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Political violence targeting women in West Africa

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POLITICAL VIOLENCE TARGETING WOMEN IN WEST AFRICA

This paper has been prepared by

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ACLED

WEST AFRICAN PAPERS

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Abstract

Women around the world are facing unprecedented levels of targeted political violence. This is also true in West Africa. Women can be targeted in a myriad of ways, by an array of types of perpetrators, during and outside of periods of conflict and contentious crises. The result though is consistent: such targeted violence has worrying implications for women's political participation as well as their involvement in the public sphere. Political violence targeting women (PVTW) in West Africa has become increasingly common, with this trend increasing even more dramatically in recent years. The threat and risks, however, have not been uniform: different types of violence and different primary perpetrators dominate the gendered violence landscape across countries. Using data from ACLED, this paper tracks how women are targeted, and who is targeting women. Only by understanding how threats and risks that women face differ across countries can strategies be created to protect women.

Key words: women, security, political violence targeting women, West Africa, Sahel.

JEL classification: D74, F51, J16, N47

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The Sahel and West Africa Club

The Sahel and West Africa Club (SWAC) is an independent international platform. Its Secretariat is hosted at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Its mission is to promote regional policies that will improve the economic and social well-being of the people in the Sahel and West Africa. Its objectives are to produce and collect data, draft analyses and facilitate strategic dialogue in order to nurture and promote public policies in line with rapid developments in the region. It also promotes regional co-operation as a tool for sustainable development and stability. Its current areas of work are food dynamics, cities and territories, and security. SWAC Members and partners include: Austria, Belgium, Canada, CILSS (Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel), the ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) Commission, the European Commission, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Switzerland, the UEMOA (West African Economic and Monetary Union) Commission and the United States. SWAC has a memorandum of understanding with the University of Florida Sahel Research Group.

More information:

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List of acronyms

ACLED	The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project
APC	All Peoples Congress
CDC	Congress for Democratic Change
IDPs	Internally displaced persons
IFES	The International Foundation of Electoral Systems
IPU	Inter-Parliamentary Union
IRA	The Initiative for the Resurgence of Abolitionist Movement
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
ISWAP	Islamic State West Africa Province
JNIM	Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa-l-Muslimin (Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims)
MFDC	Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance
NDC	National Democratic Congress
NDI	National Democratic Institute
NPP	New Patriotic Party
PVTW	Political violence targeting women
SLPP	Sierra Leone People's Party
UN	United Nations
VDP	Volunteer for Defense of Homeland

Executive summary

THE RISK OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE TARGETING WOMEN IS INCREASING

Women around the world are facing unprecedented levels of targeted political violence; this is also true for West Africa. Women can be targeted in a myriad of ways, by an array of types of perpetrators, during and outside of periods of conflict and contentious crises. The result though is consistent: such targeted violence has worrying implications for women's political participation as well as their involvement in the public sphere.

Political violence targeting women (PVTW) in West Africa has become increasingly common, with this trend accelerating even more drastically in recent years. This augmentation has been driven by an increase in the number of violent events, especially in Nigeria, and the Sahelian states of Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali.

THE THREATS THAT WOMEN FACE VARY ACROSS COUNTRIES

The makeup of this threat to women has not been uniform across West Africa. Different types of violence and different primary perpetrators dominate the gendered violence landscape across different countries. This paper uses data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) (Raleigh et al., 2010) from 2010 to 2020, to track *how* women and girls in West Africa were targeted, and *who* were the primary perpetrators.

THE VARIED THREATS WOMEN FACED, AND HOW THESE IMPACT TRENDS TODAY

Rebels posed a significant threat to women and girls in the Sahelian region between 2010 and 2020. In Burkina Faso, non-sexual attacks by rebels were the primary threat that women and girls faced. Since 2021, while rebels continue to pose the greatest threat to women and girls, targeted violence has shifted, with sexual violence taking a bigger role. In Mali, the primary threat to women and girls was non-sexual attacks perpetrated by rebels and by anonymous or unidentified armed groups from 2010 to 2020. These trends have continued since 2021. In Niger, rebels posed the primary threat to women and girls as well, though this targeted violence has primarily taken the form of abductions, with this trend continuing since 2021. That PVTW in

the Sahel is primarily perpetrated by rebels, yet takes different forms across different countries, fits in line with the differing conflicts in the region more largely (Nsaibia and Duhamel, 2021).

