter, Matfess looks at how Boko Haram has 'systematically exploited women' to advance its aims, including as lethal suicide bombers, identifying four participant types: 1) 'coerced women'; 2) 'revolutionary women'; 3) 'delinquent women'; and 4) 'women clientelism'.[22]

A 2019 policy brief, a 2021 ISS study exploring the roles women play in supporting JNIM operations, and a 2022 briefing on Burkina Faso discuss women's voluntary or coerced association with JNIM, including their role on providing intelligence, fostering recruitment and securing logistics.[23] These and other studies have explored how JNIM exploits limited economic opportunities, communal conflict and family ties, together with resentment arising from abusive, state-backed CT operations to coerce or incentivise women to join their ranks. A 2023 study by Berlingozzi and Raineri advances how armed Islamist practices in the Sahel resonate with and reinforce existing Peuhl gender norms.[24]

A 2023 study by Bernard and Mossi details how JNIM both adapts its recruitment strategy to local contexts, for example by offering Beninese women economic opportunities in exchange for working as informants, thereby helping them avoid the arranged marriages that are the norm in their conservative villages.[25] Concurring with this, Bigio and Vogelstein argue that JNIM's promise of freedom from traditional marital duties is 'a less understood push factor for women from conservative patriarchal communities'.[26] Further, recent XCEPT research by de Bruijne et al. finds that JNIM's expanding influence and the corresponding state CT operations have negatively impacted the livelihoods of women traders

18 J. Bigio and R. B. Vogelstein, *Women and terrorism: Hidden Threats, Forgotten Partners* (Council on Foreign Relations, May 2019).

19 M. Bloom, *Bombshell: The Many Faces of Women Terrorists* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2011).

20 K. Von Knop, 'The Female Jihad: Al Qaeda's Women', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30: 5, 2007, pp. 397–414.

21 O. M. Stern, *The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab* (Adam Smith International, 2019); O. M. Stern, *Married in the Shadows: The Wives of al-Shabaab* (Adam Smith International, 2020).

22 H. Matfess, *Women and the War on Boko Haram: Wives, Weapons, Witnesses* (London, England: Zed Books, 2017).

23 Bigio and Vogelstein, *Women and terrorism*; J. E. A. Abatan and B. Sangaré, 'Katiba Macina and Boko Haram: including women to what end?', Institute for Security Studies, 2021; P. Campore. 'The role of gender in violent extremism in Burkina Faso', Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition, 11 May 2022.

24 L. Berlingozzi and L Raineri, 'Reiteration or reinvention? Jihadi governance and gender practices in the Sahel', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 25 (5): 43-66. (2023).

25 A. Bernard and A. Mossi, *An assessment of the experiences and vulnerabilities of pastoralists and at-risk groups in the Atakora department of Benin*, Elva Analytical Report 9Stichting Elva, Jan. 2023).

26 Bigio and Vogelstein, *Women and terrorism*; Pellerin, *Armed violence*.

active in cross-border regions, as well as eroded the social ties that contribute to local resilience and stability.[27]

Several studies acknowledge the underrepresentation of women from the Sahel in their interview samples, as well as, more generally, the dearth of research into women's experiences of or within these groups.[28] For example, Guichaoua and Bouhlel note the risk of bias in favour of 'male gatekeepers', while Bernard and Mossi highlight the lack of 'methodical research on the push and pull factors for women and girls' involvement in VEOs [violent extremist organisations] in West Africa'.[29] Going further, Raineri asserts that the link between gender and violent extremism is 'rarely analyzed in depth', a view echoed by Rupesinghe et al.[30]

Although existing studies of jihadist governance in the Sahel have documented how armed groups tax, adjudicate disputes and regulate local life, they rarely capture how these dynamics are lived and interpreted by women themselves. In particular, the perspectives of Peuhl women – those most affected by JNIM's governance practices – remain largely absent. This silence not only obscures the gendered mechanisms used by insurgents to establish authority, but how women's adaptations, coping strategies, and cross-border social ties influence the spread of governance norms into neighbouring states.

Addressing this gap is critical if we are to understand the foundations of insurgent legitimacy, and in turn prioritise effective, gender-sensitive responses across the Sahel and CWA. Thus, through centring women's first-hand accounts of their lives under JNIM, this study seeks to paint a more nuanced picture of the group's 'effective control'.[31]

27 G. Ellis and K. de Bruijne, *Chapter 1: Stability and livelihood challenges in the Bawku and Chereponi border regions between Ghana, Togo, and Burkina Faso*, in K. de Bruijne, A. Bernard, G. Ellis, and A. Lebovich, eds, 'Life on the line: stability and livelihood challenges in the borderlands of Coastal West Africa', XCEPT Research, Aug. 2025.

28 D. Eizenga and W. Williams, 'The Puzzle of JNIM and Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel', Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 1 Dec. 2020; Guichaoua and Bouhlel, *Interactions between civilians*; Bernard and Mossi, *An assessment*; L. Raineri, *Dogmatism or pragmatism? Violent extremism and gender in the central Sahel* (International Alert, July 2020).

29 Guichaoua and Bouhlel, *Interactions between civilians*; Bernard and Mossi, *An assessment*.

30 Raineri, *Dogmatism or pragmatism?*; Rupesinghe, Naghizadeh and Cohen, *Reviewing Jihadist Governance*.

31 For the purposes of this report, 'effective control' is defined as the capacity of the state or non-state armed groups to exercise authority over a given territory consistently over time, without the intervention of competing authorities. As such, effective control does not necessarily require a permanent presence within a village. The constitutive elements of occupation are based on Article 42 of the Hague Regulations of 1907, and include three key elements: 1) the unconsented-to presence of foreign forces; 2) foreign forces' ability to exercise authority over the territory concerned in lieu of the local sovereign; and 3) the related inability of the latter to exert authority over the territory. See: M. Orkin and T. Ferraro, 'IHL and occupied territory', ICRC, 26 July 2022.

2. A benevolent but largely absent state: women's lives before the arrival of JNIM

Women spoke fondly of their lives before JNIM's arrival and the resulting conflict with the state.[32] *While life was not without its hardships, they described leading meaningful, joyful lives, and – despite some long-running disputes over resources – experienced high degrees of social cohesion, including in ethnically mixed communities. Peuhl women experienced the state as distant but functional – providing basic services intermittently and leaving dispute resolution largely to local authorities. These baseline experiences shape how women evaluate JNIM's imposed regime, while also indicating their preferred governance model: one that provides essential services but permits personal freedom and validates trusted, albeit imperfect, traditional leaders.*

Nearly all respondents hailed from villages or hamlets with limited state administration or security force presence. When asked to describe village life prior to the current conflict, they described a challenging, sometimes precarious, yet satisfying existence. Villagers subsisted on their farming, trading, fishing and livestock, with little support received or expected from a benevolent yet largely absent state. Virtually all the women said they were able to meet their basic needs. Few of the respondents could read or write, while the vast majority lived in or near the village where they had been born and raised. Whatever grievances they had with the state were perceived as manageable and fell far short of provoking sustained protests, much less stoking support for an armed insurgency.

A hopeful communal life with close social cohesion

Interviewees described the routines, challenges and expectations associated with Peuhl gender norms in rural West Africa. Women typically marry in their late teens (in arranged unions, usually to cousins or other clan members), and are responsible for managing the household, raising children, tending small gardens and caring for small livestock. Many supplement the family income through small commercial enterprises, such as selling milk, yoghurt, and eggs; fabricating straw mats; or small-scale artisanal gold mining.

Women are not generally involved in community decision-making and do not have inheritance or land ownership rights. Modesty is prized, and women gain status through childbearing, contributing to family finances, managing the household, and extending hospitality to wider family and other visitors. The majority of respondents characterised their lives prior to JNIM's arrival as 'happy', 'busy', 'hopeful' and 'joyful'.

All but three respondents described their villages as ethnically mixed, noting a high level of social cohesion and few, if any, ethnic-related disputes.[33] They described women from different ethnic groups

32 Unless otherwise noted, all quotes attributed to 'women' or 'respondents' refer to the Peuhl women interviewed for this report.

33 In Mali, these ethnic groups included the Bambara, Bozo, Dogon, Rimaïbé, Songhai, and Tuareg communities. In Burkina Faso, they included the Bambara, Bobo, Bwaba, Daffi, Daging, Foulse, Gourmantché, Lobi, Mossi, and Samogo. See Index Mundi's 'Mali demographics profile' and 'Burkina Faso Ethnic groups'. Also World Atlas's 'Largest ethnic groups in Burkina Faso'.

socialising, working together, attending each other's marriages and baptisms, and grieving the loss of loved ones together. Many said their children played and studied together. Women explained that different ethnic groups provided complementary, if not interdependent, goods and services, ranging from animal husbandry to agriculture to trade.

Twelve women, the majority Malian, complained about the state's inability to resolve longstanding disputes over natural resource access. Some had endured for decades, provoking violent clashes and languishing unresolved in local courts until JNIM's arrival.[34] Most disputes cited were between Peuhl and other ethnic communities over access to grazing, farming and fishing rights.

Every woman described the joy provided by rite-of-passage celebrations such as marriages and infant naming celebrations. They also stressed the importance of 'liberté' (freedom): to move around their village; engage in livelihood-generating activities independent of their husbands; and visit friends and family in neighbouring villages. Many had an entrepreneurial mindset and spoke with pride about their village-based business.

Descriptions of hardship included crop failure and mass livestock deaths resulting from drought; the 'hunger gap' period when stored grain and produce are depleted but the new crop has yet to be harvested; and the lack of medical care for more serious health challenges. A few described the role played by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in developing their communities through – among other interventions – constructing water wells, dams or markets; passing on farming techniques; and providing micro-credit.[35]

Infrequent state interactions and alleged bribe-taking

The majority of women said their villages previously had government-supported schools and small health clinics, with periodic vaccination campaigns for their children and livestock. Only a few respondents lived in a town with a permanent security presence. Respondents travelled to the closest town for official services beyond the remit of village or religious authorities, such as identification cards, vehicle registration, land titles, and major criminal or civil disputes.

Many women said they regularly voted (typically after consulting with their husbands), and a few described paying annual taxes to local authorities.[36] Few women from either Mali or Burkina Faso perceived the state as leading on community development or mitigating hardships, for which they relied on family, fellow villagers and traditional leaders. While respondents appreciated NGO-supported development projects, they were perceived as being entirely independent of the state, despite the fact that the NGOs in question would at a minimum have had to coordinate with the state to secure access.

There were some differences in how Malian and Burkinabè Peuhl women experienced the state. Whereas the vast majority of Malian interviewees expressed grievances, primarily about bribe-taking, relatively few

34 Interviews, Burkinabè women (BF #15, #49, #53, #54), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women (Mali #5, #7, #8, #11, #12, #14, #16, #27), Central Mali, June–August, 2025.

35 Interviews, Burkinabè women (BF #22, #48), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women (Mali #6, #15–20, #28–30, #32), Central Mali, June–August, 2025.

36 Interviews, Burkinabè women (BF #1, #5, #18, #19, #36–39, #43), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women (Mali #3, #4,#6, #15–21, #50), Central Mali, June–August, 2025.

Burkinabè respondents voiced similar concerns.[37] The state actors most criticised for bribe-taking were security force members at checkpoints; the environmental police mandated to ensure sustainable forests and water purity; state-sponsored veterinary personnel; and judiciary personnel.

Surveys by Afrobarometer and Transparency International indicate higher levels of perceived corruption – including government tolerance of venality among state and justice sector officials – in Mali compared to Burkina Faso.[38] Some surveys, meanwhile, point to public satisfaction in service provision by Burkinabè authorities, despite concerns about transparency.[39]

Malian women more often complained of crime, criticising the police and gendarmes for failing to take sufficient action against bandits or act on tips from citizens, and for having a weak presence on roads leading to markets.[40] A few women characterised fees for documents such as birth certificates, drivers' licences or vehicle registration as 'corruption', suggesting an unfamiliarity with legitimate government processes.[41] Such observations perhaps reflect JNIM rhetoric, which often characterises government levies as predatory.

37 Interviews, Burkinabè women (BF #22, #29, #31, #32, #48), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women (Mali #1, #2, #6, #7–30, #32), Central Mali, June–August, 2025.

38 Afrobarometer's study found that 56 per cent of Malians believe most judges are corrupt, while only 7 per cent had had contact with the court system in the prior five years. P.M. Wambua and C. Logan, 'In Mali, citizens' access to justice compromised by perceived bias, corruption, complexity', Afrobarometer, Dispatch No. 166, 19 Oct. 2017; Afrobarometer, 'Résumé des résultats' (2025). Based on Transparency International's *2024 Corruption Perceptions Index* (CPI), Mali and Burkina Faso are respectively ranked 135 and 82 most corrupt out of 180 countries. See: *Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index 2024* (2025), pp. 4–5.

39 B. Adou, 'Burkinabè trust the police despite concerns about corruption, misconduct, and insecurity', Dispatch No. 1015, Afrobarometer, 11 July 2025; W. S. Hassen, 'Burkinabè approve of COVID-19 response despite corruption, inadequate assistance', Dispatch No. 1018, Afrobarometer, 14 July 2025.

40 Interviews, Burkinabè women (BF# 29–32), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women #1, #2, #17–23), Central Mali, June–August, 2025.

41 This phenomenon has been similarly observed by XCEPT researchers in Coastal West Africa. See: K. de Bruijne and A. Bernard, *Life on the line: stability and livelihood challenges in the borderlands of Coastal West Africa—summary report* (XCEPT Research Report, Clingendael Institute and Elva, 2025).

3. The arrival of JNIM: imposing and enforcing a new governance regime

Women universally characterised JNIM's ascendance as precipitating profound and overwhelmingly negative changes to routines, livelihoods, relationships and mental health. JNIM's gender-specific dictates (on dress, mobility, work bans and ceremony regulation) has reshaped Peuhl women's economic and social life within and across borders. Their lives have also been upended by fighting between JNIM and government-affiliated forces.

Upon JNIM's – often unexpected – arrival in villages, the group would expel all state representatives, often destroying schools, state administration buildings and mobile phone communication towers in the process.[42] Most respondents explained how, once securely established in a given area, JNIM began imposing its rules and, over time, providing state-like services. Few respondents described JNIM's as having a permanent presence in their village. Rather, the group exerts control through daily or weekly visits. JNIM's presence waxes and wanes depending on government-supported operations and its own military priorities.

Imposing a new governance regime

JNIM's 'dictates' or 'laws' are underscored by their strict interpretation of Islam and, as described by the respondents, encompass personal behaviour, contact with state actors, perceived vice, traditional ceremonies, treatment of the environment, and religious practice. Before imposing their rules, JNIM fighters typically pay several visits to the village to introduce themselves to the elders, pray with the village men, and talk in general terms about their vision of religion and governance, often contrasting it with corrupt state governance and declining morality. Male villagers are obliged or feel pressured to attend.

During the meetings, JNIM representatives explain the consequences should villagers fail to adhere to the rules articulated. Respondents said JNIM typically asks local chiefs and elders to help them ensure compliance. After the meetings, male family members communicate what transpired to their wives, sisters and daughters.

> 'Most of JNIM's rules were directed at us, the women. And yet, they never spoke to us or took the time to ask how all these changes would affect our lives.' **48-year-old Malian, Djenne Cercle**

Very few respondents described being invited, requested or permitted to attend the meetings in which JNIM dictates were established, nor were they aware of JNIM-appointed women's liaisons, focal points or committees.[43] Some women expressed frustration at JNIM's use of the village men to communicate a new order that had so suddenly and profoundly altered their lives.[44]

42 Most women referred to JNIM fighters as 'yimba lade' (Fulfulde for 'people of the bush'), 'the bearded men', 'terrorists' or 'Nusrat', all moderately derogatory terms. Those with more positive perceptions referred to JNIM as 'sakiraabe', which means 'brothers in Islam'.

43 Interviews, Burkinabè women (BF #28, #45, #50), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian woman (Mali #1), Central Mali, July 2025.

44 Interviews, Burkinabè women (BF #6, #17, #24, #33, #45), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women (Mali #6, #16), Central Mali, July 2025.

