

Building Peace and Development in the Sahel: Enhancing the Political Participation of Women and Youth

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Cover Photo: Students attend class at a public school in Taliko, a neighborhood of Bamako, Mali. October 24, 2013. UN Photo/Marco Dormino.

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Suggested Citation:

Mireille Affa'a Mindzie, "Building Peace and Development in the Sahel: Enhancing the Political Participation of Women and Youth," New York: International Peace Institute, January 2015.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report stems from field research carried out in Mali, Niger, and Senegal from May 9–23, 2014, and from a symposium that brought together women, youth, elders, and representatives of the private sector from across the Sahel and Maghreb on June 16 and 17, 2014, in Rabat, Morocco. The regional meeting in Rabat was co-organized by the International Peace Institute (IPI), Hassan Premier University of Morocco, the Moroccan Association for Economic Intelligence (AMIE), and the Centre for Strategies and Security in the Sahel Sahara (Centre 4S).

IPI owes a debt of gratitude to its partners in this project and to all of its donors for their generous support. In particular, IPI is grateful to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the government of Finland, and the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie. The author would also like to thank Youssef Mahmoud, Maureen Quinn, and Priscilla Nzabanita for their valuable inputs.



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Executive Summary

The twin security and political crises that erupted in Mali in 2012 revealed the complex and multilayered challenges that threaten peace and stability and delay development across the Sahel. Poor governance was one of the key driving factors, as reflected in many groups' political, economic, and social marginalization. Women and youth represent the vast majority of the population in most countries in the Sahel. Yet the exclusion of most women and young people from decision-making processes persists, maintained by a range of factors that widen the gap between elected leaders and their constituencies, weaken institutions of governance, and increase social tensions.

In Mali, Niger, and Senegal—the three countries examined in this report—there are a number of barriers to the participation of women and young people in politics. On the political level, the predominantly male and older elites have maintained their monopoly on power, the practice of tokenism as opposed to meaningful representation of women is common, and women and young people often lack key skills needed to participate in formal politics. Social and economic factors include both women's and youths' economic marginalization and limited access to education, especially for girls, which excludes these groups from decision-making roles in the public sphere. At a cultural level, patriarchal attitudes and conservative religious beliefs, manifested in religious leaders' growing influence on political leaders and processes, also contribute to restricting women's access to public spaces. For young people, these factors are compounded by the absence of specific representation quotas, age restrictions on their formal political engagement, limited experience, and the high cost of politics. Furthermore, unemployment and underemployment render youth particularly vulnerable to recruitment into radical armed groups, as well as increasingly perilous migration to Europe.

A number of initiatives have sought to increase women's and youths' political participation. These initiatives include the adoption of a gender quota law in 2000 in Niger and a parity law in 2010 in Senegal. In Mali, advocates for a formal gender quota and those seeking gender parity have yet to

coalesce around one strategy. In Mali, Niger, and Senegal, civil society actors have devised various strategies to increase the participation of women in elections, as candidates and voters, often with support from government and regional and international partners. In Senegal and Mali, these efforts saw the establishment of election-monitoring platforms that encourage women to vote, facilitate their participation as electoral observers, and involve them in conflict prevention initiatives to ease election-related tensions. In Niger, women's political participation is enhanced by the recognition of their role in the country's strategy for security and development in the Sahel-Saharan zones, and the implementation of programs by the national High Authority for Peacebuilding. In all three countries, youths from political parties and civil society have also mobilized to encourage their involvement in politics, by voting and by monitoring governance processes.

Despite many promising initiatives, civil society organizations' efforts are also hindered by a number of weaknesses, such as excessive competition, politicization, and poor internal governance and transparency. As such, the exclusion of most women and youth from politics continues. To increase the political participation of women and youth, the report offers the following seven recommendations, which can benefit from stronger national and international support:

1. **Implement existing norms and strengthen institutions to improve democratic governance and political participation.** Innovative strategies should be developed to close the persistent gap between norms and implementation and ensure that the various standards and principles that have been formulated to advance democracy and inclusive governance practices, including gender equality and the political participation of women and youth, are fully realized.
2. **Build the capacity of women and youth.** To ensure the meaningful participation of women and youth involved in decision-making processes, their skills should be developed in areas including advocacy, leadership, public administration, conflict management, and gender mainstreaming.

3. **Strengthen existing women's and youths' movements.** Stronger solidarity and synergies among female leaders across political party lines and between young political elites and their excluded counterparts can help widen the political space available to women and young people.
4. **Improve social service delivery and support private sector initiatives.** Girls' education is a key factor for individual and community empowerment, and for women's political participation. Quality jobs for young people can prevent their recruitment into extremist groups, making it more likely that they will channel grievances through the political system rather than resorting to violence.
5. **Promote multisectoral approaches and engage the media.** Beyond political rights, innovative strategies need to address women's economic and social status, and seek to advance broader community development. As part of a multipronged approach, the media can play an important role in shifting attitudes around gender equality and the political participation of women and youth.
6. **Build bridges across groups and communities.** To counter conservative narratives that restrict women's public participation, women's groups need to connect with religious leaders who advocate for inclusive politics on the basis of a tolerant and progressive interpretation of the *sharia* law.
7. **Advance the women, peace, and security agenda.** The involvement of women in conflict prevention and peace initiatives across the Sahel is a key condition for sustainable peace, stability, and development in the region, which calls for the effective implementation of the women, peace, and security agenda formalized by UN Security Council Resolution 1325.

Introduction

Insecurity in the Sahel is compounded by a persistent socioeconomic crisis. The people of the Sahel, who have been affected by recurring rebellions, inflows of weapons following the Libyan revolution in 2011, and increasing drug trafficking and violent extremism, also endure chronic underdevelopment, recurrent food insecurity, hazardous weather, and new threats posed by undocumented and increasingly perilous migration to Europe. Moreover, the disconnect between the citizenry and a distant and, at times, predatory ruling elite is further weakening the social fabric and hindering sustainable peacebuilding and development efforts across the region. This situation is reflected in the endemic political and economic marginalization of significant portions of the population, which mostly affects women and youth.¹

Across Africa and the Sahel, women and youth have often been mobilized in support of the main political actors, who are mostly men, without this mobilization necessarily transforming into more meaningful political participation. As political parties controlling access to power have tended not to provide these groups the requisite space to participate effectively, women have tended to use their mobilization capacity to get involved in and lead civil society organizations instead.² Yet, in Mali, Niger, and Senegal—the three countries examined in this report—persistent legal, socioeconomic, and cultural challenges result in the exclusion of women from political decision-making processes that affect their lives and their communities.

Women and youth constitute the large majority of the population in most countries in the Sahel. In Mali, for example, 5 million of the country's 15.4 million people were between ten and twenty-four years old in 2010, and this number is projected to

¹ The definition of youth is taken from the African Youth Charter, which considers youth as being every person between the ages of fifteen and thirty-five, available at http://pages.au.int/sites/default/files/African%20Youth%20Charter%20English_0.pdf.

² European Union, Office of the Secretary-General's Special Envoy for the Sahel, and UN Women, synthesis report from the high-level conference "Femmes, stabilité et développement au Sahel," Brussels, April 9, 2013.

increase to 7.9 million by 2025 and to 13 million by 2050.³ Despite this youth bulge, defined as “a demographic trend where the proportion of persons aged fifteen to twenty-four in the population increases significantly compared to other age groups,”⁴ the involvement of young men and women in democratic, political, and governance processes remains marginal. As a result, disproportionately underemployed and undereducated youth, particularly men, are vulnerable to radicalization and can easily become a source of social and political instability.

This report seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the gap that exists between elected leaders and civil society, specifically women and youth in the Sahel-Saharan region (referred to as the Sahel, for short), and to identify ways to better harness the current youth dividend and women’s contributions in local, national, and regional peacebuilding and development efforts. It draws on interviews with women, youth, government officials, and representatives from local and international organizations that were carried out in Mali, Niger, and Senegal in May 2014. The report also draws on the views expressed in a regional symposium on the issue held in Morocco in June 2014. At the end of the symposium, the participants agreed on the creation of an independent platform for reflection and exchange called *le Groupe citoyen des 33* (GC33), or the Citizen Group of 33.⁵

In the first section, this report identifies the main political, social, economic, and cultural factors that act as barriers to women’s and young people’s participation in politics in the Sahel. The report then examines the various initiatives undertaken by women and youth groups, with the support of governments and regional and international partners, to overcome political participation challenges. It then considers innovative approaches that are being developed across the Sahel to enhance the political participation of women and youth.

Challenges to Political Participation

The breakdown of trust between elected leaders and citizens that pervades state-society relationships across the world has resulted in the rejection of politics by a number of citizens. This is especially true of youth in the Sahel region, where politics is widely perceived as a corrupt activity and, in some cases, as a means to quick enrichment. At the same time, in most countries across the Sahel, years of poor governance and an absence of the rule of law have led to a blurring of the lines between the entity of the state and the government that runs it. As a result, the stability of the state is at risk with each change of government.