Communal militias posed the most serious threat to women and girls in Nigeria between 2010 and 2020. In Nigeria, PVTW by communal militias largely took the form of abductions and non-sexual attacks. While these trends have continued since 2021, unidentified and anonymous armed groups have also increasingly begun to engage in such violence.

Meanwhile, state forces played a more significant role in PVTW in Guinea, Liberia, and Senegal. In both Guinea and Liberia, this trend has continued, with the only reports of such violence since 2021 having been perpetrated by the state. In Senegal, on the other hand, the only reports of such violence since 2021 have involved unnamed groups: unidentified and anonymous armed groups and violent mobs.

In contexts like Benin, Ghana, and Senegal, where mob violence was already one of the primary ways in which women were targeted, this trend has continued since 2021. In Sierra Leone, on the other hand, while PVTW by violent mobs was not as common, the only reports of such violence since 2021 have been perpetrated by violent mobs. In short, the threats that women and girls face vary not only across countries, but can also evolve over time.

THE IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING TRENDS IN POLITICAL VIOLENCE TARGETING WOMEN

Monitoring how the threats to women and girls varies by type and perpetrator, and across contexts, and over time, is imperative to understanding how to mitigate such threats. Understanding these distinctions and evolutions is an important step towards *security equality*: different subsets of society face distinct threats and each has the equal right to be protected from those specific threats (Olsson, 2018; Kishi and Olsson, 2019). This is crucial to peace programming. Further, PVTW has important implications for women's political participation, as such violence can thwart women's participation through fear and intimidation (IPU, 2016; IFES, 2021; NDI, 2019).

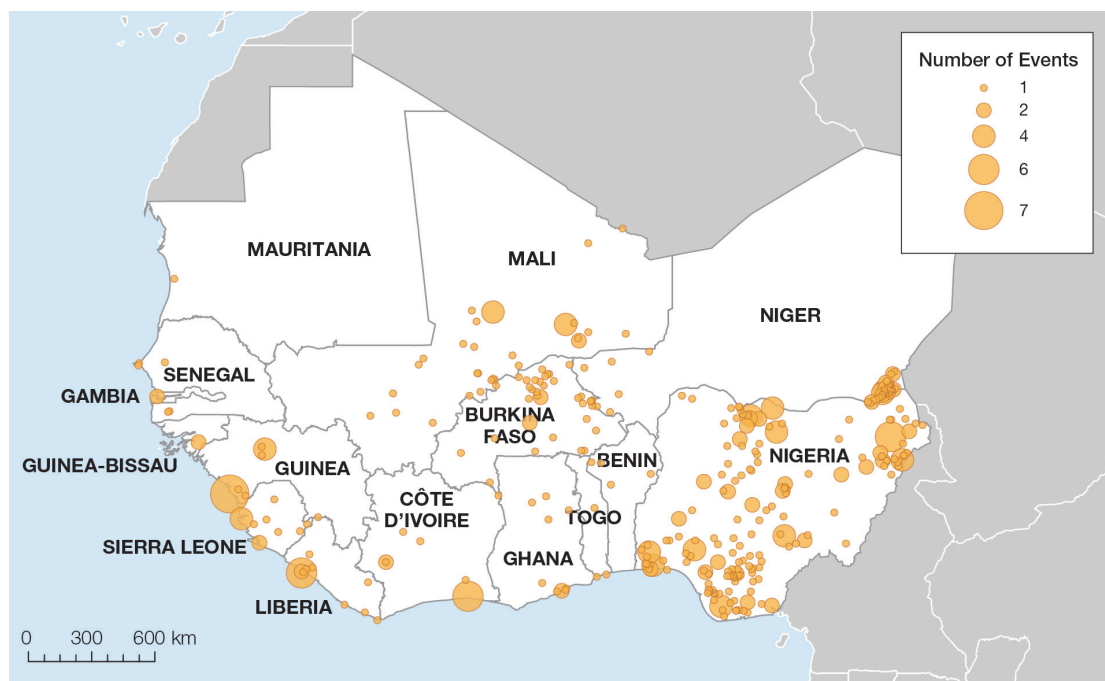
Introduction: Unprecedented levels of political violence targeting women

Women around the world are facing unprecedented levels of targeted political violence (Kishi et al., 2019). This is also true in West Africa (Map 1). Women can be targeted in a myriad of ways, by an array of types of perpetrators, during and outside of periods of conflict and contentious crises. The result though is consistent: such targeted violence has worrying implications for women’s political participation as well as their involvement in the public sphere. West African countries suffer from low development and women especially have limited political representation and have little control when it comes to making decisions that affect their lives (UN Women, 2021).