Ethnographic literature characterises Peuhl gender norms as rooted in patriarchal structures that create power imbalances and disadvantages for women in educational and economic spheres.[45] Interviews with Peuhl elders (male and female), as well as informed sociologists, affirm women's limited power in village affairs, but highlight that male relatives regularly solicit women's opinions before male-only village meetings.[46] Several women respondents and male elders noted that, under JNIM, not even men are not consulted ahead of the issuance of new dictates (many of which they oppose).[47]

'JNIM never talk to us women but have no problem striking us when we violate a prohibition.' **73-year-old Burkinabè, Sahel Region**

While some of JNIM's policies and practices exacerbate gender divisions that the central state had been trying to address – for example, in educational attainment and access to healthcare – others simply reflect the status quo (e.g. the right to inheritance and marriage-age minimums).[48] Moreover, many JNIM dictates build on pre-existing cultural gender norms, such as the importance of modesty, humility and family life.

'With JNIM, it is another world where you are powerless, subjected to everything by force, without ever considering your opinion.' **40-year-old Malian, Mopti Cercle**

JNIM's governance style and disciplinary practices varies by village and region. This can be attributed, among other factors, to the idiosyncratic practices of individual zone commanders, the degree of organisation of different 'katibas' ('battalions'), and the level of support JNIM receives from the local population.[49] As such, not every respondent was subjected to a particular dictate, although those cited by the majority of respondents are represented in Box 1 below (many of which are also noted in the literature).[50]

45 See, for example: de Bruijn, M. E., 'A pastoral women's economy in crisis: the Fulbe in central Mali', *Nomadic Peoples,* 36/37 (1995), pp. 85–104; Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), *A Profile on Gender Relations: Towards Gender Equality in Mali*, (Stockholm: SIDA, 2004).

46 Interviews, two female Burkinabè elders, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian sociologists, by phone, August 2025; two Malian elders, Bassikounou, Mauritania, May, 2024.

47 Interviews, two female Burkinabè elders, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian sociologists, by phone, August 2025; two Malian elders, Bassikounou, Mauritania, May, 2024; Burkinabè women (BF #4, #21), northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women (Mali #26, #31, #32), Central Mali, July 2025.

48 Regarding education, UNICEF reports (2022–2024) highlight that insecurity caused by JNIM and other armed groups has displaced thousands of students and teachers and forced widespread school closures in the Sahel. See: UNICEF, Transforming Children's Futures: Amplifying humanitarian impact in the Central Sahel, June 2024; Search for Common Ground, *Education in Crisis: Schools in Mali as Arenas for Conflict and Peace*, July 2023; Regarding healthcare, a coalition monitoring violence directed at healthcare workers and facilities documented 141 such incidents in Mali between 2022-2024, and 139 against Burkina Faso during the same timeframe. See: *Epidemic of Violence: Violence Against Health Care in Conflict* (Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition, 2024).

49 JNIM's divergent dictates and discipline practices are explained as "a decentralized network of fairly autonomous battalions ('katibas'), with JNIM leaders providing directives from the top surrounded by a hierarchy of chiefs who manage the training camps." See: Rupesinghe, N. and Diall, Y., Women and the Katiba Macina in Central Mali, NUPI, 2019. This information was further validated by interviews with military analysts with expertise in the Sahel, conducted by phone, May–July 2025.

50 Abatan and Sangaré, Katiba Macina; Raineri, *Dogmatism or pragmatism?*; Guichaoua and Bouhlel, *Interactions between civilians.*

Box 1: Examples of common JNIM dictates

The 'hijabou' or hijab: Women must wear black, loose-fitting robes in public, covering their entire body, and tight-fitting headscarves covering their hair and ears.[51] In addition, women cannot publicly wear adornments.

Restrictions on work: Women cannot gather wood for cooking; fetch water; or engage in commercial or income-generating activity.

Transportation: Women cannot ride bicycles, motorcycles, horses or donkeys. Moreover, women must be accompanied by a male relative if taking public transport, on which male and female passengers must be separated (usually by a curtain).

Socialising and congregating: Women cannot socialise in public, go unaccompanied to visit friends and family, or bathe in rivers.

Focus on the family: Women must dedicate themselves to caring for their husband, home and children (including the latter's moral and religious education).

Children: Children cannot attend state schools (the majority of which JNIM has closed), make excessive noise, or play games such as football or jump rope.

Men: Men must grow their beards, wear mid-calf-length pants, refrain from corporal abuse of their wives, perform chores traditionally done by women, and accompany their wives and female relatives on trips outside the village.

'Vice and debauchery': Villagers cannot use tobacco, cannabis or other drugs; brew or drink alcohol; or listen to music, dance, sing or play instruments.

Contact with the state: Villagers cannot contact state-supported teachers, mayors, prefects or security force members. Judicial redress must be sought through JNIM-linked shari'a courts rather than state judicial authorities.

Traditional ceremonies: Many customary practices associated with rite-of-passage ceremonies marking engagements, marriages, infant naming, circumcision, funerals and the return of animals from annual migration (the 'transhumance') are forbidden.

Protection of the environment and food supplies: Deforestation, small-lace fishing nets and the export of rice, fish and other products from JNIM areas of control is banned, as is physical abuse or overworking of beasts of burden.

Religious obligations and practices: Men must attend all Islamic prayers at the mosque; children are required to attend Qur'anic school; and women are expected to deepen their knowledge and practice of Islam. Villagers are obligated to pay Islamic tax (zakat), levied annually on the basis of a family's wealth.[52]

51 Some women referred to this garment as a 'burqa', which traditionally covers the entire body and face, with a mesh grille across the eyes. As JNIM did not require women to cover their face, the robe JNIM required consisted of two garments: an abaya, or loose-fitting robe covering the entire body, and hijab, or headscarf worn by Muslim women that covers the hair and neck, but not the face.

52 Zakat is an annual alms tax that Muslims are expected to pay for charitable purposes. Long practiced by local religious authorities, under JNIM's authority its collection and distribution has become more regulated, organised and centralised. See for example: H. Nsaibia, 'Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM): A detailed profile of JNIM, their operations, economic warfare, and influence in the Sahel', ACLED, 13 Nov. 2023.

Enforcing discipline

JNIM's strategic use of violence has contributed to the group's steady expansion across Mali and Burkina Faso, with the harsh enforcement of its dictates helping consolidate its control over women and their communities. Overall, JNIM's disciplinary practices appear to have become more organised, institutionalised and less severe over time. Most women acknowledged they had had to adapt and had grown increasingly compliant the longer they were subject to JNIM rule.

'Our *marabout* resisted the terrorists; he tried to defend us women for two years until JNIM murdered him. He was loved and respected; his counsel sought out by villagers from all over. After that, we had no choice but to accept JNIM's rule.' **Burkinabè matriarch, Soum Province**

Ten respondents provided examples of JNIM murdering village chiefs or religious authorities due to their refusal to accept the group's authority or their real or perceived collaboration with government forces.[53]

Two Malian women hailed from villages blockaded by JNIM over their refusal to accept its rule.[54] As described by the women (and open sources), the sieges often lasted for months and were enforced by improvised explosive devices (IEDs) planted on key routes into the village; attacks on farmers working their fields; and ambushes of convoys bringing in critical food and medicine.[55]

Many women (both Burkinabè and Malian from multiple areas of JNIM effective control) complained about the violence meted out against women by JNIM fighters enforcing the group's dictates and shari'a law more generally. Several had been 'disciplined' themselves, while others knew female family members or villagers who had been beaten.[56] Nearly all said that these violent forms of discipline had decreased significantly after the first two years of JNIM's rule.

Two women said they knew women who had died or been killed by JNIM: a Burkinabè from Sahel Region who died from pregnancy complications after being beaten by JNIM for failing to wear a black hijab, and a Malian woman from Mopti Region executed having been accused of providing intelligence on JNIM's whereabouts to the Malian army.[57]

'The beatings, without mercy … the humiliation from being whipped not only in public, in front of the entire village, but also in front of our own children.' **52-year-old Malian, Djenné Cercle**

Respondents described women being beaten or lashed for bathing in the river; selling in the market; failing to wear the black hijab; exposing their hair; sitting next to men on public transport; working in their fields; or defying bans on traditional celebrations. They expressed particular disdain for JNIM's practice of flogging women in public, often summoning other villagers to watch. Several respondents said JNIM's violent disciplinary practices contributed to their decision to flee into exile.

53 Interviews, Burkinabè women (BF #31, #45, #48, #52–54), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women (Mali #5, #6, #15, #16), Central Mali, June–August, 2025.

54 Interviews, Malian women (Mali #22, #23), Central Mali, July 2025.

55 Towns and villages subjected to JNIM blockades, which thwart movement in and out and disrupt critical supply routes for food and medicine, include Kouakourou and Boni (Central Mali); Lere (Timbuktu Region, Mali); and Arbinda, Djibo, Gorgadji, Madjoari, Mansila, Sollé and Titao (Burkina Faso). See: Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l'Homme (FIDH), *In Central Mali, Civilian Populations Are Caught Between Terrorism and Counterterrorism*, Fact-finding mission report (FIDH, Nov. 2018); Amnesty International, 'Burkina Faso: armed groups committing war crimes in besieged localities', Amnesty International, 2 Nov. 2023.

56 Interviews, Burkinabè women (BF #2, #10, #13, #19, #20, #29–32, #44, #49, #52–54), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women (Mali #1–4, #6, #15–23, #26, #28, #29, #31, #32), Central Mali, June–August, 2025.

57 Interviews, Burkinabè woman (BF #52), Northern Côte d'Ivoire), May 2025, and Malian woman (Mali #15), Mopti, Mali, July 2025.

Disciplinary practices and the level of brutality vary by region, country and JNIM commander.[58] Some respondents said JNIM commanders had initially issued warnings, allowing villagers time to adapt to the new rules. Other commanders, however, meted out punishments shortly after pronouncing their edicts. Moreover, while some commanders have clearly defined penalties (e.g. the number of lashes corresponding to particular offences), others tend to apply more ad hoc punishments. The latter appeared to be particularly the case among the Burkinabè women, which may be explained by JNIM's rapid geographic spread and less consistent presence in Burkinabè villages.

'JNIM summoned the entire village to watch the punishment of 15 people in front of the mosque: nine men, for not wearing short pants and for shaving, and six women for wearing colourful veils. They were whipped with ten lashes each.' **27-year-old Burkinabè, Sahel Region**

The women widely affirmed that all ethnic groups are subject to the same rules and similarly disciplined for failing to obey them. A few respondents, however, believed women from ethnic groups practicing Christianity or animism were subject to more frequent acts of discipline. For instance, a Malian from Koro Cercle asserted: 'The Peuhl have practiced Islam for centuries, but Dogon women are Christian, use fetishes. The hijab was an even greater shock for them … they suffered a lot'.[59]

Respondents claimed to have engaged in fewer acts of resistance once they had adapted to JNIM's dictates. Examples of early defiance described by (mostly Burkinabè) respondents include ripping off the black hijab the moment JNIM patrols left their villages, planning marriage ceremonies to align with JNIM's anticipated absence, or surreptitiously engaging in commerce by hiding goods under their hijabs.[60] These women said village elders and religious authorities often argued on their behalf, describing heated debates with JNIM over religious interpretations of dictates restricting women's dress and movement.

One Malian woman said: 'The first year was the worst; the jihadists were beating women every day at the river, the market, in their fields, at the well, in buses'.[61] However, fear of JNIM decreased in accordance with the amount of time respondents spent living under their rules, with a Malian woman from Djenné Cercle observing that, 'After 10 years, we have grown used to them. As long as you obey them, you'll be ok'.[62]

'The brigade is made up of JNIM agents, young people from the neighbouring villages. They hold crops made of camel skin for beating rule breakers. They disappear from the village for a few days, then reappear to surprise and catch people violating the rules.' **52-year-old Malian, Djenné Cercle**

Women living under JNIM for periods of five years or more described more consistent disciplinary policies, often involving shari'a judges, or qadis.[63] Moreover, so-called 'morality policing brigades' or 'youth brigades' have been progressively established in JNIM strongholds from around 2018 onwards. These consist of unarmed young men who carry switches and patrol the village, fields, riverbank and marketplaces, ensuring adherence to JNIM dictates. They also appear to serve as liaisons between villagers and JNIM, taking complaints, providing intelligence and administering punishments.

58 Interviews, Burkinabè women (BF# 29–32), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women #1, #2, #17–23), Central Mali, June–August, 2025.

59 Interview, Malian woman (Mali #6), Mopti, Mali, July 2025.

60 Interviews, Burkinabè women (BF# 1, #2, #5, #10, #19, #23, #29–32, #41, #42, #46, #57, #54), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women (Mali #1,#2, #6, #15, #24), Central Mali, June–August 2025.

61 Interviews, Malian women (Mali #7–14), Mopti, Mali, May 2025.

62 Interview, Malian woman (Mali #27), Sévaré, Mali, July 2025.

63 Interviews, Malian women (Mali #1–31), Mopti, Mali, July–August 2025; Burkinabè women (BF #29–32, #46, #49, #50), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025.

4. Living under JNIM: women's evolving perceptions

While women's perceptions of JNIM are primarily negative, they are also nuanced, tending to soften over time as women resign themselves to their new reality and the group switches from coercion to co-optation. For most women, this represents an adaptation to life under the group's dictates, rather than genuine radicalisation or an expression of unqualified support.

Respondents with overwhelmingly negative perceptions of JNIM governance had spent shorter periods living under the group's control – generally from six months to a few years. Most such women live in areas of rapid JNIM expansion, notably in Burkina Faso, and describe a brutal, 'top-down' authoritarian that seeks to crush initial attempts at rebellion and make examples of rule breakers, while providing few visible services. Several women said JNIM had threatened to forcibly recruit their sons, or had sought to coerce their daughters into marriage. In short, most regarded JNIM 'governance' as little more than the imposition of harsh practices that contradict their religious and cultural traditions, rather than representing a longer-term strategy for bettering their lives.

Just over half the respondents voiced support for one or more of JNIM's governance policies and practices. Of these, all but five had lived under JNIM's effective control for more than five years. Factors shaping their more positive perceptions include the degree to which they had benefited from JNIM's service delivery; having family members inside the group; and the extent to which they had suffered from government-supported CT operations. They also referred to JNIM's relatively more organised and institutionalised service provision; increased engagement with the group; and reduced levels of brutality – perhaps indicating not only JNIM's entrenchment, but communities' gradual adaptation to JNIM's model.

> 'Yes, they are violent at times, but now, everyone is connected to the jihadists through family and work; we are governed by our own children.' **40-year-old Malian, Mopti Cercle**

Women's evolving perceptions of JNIM's governance comports with 'contestation theory', which posits that violence against civilians is greater in areas of contested control due to the strategic use of violence to coerce support, punish resisters, control supply chains, and deter support for the 'enemy'. Once effective control is established, however, the focus shifts towards relationship building, service provision and legitimisation.[64] In this respect, Raineri observes of the Central Sahel:

> In the places where the extremist groups have a stronger hold, it would be counterproductive for them to support abuses against communities. However, in a contested area, such as in Burkina Faso and the Sahel Region in particular, attacks against civilians may form part of a deliberate strategy of intimidation with the aim of progressively gaining a stronger foothold.[65]

64 N. Dudek, 'Theories of Civilian Victimization: Constraint, Control, or Contestation? Evidence from Afghanistan', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, publ. online June 2025.

65 L. Raineri, 'Explaining the Rise of Jihadism in Africa: The Crucial Case of the Islamic State of the Greater Sahara', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34: 8, 2020, pp. 1632–46.

Several women referenced JNIM's strategic, albeit often coerced, use of trusted traditional authorities (notably village chiefs, imams and marabouts[66]), aimed at boosting the group's legitimacy and anchoring it within local communities. The fact that JNIM's zone and sub-zone commanders largely hail from the communities in which they operate further advances these aims.[67]

The women who had living under JNIM for under five years (which represented the vast majority of the 48 Burkinabè respondents) said they rarely if ever spoke with a JNIM fighter, with several referring to members of the group as 'foreigners'. They also noted that the only time village women are addressed JNIM fighters is when being reprimanded for non-adherence to their dictates. By contrast, the majority of the 40 women with some positive perceptions of JNIM governance had family members in the group, whether male relatives who were combatants, or daughters who had married fighters. Respondents said such relations made them significantly less fearful of JNIM and more invested in the group. Several women described how they had benefited from marrying fighters or benefited from commercial transactions on behalf of the group.