In this context, the continual weakening of state institutions and their failure to restore social cohesion when tensions increase demonstrates the need for citizens’ meaningful participation in the public sphere—in particular women and youth—for sustainable national and regional peace, security, and development.

Women and youth play a significant role in mobilizing support for political candidates. However, they remain mostly excluded from, or have limited access to, formal decision-making positions and processes. In addition, although women are disproportionately affected by conflict, their protection in conflict-affected contexts and their participation in conflict prevention and peace initiatives remain marginal at best. Various political, socioeconomic, and cultural factors continue to hinder the participation of women and youth in both political and peace processes, which perpetuate the existing gap between citizens’ expectations and governance practices and outcomes.

POLITICAL FACTORS

Despite relative gains in the educational and professional spheres that advance political careers,

3 UN Population Fund and Population Reference Bureau, “Status Report: Adolescents and Young People in Sub-Saharan Africa, Opportunities and Challenges,” 2012, available at www.prb.org/pdf12/status-report-youth-subsaharan-Africa.pdf.

4 Isabel Ortiz and Matthew Cummins, “When the Global Crisis and Youth Bulge Collide: Double the Jobs Trouble for Youth,” Social and Economic Policy Working Paper, UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), New York, February 2012.

5 GC33 will serve as a virtual forum for the thirty-three civil society participants who gathered in Rabat to share information; produce studies and recommendations on issues affecting the Sahel and Maghreb; serve as a link to the media; and act as a consultation mechanism for the selection of themes, objectives, and content of future meetings.

women remain under-represented at the highest political levels across the world, including in the Sahel.⁶ One major barrier to meaningful political participation by women and youth is the domination of politics by male and older elites. Due to men's virtual monopoly on political power, which is long established, women and youth find it difficult to make themselves heard. In Mali, for example, a system of gender quotas that could have increased women's representation was first rejected by the parliament in 2006.⁷ As a result, women represent only 10 percent of members of parliament, a representation that has declined over the course of the last three legislatures. Women also continue to be marginalized in government. They represent 16 percent of the cabinet, and the government appointed in April 2014 comprised five women out of thirty-one ministers. Other state institutions, such as the Economic and Social Council, are also dominated by men. In this context, the limited budget allocated to the Ministry for the Promotion of Women, Children, and the Family (0.25 percent of the national budget) appears insufficient.

In Senegal, the adoption of a parity law in 2010 may not have led to parity, but it did contribute to a record number of women being elected to parliament in July 2012. A woman, Aminata Touré, became prime minister in September 2013, but was then relieved of her duties by the president in June 2014. Five women were part of Touré's thirty-two-member cabinet, and eight women were members of the thirty-three-member cabinet appointed in July 2014 and led by Mahammed Boun Abdallah Dionne. Parity is also yet to be achieved in several state institutions, including the National Assembly Bureau (the office charged with setting the assembly's deliberations and managing its services). Much remains to be done to ensure that gender parity becomes a reality for Senegalese women. Likewise, youth represent 2–3 percent of parliament, a minimal level of participation that negatively impacts the consideration given to their priorities and concerns by the legislators.

In Niger, national and international observers interviewed during the author's field research

conducted in Niamey in May 2014 suggested that the political elite in the country is composed of approximately 400 key players who have taken turns in government since the first democratic elections in 1993, and that this group is dominated at the top by older men. Despite long-established political participation and the adoption of a gender quota law in 2000, Nigerien women's representation in parliament remains disproportionately low. Women comprised just 13 percent of parliament members after the 2011 election. In government, women constituted seven of the thirty-seven-member cabinet in 2014.

Older men, who hold the reins of political parties, also tend to be the ones drafting and controlling electoral lists, a vicious circle that perpetuates marginalization. In Mali, for example, women reported being excluded from political meetings where important decisions were made late at night. In some cases, this resulted in the alteration of agreed electoral lists. In other cases, women were presented as candidates on a list in positions that simply prevented them from being elected. Moreover, some women reported being asked to make a payment to be enlisted as candidates, while more-established male candidates received campaign subventions from their political parties. Women candidates did not always have the resources to cover these expenditures, which further increased their marginalization. These limitations were worsened by practices of vote buying. In some areas of Mali and Niger, women candidates reported facing political opponents who did not hesitate to distribute goods such as soap, salt, and fabrics to voters, transgressions that could not always be sanctioned.

Women and youth have often been co-opted for token participation, which raises questions about the quality of their representation. In Mali and Niger, women expressed the concern that those who had been selected by parties to stand for election in parliament or to be appointed to cabinet often did not have the capacity and experience to participate meaningfully in political debates and decision-making processes. As such, women consulted for this report did not feel effectively

6 Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Women in Politics Map: 2014," available at www.ipu.org/pdf/publications/wmnmap14_en.pdf.

7 University of Florida Center for African Studies and Department of Political Science, "Le quota des femmes et la question de la représentation: Mali," Trans-Saharan Elections Project, available at <http://sahelresearch.africa.ufl.edu/tsep/themesissues/femmes-representation/mali/?lang=fr>.

represented by them. This concern also was shared following legislative elections in June 2014 in Libya, where some women felt that among the thirty female representatives elected to the Council of Representatives, some had been imposed upon their constituents by political parties and did not have popular support.⁸ Both in Mali and Niger, women political leaders also indicated that the women selected on some electoral lists were often those dancing to the tunes of male leaders. Women's expertise remains marginalized, and those who are able to defend their own priorities are often left aside.

The failure to implement various domestic and international policies that would facilitate women's political participation provides further evidence that those holding power have little interest in sharing it with women. In Mali, interviewees attributed this lack of implementation to the fact that the country's higher institutions are led by men. Despite comprehensive decentralization policies, for example, aimed at increasing democracy and accountability, the reality is that women remain mostly excluded from local governance. As a result, limited consideration is given to their concerns or those of other vulnerable populations.

In addition, despite the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2000 and the subsequent resolutions that strengthened the international women, peace, and security agenda, women's participation in conflict prevention and peacebuilding efforts still lags behind. In West Africa and particularly in the Sahel, women's civil society groups expressed the view that countries in the region had so far failed to implement these resolutions, a failure that calls for additional strategies.

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC FACTORS

In addition to the political barriers in Mali, Niger, and Senegal, social and economic considerations further hinder the political participation of women and youth. Due to persistent patriarchal attitudes, women from rural regions, particularly in Mali and Niger, often remain in the background because

their husbands oppose their participation as political leaders.

For most women and youth, financial constraints linked to widespread poverty, a lack of financial autonomy, and economic marginalization prevent their meaningful involvement in politics. In Senegal and across the Sahel, women's revenues often represent half of men's. Women also face persistent discrimination when seeking access to education and are more likely to be illiterate. For young men and women who have had access to education, their experience at school is often disconnected from the job market, offering limited prospects to find gainful employment. This economic marginalization makes political participation difficult and further excludes young men and women of all ages from other forms of social dialogue and influence as workers and employers.

With limited prospects for women in the formal job sector, in Senegal it is estimated that women form more than 80 percent of the workers in the informal sector, where they face violence, harassment, and low salaries, while their employers remain exempted from implementing the relevant laws and policies that could protect and empower them. In Mali, the draft Family Code of 2009 would have granted women more rights by recognizing secular marriages, increasing the legal age for marriage to eighteen, giving girls inheritance rights, and recognizing women as equal with their husbands in the home. However, it was not signed into law by then president Amadou Toumani Touré, who was under pressure from Islamist groups to reject it. Women reported that the backlash against the proposed code also impacted on their employment, and more women left the formal employment market, took on precarious jobs, and were deprived of any form of social protection.⁹

Education remains a top concern in all three countries. While Senegal now has a higher number of girls than boys attending primary school,¹⁰ the situation remains the reverse in both Mali and Niger. In some areas of Mali, nearly 80 percent of

8 Discussion at the regional meeting on "Stability in the Sahel and the Maghreb: The Roles of Women, Youth, and the Elders," Rabat, Morocco, June 16, 2014.

9 Interview with International Labour Organization officials, Dakar, Senegal, May 2014. The draft code recognized only secular marriages, increased the legal marrying age to eighteen, gave girls inheritance rights, and made women equal with their husbands at home.

10 59.6 percent of boys and 63.4 percent of girls attended primary school between 2008 and 2012. For secondary school, the attendance was 34.9 percent of boys and 32.3 percent of girls. See UNICEF, "Senegal: Statistics," December 27, 2013, available at www.unicef.org/infobycountry/senegal_statistics.html#117.

women are reported to be illiterate despite growing numbers of girls who are accessing education.¹¹ Early marriage and early pregnancies, which negatively impact on girls' education and health, as well as gender-based violence, also hinder women's active political participation. In Niger, girls' education is further weakened by the growing conservative religious trend, whose advocates lobbied the government to reject a bill calling for an increase in the minimum age for completion of compulsory education. These threats to girls' right to education appear to be intensifying while formal education is also losing its credibility. As such, amid high unemployment, parents are also questioning the value of sending their children to school.