Against this backdrop, PVTW in West Africa has become increasingly common – comprising an ever-larger percentage of all political violence – with this trend increasing even more dramatically in recent years (Figure 1). This has been driven by an increase in the number of violent events,

Map 1

Political violence targeting women in West Africa, 2010-20



Note: The countries covered in this report are: Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Nigeria, Niger, Mali, Mauritania, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo.

Source: The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). ACLED data is publicly available.

especially in Nigeria, and the Sahelian states of Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali. Rates of PVTW were the highest in 2020, despite restrictions on movement imposed by many governments in response to the global coronavirus pandemic. In fact, PVTW “in the public sphere has continued unabated through the COVID-19 crisis – at rates consistent to those recorded before the pandemic” (Kishi, 2020).

Figure 1
Political violence targeting women in West Africa, 2010-20



Note: The countries covered in this report are: Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Nigeria, Niger, Mali, Mauritania, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo.
Source: The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). ACLED data is publicly available.

The makeup of this threat to women, however, has not been uniform across the region. Different types of violence and different primary perpetrators dominate the gendered violence landscape. Often, these trends reflect the larger political violence landscape: the dominant type of violence used to target civilians is also largely faced by women, and/or the perpetrator responsible for the most violence targeting civilians is also the same type of perpetrator who targets women most prevalently. However, there are some important distinctions in these trends, where women face a unique threat of violence or a greater threat by certain perpetrators than the population at large. Looking at granular data, which tracks factors such as *how* women are targeted or *who* is targeting women, allow for a better understanding of the distinct threats that women face across this region. Only by understanding how threats and risks that women face differ across countries can strategies be created to protect women.

Data on political violence targeting women

This paper relies on quantitative data capturing ‘political violence targeting women’ (Kishi et al. 2019) from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) (Raleigh et al. 2010) to address and explore these trends in depth – with data visualisations used to depict the variation in the threats that West African women face. These data benefit from a new categorisation added to the ACLED dataset, which allows for the unpacking of key developments in political violence involving women within the public sphere. These categories range from war-time sexual violence and attacks on women politicians, to active repression of women engaged in political processes. This paper reviews the decade from 2010 to 2020.

‘Political violence targeting women’ captures political violence in which women or girls are specifically *targeted* – not just those cases in which women or girls were *affected* or *impacted by* political violence. Such cases of targeting are deduced by who the victim(s) of such violence are. Cases are categorised as PVTW when the main victims of the event are either composed entirely of women/girls, if the majority of victims are women/girls, or if the primary target is a woman/girl (e.g. a woman politician attacked alongside two male bodyguards).

This means that events in which women or girls are killed alongside men or boys are not categorised as such (e.g. an airstrike dropped on a town will likely kill both women and men). In short, PVTW does not capture the entirety of all violence which women and girls face, as it is not a gender disaggregation of all political violence. Rather, it specifically captures cases in which a woman’s gender is the salient identity for which she is targeted.