> 'At first we really struggled, but it is now 11 years that we are governed by JNIM. Our husbands and children have joined; the women have married them; we have forgotten the Malian state. JNIM's control is total, people have adapted, life is positive.'
> **40-year-old Malian, wife of a JNIM commander**

Negotiating the limitations placed on everyday life

The vast majority of women expressed exasperation with JNIM's dictates. Four types of regulations sparked the greatest consternation, regardless of the length of time spent under JNIM rule: 1) compulsory wearing of the black hijab; 2) prohibitions on women's work; 3) regulation of traditional ceremonies; and 4) limitations on healthcare access. These restrictions, along with JNIM punishment for non-adherence, has caused significant declines in women's physical and mental health. Nevertheless, as expanded on below, some women pointed to financial benefits arising from JNIM's regulation of traditional ceremonies, raising important considerations for those seeking to limit the group's appeal.

Frustrations with compulsory black hijab

Respondents almost uniformly complained about the requirement to wear the black, polyester hijab favoured by JNIM, which many described as 'unbearably hot' and 'cumbersome'. A 50-year-old Malian said, 'We are veiled in black, wrapped up like a parcel, suffocating'.[68] While wearing the hijab is not required inside homes, household gardens and kitchens are typically outside, necessitating that the robes be worn even while doing chores. As a 29-year-old from Burkina Faso's Nord Region complained: 'Imagine having to cook with it on? You had

> 'Not one woman likes the black hijab. We can't breathe. Our villages look like Arab towns, not colourful African ones. It's like we're all dressed for a funeral, not for life.'
> **40-year-old Malian, Mopti Cercle**

66 Marabouts are Muslim holy men often believed to have healing powers; see: M. Demuynck and J. Coleman, 'Customary Leaders and Terrorism in the Sahel: Co-opted, Coerced, or Killed?', The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), 6 April 2022.

67 C. Dufka, 'Jihadist governance trends and service delivery in areas of JNIM dominance', non-public briefing paper for United States interagency partners, February 2023.

68 Interview, Malian woman (Mali #16), Mali, June–July, 2025.

to be careful not to set yourself on fire'.[69] Many women said they missed their colourful traditional dress and argued that it satisfied the Qur'an's requirement for modesty.[70]

Prohibitions on work

The majority of women complained bitterly about prohibitions imposed on both domestic tasks (e.g. gathering wood and drawing water from the well) and income-generating activities.[71] This has led to reduced income security and social connections, placing additional burdens on their husbands and children. Nearly all the respondents described being bored at having to spend long hours at home; anxiety about their sudden loss of income; and frustration at being unable to contribute financially to supporting their families. They also decried not being able to move around their village or travel for weekly market days, and detailed various physical and mental health consequences stemming from inactivity, social isolation and a loss of meaning.

> 'Of all their rules, not allowing us to work was the worst. We sat at home all day without any income of our own, cut off from our family and life itself.' **42-year-old Burkinabè, Sahel Region**

Again, the extent of the restrictions varied between villages and regions, and were loosest where JNIM had been present the longest. For example, women living in areas of more recent JNIM control – notably in central and southern Burkina Faso – described more rigid restrictions on domestic and other work, and harsher punishments for defying them. By contrast, women living under JNIM for over five years said some commanders (perhaps recognising the financial strain their communities faced) had authorised women to work in their fields and sell milk and other products, provided they are accompanied by their husbands.

> 'Before JNIM, I was the cleaner at a nearby health clinic. I looked forward to riding my bicycle to work every morning. Before, women felt free — to work, to come and go, we were so happy. After two years, I couldn't bear it anymore and fled.' **32-year-old Burkinabè, Nord Region**

Regulation of traditional ceremonies

Almost all the 77 respondents, including those with otherwise positive perceptions of JNIM, expressed sorrow over the restrictions on traditional ceremonies and celebrations. While JNIM does not forbid rites-of-passage ceremonies entirely, it has banned deeply-held traditions commemorated by Peuhl villagers for generations. Two Peuhl elders in frequent contact with JNIM's leadership explained the latter perceives such celebrations as contrary to core Islamic principles, particularly the Ummah – the bond of faith among all Muslims that takes precedence over tribal loyalties.[72] As one of the elders commented:

> 'They imposed a hijab on the bride instead of our traditional dress and beautiful jewellery; they forbid the tam-tams, the flutes, our traditional dance; they took away the gifts a bride will have her whole life. They destroyed all the joy in marriage.' **55-year-old Malian, Douentza Cercle**

69 Interview, Burkinabè woman (BF #16), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025.

70 Interviews, Burkinabè women (BF #10, #14, #17, #20–23, #36–38, #41, $48, #51), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women (Mali #1, #3–5, #15–23, #26, #28–31), Central Mali, July–August, 2025.

71 Women had previously supplemented their family's income by working as cooks, cleaners or hairdressers; in their own or another person's fields; in artisanal gold mines; or by fishing.

72 Interviews, two Peuhl elders from Mopti, Mali, and Mauritania, by phone, July 2025.

> Traditional dances, gathering of men and women in the same place, and elaborate expenditures on feasts and for the dowry are all central to Peuhl tradition. But they also contradict JNIM's world view which reveres humility, simplicity, and a singular focus on God above all.[73]

Among the most prominent of the affected traditions are:

- **Peuhl marriages:** JNIM has restricted the typical multi-day ceremony to a two-day maximum, limited attendees to around ten, and dramatically capped the money and items given as dowry. Respondents described how these restrictions had removed the joy previously attached to the anticipation, planning and celebration of marriages.

> 'As a parent, you are so happy for your child getting married. And for them, it's something they so look forward to. Now, mothers and daughters cry from disappointment. Without others around to celebrate, it's like it never happened.'" **Burkinabè, Soum Province, Sahel Region**

- **Traditional infant naming or welcoming ceremonies:** Typically, men would go to the mosque while the women prepared a feast to be enjoyed by family, friends and neighbours, accompanied by music and dance. Now, JNIM has mandated the ceremony be limited to a quiet celebration at the parents' home, attended only by immediate family.

> 'When a baby came, the entire neighbourhood gathered in celebration as we announced the name of our child to all those we hold dear. But under JNIM, my husband had to go up to his friends and say, "Hey, I had my first child, and his name is Abdulai.' **27-year-old Burkinabè, Sahel Region**

- **Traditional grieving norms:** Several women said JNIM had forbidden public displays of grief and curtailed visits by friends and family wishing to express condolence.

> 'Before everyone wailed in public, falling on the ground in grief. People travelled from afar to express their sorrow, pray together, making food and sometimes staying for weeks. Under JNIM, grieving is hushed; you are made to bear it alone.' **65-year-old Malian, Ténenkou Cercle**

- **Muslim holiday celebrations:** JNIM has suppressed traditions associated with several holidays, notably Eid al Fitr, which marks the end of Ramadan, and Eid al-Adha, known in much of West Africa as Tabaski. Whereas previously, such holidays would involve new clothing for the entire family, feasts and countless visits from loved ones, families are now told to gather in small groups and celebrate modestly.

On the other hand, some women have seen benefits in JNIM regulation of traditional celebrations, reflecting adaptation to the group's approach and highlighting an issue that regional states should address upon return. Twenty-five women said JNIM restrictions on dispensing huge sums of money to mark traditional rites of passage had resulted in significant savings, leaving them with more funds for emergencies or to invest in livestock.[74]

Citing marriages in particular, the women said families often saved for years, spending well beyond their means to pay dowries, as well as to fund festivities which often became a competition between families. They said JNIM couched the expenditure limits in the context of bridging the gap between socio-economic classes. This reinforces findings from the literature. For example, Guichaoua characterises JNIM's imposition of lower dowries as a 'democratisation of marriage',

> 'At first we really missed the celebrations, but after a few years we really started seeing the benefit from not spending so much … Families impoverished themselves … I find JNIM's way very beneficial for society.' **Elder Malian, Djenne Cercle**

73 Interview, Peuhl elder from Mauritania, by phone, July 2025.

74 Interviews, Burkinabè women (BF #10, #11, #36–40), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women (Mali #1, #5, #7, #9, #13–19, #21, #22, #28–31), Central Mali, June–August 2025.

making it a popular challenge to social norms.[75] Raineri, meanwhile, observes that the change resonated deeply with many villagers, including the 'previously marginalized, such as low-caste women, divorced women, sex workers and others', who now found it easier to marry.[76]

Some women felt the savings were not commensurate with the sacrifice, however, with several echoing sentiments similar to this Burkinabè woman: 'Sure, we saved money, but it wasn't worth the joy that we've lost'.[77] A Malian matriarch likewise stated: 'We, as women, have the right to spend our savings as we want, including on celebrations that bring us so much joy'.[78]

Limitations on access to healthcare

Respondents said women's health had suffered dramatically under JNIM due both to inadequate access to healthcare and restrictions on mobility leading to a more sedentary lifestyle. Of particular concern was maternal health, exacerbated by the dearth of midwives trained to deal with complicated births and determine when women need to be referred to hospital.

'When you're sick, there is no medicine, there are no doctors. JNIM does nothing to help. You just lay down and hope to God you feel better again.' **65-year-old Malian, Ténenkou Cercle**

Women pointed to several factors undermining healthcare in their communities. First, the departure of state-supported health workers from village clinics due to JNIM attacks on government infrastructure. Second, the precarious security situation, which undermines supply chains, leading to food and medicine shortages. Third, male family members being required to accompany women to clinics or hospitals outside their village, thereby exposing them to arrest or killing by government-affiliated forces. Fourth, JNIM ban on women riding motorcycles has prevented their use in evacuating those in need of emergency healthcare.

'Pregnant women died because their husbands couldn't accompany them, fearing murder by Dozos [government-affiliated militia] at checkpoints along the way. Pregnant women made it to hospital only by walking through the bush.' **43-year-old Malian, Douentza Cercle**

Nearly half the respondents cited family members or friends who had died under JNIM rule from malaria, diarrhoea or diabetes, or during childbirth.[79] Three Burkinabè women interviewed together from villages in northern Soum Province reeled off family members who had perished between 2016 and 2023, with a 73-year-old matriarch relating how she lost five grandchildren: 'We tried to evacuate them from northern Burkina to Mali but they perished along the way'. The older sister and niece of another of the women died from 'strokes' likely to have been pre-eclampsia during late-stage pregnancy. Their infants also died. A third woman lost her mother to an unspecified illness having faced a 'lack of medication'.[80]

JNIM generally allows women to travel to clinics in government-controlled areas, although it sometimes interrogates them upon their return. A Malian woman complained: 'First you need JNIM authorisation to

75 Guichaoua and Bouhlel, *Interactions between civilians.*

76 Raineri, *Dogmatism or pragmatism?*, p. 9.

77 Interview, Burkinabè women (BF #30), Abidjan, July 2025.

78 Interview, Malian woman (Mali #2), Mopti, Mali, July 2025.

79 Interviews, Burkinabè women (BF #2, #20, #15, #17, #29–32, #42, #46, #48, #51, #53, #54), Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women (Mali #1, #2, #6–14, #16–21, #27–31), Central Mali, July–August, 2025.

80 Interviews, Burkinabè women (BF #29–32), Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025.

go to Djenné, and on your return, you're subjected to an exhausting and frightening interrogation on what was said about them and those you met'.[81]

There are limited signs that JNIM has sought to respond to the hardships its restrictions cause. Three NGO representatives in JNIM-controlled areas of northern Burkina Faso and central Mali cited loosened restrictions on NGOs, as well as JNIM efforts to support training for male healthcare providers, village clinic staffing and the distribution of medicine.[82]

Twelve respondents, all living under JNIM for over five years, credited JNIM-supported clinics with treating men and children, especially for malaria and minor injuries, but said they were staffed by male nurses who were not permitted to treat women.[83] A Malian from Douentza Cercle commented, 'JNIM's male nurses can't touch or examine us, so our husbands go with a description of our ailment, and the nurse dispenses medicine accordingly'.[84] A community leader in touch with JNIM's leadership said the group had lifted the restriction on men from treating women in some areas, and was reviewing the policy overall.[85]

Two Malian women from Youwarou Cercle, Mali, described how JNIM fighters at checkpoints refused entry to women travelling to approved clinics because they were not accompanied by a male relative, including one heavily pregnant woman in distress.[86] Another related the story of a woman forced to turn back when seeking care for her sick child. 'When asked by the jihadist at the checkpoint why she wasn't with her husband, she said, "because you people killed him". JNIM turned her away'.[87]

'I used to look forward to my work. I felt useful, healthy and busy. After JNIM, I just sat around. I gained weight, felt bloated, I was stressed, sad and got sick more often.' **32-year-old Burkinabè, Nord Region**

Many women described how JNIM's restrictions on mobility had led to weight gain, swelling and overall lethargy. While acknowledging the hardships of village life, they missed the physical exercise they used to get doing domestic and other work.

The mental health impacts of JNIM rule

Nearly every respondent described a decline in their mental health arising from JNIM restrictions and anxiety related to the armed conflict. However, their mental health appeared to improve relative to the time spent living under JNIM.

I felt discouraged, depressed, bored, fearful all the time, powerless. How could we ask them to change the rules when they had guns?' **26-year-old Burkinabè, Nord Region**

Many women reported a loss of joy, as much of what they had looked forward to in life had been precipitously taken away. Respondents described a loss of social connection from the family and friends they had previously spent time with, both informally – while gardening,

81 Interview, Malian woman (Mali #27), Mopti, Mali, July 2025.

82 Interviews, community leader and NGO representatives (Bamako, Segou and Mopti, Mali), by phone, May–July, 2025.

83 Interviews, Burkinabè women (BF #44, #51, #52), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women (Mali #1, #5, #22–26, #28, #29), Central Mali, July–August, 2025.

84 Interview, Malian woman (Mali #1), Sévaré, Mali, July 2025.

85 Interview, Peuhl community leader from Central Mali, by phone, July 2025.

86 Interview, Malian woman (Mai #13), Central Mali, June 2025.

87 Interview, Malian woman (Mali #8), Central Mali, June 2025.

fetching water or going to market – and during traditional celebrations. JNIM's requirement that women be accompanied by a male relative when travelling to neighbouring villages has further contributed to this social isolation. A Burkinabè woman commented, 'social relations must be maintained, and by forbidding women from using a bike or motorcycle, we spent months without seeing the people we cared about'.[88]

Anxieties are stoked by armed JNIM fighters in their midst, as well as government-supported operations, militiamen at checkpoints, IEDs on roads, and air and drone operations. Over half the respondents had been affected by the deaths of loved ones in military operations or war crimes perpetrated by JNIM or government-affiliated forces.[89] Several said the restrictions on social gatherings compounded their grief by limiting their support network.

Nearly all Malian and Burkinabè women expressed sadness or anxiety over their children's emotional state, with some Burkinabè respondents choosing to flee their villages out of fear JNIM would forcibly recruit their adolescent sons.[90] Women living under JNIM for longer periods worried about their sons becoming too accustomed to and wanting to join the group, as well as their daughters wanting to marry JNIM fighters for the perceived social and material benefits this would bestow.

'Our children are sad, bored, anxious. Because JNIM closed the schools, they spend all day sitting under trees instead of playing football and jump rope. With nothing to do, they're now doing odd jobs for JNIM, getting too used to them.'
50-year-old Malian, Koro Cercle

Building legitimacy through justice, protection and service provision

JNIM has sometimes sought to balance unpopular dictates with targeted service provision in an effort to increase its local legitimacy and discredit state governance. In this respect, many villagers appear sympathetic to the group's approach to delivering services; strengthening justice; resolving disputes; managing natural resources; and reducing corruption, crime and domestic violence. JNIM uses humanitarian aid, sourced from zakat (Islamic tax) and looting, to further encourage support and cooperation.

Around half the respondents cited at least one way they – or their family or community – had benefited from JNIM's rule.[91] Again, those with the most positive perceptions came from areas that had been under JNIM's effective control the longest, which had enabled the group to develop more organised, strategic and advanced service provision.

Many of these women asserted that in some respects JNIM's service provision represents an improvement on the equivalent state-delivered services, describing it as more immediate, less bureaucratic, less corrupt, and more consistent with their conservative religious values. They also felt JNIM's governance has helped tackle harmful traditional practices, including the excessive fees charged

88 Interview, Burkinabè women (BF #19), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025.

89 Interviews, Burkinabè women (BF #1, #4, #8, #12, #21, #28–32, #38, #42–44, #48, #50, #53, #54), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women (Mali #1, #2, #4, #5, #7–16, #22–28,#30, #31, #39), Central Mali, July–August, 2025.