These barriers to education negatively impact women's access to information and their analytical and communication skills, in turn preventing many from offering strong and clear alternatives to long-standing political programs. Women also reported being impeded by their lack of confidence and public speaking skills. As a result, even if women are represented in small numbers in parliament and government, they rarely establish the leadership necessary to promote issues of common concern.

CULTURAL OBSTACLES

More than 90 percent of the population in Mali, Niger, and Senegal identifies as Muslim, and religion plays a critical role in shaping social and cultural values and attitudes. Conservative clerics prevent or limit women's public participation, whether due to ignorance, patriarchal traditions, or misogynistic interpretations of religious precepts. Politics is widely perceived as a masculine sphere, and in some areas, women are discouraged from engaging in it. This is becoming more common since, as governments continue to be discredited, conservative religious organizations have stepped up their communication strategies.

In Senegal, where a parity law was adopted in 2010, observers reported that parity exists "only on paper." The reality remains starkly different, and

this contrast is even starker in rural areas. While some women have proven very active and successful in advancing gender equality, for example, by participating in peacebuilding activities in the Casamance region or in efforts to fight poverty in their communities, they still face obstacles to their formal political participation. In the Touba region of Senegal that traditionally hosts the Mourid religious community, conservative religious leaders succeeded in preventing women's participation in the June 2014 local elections. Some women belonging to the Mourid brotherhood also expressed their unwillingness to participate in the elections. However, for many Senegalese women, the "Touba issue" goes beyond the status of women; they cite the state's responsibility in specifying the legal status of this religious city.

In Niger, where 70 percent of the population would like to see *sharia* law implemented,¹² conservative religious and traditional beliefs have prevented the adoption of a more progressive family code for the past twenty years. Niger included a substantial number of reservations when it ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1999. In 2006, the country's parliament rejected a motion seeking the ratification of the African Union Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa. And in late 2012, conservative religious groups, including Muslim students' and women's associations, succeeded in blocking the adoption of a bill that sought to increase the age of compulsory education completion from twelve to sixteen, and thus protect student girls from early marriage. It is estimated that 51 percent of Nigerien girls between ten and fifteen years old have never been to school, while one-third of girls are married before they reach fifteen, the minimum legal age for a girl to marry.¹³ High illiteracy rates, poverty, and conservative religious and traditional beliefs increase girls' exposure to early marriages and early pregnancies and often prevent women from accessing information and basic social services, limiting their ability to express themselves and participate fully in public spheres.

11 UNICEF, "Mali: Statistics," December 27, 2013, available at www.unicef.org/infobycountry/mali_statistics.html#117.

12 Afrobarometer, "Results of the Fifth Series of Surveys in Niger: Fourth Dissemination," January 2014, available at www.afrobarometer.org/files/documents/media_briefing/ngr_r5_presentation4.pdf.

13 UNICEF, "Ending Child Marriage: Progress and Prospects," New York, 2014, available at http://data.unicef.org/corecode/uploads/document6/uploaded_pdfs/corecode/Child-Marriage-Brochure-7_17-HR_164.pdf.

In Mali, even before the 2012 military coup and the crisis in the country's north, a revision of the Family Code failed due to religious pressure. While the northern region of Mali has long been considered the one under the strongest religious influence, insecurity linked to the crisis has further aggravated recurrent social and cultural challenges there. In the region of Tessalit, for example, a woman running for the 2013 parliamentary elections needed the UN Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) to ensure her security during the campaign. Following the crisis, religious groups are increasingly organizing themselves to infiltrate political parties and participate in politics. For one Malian observer, the mix between the religious and political spheres raises new concerns, as religion has always been considered the population's last resort against injustice.

As Islamist groups continue to build alliances across the Sahel region, participants in the field study emphasized that governments and civil society are failing to denounce these movements and take the appropriate steps to counter religious extremism while it can still be defeated.

SPECIFIC CHALLENGES FACED BY THE YOUTH

Youth participation is often hindered by standard electoral rules that place age limits on who can vote and hold office. In Senegal, for example, one must be twenty-five years of age to run for parliament and thirty-five for president.¹⁴ In addition, unlike women who might benefit from quota or parity systems, youth do not enjoy any affirmative policy geared toward their increased participation. Instead, it appears that the lack of consideration given to them by older members of society, their disconnection from political power, and the education challenges they face have led to their marginalization across the Sahel. In Niger, these challenges are compounded by the limited number of political parties, limited financial resources, and the high cost of politics. These factors, combined with the presence of entrenched political elites, perpetuate the absence of youth from decision-

making processes and fuel frustration.

In addition, more established politicians often argue that young political leaders lack experience, which justifies their marginalization. On the ground, however, youth are often the ones helping with voter mobilization and the day-to-day running of political parties. Their limited involvement in decision-making processes has led to a growing disinterest in politics among many youth, who do not feel adequately represented by the political elite. Evidence of this is higher in contexts where political leaders have disregarded their electoral promises, further eroding their credibility. In addition, despite the establishment of institutions such as youth ministries, national youth councils, or state structures dealing with youth employment, the politicization of these institutions and the ensuing lack of trust in them limit their effectiveness.

Insecurity and risks of violence are often associated with youth unemployment. The majority of youth in the region remains excluded from quality employment and income-generating activities, and, more generally, from any sustainable social and economic integration. In the context of an enduring economic crisis, youth unemployment and underemployment could be very dangerous if left unaddressed. Unemployed and underemployed youth are at risk of political manipulation and recruitment by extremist groups, and involvement in violence.¹⁵

In fact, rebel and Islamist groups across the Sahel have exploited three regional deficits to recruit youth: limited citizen participation in politics; underdevelopment and the inequitable sharing of resources; and weak educational systems. Insecurity and violence at work, for youth who are mostly employed in the informal sector, could also lead to their recruitment into illicit and violent activities.

Finally, uneducated and socioeconomically marginalized youth from countries in the Sahel are taking increasing risks to cross the Mediterranean Sea, in search of greener pastures in Europe, or to

¹⁴ See Government of Senegal, Modified Law No. 2014-18 on electoral code, Article L.O.152 (April 15, 2014), available at www.gouv.sn/Loi-no-2014-18-du-15-avril-2014.html; and Government of Senegal, *Constitution of the Republic of Senegal*, Article 28, available at www.gouv.sn/Titre-III-Du-President-de-la.html.

¹⁵ Henrik Urdal, "The Demographics of Political Violence: Youth Bulges, Insecurity and Conflict," in *Too Poor for Peace? Global Poverty, Conflict, and Security in the 21st Century*, edited by Lael Brainard and Derek Chollet (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2007), pp. 90–100. See also "Understanding the Causes of Violent Extremism in West Africa," *Irin News*, May 10, 2013, available at www.irinnews.org/report/98012/understanding-the-causes-of-violent-extremism-in-west-africa.

cross the borders to countries such as Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, or Algeria and Libya to the north. The multiple security incidents, which caused the death of 600 migrants at sea in 2013—a figure that had increased to 800 in the first half of 2014—call for a deeper reflection on the issues raised by unregulated African migration and the challenges this immigration poses to the continent's long-term development.¹⁶

Responding To Political Marginalization

LOCAL RESPONSES: WOMEN

Given their political marginalization, women have developed alternative strategies to maximize their participation by turning to civil society movements, and they are actively involved in associations dealing with issues such as education, health, and development. These experiences serve as a useful springboard for the greater involvement of women in politics.

Niger: Increasing Political Participation

In Niger, though less visible than men, women have a long track record of public participation and have found innovative ways of carving out space to participate in the political discourse. Traditionally, first ladies and other women related to political leaders have played influential roles as counselors, educators, and defenders of social causes. During the country's rebellions in 1990 and 2007, and in occasional community conflicts between pastoralists and farmers, women played active roles not just by supporting their families as breadwinners but also by collecting information and making financial contributions to purchase arms. More recently, Nigerien women served as union members and as political party activists. These kinds of activities gradually facilitated their formal political engagement, and more women have become actively involved in politics. Two women are heads of political parties, and former foreign minister Aïchatou Mindaoudou Souleymane was appointed UN special representative of the secretary-general for Côte d'Ivoire in 2013. Hadiza Souana, who plays a leading role in one of Niger's

political parties, explained the creation of her party by her will to encourage women to vote and to demonstrate that women could hold high-level decision-making positions.

A number of initiatives are increasing women's political participation and economic empowerment in Niger. Alternative espaces citoyens, a civil society group that runs several radio stations and a newspaper, has been mobilizing its media outlets in support of women candidates since the 2009 parliamentary and local elections. Of the sixteen women candidates whose campaigns were supported then, ten were elected to parliament. Women's associations also provided microcredits to women candidates to encourage their participation. Development partners implemented training programs to strengthen the capacity of women elected to parliament and local councils. For example, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) supported women in parliament to raise awareness of gender in budgetary and other legislative procedures. These capacity-building initiatives further helped women to strengthen their positions within their political parties.