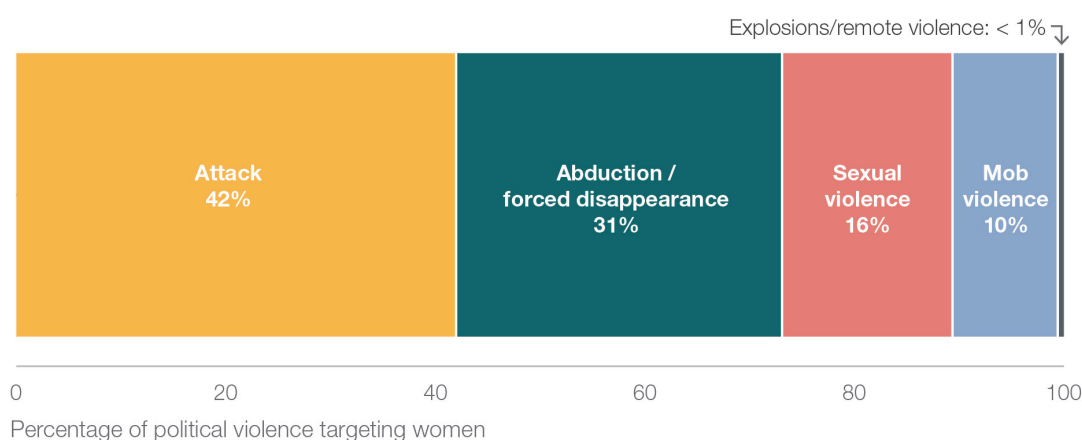
Moreover, the trends in this paper look only at *political violence* which targets women, not *all violence* – which is of course a much wider subset. Domestic violence, for example, poses an incredible threat to women in West Africa (Ford, 2012), as well as the world over. “Furthermore, it is important to note that underreporting of violence targeting women by victims is common due to backlash or normative concerns and this should be considered when drawing conclusions from the data. As is the same for all datasets, coverage within the ACLED dataset is limited to what has been reported in some capacity” (ACLED, 2021).

Types of political violence targeting women

Political violence targeting women can take on a variety of forms: sexual violence, non-sexual attacks, abductions and forced disappearances, mob violence, and explosions and other forms of remote violence (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Political violence targeting women in West Africa by type, 2010-20

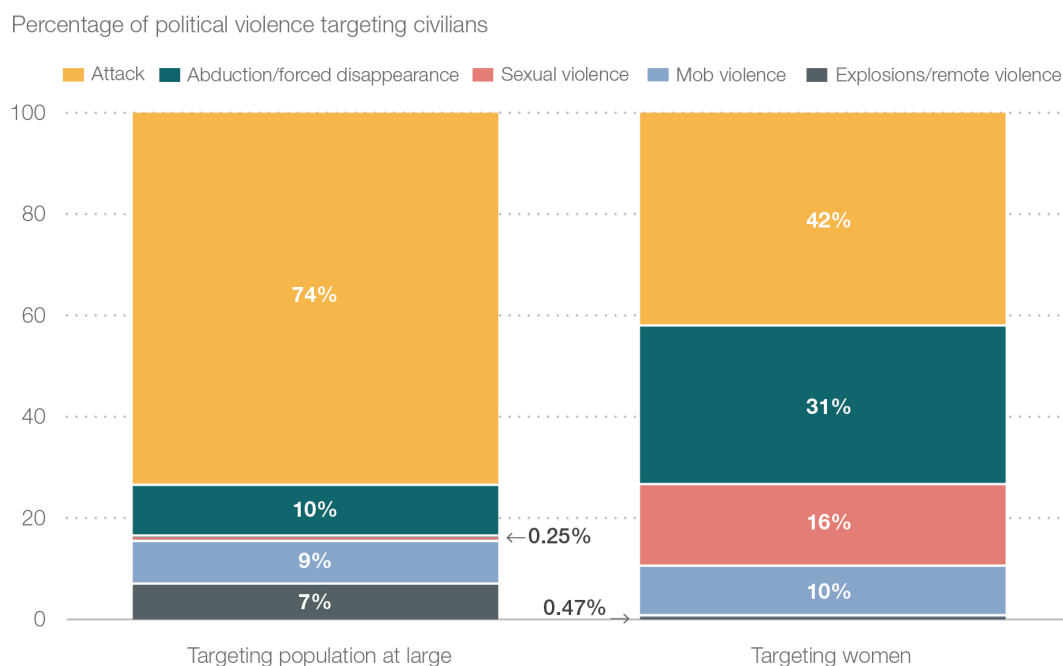


Note: The countries covered in this report are: Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Nigeria, Niger, Mali, Mauritania, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo.
Source: The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). ACLED data is publicly available.