90 One Burkinabè respondent said village members had been forcefully recruited by JNIM, while six other respondents said JNIM exerted considerable pressure on community members to provide recruits. Three of the latter group said this threat had forced them into exile in Côte d'Ivoire. Interviews, Burkinabè women (BF #19, #21, #29–32, #41), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May, 2025.

91 Interviews, Burkinabè women (BF #10, #13, #20, #21, #29, #30, #44, #48–50, #53, #54), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women (Mali #1–8, #13–29, #30, #31), Central Mali, June–August 2025.

by elites for land and water use. Even so, the same women who praised JNIM's service provision harshly criticised the group's suffocating restrictions – proof that lived experience can give rise to conflicting perceptions.

Delivering humanitarian assistance

Just under a third of respondents reported humanitarian assistance such as deliveries of food, petrol and cash to widows, orphans and villagers uprooted by fighting or suffering from hunger, although not all had benefited personally.[92] The vast majority of this group had lived under JNIM for over five years, and described a well-organised, institutionalised system of aid distribution: several said food distributions take place every three months, while two Malian respondents who fled their village after an army attack described uniform payments to male heads of household, as well as widowed or divorced women.[93]

Respondents said JNIM's aid is sourced through a combination of annual zakat collected from villagers; foodstuffs confiscated during attacks on security force camps and convoys; and looting and cattle raids targeting civilian villages resistant to JNIM rule or supportive of government-affiliated forces. While zakat has historically been a feature of village life, JNIM has sought to systematise its collection and distribution.

> 'JNIM gives grain to the poor, and often to everyone, during the hunger gap, or if there wasn't enough rain. But most beneficiaries are victims of attacks.' **47-year-old Burkinabè, Sahel Region**

Several of the respondents in areas receiving aid criticised JNIM for creating the conditions that necessitated humanitarian assistance in the first place, while three accused JNIM for using zakat to sustain its own fighters over the poor, or of instrumentalising aid to attract adherents.[94] As one Burkinabè woman observed: 'JNIM only shares grain and zakat with orphans to recruit them, and with widows to more easily marry them'.[95]

Several women described steps taken by JNIM to ensure the availability, affordability and quality of basic commodities, including patrolling markets to monitor prices and inspect products, and regulating the trading of some items.[96] A Burkinabè woman from Soum Province commented: 'Before JNIM, everything was more expensive, now they have an eye on prices, making sure there are no spikes'.[97] Regarding the Islamic policing directorate's quality and price control efforts, a 50-year-old Malian from a village in Mopti Cercle observed: 'In the market, the cleanliness of cereals – millet, rice, sorghum and corn – are monitored; the prices of foodstuffs are set by them'.[98]

92 Interviews, Burkinabè women (BF #20, #36, #37, #38, #45, #44, #48, #49, #51), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women (Mali #1, #2, #3, #4, #5, #15, #17, #18, #19, #20, #21, #22, #23, #26, #27),

93 Interviews, Malian women (Mali #22, #23), Mopti, Mali, July 2025.

94 Interview, Burkinabè women (BF #19), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025.

95 Interview, Burkinabè women (BF #45), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, June 2025.

96 Interviews, Burkinabè woman (BF #53), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, June 2025; Malian women (Mali #15–21, #27), Central Mali, June–August, 2025.

97 Interview, Burkinabè woman (BF #53), Mopti, Mali, June 2025.

98 Interview, Malian woman (Mali #16), Mopti, Mali, July 2025.

The swift, 'efficient' delivery of justice

While the formal courts (in both Mali and Burkina Faso) deal with criminal and civil matters on the basis of French civil law, JNIM 'adjudicates' such matters – as well as personal conduct and religious practices – through strict shari'a-based jurisprudence.

Over a third of respondents expressed support for JNIM's justice system, which, as with other aspects of its governance, appeared most organised in areas where the group had enjoyed a longer period of effective control.[99] These respondents appreciated that proceedings were conducted in local languages; that complainants didn't have to travel long distances to court; and that JNIM officials did not solicit bribes to move cases forward.

'Many Peuhl prefer shari'a law to state justice. It costs less, no coming or going to town, and no bribes to move the dossier forward. The decision is taken and applied to the letter. And with JNIM you express yourself freely without the use of an interpreter.' **36-year-old Malian, Tenenkou Cercle**

While few respondents had personally filed cases or benefited from a judgement, several of those with favourable views of JNIM's judicial system were familiar with cases filed by other villagers, including women seeking divorce.[100] They perceived such cases to have been properly investigated and felt proceedings had been largely transparent (done in the presence of both sides and often involving family members and community representatives), with decisions rendered quickly and impartially. A few respondents described how JNIM fighters themselves were not exempt from justice, and had been convicted for crimes or indiscipline.

In some areas, male relatives file cases for women by proxy, while in others women lodge complaints themselves, either with local religious authorities, women they perceive as working with JNIM, or male Islamic policing representatives. A Malian woman from Douentza Cercle reported: "Women told me they filed their cases in something like a polling booth, separated by a sheet; you don't know who you're talking to".[101]

Many of the women who praised the 'efficiency' of JNIM justice nevertheless criticised the harsh physical punishments involved, contrasting it with the reparative judicial norms they were used to. A Malian woman from Douentza Cercle argued, 'Peuhl traditional society is based on forgiveness, reconciliation, amicable settlements, not violence'.[102] Similar sentiments were expressed by a Burkinabè woman: 'Before, the chief, imam, or marabout sorted the same problems as JNIM, but without the brutality'.[103]

'I prefer state justice where you pay a fine or go to prison. With JNIM, the sentence is violent. I'd rather eat a spoonful of rice a day in prison than be beheaded. Also, under the state, women can be heard directly by justice officials.' **43-year-old Burkinabè, Sahel Region**

The perceived positive aspects of JNIM's justice system can be broken down into the categories below.

Eliminating bribery: Just over a third of respondents, all of whom had lived under JNIM for over five years, credited the group with ending bribe solicitation by public servants, with several asserting: 'We

99 Interviews, Burkinabè women (BF #30, #49, $50, #53, #54), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women (Mali #1, #2, #5, #7–21, #24, #25–27, #30, #31), Central Mali, June–August, 2025.

100 Interviews, Malian women (Mali #1, #2, #5, #7–14, #16, #24–27, #30, #31). Whether or not JNIM's divorce procedures are seen as superior to how Peuhl women traditionally address divorce—through trusted local religious leaders—was inconclusive.

101 Interview Malian woman (Mali #1), Sévaré, Mali, July 2025.

102 Interviews, Malian women (Mali #17–21), Sévaré, Mali, July 2025.

103 Interview, Burkinabè woman (BF #32), Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025.

don't pay bribes anymore'.[104] By contrast, just two respondents gave examples of JNIM engaging in corrupt practices. JNIM's actions in this regard appear to have engendered trust in the group, which has frequently spoken about combating the corruption perceived to pervade state services.

'JNIM put an end to bribe-taking by gendarmes extorting fishermen and pinnaces bringing goods from Timbuktu to Mopti; from the environmental police taking money from shepherds and wood sellers; from the justices of the peace and town hall who extorted traders. It was a very serious problem.' **Malian matriarch, Djenné Cercle**

Reducing domestic violence: Again, just over a third of the respondents credited JNIM with reducing domestic violence due to the group's explicit ban on spousal abuse, which has made it easier for women to seek remedy through the shari'a-based justice system.[105] Describing JNIM messaging on domestic violence, a 60-year-old man from northern Burkina Faso said, 'In sermons, JNIM directed us to be good to our wives, to work in their place, to defend their dignity'.[106] Such progress appears more dramatic in areas where the group's governing structures have evolved to include, among other governance structures, Islamic policing directorates mandated to receive community complaints. Several Malian women gave examples of JNIM intervening in domestic violence cases that had been brought to its attention either by the victim or via an anonymous denunciation.

'The phenomenon [of domestic violence] has disappeared because of JNIM's message to men in their sermons, but also because women don't hesitate to file complaints against their husbands for abuse.' **50-year-old Malian, Mopti Region**

Some who credited JNIM with reducing domestic violence nevertheless said the group's abuse of women for other infractions felt like hypocrisy. A Burkinabè elder from Soum Province commented: 'Even if we weren't being beaten by our husbands, the bearded men compensated by beating us for other things like not wearing the burqa'.[107] Several women also criticised the severity of punishments endured by men for spousal abuse.[108]

Despite credible reports of sexual and gender-based violence perpetrated by armed Islamist groups in the Sahel, none of the women interviewed accused JNIM of perpetrating rape in their communities.[109] Three respondents did, however, accuse JNIM fighters of threatening rape should women refuse to respect behavioural dictates.[110] Moreover, double that accused the group of forced marriage,[111] and

104 Interviews, Burkinabè women (BF #29–32), Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women (Mali #1, #2, #7–23, #28–31), Central Mali, June–August 2025.

105 Interviews, Burkinabè women (BF #29–32, #55), Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women (Mali #1, #2, #7–21, #24–27, #30, #31), Central Mali, June-August, 2025.

106 Interview, Burkinabè man (BF #55), Northern Côte d' Ivoire, May 2025.

107 Interview Burkinabè woman (BF #30), Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025.

108 Interview Burkinabè woman (BF #33), Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian woman (Mali #29), Mopti, Mali, July 2025.

109 See: Human Rights Watch, 'Mali: mounting islamist armed group killings, rape', 13 July 2023; Human Rights Watch, 'Mali: abuses spread south: Islamist armed groups' atrocities, army responses generate fear', 19 Feb. 2016; Human Rights Watch, 'Burkina Faso: armed Islamists kill, rape civilians: army, militia respond with summary executions, enforced disappearances', 16 May 2022; United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, 'Mali'. Some of these reports detail how victims of rape by JNIM were women from non-Puehl ethnic groups. For instance, Human Rights Watch, 'Burkina Faso: armed Islamists', which documents numerous cases of rape in Burkina Faso's Centre Nord Region, notes: 'The armed Islamists targeted women and girls who were gathering firewood, on their way to or from market, or as they fled attacks on their villages. The women said the assailants tried to extract information about government forces and militias and told them to convey ultimatums to their villages to abandon the area.'

110 Interviews, Burkinabè woman (BF #31), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women (Mali #30, #31), Central Mali, August 2025.

111 Interviews, Burkinabè woman (BF #46) Northern, Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women (Mali #7, #8, #9, #14, #28, #29), Central Mali, July–August 2025.

several more of coercing adolescent girls, women and widows into marriage.[112] On this point, a Burkinabè matriarch from Sahel Region observed:

> The more JNIM were around, the more pressure they exerted. We found it difficult to refuse to marry our daughters off; even fathers feared resisting. A few girls went on hunger strikes, and JNIM eventually returned them to their families. Over time, however, girls started marrying JNIM voluntarily.

Three human rights researchers similarly characterised cases of rape and forced marriage by JNIM as isolated, but acknowledged the widespread dynamic of coerced marriages, noting that even before JNIM's arrival, girls and women were largely married on the basis of arrangements made by the couple's families.[113]

Curbing banditry: Just under a quarter of the respondents, the majority Malian, credited JNIM with reducing banditry in areas where there had been frequent attacks on people in their homes, shops and fields.[114] Here, JNIM's success in stopping the infamous 'coupeurs de route' (armed men who target traders and businesspeople travelling to and from weekly markets) featured prominently. Respondents cited three factors as having contributed to JNIM's success: 1) the large network of collaborators passing on information about the armed bandits and where stolen goods are being sold; 2) the harsh punishments inflicted on criminals, including execution; and 3) known criminals (purportedly) reforming and being recruited by JNIM. Some of the women who credit JNIM with reducing banditry noted that its members are themselves implicated in cattle theft and looting villages perceived to support the government.[115]

'Crime was a big problem; we were always calling the police and gendarmerie, but they didn't act. The problem of banditry has improved a lot under JNIM.' **Burkinabè elder, Sahel Region**

Capping fees paid to land owners: Several women credited JNIM with eliminating or capping the traditional fee payable to the Peuhl land-owning class (Djowros) for grazing cattle on open pasture land (bourgoutières) or fishing in streams.[116] They added that this challenge to the longstanding power of traditional elites had made it easier for them to ensure food security.

'Shepherds used to pay huge sums to the Djowros to graze their animals. But now, JNIM made access to pasture and water for fishermen affordable for all on the grounds that the land belongs not to individuals but to all inhabitants of earth.' **40-year-old Malian, Mopti Cercle**

Natural resource dispute resolution and protection: Respondents and experts referred to disputes over access to rivers and streams (for fishing and irrigation); access to water and grazing land for livestock; and compensation for destruction of crops by grazing animals.[117] Around a third of the respondents, the majority Malian, credited JNIM

112 Interviews, Burkinabè woman (BF #46), Northern, Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women (Mali #7–10, #11–14, #28, #29), Central Mali, July–August 2025.

113 Interviews, Malian, Burkinabè civil society members, and researcher for international human rights organisation, by phone, October 2025.

114 Interviews, Burkinabè women (BF #22, #29–32), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women (Mali #1, #2, #8, #17–26), Central Mali, June–August 2025.

115 The literature substantiates that livestock theft plays a key role in armed Islamist group financing. See: J. Courtright and K. de Bruijne. Cattle Wahala: Addressing the political economy of cattle rustling and smuggling between Ghana, Burkina Faso and Togo (Clingendael, May 2025); F. Berger, *Cattle rustling and insecurity: dynamics in the tri border area between Burkina Faso, Cote d' Ivoire and Ghana* (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, July 2025).

116 Interviews, Burkinabè women (BF #53, #54), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women (Mali #8, #13–16, #28, #29).

117 The disputes occurred as the population grew, deforestation intensified, and farmers extended their fields to encompass traditional corridors used by nomadic herders during the seasonal movement of livestock between the wet and dry season, known as the annual 'transhumance'. Interviews, Malian and Burkinabè political scientists, by phone, May-June 2025.

with resolving these natural resource disagreements, some of which had previously provoked violent clashes or were now languishing in national courts.[118] Most such disputes flare between members of different ethnic communities, with JNIM's interventions therefore perceived as reinforcing social cohesion, as well as benefiting food security.

'JNIM's ability to solve these disputes, which sowed so much discord and left many dead during flare-ups, has been a huge relief for our people.' **Malian village chief, Ségou Region**

The women described how JNIM enforces – through monitoring and patrols – livestock grazing corridors; strict dates for animals departing to/returning from the transhumance; fishing timelines; and clear lines of responsibility in the event of livestock trampling on agricultural fields. JNIM also facilitates a community- and dialogue-driven process, with village leaders from both sides brought together to find workable solutions.

'The fight between the Bozo and Rimaibe over the Yogon-siré stream endured for decades. Malian authorities were never able to resolve it. Clashes broke out every year, killing many people. JNIM put an end to this conflict: their qadi reunited both communities and they finally buried the hatchet.' **55-year-old Malian, Djenné Cercle**

A dozen respondents credited JNIM with ensuring more sustainable fish supplies by banning small-lace fishing nets, which had been depleting stocks.[119] Several of these women, resident in villages along the Niger River, said JNIM also restricted when villagers could fish. Such measures had reportedly led to more and cheaper fish, shoring up employment for villagers involved in the fishing business. A number of women credited bans on deforestation and slash-and-burn farming methods with regenerating wooded areas. At the same time, they noted this helped JNIM fighters conduct ambushes and avoid detection during state CT operations.[120]

'Today, small fish are no longer sold or found at market; they now have the chance to grow big and reproduce. Fish species that had dwindled years ago have reappeared in the river. This is good for feeding our children.' **42-year-old Malian, Koro Cercle**

Some women said villagers adhered to JNIM decisions on land matters due both to the group's muscular enforcement methods and its widespread presence in areas where the decisions were applied. A Malian elder explained: 'The state tried to deal with some of these land problems but in the absence of police and gendarmes to ensure respect, people just ignored the judgements'.[121] By contrast, as a 50-year-old Malian from Mopti Cercle related: 'JNIM are everywhere, patrolling day and night to make sure people don't dare disrespect their laws including livestock grazing corridors they laid out in 2016'.[122]

'"JNIM forbade what they called "violence against nature", like cutting the forests and burning fields before cultivation, which at times raged out of control. Now it is greener and there is shade.' **Malian, Youwarou Cercle**

Cracking down on 'vice': Over a third of women credited JNIM with ending prostitution, as well as the production, sale and consumption of alcohol, tobacco and illicit drugs. They said the 'crackdown' had especially benefited young people and those living near artisanal gold mining areas, where such behaviours are allegedly common.[123] Some of the same respondents said JNIM's imposition of the hijab

118 Interviews, Burkinabè women (BF #49, #53, #54), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women (Mali #5, #7–23, #27–31), Central Mali, June-Aug. 2025.