Niger adopted a gender quota law in June 2000, which sets a 10 percent quota requirement for the election of women in parliament, and a 25 percent quota for their appointment to government and high-level positions in public administration.¹⁷ As a result, women's representation in parliament increased from 1.2 percent in 1999 to 12.4 percent in 2004, and to 13 percent after the last election in 2011. In 2014, there were fifteen women in parliament, and seven women in government. This greater participation has contributed to an increased number of laws protecting women from violence. Women have also used National Women's Day, celebrated annually on May 13th, to lobby the government to increase the current 10 percent gender quota to a 30 percent quota. The government's pledge to heed this call is yet to be realized.

Niger is one of the countries in the region that has developed a national strategy that takes into account the role of women in security and development, for example, by putting emphasis on their

16 UNHCR, "UNHCR Calls for Urgent European Action To End Refugee and Migrant Deaths at Sea," July 24, 2014, available at www.unhcr.org/53d0e2d26.html.

17 Alice Kang, "The Effect of Gender Quota Laws on the Election of Women: Lessons from Niger," Faculty Publications: Political Science, Paper 56, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, April 2013, available at <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1057&context=poliscifacpub>.

access to employment opportunities and to socioeconomic assistance.¹⁸ In addition, the country's High Authority for Peacebuilding, established in October 2011 to foster a culture of peace, trust, dialogue, and tolerance among the country's diverse communities, supports activities to increase women's participation in peace initiatives. Campaigns have been organized to raise awareness about women's roles in conflict prevention. Assistance is also provided through training programs and income-generating activities. Despite these initiatives, the issue of women's meaningful representation, especially in parliament, remains unaddressed, and their participation in national and regional conflict prevention and peacebuilding efforts requires strengthening.

Senegal: Advocating for Peaceful Elections

Senegal adopted a national gender policy in 2008. Following years of mobilization, public information, and awareness activities in urban and rural areas, women also lobbied successfully for the adoption of a parity law in May 2010. The law has facilitated greater representation of women in parliament. As a result, sixty-four female representatives were elected to the 150-seat parliament in 2012, increasing women's representation from 18 to 43 percent. The requirement of parity lists for the June 2014 local elections further increased women's political representation. However, these democratic gains remain fragile, and Senegalese women agree that more awareness raising and a permanent dialogue among all members of society are needed to enhance gender equality and women's participation.

In that regard, Senegalese women established an election-monitoring platform to prevent electoral fraud and conflict during both the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2012. The platform was established in response to attempts by the government to modify electoral rules. The mechanism resulted from combined efforts by an internal and spontaneous women's movement that wished to advance peace in the country, and by the African Union's Gender is My Agenda Campaign, seeking to encourage greater women's participation in

continental peace processes. The Senegalese platform is comprised of approximately sixty members, mostly women's associations, under the leadership of Femmes Africa Solidarité, a pan-African organization with wide experience in conflict management across the continent.

A number of activities were undertaken both during and after the elections, which included training and consultations. The consultations rolled out a "3-M strategy"—namely, mobilization, mediation, and monitoring. Women and youth were mobilized, at grassroots level, to actively participate in the electoral process. As politicians' wives, sisters, and daughters, women also were mobilized to relay messages from society to political leaders and appease tensions. Moreover, a monitoring room was established during the elections and facilitated by women who had received the appropriate training and equipment. These initiatives were revived ahead of the June 2014 local elections.

The election-monitoring platform and the presence of trained female electoral observers proved useful in appeasing tensions and encouraging women to go out and vote. By speaking out on potential fraud, such as vote buying, the platform also played a dissuasive role that benefited from the support of the national authorities. The platform facilitated the signature of a covenant between women political leaders and civil society, marking their joint commitment to peace. Experiences were shared with women from across West Africa, including Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Guinea, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, and Sierra Leone. Moreover, empowered by the training they had received to support the platform, some young women found a new interest in politics and went on to run for elections in 2014.

In addition to the platform, Senegalese women organized peaceful demonstrations to prevent electoral violence and appease social tensions ahead of the 2012 presidential election, namely through the "white movement." Dressed in white clothes, nearly 2,000 women conducted peace caravans in various regions of the country.

18 Republic of Niger, Cabinet of the Prime Minister, "Strategy for Development and Security in Sahel-Saharan Areas of Niger," October 2011, available at http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/sds_version_english.pdf.

Mali: Supporting Women in Politics

Although Malian political parties have adopted a voluntary quota system to increase women's participation, women still occupy only 10 percent of seats in parliament, a percentage that further decreases in local government. This is despite women's involvement in efforts to end the 2012 crisis: women organized demonstrations to claim their rights; they traveled to Burkina Faso and lobbied the various actors to be involved in the Ouagadougou peace negotiations;¹⁹ and they also lobbied West African heads of state and the UN Security Council to raise awareness of their situation. Understanding that achieving gender equality is primarily an endogenous process, Malian women sought to make use of the postconflict context to speed up change. Government and local and international organizations have provided support to women's efforts to enhance their political participation.

In regard to government efforts, the Malian Ministry for the Promotion of Women, Children, and the Family identified a number of priorities for the year 2014. These included a review of the national action plan for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, and a 2014–2018 action plan linked to the national gender policy. The Malian gender policy was drafted with the support of civil society and adopted in 2010. The policy provides a conceptual and operational framework to accelerate Mali's human and economic development by advancing gender equality. It has the potential to bring a response to women's concerns and was complemented by the establishment of a fund for female empowerment in 2011, which will serve as its main financing instrument. However, for civil society, no clear political will has been demonstrated to promote the implementation of the national gender policy, challenges that have been reinforced by the 2012 crisis. Moreover, new demands emerged in the postconflict context that need to be addressed, including women's participation in the national dialogue and mediation process.

Focusing on women's political participation, the gender ministry endeavored to make women's

right to run for elections into a reality. This was done by assisting candidates with training, through the preparation and distribution of brochures, and by supporting campaigns to mobilize women and civil society groups. The ministry also supported the organization of study visits to neighboring countries, such as Senegal, where Malian women observed the functioning of the Senegalese election-monitoring platform.

Complementing the government's initiatives, the Malian Center for Inter-Party Dialogue and Democracy (CMDID), a platform that brings together more than sixty political parties from both government and opposition, works toward the political emergence of women and youth. CMDID strengthened women's political capacity, helped mobilize citizens, and accompanied female candidates, including by facilitating their access to resources and supporting the distribution of voting cards in rural areas. As a result, it was reported that the number of women candidates to local elections increased. Women were more conscious of their role, and they more easily engaged in advocating for their priorities. With assistance from UN Women, CMDID launched various advocacy programs within political parties, ahead of the municipal elections scheduled for April 2015. With the commitment of political parties, these programs aim to encourage women's positions on electoral lists.

Civil society organizations, including the Malian chapter of the Women in Law and Development in Africa (WILDAF), a pan-African network promoting women's rights, also initiated programs to raise awareness about the need for women's involvement. Training was provided to women candidates. WILDAF also mobilized its members to support several female candidates' campaigns by organizing radio programs, printing posters, and buying T-shirts. WILDAF's approach was to increase women's participation in all decision-making positions, including ones related to the management of schools, health centers, and water points, for example. To ensure the success of this approach, a number of focus groups were held, among religious and traditional leaders, youth groups, and women themselves, to build support.

¹⁹ Signed between the government of Mali and the Tuareg groups of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad and the High Council for the Unity of Azawad, the June 18th Ouagadougou agreement provided for an immediate ceasefire, paved the way for the holding of presidential elections in July 2013, and committed the parties to discussing sustainable peace through an inclusive dialogue that was to take place after the election. See Institute for Security Studies, "A Tenuous Solution in Mali: Between Internal Constraints and External Pressures," ECOWAS Peace and Security Report Series, Issue 5, July 2013.

During the crisis in 2012, the organization provided assistance to women in northern Mali who had experienced violence, and a legal aid unit was established to advise and support the victims.

Other initiatives to increase women's political participation saw the establishment of an election-monitoring platform supported by MINUSMA together with former members of parliament and other groups. Local organizations, including WILDAF and a network that focuses on the protection of women and children's rights called Groupe pivot droit et citoyenneté des femmes, facilitated the recruitment of coaches who accompanied women candidates. UN Women provided financial and technical support to thirty women candidates, and Groupe Pivot supported five other women candidates. As a result, of the fourteen women who were elected to parliament in November 2013, eleven had been supported by the electoral platform. Such joint support should be sustained, including for local elections that have a strong potential for increased women's representation due to the close proximity between candidates and voters. In addition, Malian women requested stronger pressure by development partners on the government, to ensure that their political involvement receives support beyond repeated training projects. Partners themselves were asked to increase their financial assistance for women candidates to meet their campaign expenses and augment their participation.

In relation to the recent crisis, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) provided technical support to the Consultative Framework for Women in the Malian Political Parties, a coalition bringing together women from approximately fifty political parties that proved to be an important mediator during the crisis. In the postconflict context, NDI is accompanying the Malian chapter of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Network on Peace and Security for Women to ensure that women actively participate in ongoing national reconciliation efforts. In that regard, a project is being implemented that seeks to collect women's concerns and priorities across the country, and to present its findings to the

future Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission. Through this project, and in addition to traditional capacity-building approaches, NDI seeks to facilitate women's interventions that will enhance their overall image and role in society.