119 Interviews, Burkinabè woman (BF #50), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women (Mali #7, #8, #13–16, #27–31), Central Mali, June–Aug. 2025.

120 Interviews, Burkinabè woman (BF #50), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women (Mali #7–14).

121 Phone interview, Malian political scientist, July 2025.

122 Interview, Malian woman (Mali #16), Sévaré, Mali, July 2025.

123 Interviews, Burkinabè women (BF #9, #10, #20, #21, #44, #53), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women (Mali #1, #2, #5–14, #17–21, #26–31), Central Mali, June–August, 2025.

had put a stop to 'nudity', defined as women exposing their arms or parts of their legs, and prevented other perceived 'immoral' behaviour by women and girls. JNIM's public stance on illicit drugs stands in contradiction, however, to research documenting the financial benefits reaped by the group from taxing drug smuggling in West Africa.[124]

'People from all over flooded into our area to mine, bringing their bad habits with them. We were powerless to stop it, but JNIM ended prostitution, drugs, alcohol, debauchery of every sort.' **36-year-old Burkinabè, Boucle du Mouhoun Region**

124 C. A. Ndubuisi, 'Unravelling the illicit economies that sustain terrorism in the Sahel', Institute for Security Studies, 12 August 2025; A. Aguilera, 'The link between terrorism and drug trafficking in Africa', R*evista Internacional de Estudios sobre Terrorismo* 7, 2022, pp. 34–42.

5. Adaptation or radicalisation?

Women's positive perceptions of JNIM governance appear to reflect adaptation rather than genuine religious radicalisation, with most framing their acquiescence as a survival strategy. In effect, they are willing to endure life under the group's authority if it means they can avoid dispossession, displacement or further violence. While JNIM has sought to deepen religiosity in the communities it controls, most respondents have not adopted the group's strict interpretation of Islam. Many expressed concerns about JNIM's coercive methods and dismissal of respected local religious authorities and practices, referencing their own pre-existing religious conservatism as a baseline belief system. Long-term exposure to JNIM appears to be shifting religious beliefs and practices in subtle ways, however, with some women (along with men) demonstrating heightened religiosity and a Qur'anic literacy that aligns with the group's interpretation of Islam.

All women who had lived in JNIM areas of effective control for more than five years (39 of the 77 respondents) noted that life had become easier over time, despite hopes for a return to the status quo (through JNIM's military defeat or a negotiated settlement with the government) not coming to fruition.[125] They described how they and their peers were adapting to JNIM by making choices that minimise risks to themselves and their families, while maximising potential benefits.

Women's social adaptation to JNIM religiosity

The above-mentioned group of 39 women described JNIM efforts to increase religious adherence, including through study groups led by and for women. However, only a few had participated in these groups or could articulate in-depth understanding of JNIM's objectives or wider goals. Many women criticised JNIM for: failing to acknowledge existing levels of religious observance; contradicting respected elders' interpretation of the Qur'an; and coercing, intimidating or killing local religious authorities.[126]

Despite criticising JNIM methods, ideology and practices – including the group's religion-based rationale for delivering essential services – respondents acknowledged the practical benefits such services afford. This parallels Raineri's observation that, ''Women may take a pragmatic approach, looking favourably on certain measures introduced by "jihadist governance" that have progressive implications in terms of gender, without wholly sharing the ideology of the extremist group'.[127]

Furthermore, among the roughly one dozen Malian respondents who discussed their non-combat operational support for JNIM military efforts, most did not describe their actions in terms of new-found religious commitment. They more often cited expectations around their roles as wives, daughters, or sisters of JNIM fighters.[128] When queried on their support for JNIM, most attributed it to the unlawful (whether real or perceived) killing of loved ones by government-affiliated forces. The JNIM support roles described by these women spanned intelligence, reconnaissance, logistics procurement, Qur'anic education, and cleaning and cooking in JNIM bases. Description of women's auxiliary support roles also

125 Interviews, Burkinabè women (BF #29–32, #44, #46, #49, #50), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women (Mali #1–31), Central Mali, June–August 2025.

126 Interviews, Burkinabè women (BF #10, #14, #17, #21–23, #36–38, #41, #48, #51) Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women (Mali #1, #3–5, #15–23, #26, #28–31) Central Mali, June–August 2025.

127 Raineri, *Dogmatism or pragmatism?*, p. 9.

128 Interviews, Malian women [Mali #7-91, #15-21, #28-31], Central Mali, June–August, 2025.

appear in the literature and were reinforced by interviews among Malian and Burkinabè security forces and judiciary personnel for this study. There are few indications that women play an active armed role in JNIM combat operations.[129]

Community responses to JNIM promotion of religiosity

Sustained contact with JNIM may precipitate an evolution in women's religiosity over time. Three Peuhl elders in frequent contact with JNIM leadership, as well as a handful of respondents, described a concerted effort by JNIM to deepen the religious practice of women and girls. This includes training the wives of JNIM commanders and supporting them to establish informal Qur'anic schools and study groups.[130] Whether such efforts will ultimately contribute to heightened religious observance and more extreme beliefs remains to be seen and merits further tracking.

> 'Five wives of the bearded men, all daughters of our village covered from head to toe in black, gathered all the village women together [in 2021]. They said we should be good Muslims, they spoke of the Qur'an and JNIM's message. It was the first of many meetings they organised in our village.' **70-year-old Burkinabè, Sahel Region**

Just over a quarter of respondents noted increased religiosity in their communities since JNIM assumed control. In particular, they deemed that Islam is now 'a priority for everyone' and that people are less concerned with wealth and social status and are more benevolent towards others.[131] They also commented that knowledge among villagers of the Qur'an, hadiths and other texts had greatly increased, with children spending more time in Qur'anic schools and women attending study groups in some areas. Conversely, some of these respondents criticised JNIM's imposition of new religious practices, such as expecting worshippers to cross arms over their upper-chest during prayer, discouraging the use of Muslim prayer beads, and requiring men to attend all five prayers at the mosque daily.

129 Interviews, Burkinabè intelligence officer, Malian gendarme, and Malian prosecutor, by phone, July 2025. For the relevant literature, see: Abatan and Sangaré, *Katiba Macina;* Raineri*, Dogmatism or pragmatism?*; Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition, 'The role of women in violent extremism in Mali—magnitude and impact', 24 May 2022.

130 Interviews, Malian Peuhl elders, Daker, Senegal, June 2023, and Mauritania, May 2024; Burkinabè Peuhl elder, by phone, Jan. 2025.

131 Interviews, Burkinabè women (BF #20, #40, #49, #50, #53–55), Northern, Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women (Mali #7–15, #22, #23, #27–31), Central Mali, June–August, 2025.

6. Women's governance preferences in the contest for power between JNIM and the state

The study's fieldwork reveals a vicious cycle in which alleged violations by government-affiliated security forces – such as unlawful killings, enforced disappearances, looting and pillaging, and sexual violence – have profoundly eroded trust in the state, thereby positioning JNIM as a more credible, if brutal, alternative. Crucially, a desire for vengeance – spurred by the death of family members in government operations – is driving men and, increasingly, women to support JNIM. These findings underscore a dangerous paradox: campaigns designed to reassert state authority are deepening local disaffection, legitimising jihadist narratives and fuelling insurgent growth across the Central Sahel. Nevertheless, the majority of women harshly criticised both JNIM and the state. In doing do, they expressed a strong preference for minimalist governance, valuing citizen security, freedom and the trusted authority of local leaders over state institutions or armed Islamist governance.

Diminishing support for the state due to security force violations

CT efforts in the Central Sahel – whether military or diplomatic – are oriented around facilitating the return of the state. Such aspirations are, however, complicated by alleged atrocities committed by government-affiliated security forces during CT operations, which are damaging community perceptions of state legitimacy and driving recruitment into JNIM. As a Malian woman from Tenenkou Cercle lamented: 'After the army massacred our people, how can we ever find room in our hearts to trust or believe in the state again?'[132]

Most respondents had neutral or positive perceptions of the state prior to and in the early days of JNIM's takeover. However, as CT operations ramped up (from 2013 in Mali and 2016 in Burkina Faso) perceptions of the state shifted markedly, driven by a perception – real or imagined – that violent collective punishment was being inflicted on the Peuhl community. These negative views have been exacerbated by the fact that, in many areas, women's only contact with the state is via government-affiliated forces.

'First Mali's authorities neglected the situation, leaving the bearded men to take over, and then when they react, the army starts killing us.' **52 year-old Malian, Mopti Cercle**

'We are caught in the middle … forced to wear black by the jihadists, then blamed and abused by the army when on operation for wearing the same black hijabs.' **27-year-old Burkinabè, Sahel Region**

Some three-quarters of the respondents described – and in many cases had experienced – CT operations in which their husbands, sons, fathers and sometimes scores of other villagers were extrajudicially killed or disappeared, and their villages burned and looted.[133] Respondents were especially critical of auxiliaries,

132 Interview, Malian woman (Mali #27), Mopti, Mali, July 2025.

133 Interviews, Burkinabè women (BF #1, #6, #11–13, #20, #21, #24, #28–38, #42–44, #45, #48, #50–54), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women (Mali #1-14, #17–27, #28–31), Central Mali, June–Aug. 2025.

including ethnic-based (and other) civil defence groups such as the Bambara-based Dozo, the Dogon-based Dan Na Ambassagou militias in Mali, and the Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie, VDP), created in 2020 in Burkina Faso.[134] These groups were alleged to have committed particularly egregious abuses, damaging social cohesion between the Peuhl and other ethnic communities. The Russian-backed Wagner Group was also singled out for criticism.

Three Burkinabè women said the state had refused to allow the Peuhl community to enrol in the VDP, adding fuel to a narrative of discrimination.[135] Several Burkinabè women who had suffered at the hands of government-affiliated forces had much more negative perceptions of the VDP than of the Burkinabè Defence and Security Forces (FDS).[136] This resonates with recent XCEPT research in the borderlands between Mali, Burkina Faso and Ghana.[137]

JNIM violence is criticised but seen as more predictable

Almost all the women who described CT operations in their villages likewise condemned looting, destruction and unlawful killings by JNIM—whether against the Peuhl or other ethnic groups. They did, however, characterise JNIM's attacks on civilians as less indiscriminate. One Burkinabè woman voiced a commonly shared sentiment: 'Each time JNIM kills, there is a reason. You may not agree with their decision but there is a cause, and usually a warning. The state kills for no reason, with no warning'.[138]

Some respondents, including those with negative perceptions of JNIM, said they were terrified of reprisals if state forces return to their villages. This fear, in tandem with JNIM efforts to control banditry, has allowed the group to position itself as protecting the community. JNIM cultivates this image through social media posts showing JNIM fighters rescuing survivors of massacres, notably women and children, and providing humanitarian aid.[139] Islamic State-allied groups active in Mali and Niger are similarly regarded by villagers as having protected them from criminals.[140]

134 The VDP was created by a 2020 law authorising the mobilisation, training and arming of civilians to both defend their villages and engage in wider CT operations in coordination with state security forces. Members also engage in intelligence gathering, patrolling, and escorting of military and civilians. The vast majority of members were recruited from agrarian ethnic groups, notably the Mossi, Songhai, Gourmantche and Foulse. For data on human rights and international humanitarian law violations, see the web pages on Burkina Faso provided by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.

135 This claim has been documented in the literature, which notes that while Peuhl citizens are not formally excluded, they are generally excluded in practice. See M. DeAngelo, 'Lessons from Burkina Faso's Fight Against al-Qaeda and the Islamic State', Foreign Policy Research Institute, 18 September 2025.

136 Interviews, Burkinabè women (BF #1, #12, #27, #24, #39), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025.

137 de Bruijne et al., *Life on the line—summary report.*

138 Interview, Burkinabè woman (BF #12), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025.

139 These include JNIM social media posts following a February 2024 massacre near Gayeri, in eastern Burkina Faso, in which fighters are seen rescuing two toddlers from a pile of some 30 bodies (video in author's records); and the widely reported March 2025 massacre of over 50 people near Solenzo, Burkina Faso, in which JNIM is shown to be providing humanitarian aid to the survivors. See: Human Rights Watch, 'Burkina Faso: government-allied militias linked to massacre', 14 March 2025; France 24, 'Le point sur les exactions à Solenzo', 17 March 2025.

140 International Crisis Group, *Women's Lives under Islamic State in Niger's Tillabery*, Africa Briefing No. 200, (Niamey/Dakar/Brussels: Aug. 2024).

State-backed violence as a driver of JNIM recruitment

> 'The army killed each time there was an operation – twelve one day, ten another. Our people found tied and blindfolded. The result? Youth from every single village in our area have joined them.' **42-year-old Malian, Tenenkou Cercle**

About half the women who described the use of excessive force during state-sponsored CT operations said it had prompted many male villagers, including family members, to join JNIM. This phenomenon is well-documented in the literature.[141] A 2017 UN study examining the drivers of recruitment into extremist groups in Africa found that the 'tipping point' for 71 percent of survey respondents was the killing or arrest of a family member by government forces, concluding that: "State security-actor conduct is revealed as a prominent accelerator of recruitment, rather than the reverse".[142] Raineri notes that state neglect or absence is increasingly being seen as less important than abuses by state authorities in driving jihadist recruitment, observing 'it is rather state action – and not the lack thereof – that best explains the capacity of mobilisation of jihadi insurgencies in African borderlands'.[143] Echoing this sentiment, a Burkinabè army officer commented, "As long as women and those they love continue to be collateral victims of the war against terrorism, they will give birth to future generations of jihadists."[144]

> '"The army came at 5 am, set fire to the village and took our men. We heard their cries and found 14 of them dead later that day. It is the army we now fear ... the return of the state would be disastrous.' **36-year-old Burkinabè, Sahel Region**

Several people interviewed for the study said state excesses were also driving female recruitment into JNIM, including women they knew.[145] For instance, a Burkinabè elder showed researchers text messages from his 17-year-old niece explaining that she had decided to join JNIM after witnessing the execution of her father and two bothers by the VDP. The elder observed that, 'Men and women have the same heart and spirit – both can be motivated by revenge'. The longer women respondents had spent under JNIM control, the more severe their criticism of state governance tended to be. This trend has important implications for Sahelian states looking to restore control over their territory and CWA states attempting to prevent JNIM's expansion along their borders.

Women's preference for limited state governance

Nearly all the Peuhl women harshly criticised both JNIM and state forces for greatly increasing daily hardships, notably by: endangering their communities; subjecting them to harm during violent confrontations; and failing to adequately consult them on crucial decisions affecting their lives. Respondent preferences for one governance model over the other did not alter the level of women's critique. Likewise, all but a few respondents blamed JNIM and government-affiliated forces in equal measure for sowing division between communities – illustrating the priority these women place on social cohesion.

141 G. Katz, *Mixed Method Study: Gender Differentiated Drivers of Violent Extremism in Central Sahel: Perceptions of VE Drivers: A Quantitative Analysis* (USAID and FHI360, 19 October 2020); Pellerin, *Armed violence.*

142 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Journey to extremism in Africa: pathways to recruitment and disengagement* (2023), pp. 4–6.

143 Raineri, 'Explaining the Rise'.

144 Interview, Burkinabè army officer, by phone, July 2025.

145 Interviews, Burkinabè women (BF #52, #54) and Malian women (#28--31), northern Côte d'Ivoire, Abidjan and Mopti, May-August 2025.

Of the 61 respondents who articulated a preference for a particular governance model, just over half said they favoured living under the state. This did not reflect expectations for particular services,[146] but rather the desire to return to minimalist governance, with guarantees for citizen security and provision of essential services and some development projects. These women place paramount importance on freedom – freedom of expression, movement and dress, and freedom to work, gather and practice their culture.

Those preferring to live under JNIM – just under half the 61 respondents who answered this question – appeared motivated primarily by anger at the state for abuses perpetrated during CT operations, alongside fear of reprisals should the state return.[147] Other reasons included: having family members in JNIM; finding equal or greater income security since the group's arrival; and, to a lesser extent, viewing JNIM's model of religion and governance as preferable.

Women placed great confidence in trusted local leaders – family heads, village chiefs, imams and marabouts – who, while not above criticism, have long managed to address local grievances using traditional and religious norms, thereby providing enduring sources of social cohesion and resilience. It was these traditional leaders in whom women most put their trust, whether under state governance or under JNIM – in the latter case due to their persistence in pushing back on JNIM dictates and advocating for leniency in enforcement.

146 Interviewees preferring the state had largely lived under JNIM for shorter periods of time. They consisted of Burkinabè women (BF #1, #6, #11–13, #17, #20, #28–40, #42, #44–46, #48–50), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women (Mali #5, #6, #23–#6), Central Mali, June–August 2025.

147 Interviewees preferring JNIM had nearly all lived under JNIM for at least five years: Burkinabè women (BF #12, #20, #24, #42, #52–54) Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025; Malian women (Mali #1, #2, #7–11, #15-22, #27–31), Central Mali, June–August 2025.

7. Recommendations for CT responses and future research

Regional states and their international partners have invested significant resources in countering JNIM's entrenchment in the Central Sahel, as well as preventing its expansion into CWA, especially in northern Benin. A critical examination of current CT policies and responses – both in relation to gender and more generally – is crucial to ensuring effectiveness and relevance to women's experiences. This section analyses the dominant assumptions undergirding regional policy frameworks, considers women's lived experiences under these frameworks, and offers recommendations for future CT and conflict resolution efforts, as well as relevant research going forward.

Revisiting assumptions underpinning CT approaches

Women are passive victims. Policy frameworks often emphasise women's vulnerability to forced marriage and humanitarian crises. Insufficient attention is given to the more complex reality of women who remain in JNIM-controlled areas by choice or necessity. This may involve tolerating certain rules, holding mixed views of insurgent governance, or actively supporting the group. While some studies acknowledge this nuance, most emphasise women's passivity, potentially missing opportunities to craft more effective response that account for women's agency and varied experiences.[148]

Violent extremism thrives where governance is absent. This view, argued by some policy experts, fails to account for the reality that state services such as clinics and schools were present and often valued prior to JNIM's arrival.[149] In many areas, JNIM's entry precipitated a collapse (albeit limited) of state services, rather than filling a governance void.[150] This compounded problems arising from insufficient state security and lack of government transparency in areas captured by JNIM.

Insurgent governance seeks to destroy state infrastructure and services. Service provision under insurgents is more complex and dynamic than commonly assumed. An initial collapse or partial destruction of essential services often is followed by their gradual restoration and sometimes expansion. This takes place alongside the regulation of – among other aspects of social and economic life – markets, natural resources and dispute resolution. Such nuance, expressed by women who have endured prolonged periods under JNIM control, is absent from most policy literature, which rarely incorporates longitudinal evidence.[151]

148 See for example: Raineri, *Dogmatism or pragmatism?*; J. Bigio and R Vogelstein, 'Women and Terrorism: Hidden Threats, Forgotten Partners', Council on Foreign Relations, May 2019.

149 UNDP, 'Preventing Violent Extremism Through Promoting Inclusive Development, Tolerance, and Respect for Diversity: A development response to addressing radicalization and violent extremists', Discussion Paper, 2016; European Union, 'European Union External Action Service Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel', 21 June 2016.

150 UN Women, *Civil Society Voices on Violent Extremism and Counter-Terrorism Responses, Regional Perspectives from West and Central Africa*, (UN Women, January 2021).

151 E. Beevor, *JNIM in Burkina Faso: a strategic criminal actor* (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2022).

Insurgent governance is inherently more abusive and less efficient than state governance. The restoration of state authority often is assumed to be both sufficient and desired.[152] Research exploring the complexity of civilian–insurgent relations often treats a 'return to the state' as the unquestioned endpoint of CT policies and programmes. Yet some Peuhl women respondents in this study often reported feeling safer under JNIM than under state security forces, with some fearing reprisals in the event of state forces regaining control. Likewise, some respondents perceived JNIM service provision in select sectors as more equitable and efficacious.

Insurgent ideology is incompatible with women's aspirations. CT policy response frameworks sometimes portray the values of JNIM and women as diametrically opposed.[153] Doing so, however, overlooks women's selective alignment with certain elements of JNIM ideology. While some studies acknowledge the possibility of adaptation, this falls short of acknowledging the potential that some norms may be shared between women and JNIM.[154] A more nuanced understanding of ideological (mis)alignment is a necessary precursor to effective CT and conflict resolution interventions, including dialogue.

Challenges to effective CT responses

Coordination gaps remain between national governments, regional blocs, and donors in attempts to counter JNIM expansion. Interviews with policy experts highlighted weak alignment on shared objectives, as well as a failure to integrate gendered perspectives from the outset.[155] As a result, gender has often been treated as an afterthought, addressed years into securitised responses. Donors also diverge on what gender-sensitive responses mean – interpretations range from nebulous notions of women's empowerment to preventing women's radicalisation and recruitment – which risks incoherent and ineffective responses to the gendered dynamics underpinning regional conflict. This problem is starkly present in Mali and Burkina Faso, and even more acute in CWA, where donor-funded programming is more nascent and faces significant cuts.

CT response frameworks often rely on generalised approaches, overlooking gendered and other contextual dynamics that vary by region or operational phase. In Mali, JNIM often established control over communities through a mix of coercion, regulation and mediation, while in Burkina Faso the group largely asserted its authority through fear and violence. In the CWA borderlands, justice, security and livelihood deficits offer the main entry points for JNIM expansion.[156] Most frameworks fail to distinguish between insurgent entry tactics (e.g. exploiting grievances) and post-entrenchment strategies (e.g. regulating fishing in Djenné). Despite some efforts to document these practices, policy frameworks still tend to conflate JNIM's entry into a community with governance. This not only diminishes programmatic responses in areas where JNIM is entrenched but undermines prevention efforts elsewhere.

152 See for example: Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), *Guidelines on Women, Peace, and Security* (December 2020); E. Stoddard, T. Chafer, I.O. Albert, B.E. Dicko, C. Nagarajan, B. Ndiaye, M. Sy, 'Civilian Protection as Strategy: A New Approach to Counterterrorism in West Africa', Georgetown Journal of international Affairs, 26 March 2025; E. Beevor, *JNIM in Burkina Faso*; Guichaoua and Bouhlel, *Interactions Between Civilians*.

153 ECOWAS, *Guidelines on Women;* Beevor, *JNIM in Burkina Faso.*

154 Cambridge University Press, 'Women of the Sahel: Portraits of women living through violence and conflict in the Sahel', *International Review of the Red Cross* 103: 918, 2021, pp. 781–94.

155 Interviews, policy stakeholders (P01, P02, P04, P08–P10).

156 de Bruijne et al., *Life on the line—summary report*; See also: ISF Africa, 'VEOs and Gender Dynamics in Northern Togo, Ghana, and Benin', June 2024 [Private, Unpublished]

Women's lived experiences are often overlooked in policy development. Although some literature acknowledges the diverse roles played by women amid an insurgency – as well as in community life more generally – there remains considerable scope for capturing the ways in which governance and security deficits shape women's everyday lives in conflict-affected areas.[157] Policy debates on countering JNIM's expansion have not adequately engaged with the nuanced experiences of women under the group, whether positive or negative – and often reduce women's needs to specific areas of development assistance (e.g. education or empowerment) or resilience (e.g. preventing extremist recruitment or countering victimisation).[158] There has been little focus on women's health, for example, an issue of immense importance to women facing severely reduced healthcare access under JNIM. Conversely, common policy assumptions about JNIM's negative treatment of women do not adequately account for the views of women who cite reduced domestic violence under JNIM or laud the group's 'efficient' shari'a-based justice system. To develop credible alternatives to extremist governance, regional governments and their partners require a clear understanding of women's lived experiences.

Strengthening gender-sensitive CT responses

Amid uncertainty around the future trajectory of international aid, it is imperative to identify effective and efficient pathways to restoring stability. Gender-sensitive programming is critical to the durability of CT efforts in vulnerable borderland and JNIM-held communities. Women are a key constituency for community stabilisation. Greater focus must be placed on their experiences under JNIM when designing and implementing regional CT responses. Below we set out several areas for consideration, with recommendations for strengthening CT programming in the Central Sahel and CWA.

Rebuilding state legitimacy through civilian protection

For Central Sahelian states: Curb violations and ensure discipline

Unlawful killing (including massacres and other forms of collective punishment), looting, destruction of property, and other abusive practices by government-affiliated security forces undermine the effectiveness of CT responses by, among other consequences, driving recruitment into JNIM. As described by respondents, such abuses have also led to many communities fearing the state's return, whether by force or a negotiated solution.[159] To rebuild trust, Central Sahelian governments should:

- enforce discipline among government-affiliated forces by upholding standards of conduct, vetting recruits, and reforming or demobilising abusive units/auxiliaries.
- conduct independent, transparent investigations into alleged violations by all sides, and publicise the findings and remedial actions.
- ensure security force personnel mandated to ensure discipline and compliance with international humanitarian law, including provost marshals, are fully integrated into CT operational planning and

157 UN Women, *Civil Society Voices*; and H. Matfess (she/her), 'Convergence and contestation: The Women, Peace and Security Agenda in Central Mali', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 27 (2), pp.401-424 (2025).

158 See for example: ECOWAS, *Guidelines on Women*; Beevor, *JNIM in Burkina Faso*; Stoddard et al., *Civilian Protection as Strategy.*

159 Interviews, Malian women (Mali #17–19), Mopti, Mali, July 2025; Burkinabè women (BF #12, #13), Northern Côte d'Ivoire, May 2025.

are empowered to investigate alleged international humanitarian law violations by all sides.

- establish civilian-harm tracking and community-reporting channels (made accessible to women from all ethnicities), pausing operations in areas where civilian harms are reported and quickly remediating issues.

- ensure security forces impartially uphold civilian protection principles and communicate reassurance through public messaging, including as part of any dialogue processes.

For CWA states: Proactively prevent indiscipline by government forces in borderlands

While CWA security force operations (near their shared borders with Central Sahelian states) have not resulted in widespread violations against civilians, governments should take proactive steps to prevent such any such acts from occurring. Concerns expressed about security actors include arbitrary arrests, refoulement of Peuhl villagers, and solicitation of bribes at checkpoints.[160] There is room to mitigate negative sentiment among borderland communities aroused by such violations, particularly given CWA security forces largely retain popular legitimacy – more so than their Sahelian counterparts.[161] CWA states also should apply critical lessons from the Central Sahel experience, avoiding well-documented mistakes in CT responses.

CWA states should:

- impose restraint and discipline upon forces deployed in borderlands; publicly reinforce respect for international humanitarian and human rights law; and deter violations through transparent investigations and enforcing accountability.

- ensure that the highest standards of conduct are upheld in cross-border security cooperation with Sahelian counterparts.

- strategically communicate and uphold policies that counter extremist narratives, such as showing zero-tolerance for corrupt and abusive practices and establishing reporting hotlines staffed by credible community members.

- shore up the role of personnel mandated to ensure discipline and compliance with international humanitarian law, including in operational planning, ensuring they are empowered and resourced to investigate allegations of indiscipline or of abuse by all sides.

- engage members of parliament and civil society, including supporting parliamentary inquiries into the status of civil–military (civ-mil) relations in vulnerable borderland communities.

160 de Bruijne et al., *Life on the line—summary report.*

161 Ibid.

Integrating inclusive civil–military approaches into regional responses

Prioritise civil–military engagement from the outset

Civ–mil programmes are a crucial, community-facing threat reduction tool that can help bolster state legitimacy and engender trust between government-affiliated forces and the civilian population. Ensuring female security force members are part of civ–mil engagement and public facing can help open more effective channels of communication with women in vulnerable communities, where direct interaction with male soldiers may be feared or taboo. The Ghanaian Female Engagement Teams (FETs) used in UN peacekeeping missions offer a practical example of how a more inclusive approach could enhance gender sensitivity and improve relations between security forces and local communities. In the Democratic Republic of Congo and Central African Republic, FETs not only enabled security force engagement with local women, but improved trust and legitimacy outcomes.[162] In Mali, respondents said they would be more willing to report abuses or seek help if female authorities were present.[163]

Enhancing civ–mil relations is paramount to building and retaining trust among vulnerable communities. Delaying civ–mil engagement can weaken the state's ability to shape community perceptions from the outset of security operations, potentially eroding community resilience to armed Islamist group influence.[164] By contrast, sustained and structured civ–mil interactions can improve cooperation between communities and the security forces tasked with protecting them. While this applies even when it comes later in a deployment, embedding civ–mil engagement early – and ensuring women are meaningfully integrated into relevant committees and outreach teams – can accelerate impact.[165] While civ–mil relations are primarily the responsibility of regional states, international partners can play provide training and advisory support, drawing on lessons learned from their experiences in the Sahel.[166]

Enforce anti-corruption measures

Respondents across Mali often described government-affiliated forces and their representatives as more corrupt and predatory than those of JNIM, with solicitation of bribes at checkpoints – among other practices – weakening state legitimacy and increasing tolerance for armed Islamist groups.[167] Enhanced security deployments in the borderlands of CWA states have also led to increased public perceptions of extortionary practices, whether in the form of bribes or legitimate fees imposed in areas where the state has historically had limited presence.[168] In addressing these challenges, regional states could consider a range of policy options, including:

- implementing transparent complaint mechanisms, including corruption reporting hotlines; rewarding high-performing officers and units; and making disciplinary outcomes public.

- establishing or strengthening anti-corruption mechanisms within defence ministries and judiciaries,

162 G. Baldwin, *From female engagement teams to engagement platoons: The evolution of gendered community engagement in UN peace operations* (New York: International Peace Institute, 2021).

163 Interviews, Malian women (Mali #12, #23), Central Mali, June 2025.

164 UNDP, *Journey to extremism.*

165 Ibid.

166 J. Tchokogoue, 'Global Fragility Act in Coastal West Africa: Policy Lessons from US Engagement in the Sahel', *Small Wars Journal*, 16 June 2025.

167 Interviews, Malian women (#2, #14, #16, #20, #27), Central Mali, June 2025.

168 de Bruijne et al., *Life on the line—summary report.*

exposing misconduct and prosecuting relevant cases.

- demonstrating a clear commitment to upholding accountability for corruption, in order to close the legitimacy gap exploited by JNIM.

Countering JNIM's governance model by centring women in response strategies

Reorient CT and development strategies around women's priorities

Regional states and international actors should critically assess how to better align programming with the priorities expressed by women in vulnerable communities. For instance, women respondents in this study challenged the idea that promoting liberal values or political rights offered effective entry points for restoring state legitimacy. Above all, they sought functional governance, and articulated this as the provision of security and essential services to enable the pursuit of cultural, religious and family endeavours without undue interference. In short, legitimacy was grounded in practical improvements to their everyday life, not ideology.

Respondents highlighted freedom of movement, access to markets, clinics, fair-and-fast dispute resolution, and freedom from bribery and harassment as critical state functions.[169] Programmes that focus on rights-based or ideological messaging without addressing these practical needs risk missing the mark. Similarly, communications efforts aimed at enhancing trust in the state must take account of women's divergent perceptions of the state's civil and security functions, actively engaging them in dialogue and showing responsiveness.

Demonstrate responsiveness to local needs

JNIM has had more than a decade to refine its governance approach. Over time, local populations have adapted to life under the group's control, complicating efforts to counter the group's influence. Re-acclimating communities to central state governance will be enhanced by the introduction of responsive, accountable governance upon the state's return. Assessing the aspects of JNIM's governance model that appeal to local populations, as well as those that cause offence and harm, can offer insight into features of governance that will resonate among communities in both the Central Sahel and CWA. This could include:

- drawing on CT experiences in the Sahel to embed greater focus on local development needs (e.g. healthcare, education, infrastructure, microcredit) and safety concerns.[170]

- demonstrating strategic flexibility and responsiveness in military operations, state service provision and development assistance can offer a practical means of enhancing state legitimacy.

- ensuring elected representatives (notably parliamentarians representing diverse communities and liaising between local and national authorities) meaningfully engage with their constituents and deliver on their behalf beyond election cycles.

169 Interviews, Malian women (#16, #22, #23), Central Mali, June-July, 2025. Interview, Burkinabè woman (#12), northern Cote d'Ivoire, May 2025.

170 Interviews, Malian women (#17–19, #21), Central Mali, June-July, 2025, and interviews, Burkinabè women (#10, #21), northern Cote d'Ivoire, May 2025. .

- positioning district-level officials to act in service of community needs, for example by: equipping local governance entities with emergency funds; delegating authorities; and simplifying public-facing procedures for resolving land and water disputes.