Parity versus Gender Quota in Mali

In devising strategies to increase women's political participation, women in the Sahel, and in Mali in particular, have yet to decide whether aiming for gender parity or a gender quota—two mechanisms to fast track gender balance in politics²⁰—is the best strategy to increase their national and local representation. Considering both the previous setbacks for women's rights and the main political actors in Mali, advocates of gender quotas feel the time is not ripe for a change that remained at odds with social and political realities. Parity may be formalized on paper, but it would not be implemented in practice, they argue. As a result, it seems more strategic to lobby for a quota law to improve women's representation in politics. This position is supported by the Malian gender ministry, which suggested a 35 percent quota for women's representation, with alternative positioning of men and women on the electoral lists. This process is seen as a bridge that could lead to parity by the year 2018.

However, in view of the poor results yielded by the decades-long campaign to advance women's political participation, other Malian women believe there is no other choice than to demand a parity law. For this group, Malian women bear the cost of the recent crisis. As the country emerges from conflict and decisions are made on defining "a new Mali," they believe the time has come to fight for parity. Malian activists advocating for a parity law also referred to the 2004 African Union Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality, which commits African leaders to expand and promote the gender parity principle to all organs of the AU, to the regional economic communities, and at the national and local levels in collaboration with political parties and national parliaments.²¹ On this

20 International IDEA, Stockholm University, and Inter-Parliamentary Union, "QuotaProject: Global Database of Quotas for Women," available at www.quotaproject.org/aboutQuotas.cfm.

21 African Union, "Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa," Third Ordinary Session, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, July 6–8, 2004, available at [http://wgda.aun.int/en/sites/default/files/Solemn%20Declaration%20on%20Gender%20Equality%20in%20Africa%20\(SDGEA\)%20-%20English.pdf](http://wgda.aun.int/en/sites/default/files/Solemn%20Declaration%20on%20Gender%20Equality%20in%20Africa%20(SDGEA)%20-%20English.pdf).

basis, governments should be held accountable for the commitments they voluntarily agreed to, together with their international partners supporting national implementation efforts.

* * *

More generally in West Africa, following Femmes Africa Solidarité's establishment of a women, peace, and security group in 2009, the UN encouraged the establishment of group representations in each country. Facilitated by the United Nations Office for West Africa (UNOWA), a regional database was established. Video teleconference meetings are held every two months to strengthen networking and information sharing. In addition to capacity-building programs, these initiatives promote the effective implementation of the various provisions of the international women, peace, and security agenda, their proper monitoring at national, regional, and international levels, and their periodic review. The network further seeks to enhance opportunities for women to participate in conflict prevention and peace processes across West Africa and the Sahel. With UNOWA's support, women in the region advocated for the adoption of a subregional action plan for UN Security Council Resolution 1325. Of the fifteen ECOWAS countries, only Benin, Cape Verde, and Niger have yet to adopt a national action plan for implementing the landmark resolution.

These efforts to enhance women's participation in political and peacebuilding processes in the Sahel are complemented by initiatives to enhance the involvement of youth.

LOCAL RESPONSES: YOUTH

To counter the frustrations caused by political exclusion and the risks that extremist ideologies, terrorist groups, and arms, drug, and human traffickers pose to youth across borders in the Sahel, efforts have been increased to enhance youth participation in democracy and governance.

In Mali, the establishment of the youth group Democracy 101 provided young activists with a platform to mobilize ahead of the 2013 elections and facilitate voters' registration by distributing

voter cards, confirming registration on electoral lists, and encouraging people to cast their ballots. During the election, the organization also operated a telephone line to provide voters with information, which reportedly received and addressed more than 14,000 calls. Youth participation increased from 9 to 13 percent during the last presidential election, a result Democracy 101 also credited to its advocacy work.²² Following the election, Malian youth launched petitions and organized demonstrations calling upon the new government to fulfill its electoral promises and to ensure their participation in the implementation of relevant programs. Increasingly, a youth social forum called the "grin" is being used to discuss political issues, including the role of elected leaders.

Having concluded that better management of the underlying conflict factors could have averted the 2012 crisis in Mali, young political leaders came together to establish a multiparty network that pursues the vision of a democratic state and serves as a dialogue platform on issues of national interest. Among these issues, young politicians identified advocacy for higher numbers of youth registration on electoral lists, efforts to promote the political emergence of youth, and capacity-building initiatives from the ground up to promote tolerance, patriotism, and a secular state. Furthermore, in the postconflict context, the network aims to facilitate the participation of Malian youth in ongoing national reconciliation efforts. In this regard, an advocacy document for peace and reconciliation was developed, in which plans were made that included peace education, conflict early warning, and citizenship education.

In Niger, youth have traditionally avoided involvement in politics. However, the youth interviewed in Niamey in June 2014 displayed an awareness of the importance of their political engagement and were participating in capacity-building programs, which sought to enhance their political engagement. Several organizations that work with youth have been established in the fields of education, health, and peace, among others, many of which aim to increase youth participation in interconnected peace and development efforts. For instance, the Niger High Authority for Peacebuilding is implementing a program focusing

22 Interview with representatives of Democracy 101, Bamako, Mali, May 2014.

on short-term stability, which seeks to support and strengthen the capacity of vulnerable groups including women and youth. Through its Youth, Peace, and Development program, the High Authority for Peacebuilding provides support for income-generating activities. The Mouvement des jeunes pour le développement et l'éducation citoyenne (MOJEDEC), a network bringing together more than 120 youth organizations of those between the ages of fifteen and thirty-five, facilitates peer-to-peer training on topics including citizenship, leadership, nonviolent conflict resolution, and building a culture of peace across the country. In addition, MOJEDEC has developed literacy and management programs.

Youth in Niger also have developed spaces that allow for social and artistic forms of expression that are used for citizen governance monitoring. Radio programs provide platforms for young leaders as well as uneducated youth to discuss issues such as politics, current affairs, and reproductive health, for example. Alternative espaces citoyens, a civil society group in Niger, organizes writing and analytical skills training for youth, who can make use of the organization's newspapers to raise issues of concern. Nigerien youth further participate in civil society training programs that seek to increase citizen participation in budget preparation and implementation at the community level. Efforts to promote good governance include the organization of anticorruption caravans and training workshops on how to fight corruption. Youth are increasingly involved in activities related to better natural resource management and environmental challenges, such as reforestation, community sanitation, and the use of solar energy.

In Senegal, a mass demonstration in 2011 called the June 23 Movement that coalesced around the theme "Do not touch my constitution" underscored the desire for change by youth and civil society. The movement brought together various groups of men, women, and youth, including human rights NGOs, unions, and development organizations. For one Senegalese human rights activist, the success of the June 23 Movement lay in the unity of all the actors involved, their ability to build mutual trust, the democratic nature of the movement with regular consultations, and the

respect by all of the nonpartisan nature of the civil society mandate.²³

Building on this mobilization, the "Y'en a marre" ("We've had enough") movement initiated by young journalists and musicians used music and poetry to rally the youth against former president Abdoulaye Wade's attempts to run for a third term in 2012. It encouraged them to vote and sought to persuade young citizens to contribute to their communities' efforts to advance democracy and good governance. "Y'en a marre" is credited with the registration of 380,000 youth on electoral lists ahead of the 2012 presidential election. This effort provided an opportunity for the youth to participate in the political debate aimed at strengthening the democratic process in the country, consolidating democratic gains, and putting citizens' concerns at its center. Following the elections, the movement evolved into a monitoring and advocacy group speaking up on the multiple challenges facing Senegalese citizens, such as food insecurity, youth unemployment, education, and street children.

Additional networking and awareness-raising activities have been implemented by the Youth, Population, and Development Network to encourage youth participation in decision-making processes and foster generational parity. The network helped to create high school clubs across Senegal that offer leadership training to youth. The trainees are organized into "citizen juries" who provide monitoring and early warning tools for transparency and accountability. A committee for conflict prevention also was established to raise awareness and inform the youth. In partnership with the government and organizations focusing on youth and girls, the youth network promotes girls' participation in campaigns related to topics such as education, empowerment and leadership, the use of new technologies, and the eradication of female genital mutilation.

ASSESSING THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

By serving as a bridge between the state and its citizens, civil society organizations can play an important role in women's and youths' empowerment and the promotion of a message of peace

23 Interview conducted in Dakar, Senegal, May 2014.

across the Sahel. Diverse strategies have demonstrated promise in promoting the meaningful participation of women and youth, such as advocacy for the implementation of clear and concrete policy recommendations, active engagement of the media, and coordination among organizations to increase effectiveness. In Senegal, best practices shared by leaders of the June 23 Movement highlighted the importance of agreeing on a concrete strategy, defining clear objectives, and building broad and strong alliances. In addition, dialogue and consultation were presented as critical tools for any successful democratic movement.