- advancing women's participation in local governance through dedicated women's liaisons and committees (where relevant and accepted).

Improve local justice delivery

In areas where JNIM has a more established presence, respondents described the group's shari'a-based justice system as faster, cheaper and more accessible than the state equivalent. Women expressed relief at no longer having to travel long distances or pay bribes to resolve disputes, and at being able to communicate in their own language. Unless state judicial systems function more effectively at the local level, there is a risk that JNIM's parallel structures will retain at least some appeal for frustrated citizens.[171] Delivering more efficient, accountable justice services could undermine JNIM. This could include:

- decentralising justice services through local, mobile mechanisms that reduce the dependency of frontline and borderland communities on centralised urban bureaucracies. Services could be further improved in response to audits of wait times, interpreter availability and other in-demand services.

- establishing hotlines for reporting unprofessional judicial conduct (including solicitation of bribes). Patterns of misconduct could be reported to inspectors general or ombudspeople charged with overseeing compliance.

- supporting alternate procedures for resolving communal disputes over access to land and water, incorporating lessons from JNIM dispute resolution efforts that draw positive comments while ensuring standards and claimant rights are upheld. Alternative judicial reform models include mediation initiatives that incorporate traditional and religious leaders in negotiation/adjudication.

- establishing 'justice houses' staffed by paralegals (including women) empowered to work alongside state officials and traditional authorities. Such houses, which are a familiar concept in the region, could offer education on legal rights and mediate minor disputes, preventing minor conflicts from escalating in ways that JNIM can exploit.

Address domestic violence

Across Mali and Burkina Faso, respondents consistently reported a sharp decline and, in some areas, near-total elimination of domestic violence in areas of JNIM control, due to strict enforcement and swift retribution for offenders. Women described feeling safe to report abusive partners, citing cases where men were reported by anonymous observers and punished by JNIM.[172] The perception of armed groups as more reliable protectors of women than the government weakens state legitimacy and reinforces the appeal of parallel authority.[173] Scaling up domestic violence response systems, including confidential reporting channels for women and visible enforcement of the law, may help regional states regain ground. Failure to act in this sphere may be interpreted as tolerance for abuse.

171 Mercy Corps, 'Mali justice perceptions: justice and stability in the Sahel' (JASS) (Aug. 2022).

172 Interviews, Malian women (#16, #24, #26), Central Mali, June-July, 2025. And Burkinabè women (#10, #21, #50), northern Cote d'Ivoire, May 2025.

173 J. T. Lar and A. Vessier, *ECOWAS Toolkit T7: Non-State Justice and Security Providers and Security Sector Governance And Reform* (Geneva: DCAF, 2021).

Shift focus from deradicalisation where it is not relevant; spotlight instead JNIM's coercive methods

CT efforts in the Central Sahel have often treated communities under jihadist control as needing to be brought back to 'moderate' norms, whether through deradicalisation initiatives or other ideology-based interventions. This study shows that many women – and their communities – never accepted JNIM's religious orthodoxy. They were not drawn to the group's religious ideology, but instead gradually adapted their own (already conservative) religious practices to survive under JNIM.

CT responses should avoid treating adherence to conservative Islam as a risk factor for radicalisation. Doing so risks alienating communities and overlooking their core interests, namely, the desire for personal freedom, hands-off governance and effective services. Regional and donor CT resources should be rebalanced to centre on the state's role in civilian protection and service provision.

Promote social and cultural expression as core elements of community cohesion and resilience

Many respondents grieved the loss of community cohesion and connection caused by JNIM restrictions on traditional rites-of-passage – such as wedding celebrations and infant naming ceremonies – despite the easing of financial burdens engendered by the ban. This presents a strategic opportunity to counter JNIM. Communities in areas outside JNIM control, including displaced Malian and Burkinabè communities, could be encouraged to celebrate cultural and religious ceremonies as expressions of local and communal identity. Promoting such ceremonies, while presenting them as compatible with conservative Islamic values, could reinforce cohesion within and between ethnic groups – particularly if the state and its representatives visibly acknowledge celebration of these traditions as anchors of resilience and social cohesion in vulnerable borderlands.

Leverage displaced women's groups to foster solidarity and preserve traditions

In northern Côte d'Ivoire, refugee women reported having no awareness of women's groups or associations in host communities. Displaced women in central Mali likewise displayed a similar lack of knowledge. When properly resourced, these women's groups can provide vital economic, psychological and social support; help in the pooling of resources; and repair community cohesion between women of different ethnic communities. Establishing women's groups offers a strategic win for governments and donors by enabling women to enhance their livelihoods and cultivate a social network, fostering connections between displaced women and their host communities.

Enhancing regional and cross-border CT coordination

Insufficient coordination among donors and regional actors in the Sahel and CWA remains a major barrier to effective CT responses.[174] This is in part due to diverging interests and heightened regional tensions following coups in the countries belonging to the AES.[175] There is currently no unified regional coordination mechanism to align intelligence and analysis of evolving dynamics, evaluate effective approaches (and learn from missteps) and develop joint responses.[176] Every policy stakeholder

174 G. Montpetit, *A Path to Security: Renewing Relationships Within and Beyond the Sahel* (Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, April 2024).

175 Sandor, Frowd and Hönke. 'Productive failure'.

176 Montpetit, *A path.*

interviewed for this study cited improved coordination as a top priority, noting its absence undermines strategic direction and limits the adaptability of responses.[177]

Establishment of a regional working group under current stabilisation frameworks (e.g. the Coastal States Stability Mechanism; the International Organization for Migration's Central Sahel Crisis Response Plan; and/or the UN Development Programme's Regional Stabilisation Facility) could help improve coordination, particularly if linked to regional initiatives such as the Accra Initiative or ECOWAS mechanisms. This would help facilitate regional cross-border cooperation on CT and stabilisation.

Although the gap between AES and ECOWAS member states continues to impede cooperation, pragmatic engagement on mutual cross-border security interests is taking shape, potentially reducing frictions.

Given the current funding climate, coordination mechanisms should be light-touch and regionally owned. The focus should be on lesson learning, information-sharing, joint analysis and civ–mil coordination, rather than creating new, cumbersome structures.

The recent withdrawal of US development aid and broader donor funding cuts across the region mean CT operations and programming in the Central Sahel and Coastal West Africa face growing resource constraints. Gender-focused interventions are particularly vulnerable to reprioritisation. In the absence of traditional donor support, national governments and regional blocs will come under pressure to adjust their strategic ambitions or risk ceding space to other actors.

Priorities for further research

Despite a growing body of literature, considerable evidence gaps remain regarding the complex dynamics shaping women's perceptions of, and lived experiences under, armed Islamist governance in the Central Sahel and West Africa. A more thorough understanding of the factors shaping women's experiences – and a meaningful commitment to put this knowledge to good use – can enable national governments and their international partners to formulate more effective and inclusive governance, service provision and CT interventions. Alongside this, a research agenda consciously targeting evidence gaps identified in this study can help calibrate interventions to the needs of women and their communities.

Prioritise qualitative research on displaced Peuhl women in Togo, Benin, and Ghana

While this study helps fill the knowledge gap around displaced Peuhl women in Côte d'Ivoire, there remains a lack of qualitative data concerning their compatriots in neighbouring coastal states. More specifically, there is little codified understanding of how national asylum and displacement policies may be influencing the spread of armed group influence across borders – for example, whether women more aligned with JNIM are settling in particular areas. What the data from Mali and Burkina Faso confirm is that the longer JNIM entrenches itself in the Sahel and CWA borderlands, the more likely communities are to adapt to their rule. Understanding how this takes shape is critical to prevent normalisation.

177 Interviews, policy stakeholders (P01–P14), May-August 2025.

Investigate how non-Peuhl Sahelian women experience life under JNIM

Although this study sheds light on the perspectives of Peuhl women, there are almost certainly differences in how other ethnic communities (particularly those less represented in the group's ranks) experience JNIM's governance. Further research could determine how these communities may have been impacted by JNIM's gender policies, and the extent to which the group is targeting them in its drive to expand beyond the Central Sahel. Such research could also shed light on whether the problematic aspects of state governance discussed by the Peuhl respondents are more widespread across Sahelian society.

Research how borderland communities perceive life under JNIM

The policy stakeholders interviewed for the study acknowledged a lack of insight regarding how borderland communities regard JNIM rule, and whether such perceptions might be driving support for the group.[178] Given this, future research should examine what matters most to those who find themselves subject to JNIM's governance regime (e.g. loss of autonomy, ability to farm, mobility or joy) and use those insights to inform campaigns aimed at countering JNIM's regional expansion.

178 Interviews, policy stakeholder (P02, P07, P08, P09, P11), May-August 2025.

Conclusion

JNIM's military, religious, and ideological campaign to engender the support of communities in the Central Sahel and extend their project into Coastal West African states is ongoing, with respondents readily characterising members of their ethnic group, the Peuhl, as the engine driving and anchoring the group's expansion. This points to the importance of focusing on this group when formulating policy responses.

In areas where JNIM has entrenched its influence, women are playing the role of quiet yet influential protagonists in both armed Islamist expansion and, potentially, conflict mitigation and social cohesion. This is because, on the one hand, they are brought closer to the group by marriage or kinship with local men who join as fighters, with sons who are recruited and daughters who marry into the group. On the other, they play a central role in communal life through relationships with other women – including across ethnic groups – and influencing male relatives who are directly engaged with JNIM as a governing actor.

Sahelian, West African, and partner governments must recognise the complex push and pull factors – beyond fear, coercion and exploitation of grievances – propelling community support for armed Islamist groups such as JNIM. In considering CT responses, including potential negotiations, it is critical to balance military and governance tools. JNIM's competitive state building project is most effectively countered by strict adherence to international humanitarian law and civilian protection. Failure to do so can undermine state legitimacy and drive support for JNIM, making solutions – whether military or political –exponentially more complicated.

Re-asserting effective state presence in formerly JNIM-held territory – whether regained through military operations or negotiations – will require replacing aspects of armed Islamist governance and service provision that resonated with communities, and with women especially. This includes ensuring state service provision is equitable, accessible, efficient and transparent and incidences of corruption and abuse are decisively addressed. Regional states may need to grapple with the reality that JNIM's expansion has raised popular expectations around certain aspects of governance and service provision, including related to women's protection.

Elevating and centring women's experiences, opinions and voices are key to more effective policy and programme responses. While security and development interventions informed by women's views should not be seen as a silver bullet, they offer a better chance of limiting and reversing JNIM's gains, as well as contributing to a negotiated solution and plan for governance that charts a more stable future.

Annex 1. Data collection methodology

We summarise here the methodology utilised by the research team:

Research questions

The study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How have women in areas under JNIM control both suffered and benefited from JNIM policies and practices?

2. How did their experience with JNIM governance contrast with that under state governance?

3. To what extent are women inadvertently or strategically facilitating JNIM's entrenchment in the Central Sahel and its geographical expansion?

4. How can enhanced understanding of women's experiences under JNIM in the Central Sahel inform policies and practices to counter the group's spread into Coastal West Africa?

Research design

The study employed a qualitative, exploratory methodology relying on semi-structured, mostly individual, in-person interviews designed to generate context-rich insights into how women perceive and navigate insurgent governance in Mali and Burkina Faso.

A total of **77 Peuhl women from 68 different villages in Mali and Burkina Faso** were interviewed in two phases between May and August 2025 (see Figure 2, below):

- **Phase I** (Côte d'Ivoire, May–June): **46 displaced Burkinabè women** were interviewed from five conflict-affected regions: Boucle du Mouhoun, Cascades, Hauts-Bassins, Nord and Sahel. Interviews took place in Ferkessédougou, Ouangolodougou and Abidjan.

- **Phase II** (Mali, June–August): **31 Malian women** were interviewed from Mopti Region's administrative areas of Bandiagara, Bankass, Djenné, Douentza, Koro, Mopti, Tenenkou and Youwarou. Interviews took place in Sévaré and Mopti.

To gather additional perspectives and validate analysis, the research team conducted **24 key informant interviews (KIIs)** with eleven Malian and Burkinabè village elders; three West African security force members; and ten policymakers and local civil society actors.

Sampling methodology: The study relied on a purposive, non-probability sampling method to identify respondents who had lived under JNIM rule for at least six months. Local community leaders and other intermediaries supported identification of relevant respondents. The research team selected respondents who had lived varied lengths of time under JNIM, including some who had been under JNIM control for ten or more years. All respondents selected were Peuhl, in order to capture the views of an ethnic group targeted by JNIM for recruitment and territorial expansion, as well as by state CT operations.

Figure 2. Number and origin of women interviewed for this study

Instruments and implementation: Interview tools were semi-structured, piloted in Mali, and refined iteratively during data collection. Respondents were asked six core open-ended questions with prompts, thereby ensuring depth and comparability while allowing respondents to relay individual narratives.

Fieldwork was implemented by a team of four experienced researchers, including two Malians fluent in relevant local languages. Interviews lasted between one and three hours and were conducted in private, secure settings. Respondents included women living in JNIM areas (who travelled to secure locations for the interviews) and those who had fled JNIM-controlled areas.

Analysis: Interview transcripts were anonymised, manually reviewed and coded using a thematic analysis approach. Codes were derived inductively while also being aligned with the study's core questions, allowing for systematic comparison across geographies and respondent groups. The analysis paid attention to recurring narratives, regional divergences, and variations in how women described themes of governance, agency and insecurity.

Coding and interpretation were led by the research team lead to ensure consistency. Research team members contributed to the policy analysis and literature review. All transcripts and findings were reviewed by each of member of the research team, enabling triangulation of findings on lived experiences with other literature and policy frameworks.

Ethical safeguards: To minimise risk, personal identifying information has been anonymised and geographic origins generalised. Informed consent was obtained orally in the respondent's native language to ensure comprehension. Psychosocial support resources were identified to support swift referral of respondents or research team members if needed. In a number of cases where women had to travel from JNIM-controlled areas, local permission was sought to reduce risk of reprisals. Travel costs were reimbursed but no financial incentives were provided.

Limitations: Some constraints should be noted in interpreting these findings. The research was designed to prioritise depth and context over systematic sampling. Although measures were taken to address bias, several factors inevitably shaped both the process and the evidence produced. To mitigate these constraints and support validation, the team systematically compared findings across all respondent groups and regions of origin, supplemented by KIIs.

- **Sampling approach:** The purposive sampling method, while appropriate in conflict settings, limits generalisability. The findings should thus be read as indicative of patterns and experiences, not as statistically representative results.

- **Ethnic focus:** All respondents were Peuhl women. This offers depth on the experiences of a key group targeted by JNIM but inevitably excludes the perspectives of women from other ethnic groups living under JNIM control, thus limiting the generalisability of the findings.

- **Armed group and country focus:** The research focused on the armed Islamist group with the most advanced governance model (JNIM, as opposed to Islamic State-allied groups). Accordingly, respondents were selected from Mali and Burkina Faso, where this model is most entrenched, excluding respondents from Niger.

- **Geographic scope:** The research did not include women from Burkina Faso's Est and Centre-Nord regions, due to displacement of these populations to Niger, Ghana, Togo and Benin. These women may have different experiences not captured here.

- **Trauma and memory:** The psychological effects of conflict and the passage of time shaped how participants recalled and narrated events. Some respondents blurred timelines or were unable to recall precise dates.

- **Security dynamics:** JNIM's permission was required to allow some respondents—such as those married to JNIM fighters or living in remote JNIM-held enclaves—to travel to interview locations. While this reduced risk to participants, it may have influenced how freely they spoke.

Annex 2. Detailed quotations

Importance of ethnic and social cohesion prior to JNIM's arrival

'The Peuhl and Mossi prayed and worked together; attended each other's marriages and mourned deaths together. Our children played and went to school together. Later, we were both subject to JNIM's harsh rules, and in 2023, our families were massacred together by soldiers. The survivors even fled together.'
40-year-old Burkinabè, Soum Province

'There was a deep connection between the Peuhl, Bozo and Rimaibe. We bore hardship together and shared in times of plenty … the Bozos giving fish, the Peuhl providing milk, and the Rimaibe giving rice. Our ties were as strong as blood ties, until war drove us apart.'
36 year-old Malian, Tenenkou Cercle

'It is from the land and our livestock that we survive. If the rains are not good, the cattle perish; there is hunger and sickness. Our neighbours from all [ethnic] communities and NGOs more than the government helped us through these periods.'
50-year-old Malian, Koro Cercle

Women's characterisations of life under the state or JNIM (overarching quotes)

'Under the state, they gave us a clinic and a school; we grew our own food, there was freedom, joy in life, and fraternity with other [ethnic] communities with whom we had lived, worked and celebrated for generations. Under JNIM, you are subjected to everything by force without asking your opinion. A new Islam, foreign to our elders, is imposed on us. Their war is creating many orphans. We are in the middle, with nothing, and die more than those who have the weapons. I want to go back to the way life was under the state.'
50-year-old Malian, Koro Cercle

'Before JNIM there was too much disorder, immorality, corruption by state agents. At first, women suffered under JNIM – deaths in childbirth, the prohibitions, the black hijab and lack of income from work. But over the years we adapted to the new life and now find it better than before when we were slaves to life, working incessantly to have more money than our neighbours. With the state, one must go to school to be considered a citizen and benefit from government. Under JNIM, everyone is valued and contributes to their vision. Now, we are all part of the movement … Our husbands and children are fighters, our daughters and sisters are wives. We benefit from food distribution, from justice, life is affordable, and we live by the Ummah.'
Malian wife of a JNIM fighter

Women's negative perceptions of JNIM's dictates

Compulsory black hijab:

'These people didn't teach us anything. Our elders are devout and know the Qur'an better than they do. We already dress modestly. Nowhere in the Qur'an does it say women have to dress in black.'
67-year-old Burkinabè, Soum Province, Sahel Region

'We flatly refused the burqa. How can you work in your garden in the sun, digging, carrying water, with a huge, hot robe flapping around?'
Burkinabè, Boucle du Mouhoun Region

Prohibitions on work:

‘JNIM said the ban on work was to protect women, but it felt like prison. All it did was depress us and add to our financial burden.’
50-year-old Malian, Mopti Cercle

‘Before the bearded ones, I wove straw mats and made enough to buy clothing for my children, hair products for me and save for ceremonies. My husband sold livestock. We lived really well.’
55-year-old Malian, Boni Cercle

Banning of Peuhl traditions during rite-of-passage ceremonies:

‘There used to be a procession marking the groom’s presentation of the dowry to the bride’s family, and a cortege when the bride was brought from her family home, with hundreds of people running along. Now only the groom or his brother fetches her on a single motorcycle. All that joy we lived for is gone.’
43-year-old Burkinabè, Boucle du Mouhoun Region

‘For parents … the joy of that first baby … it is a human life that we want to announce and welcome properly into this world.’
45-year-old Burkinabè, Sahel Region

‘So many young people, our husbands and sons, died fighting for JNIM, but they forbid us from mourning our own children, forbid us from even saying they were dead, rather, they were now in paradise.’
Three Malian mothers, Douentza Cercle

JNIM’s impact on healthcare and mental health:

‘I know six pregnant women including those in labour who perished because it was haram for them to get on a motorcycle even for transfer to hospital.’
52-year-old Burkinabè, Sahel Region

‘Imagine a woman used to working in the fields, walking, moving all day – forced to be inside the house all day: it affected our health and our spirit.’
27-year-old, Boucle du Mouhoun Region

‘JNIM took all the happiness from our lives – the joy we felt when our children married; the dancing, the music, time together – and replaced it with a big black burqa.’
57-year-old Burkinabè, Sahel Region

‘We have been beaten and humiliated in front of our children. We can no longer work. We are enveloped in black. Celebrations we looked forward to all our lives are no longer. When you lose your husband, you are even forbidden from mourning.’
50-year-old Malian, Mopti Cercle

JNIM enforcement and discipline:

‘JNIM caught a neighbour pounding millet without a veil. They told her husband to take the baby off her back, then gave her ten lashes until blood ran down her back.’
Burkinabè, Sahel Region

‘A Dogon woman was beaten by five fighters with whips because her hair extensions were showing. They cut her hair with a knife and set it on fire.’
50-year-old Malian, Koro Cercle

‘Eight fighters brought two women in their forties then convened everyone to witness the punishment. The first was doing laundry near a well and wasn’t veiled. The other was taking her goats to water them at the

well. JNIM explained that each broke two rules, and gave each 20 lashes.'
52-year-old Burkinabè, Sahel Region

Acts of resistance:

'We calculated when they'd return to the village and all of us – the Peuhl, Mossi and Bambara – tore off the hijab the second they left but kept it close for when we heard their motorcycles approaching.'
53-year-old Burkinabè, Haut Bassins Region

'The marriage was planned for when JNIM wouldn't be there. We were celebrating – men and women dancing and singing. We mistook the sound of motorcycles for neighbours coming to join. But it was JNIM, who punished us harshly. We were testing them, but we learned and never did that again.'
36-year-old Burkinabè, Boucle du Mouhoun Region

Women's positive perceptions of JNIM's dictates

Women's level of engagement with JNIM:

'The youth working with JNIM are doing well. We see them with new motorcycles and money to buy livestock. Fighters permanently on mission benefit even more. This helps their family too.'
47-year-old Malian, Tenenkou Cercle

'All my children, brothers, cousins are employed by JNIM for different tasks. What other opportunities for work are there? If your son or husband is a fighter you are respected and live well.'
50-year-old Malian, Mopti Cercle

'Being a JNIM wife is like being a queen, especially those married to a chief. Their husbands are less abusive, they work less, they spend their time reading the Qur'an. This made many women want to marry a jihadist. But living in bush camps is hard: many wives die there.'
Malian matriarch, Youwarou Cercle

Religiosity:

'JNIM made our values change – we became more focused on our family, on social engagement, on religion and less obsessed with material things and money – on being rich, on competing over who has more.'
56-year-old Burkinabè, Soum Province

'The practice of Islam is our top priority. There are no female combatants, but wives promote shari'a law by teaching in Qur'anic schools for girls and in women's homes. JNIM encourages women to attend debates with marabouts over the rules. Girls feel glory in marrying a mujahedeen and those who do not are considered of lower status and unlucky.'
Malian wife of JNIM fighter, Central Sahel

Eliminating bribery:

'We grew tired of the gendarme checkpoint at the entrance to our town which demanded money from market women, passengers in buses, on motorcycles, even donkey-cart drivers going to and from market. JNIM put a stop to it.'
Five Malian women, Mopti Region

'My family has a lot of cattle and vaccinating them is expensive. My husband used to bribe the state veterinarian to show we'd vaccinated all our cattle. Under JNIM, we can't do that anymore.'
55-year-old Malian, Douentza Cercle

Delivery of humanitarian assistance:

‘The commune is 100% controlled by JNIM, so villagers necessarily benefit from its masters. Everything collected during zakat is taken to one village, and every three months, representatives of the surrounding villages come and collect their share.’
40-year-old Mali, Mali Cercle

‘JNIM regularly distributes to villagers displaced after government forces torched their villages. After ransacking army camps, they share the booty with us, usually rice, millet, flour, oil, sugar, pasta and boxes of biscuits.’
42-year-old Malian widow, Koro Cercle

“If fuel shortages hit our area -- JNIM brings petrol in 20-liter canisters and distributes it to those using motorcycles and tricycles.’
52-year-old Burkinabè, Soum Province

Financial savings from JNIM’s regulation of traditional practices:

‘This dowry and marriage affair and paying the Djowros for grazing rights was very heavy in a poor country like Mali. JNIM’s rules have helped families a lot.’
Malian elder, Youwarou Cercle

‘Before, we mixed religion with culture. It was not healthy. Extravagance is forbidden in Islam. We came to appreciate that our way of celebrating weddings was boastful, divisive and unnecessary.’
55-year-old Malian, Djenné Cercle

‘Poor families no longer have problems marrying off their children. The difference between rich and poor is no longer seen in the dowry and ceremonies.’
50-year-old Malian, Mopti Cercle

Provision of justice:

‘Islamic justice is now used by people all over the flooded zone. Every day God makes there are people waiting to file cases. Judgements take place every Friday, except for serious crimes like murder, which happen in the markaz [“base”].’
40-year-old Malian, Mopti Cercle

“In the markaz I’ve seen many trials for theft, enemy collaboration. Three cases involved JNIM fighters accused of abusing villagers. Two Tuaregs convicted of murdering civilians during a bus robbery were bound, blindfold and executed after a long sermon by the qadi.’
35-year-old Malian, Mopti Cercle,

‘Justice has radically changed. It is open to everyone, disputes are settled in front of everyone, and very quickly. Before you had to be rich to resolve your case.’
55-year-old Malian, Douentza Cercle

‘Under the state, he who is strongest offers the best bribe wins. But under JNIM, under shari’a, it is fair, the law of God, in the Qur’an and hadiths, not decisions by a single man.’
Malian matriarch, Youwarou Cercle

Reducing domestic violence:

‘Where conjugal abuse continues, it is only because the wife has failed to file a complaint with JNIM.’
Burkinabè elder, Soum Province, Sahel Region

‘I know a woman beaten to the point of injury by her husband. The lady went to the qadi, explaining it wasn’t the first nor the second nor the third time. The qadi asked her to bring witnesses, which she did, all of them confirming her accusation. Then he summoned her husband. She was granted a divorce on the

basis of the abuse.'
47 years-old Malian, Tenenkou Cercle

Reduction in banditry:

'I was a victim of a robbery, near Serma. Our area was a hub of crime by Tuareg and Arab traffickers; cattle thieves; and highway robbers between Boni and Mondoro. Now the area is secure. JNIM neutralised this problem of banditry.'
55-year-old Malian, Douentza Cercle

'Since the bearded men are in control, there has been a notable decrease in crime with less animal and other types of theft.'
Malian matriarch, Tenenkou Cercle

Cracking down on 'vice':

'The compulsory wearing of the veil and hijab has prevented girls from dressing nakedly and being courted and seduced inappropriately by men.'
55-year-old Malian, Boni Cercle

'Before the bearded man, our youth didn't listen or respect their elders. This really improved under JNIM … they became proper young people.'
41-year-old Burkinabè, Nord Region

'Local beer consumption was starting to take a toll on our young people. We were relieved when JNIM banned it and closed the bars.'
40-year-old Malian, Douentza Cercle

Resolution of natural resource disputes and environmental practices:

'The dispute between the Peuhl and Dogon for land near the Sangha Mountain went on for decades. In 2019, JNIM brought together elders from over 40 villages in an open-air court. In the end the field was granted to the Peuhl. Case closed.'
42-year-old Malian, Koro Cercle

'Before, Peuhl shepherds were denied access to the pastures of Lake Debo and there were other disputes with the Bozo overfishing areas. JNIM and their qadi resolved all of these cases.'
50-year-old Malian, Mopti Cercle

'Big men from the cities used to buy up all the local fish at a low price and sell it for a large profit. JNIM stopped this export of fish and rice, allowing us, the villagers, to benefit from what the land provides us.'
Malian matriarch, Mopti Cercle

'The jihadists walk around the riverbank day and night. Some Bozo took advantage of the dark night to fish on the lake but JNIM control agents seized their canoe and the offender received 30 lashes.'
Malian elder, Mopti Cercle

Contestation between the state and JNIM

'All the youth have joined JNIM because of FAMA [Malian Armed Forces] and the men of Dan Na Ambassagou. They massacred 40 people in my village alone.'
42-year-old Malian, Koro Cercle

'If FAMA had stayed and maintained security we wouldn't be under the yoke of JNIM. But now we are used to them and find them better. Today, no one wants the return of the state because the reprisals by the army will spare no one.'
40 year-old Malian, Mopti Cercle

‘As women, how can we support a state that has raped, stolen our jewellery, and killed our men before trial?’
Malian matriarch, Youwarou Cercle

‘We hold deep rancour for how the FDS and VDP massacred our family. The bearded ones are not doing that; it is the state. It is only natural to fear and blame those who killed your people.’
73-old-old Burkinabè, Sahel Region

Women’s adaptation and governance preferences

Women’s answers to the question: ‘Which system of governance – JNIM or the state – do you prefer to live in and raise your children?’

Women’s adaptation over time:

‘Most women supporting JNIM do so for lack of options – they are wives, very young, under pressure to avoid problems for their family. Peuhl women don’t have a presence in the big city. We aren’t free to just leave the village. We are forced to resign ourselves to what our men and the armed men expect.’
Malian matriarch, Youwarou Cercle

‘As village women we are poorly educated and vulnerable to thinking JNIM have a noble struggle. We are under them now, unable to flee for the capital on our own, not wanting to leave our land, with no choice but to adapt.’
Malian matriarch, Mopti Cercle

‘At first, we took JNIM for jokers, but over time we realised we were condemned to accept their rules and brutality. Over ten years we obeyed them, and now we are benefiting greatly from their justice system, humanitarian aid and other policies. And now, because they trust us, they leave us pretty much alone, like it was under the state.’
40-year-old Malian, Douentza Cercle

‘JNIM’s war brought death and created many widows. It confined us to our houses, and took away the village joy. The sound of gunfire created psychosis in children already weakened by the death of their fathers. But over time – eleven years now – all our villages have adhered. Our husbands and children have joined the fighters; the women have married, them. We are less than thirty minutes from a garrison army town but JNIM’s control is total.’
40-year-old Malian, Central Mali

‘I blame the state for letting JNIM take control and bamboozle our children into jihad. But after eleven years, I’ve come to value them. Besides, I lost my eldest son and for his memory I must remain faithful to JNIM’s ideology. For all my other children, JNIM’s system is the only governance they know.’
52-year-old Malian, Djenné Cercle

Relatively pro-state sentiments:

‘We fear the army but still support the state because it doesn’t regulate, control and punish your personal behaviour, like how you dress, who you socialise with, nor does it stop you from working and celebrating life.’
27-year-old Burkinabè, Boucle du Mouhoun

‘JNIM has falsified our religion and brought in one which contradicts our aspirations, our customs and traditions. The state did not interfere in religious affairs. Also, JNIM has created confusion between communities and established a climate of mistrust between populations who have lived, worked and celebrated together for hundreds of years.’
57-year-old Burkinabè, Soum Province

“JNIM is a phantom government ruling by fear versus a fixed proper state authority. But in our hamlets, our children are growing up under their regime and in a hurry to join them. They are isolated from the outside world unable to appreciate what the state did; what other options they have in life.’
Malian matriarch, Bankass Cercle

‘Under the state, life was so happy. Life under the bearded ones is not living. We want to be free to work in our gardens, go to market, visit our friends. But the state must stop killing so many people before they are judged.’
Burkinabè matriarch, Soum Province

‘Under the state there is hope. Women are free from intimidation and your opinion matters. Children can play and go to school instead of being recruited.’
36-years-old, Burkinabè, Soum Province

‘Under JNIM, we are more faithful Muslims and land conflicts have ended. But I want my children to go to school, not to go to war, and for that reason, I prefer the state.’
57-year-old Burkinabè, Soum Province

‘Even if the bearded ones have done some good things, what benefit is gained when you lose your beautiful son to war? Our children are perishing. The army’s massacres are pushing them to join JNIM. Then JNIM is brainwashing them to be people we no longer recognise.’
45 year-old Burkinabè, Soum Province

Relatively pro-JNIM sentiments:

‘I have never known the management of the state in my village. We rarely saw them. For almost ten years we are under JNIM. They don’t hurt anyone unless you disrespect their rules. Life has become monotonous but they spared our lives, unlike the army, and we don’t lack the essential needed in life.’
42-year-old Burkinabè, Soum Province

‘I want my children to grow up with JNIM. Even if their rules are hard to respect and they run the village with a shari’a we don’t quite understand, at least they aren’t killing us like the army.’
40 year-old Malian, Mopti Cercle

‘Under the state we were governed from afar, but I have lived very closely with JNIM elements in my village. Overall, they govern fairly, without discrimination, with faith and without favour.’
56-year-old Burkinabè, Soum Province

‘We didn’t want this new administration of unknown men but there were no soldiers to drive them away. They imposed on us a radical change, but over time, our youth joined them; they are no longer foreigners. And when the army started killing without mercy, it made us even prefer life under JNIM.’
56-year-old Burkinabè, Soum Province

‘While I don’t approve of the violence, I prefer JNIM governance. Before JNIM, we worked tirelessly, selling milk, weaving mats, for celebrations which lasted a few days, always thinking about material things. Now life is affordable; the poor are cared for. Everyone has access to a field to feed their families. Life has become more religious than worldly, the little we have is enough for us.’
50-year-old Burkinabè, Soum Province

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