In Niger, civil society organizations have developed strategies to monitor the adoption and implementation of budgets by local governments. A citizen budget session is organized annually, which provides an opportunity to analyze budget implementation for the previous year and calls on the government to explain established gaps, to define budget projections, and to make recommendations to the budget ministry. At the local level, young people are encouraged to participate in budget preparation. Alternative espaces citoyens also seeks to increase gender mainstreaming in local and national budgets by assessing populations' expectations and conducting gender analyses of budgets. The organization conducted training and awareness-raising programs, including in traditionally marginalized regions such as Agadez, Diffa, and Zinder, to inform local populations about the stakes and the importance of their involvement, as well as the need for gender-sensitive budgets.

Despite these models, civil society's impact on political participation, peace, and development across the Sahel continues to show mixed results. For example, in Niger, numerous associations work to promote women's and children's rights and welfare; however, these organizations face constraints due to poor internal governance and lack of transparency. Many nongovernmental organizations also lack the capacity to purposefully engage in development and peacebuilding programs, and competition is high for funding. Moreover, some organizations are highly politicized, a phenomenon that is compounded by local "brain drain" and the co-opting of development

experts into better-resourced international organizations.

In some cases, tensions were reported between civil society organizations and governments, which consider vocal civil society actors—rightly or wrongly—as aligned with the opposition and thus a threat. In Mali, the politicization of civil society was identified as a factor in the 2012 crisis. Despite the multitude of actors and mechanisms, civil society groups failed to anticipate the crisis. This failure was explained by the alliances these organizations built with political parties and the "consensus à la malienne" (Malian consensus) institutionalized by former president Amadou Toumani Touré. Characterized by the search for consensus on all issues, this governance approach gradually deprived civil society organizations from any capacity to serve as watchdogs and raise issues of common concern.

Providing adequate space for civil society to contribute to national efforts to improve inclusive governance can positively impact on women and youth political participation. However, additional strategies also need to be developed if women and youth are to take meaningful part in governance, peace, and development efforts across the Sahel.

Enhancing the Political Participation of Women and Youth

For greater political participation by women and youth, the challenges posed by exclusive and unaccountable governance must be overcome and strategies that promote people-centered governance need to be developed. There are seven areas of focus that could prove fruitful in this respect: (1) bridging the gap between governance norms and policies and their implementation; (2) building the capacity of women and youth to participate meaningfully in political life; (3) strengthening existing movements that empower women and youth; (4) reducing poverty by facilitating access to basic social services and widening the space for the private sector; (5) multisectoral and media initiatives for the political participation of women and youth; (6) creating bridges across groups and communities; and (7) advancing the women, peace, and security agenda.

NORM IMPLEMENTATION AND INSTITUTION STRENGTHENING

Across the Sahel, numerous frameworks have been adopted to promote democracy and good governance practices, including the political participation of women and youth. However, the implementation of these frameworks remains limited. Current efforts should therefore put a hold on the adoption of new laws and policies, and innovative strategies should be developed to bridge the gap that persists between national and international laws, policies, and programs on the one hand and their actual implementation on the ground on the other.

In Senegal, female lawyers have called on the government to effectively implement international conventions concerning women and to harmonize these conventions with domestic laws to ensure their implementation. Women's groups are also lobbying for the effective implementation of the 2010 national gender parity law without exception. Understanding that the law resulted from a combination of years of lobbying and advocacy by women's groups, and former president Abdoulaye Wade's political will, it is critical to ensure that a "late majority" subscribes to the national gender equality agenda. For the Senegalese women's movement, the time has come to choose between measured efforts that leave the society sufficient time to adjust while taking into account the country's sociocultural realities or those that step up action and confront political leaders to implement the new law.

In Mali, some participants in the study observed that there remains too much talk and too few results in advancing gender equality. All the necessary legal instruments have been adopted and, on paper, national policies are generally protective of women. Furthermore, with regard to the international women, peace, and security agenda, it was observed that the growing normative framework is now sufficient, and it is important to move from adoption to implementation. In that regard, the importance of meaningful women's representation is critical, especially taking into account parliament's role in monitoring the implementation of international treaties and

conventions. This puts a greater responsibility on female elected leaders to ensure that the relevant laws and policies regarding women's rights are being implemented and that women's aspirations are met. To complement this national responsibility, international development partners also have a duty to ensure that their funding efforts produce the expected results.

In addition, the national mechanisms that have been established to promote good governance, gender equality, and youth participation should be strengthened by providing adequate resources, autonomy, and clear mandates. In Niger, there were plans to establish a unit hosted in the Ministry of Women's Promotion and Child Protection to monitor the implementation of the 2000 quota law. However, this monitoring unit has not been functional. Instead, the implementation of the law was left to the "good will of the government," under the leadership of the gender ministry.²⁴ As a result, this implementation and subsequent appointments were perceived to be decided often on the basis of political grounds rather than abidance to the quota law.

In Senegal, the National Parity Monitor (l'Observatoire national de la parité) was established under the 2010 law. Other institutions established to promote good governance include the Ministry of Good Governance, the National Commission for Institution Reform, the National Electoral Commission, the National Office against Corruption, the Court for the Repression of Illicit Enrichment, and the Government Accountability Office (la Cour des comptes). The December 2013 law on decentralization further encourages popular participation. All these institutions and frameworks have helped reduce the gap that exists between elected leaders and their constituents. However, these efforts remain insufficient. With the backlash caused by the "Touba list," which was submitted ahead of the June 2014 local elections and violated the parity law, recent initiatives have emphasized the respect for the mandate and independence of the country's election, governance, and gender-monitoring mechanisms—initiatives that should at the same time equip citizens with the necessary tools to monitor the government's action for

24 Interviews conducted in Niamey, Niger, May 2014.

increased transparency and accountability.

Senegal has ratified the 2006 African Union Youth Charter, and a national youth council has been established. However, the structures created to facilitate youth representation in decision-making processes and promote the implementation of programs affecting them are often perceived as highly politicized and their membership based on co-optation. National youth councils—which also were established in Mali and Niger—therefore need to be reinforced and their independence reaffirmed. More broadly, youth from these countries and across the Sahel need to be equipped with the necessary education and legal tools to facilitate their active participation in the definition, implementation, and monitoring of normative frameworks established to address their priorities and concerns.

Civil society more generally also has a role to play, through awareness raising, advocacy, and monitoring of the implementation of these norms and principles. And the general public, which could pressure the state into implementing its legal commitments, will remain unable to do so unless it is adequately informed and educated. In Mali, international Human Rights Day on December 10th also marks the national day of democratic questioning (*Espace d'interpellation démocratique*). Established in 1995 under former president Alpha Omar Konaré, this accountability process provides citizens with a forum to call on their leaders and present their grievances through a national advisory commission. Over the years of implementing this process, some progress has been achieved on issues such as tax payment and awareness of women's rights. Yet, due to the limited number of cases declared admissible by the advisory commission, which makes recommendations, and the absence of concrete follow up on the questions raised and recommendations made, the results of the process remain a mixed bag. Therefore, justice institutions, which play a critical role in protecting human rights and monitoring governance, should also be supported, including by ensuring their independence and the provision of adequate resources.

In addition to strengthening institutions and bridging the gap between norms and practices, inclusive governance for peacebuilding and development requires greater capacity of women

and youth to enhance their involvement.

CAPACITY BUILDING

Participants in the research observed that female elected officials often lacked the capacity to fully realize their contribution to political processes, particularly with regard to pressuring the government in the implementation and advancement of gender equality laws. Adequate time should therefore be set aside to build the capacity of female candidates before the beginning of any electoral campaign. This is also true for younger candidates who may lack experience. To facilitate their meaningful participation and limit cases of token representation, women and youth should see their capacity developed in areas such as communication and advocacy, conflict management, mediation, gender mainstreaming, public administration, and leadership. Additionally, their understanding of national and international norms, standards, programs, and processes should be improved so as to generate strategic knowledge and reinforce the ability of women and youth to develop a vision for their country and contribute to its realization.

Moreover, campaigns that raise awareness about increasing these groups' participation can lead to stronger support for, and reinforcement of, women's and young people's ability to promote the adoption of political programs that prioritize their needs and perspectives. Such initiatives may include, for example, encouraging women to vote for and support women involved in politics, including those beyond their political affiliation, and the immersion of youth in political life to facilitate the emergence of credible and effective leaders.

In Niger, research showed that organizations were engaged in implementing innovative capacity-building strategies, including training women on social and economic empowerment through the development of small income-generating projects, literacy and numeracy programs, and protection against violence. In one local community, a female doctor started a community center that trained women on their reproductive rights and maternal health. Awareness-raising programs addressing husbands and men, including the "School for Husbands" initiative of the UN Population Fund, further contributed to the promotion of women's reproductive health. Participants in the study noted

the positive impact these programs had on the reduction of gender-based violence, the promotion of social cohesion, and women's participation in decision-making processes in their communities.²⁵

Sharing information and experiences with countries such as Rwanda, Burundi, South Africa, and Tunisia that have achieved high rates of women's representation in parliament could also provide useful lessons for the meaningful participation of women and youth across the Sahel, and improve these groups' capacities to defend their constituencies' priorities and concerns. Such sharing of lessons learned and good practices, including by facilitating dialogue platforms among civil society, could also benefit from the use of new technologies and strengthening of regional networks.

STRENGTHENING WOMEN'S AND YOUTHS' MOVEMENTS

Overcoming issues of competition, a lack of solidarity among women's organizations, and the disconnect between female elected leaders and their fellow women and constituents also will enhance women's political participation in the Sahel. Building on their longtime involvement in social networks, women in political parties should develop joint strategies that pursue the interests of all women. While understanding that women running for elections tend to do so firstly on behalf of their political party, the goal also should be to promote the emergence of female leadership across political parties, and women should cultivate solidarity beyond their political affiliations to this end. Stronger female mobilization, including within political parties, should lead to women gaining greater political space. And political parties whose programs respond to the priorities of women in society are likely to garner more support from women.

Another strategy for strengthening the women's movement is to establish and reinforce bridges among those holding electoral and political positions, those in the high administration, and women from civil society. In Niger, the 25 percent quota for the appointment of women in the senior

administration has facilitated the emergence of a number of high-level cadres. Connections should be reinforced between these women and those in politics to build solidarity. In this regard, suggestions were made to undertake a census of all women holding high-level positions in the administration, for their organization into a pool of experts that goes beyond political parties.

The dividends of women's political engagement for inclusive governance, local and national socio-economic improvement, and community and regional conflict prevention and peacebuilding should be made known to all. Women who benefited from parity and quota laws should be encouraged to support these policies. In addition, awareness-raising programs should target populations who can support women candidates to build support from the bottom up. These efforts should aim to change women's image in the society toward a more positive one.

Joint platforms also should be established between the existing women's movement and young activists to build mutually beneficial synergies. In this regard, it is important that women familiarize themselves with and make use of new tools such as social media to reach and positively influence young women. In addition, young political actors can benefit from strategies long tested by the women's movement, which can promote the adoption of a quota law to increase youth political participation.

In countries where the majority of the population lives in rural areas, youth are at greater risk of being marginalized, although they often come out en masse to vote. Thus, recent efforts tend to include rural youth in decision-making processes, and the participation of illiterate and rural youth is being encouraged in community initiatives addressing issues of hygiene and sanitation, security, and community policing, for example. Building on these new approaches, stronger synergies and networks need to be established, particularly in Mali, between young political leaders and young women and men from other groups, including civil society and traditionally marginalized groups.

²⁵ Interviews conducted in Niamey, Niger, May 2014. See also UN Population Fund, "In Niger, Empowering Girls To Take a Stand against Child Marriage," July 21, 2014, available at www.unfpa.org/news/niger-empowering-girls-take-stand-against-child-marriage; and Joan Erakit, "How Niger's Traditional Leaders Are Promoting Maternal Health," Inter Press Service, September 11, 2014, available at www.ipsnews.net/2014/09/will-you-be-chief-how-nigers-traditional-leaders-are-promoting-maternal-health/.

Within political parties, internal democratic practices also should be encouraged to facilitate the emergence of a new and more inclusive generation of leaders. Suggestions were made to put an end to the partitioned system created by women and youth commissions that often results in clustering these groups' participation. Instead, female and young political party hardliners should be encouraged to mainstream their perspectives and enhance their participation beyond a mobilization role, into decision-making positions. Efforts to provide a larger space for the youth to raise their voices and participate in decision-making processes should also be strengthened beyond political parties.

This space can take the form of consultations at national and community levels to establish bridges between youth and other groups in the society. For Malian youth, social gatherings such as "grins," where young men and women meet to socialize and discuss various issues, should be used as dialogue platforms to enhance youth citizenship and address issues of concern. Youth champions who can pass on positive values should be promoted to serve as role models. At the same time, educated and empowered youth have the responsibility to mobilize for enhanced public participation. In Niger, where greater engagement is called on to counter youths' political apathy, a suggestion was made to follow on regular student marches and demonstrations with the adoption of a clear agenda to improve their living conditions, which could benefit from negotiations with the government.

SOCIAL SERVICE DELIVERY AND THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Access to social services, including education, health care, housing, water, and employment (especially for the youth), is an important prerequisite for meaningful citizen participation and for more democratic and accountable governance systems.

Access to education, particularly for girls, has proved invaluable in bringing change to traditional societies where beliefs and practices continue to hinder women's political participation. Studies have highlighted the benefits of education for women's individual empowerment and overall

economic growth, personal and community health care, protection against violence and other harmful traditional practices, and democratic and political participation.²⁶ For countries in the Sahel, the creation of a conducive environment by sensitizing parents and involving men is one way of keeping girls in school and providing training opportunities to women. Education is also a key element in making peace more attractive to youth than violence. Quality education should therefore provide youth, including those in rural areas, with concrete employment opportunities and meaningful alternatives to their recruitment by radical Islamist groups. Religious education, which has been used as a recruitment channel, should return to teaching the Islamic values of dignity, tolerance, and peace. And governments, which lead the development of school curricula, should ensure that quality education helps prepare youth for meaningful political participation.

In addition to education, access to employment, as a source of human dignity and security, is also a significant factor for increasing the political participation of women and youth. Countries in the Sahel therefore have a duty to craft social and development policies that respond to their populations' needs and create the conditions for sustainable peace. In the context of a growing informal sector characterized by limited social protection, civil society organizations can also play a role in raising awareness of and advocating for those workers who do not benefit from legal protection.

In Chad, local efforts and the government's provision of microcredits to launch development projects sought to foster female entrepreneurship. Combined with outreach to local administrators and traditional leaders, campaigns across the country identified promising economic sectors and undertook the strengthening of women's capacity in the agro-food business. Initiatives also encouraged dialogue processes among Chadian women from farming and pastoralist communities to prevent and manage existing conflicts, and synergies were developed among the country's various regions. However, to increase female entrepreneurs' visibility and broaden their access to markets, more efforts should be made to increase

26 Barbara Herz and Gene B. Sperling, "What Works in Girls' Education: Evidence and Policies from the Developing World," Council on Foreign Relations, April 2004. See also Anne Marie Goetz, "Women's Education and Political Participation," paper commissioned for the Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2003/4, "Gender and Education for All: The Leap to Equality," 2003, available at <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001467/146770e.pdf>.

exchanges among women from the various countries across the Sahel.

Additional initiatives can help build bridges between the private sector and communities. Visionary and ethical leadership, which often begins within economic enterprises, can contribute to building social cohesion and a culture of peace by advocating for legal protection for employees and ensuring a more equitable share of national resources with workers in informal sectors. For example, multinational companies can exercise their corporate responsibility by increasing employment opportunities for local youth or by developing accompanying projects in communities where local populations still lack the necessary skills to gain employment. In Burkina Faso for example, the installation of a multinational company in a mining region initially led to tensions with the local communities. To appease these tensions, an innovative approach sought to develop partnerships between the multinational company and local populations, through the support provided to micro and other agricultural projects that encouraged local empowerment and women's participation.²⁷

The promotion of new systems of organization and protection that involve workers in the informal sector and respond to their needs is another condition of stability in the Sahelian region. A strong emphasis on youth entrepreneurship, for example, is a way of boosting their economic empowerment and enhancing their contribution to national and regional peace and development. In Senegal, the government announced plans to establish a fund for young entrepreneurs, as part of its efforts to develop youth leadership in the private sector. In addition, youth groups encouraged their members to fight unemployment using their own resources and not to rely only on the government to provide jobs.

Partnerships can be developed between government and small business owners—including female business owners—who also have the responsibility to seek and take advantage of both public and private training opportunities to actively contribute to local development and crisis preven-

tion efforts. In Mali, for example, traders and transportation workers, who work across the country and form wide professional and social networks, can usefully contribute to conflict early warning initiatives.

Finally, development challenges in the Sahel include environmental issues posed by desertification and climate volatility. Harmonized efforts by both national and multinational companies should increase social considerations and reduce these companies' environmental impact. At the local level, women's involvement in agricultural activities can also contribute to efforts to anticipate food crises and increase productivity.²⁸

MULTISECTORAL APPROACHES AND THE MEDIA

New strategies to overcome resistance and enhance the place of women in society further include multisectoral approaches that address not only issues of political participation but also of social and economic status, specifically the economic empowerment of women. This approach is reflected in the proposed *ECOWAS Protocol for the Equality of Rights between Women and Men for Sustainable Development in West Africa*, which is being considered for adoption. Beyond encouraging women's political participation, women's rights also should be promoted with regard to access to land, credit, technology, equal pay, and equal social protection. In Niger, civil society organizations, including *Alternative espaces citoyens*, adopted such rights-based approaches to promote governance practices that are inclusive of women and youth, and protect their human rights. In rural Mali, while women were the most active members of the community, they hardly benefited from their small trade activities. A new approach, focusing on equal opportunities instead of gender equality, involved consultations with men and the facilitation of their communication with women. This strategy proved successful in increasing benefits for the community as a whole.

Innovative approaches further seek to increase media engagement on these issues. In Senegal, it was suggested that the press and the media more generally should engage in a self-assessment

27 See Fatima Kyari Mohammed, "Women as Drivers of Economic Recovery and Development: Women's Economic Empowerment in the Sahel Region and the Impact on Food Security," background paper prepared for the High-Level Conference on Women's Leadership in the Sahel, convened by the European Union, the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for the Sahel, and UN Women, Brussels, April 9, 2013.

28 Ibid.

exercise and stop disseminating negative images of women. Instead, more positive representations of women and specific attention to gender balance in radio and television programs on topics that are not specific to women should foster gender equality and raise the general public's awareness of the importance of the recent parity law, for example.

In Niger, it was observed that despite women's involvement in the media as technicians and broadcasters on radio and television programs, their participation in the political debate remains limited. While they may take part in discussions on education or health, women's political leadership is yet to be affirmed and made more visible. Women across the Sahel were, therefore, encouraged to be more proactive in participating in media programs. Radio and television could facilitate this presence by ensuring that programs in local languages are adequately featured. At the same time, observers noted that issues of expertise, urgency to cover current news, and the commercial nature of the media enterprise make it difficult for the media, especially the private media, to prioritize gender equality.

While traditional media, including community radio programs and audiotapes in local languages, accompanied awareness-raising caravans across Mali and Niger where illiteracy remains widespread, youth in Mali and even more so in Senegal are increasingly using new information and communication technologies, including SMS, and social media, such as Facebook, to communicate with their peers, discuss issues of concern, and raise awareness. Increasingly popular, new technologies also have been used to publicize messages of peace. In Senegal, for example, SMS through mobile phones helped to mobilize youth and secure vote counting during presidential elections in 2000 and 2012, which both saw sensitive transfers of power.

BUILDING BRIDGES ACROSS GROUPS AND COMMUNITIES

Religion constitutes an important source of social norms in mostly patriarchal West African communities. In Niger, despite strong and widespread respect for Islam, civil society organizations are increasingly concerned about renewed attempts to curtail women's and girls' rights. In

response, a number of initiatives have been developed to promote and support a more tolerant and progressive type of Islam. However, for Nigerien civil society, unless the government shows equally strong political will, these efforts will remain ineffective. In Senegal, civil society actors also observed that to anticipate any violation of the 2010 parity law by conservative religious leaders, the government could have met with religious leaders from the Touba region ahead of the elections, to explain the necessity of implementing the new law.

Efforts should therefore involve religious actors in advocacy programs to overcome resistance. Progressive religious leaders, who can positively contribute to gender justice and inclusive politics, should be encouraged to express their support for the public participation of women and youth, and publicize a progressive interpretation of *sharia* law. In Senegal, building relationships and establishing connections with religious brotherhoods was deemed crucial due to the critical role these brotherhoods, including the Mourids from the Touba region, play in preventing the expansion of radical Islam. In Niger, the gender ministry has included clerics in the preparation and implementation of its programs, and a training module on "Gender and Islam" has been developed for training of Muslim clerics. In Mali, the gender ministry also reaffirmed the need to enroll the support of progressive religious leaders for any successful program seeking to combat exclusion. This is more so following the crisis in northern Mali and citizens' questioning of the place and the role of religion in the state. In implementing this new inclusive approach, "traditional communicators," who serve as a bridge between religious and traditional leaders and civil society and women's groups, have proved useful in gaining the support of local leaders. Moreover, traditional leaders have been involved in intergenerational focus groups to share with other community members their views on the management of issues of common concern. These consultations highlighted, among other strategies, the importance of engaging husbands in rural areas to allow their wives to participate in literacy and other capacity-building programs.

Both in Mali and Senegal, religious and traditional leaders proved particularly influential in rallying voters around endorsed candidates. It was

recommended that female candidates and political parties should reach out to community leaders to sensitize them on women's political participation and win their approval ahead of electoral campaigns. More efforts should seek to convince local leaders and populations of the necessity and benefits of women's inclusion. In this regard, progressive clerics need to be supported to conduct research on religious principles and to be provided with a platform for their voice to be heard in support of gender parity. And to support national and regional efforts to counter radicalization and the barriers it places on women's participation, the appointment by the UN of goodwill ambassadors who could explain tolerance-based religious principles and make use of the media to pass on their message was suggested.

ADVANCING THE WOMEN, PEACE, AND SECURITY AGENDA

Beyond their political participation, the involvement of women in conflict prevention and peace initiatives in the Sahel is a key condition of stability and development in the region. In the Malian context, the challenge is to ensure that women are involved in the ongoing dialogue, mediation, and reconciliation processes. During the peace negotiations in Ouagadougou in June 2013, women's groups lobbied for their participation in the process. However, only two women, members of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad delegation, were initially involved, and they were later recalled. Two women were also among the fifty-member commission delegated by the Malian government to the negotiations launched in July 2014 in Algiers, with no civil society representative.²⁹ To build lasting peace, the circle of exclusion against women must be broken, and Malian women's civil society groups called for measures to ensure their stronger involvement in the country's peace process.

Greater efforts should therefore be geared toward the effective implementation of the women, peace, and security agenda as formalized by the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and subsequent resolutions. In this regard, women from the Sahel should continue to ask for their involvement in local, national, and subregional

conflict management and resolution initiatives. Synergies should be built with regional and international partners to strengthen women's capacity and share experiences and good practices. Awareness-raising programs should highlight the importance of women's role in conflict prevention and peacebuilding. In addition, training on conflict and peace and mediation techniques will help quantify and qualify women's participation.

Such participation can be facilitated by the institutionalization of mechanisms for women's participation in conflict prevention and peacebuilding initiatives. Moreover, women in the Sahel asked for a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation mechanism of the implementation of Resolution 1325. Specifically, an assessment must be conducted of the shortcomings that have prevented the realization of gender equality and the women, peace, and security agenda in the region. These efforts should take into account the diverse needs and priorities of women in the Sahel.

Conclusion

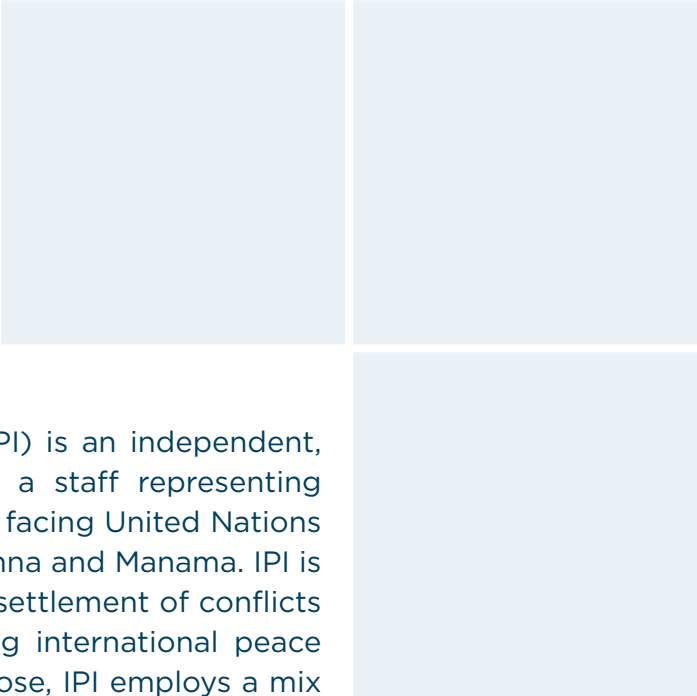
The various and multilayered factors that combine to limit or prevent the effective involvement of women and youth from countries in the Sahel-Saharan region to national and regional political processes are yet to be addressed. For the youth, these factors add to the specific challenges that relate to growing security threats linked to radicalization and violent extremism in the region. While both women and youth groups have developed strategies that advance their political participation, more efforts are needed to make this participation sustainable and ensure their contribution to ongoing initiatives to promote peace, security, and development across the region.

Innovative strategies must seek to bridge the persistent gap between the norms adopted to advance the political participation of women and youth and their implementation, and to strengthen the mechanisms established to monitor this implementation. Such strategies must continue to reinforce women and youth movements and build their capacity. Moreover, addressing development challenges by increasing the provision of social

29 M. A. Traore, "Négociations d'Alger: les femmes, grandes absentes," *L'Essor*, available at www.essor.ml/negociations-dalger-les-femmes-grandes-absentes.

services must be considered. In this regard, the specific role of the private sector should be recognized, which can partner with governments at central and local levels to expand employment opportunities, reduce poverty, and ease social tensions. Comprehensive approaches merging individual and community development should also be pursued to overcome resistance to women's empowerment and public participation, and the role of the media and new technologies in

promoting inclusive and accountable governance should be enhanced. Building bridges among key stakeholders must be encouraged further, with a specific focus on the role of community elders and of religious and traditional leaders, whose influence can help promote both inclusive governance and social cohesion. Finally, increased political participation by women in the Sahel goes hand in hand with advancing the international women, peace, and security agenda.



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