The dominant type of violence used to target civilians was often the same as that faced by women and girls. However, there were certain types of violence that disproportionately targeted women and girls; these include: sexual violence, abductions and forced disappearances, and mob violence (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Rates of political violence targeting civilians in West Africa by type, 2010-20



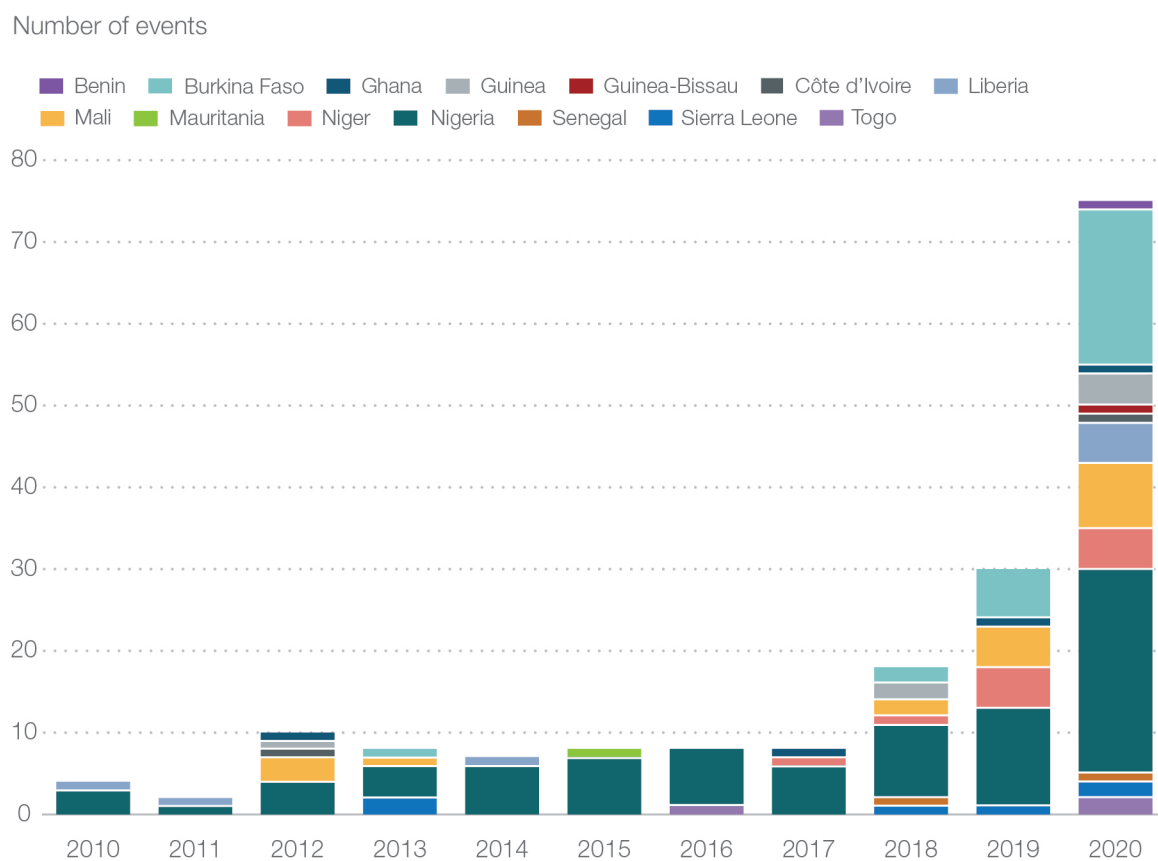
Note: The countries covered in this report are: Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Nigeria, Niger, Mali, Mauritania, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo.
 Source: The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). ACLED data is publicly available.

NON-SEXUAL ATTACKS

Non-sexual attacks are “violence of a non-sexual nature by an armed actor targeting an unarmed individual” (Kishi et al., 2019). They were the most common form of violence targeting women in West Africa; 42% of PVTW between 2010 and 2020 in the region took this form (Figure 2). This mirrors trends globally where non-sexual attacks are the most prevalent form of PVTW (Kishi et al., 2019). Such attacks increased in West Africa after 2018 (Figure 4), driven by an upward trend in Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and Mali since 2019.

Nigeria is home to “harmful cultural practices [against women], poverty, the highest maternal mortality rate in the world, economic inequality, misogynistic laws, and political exclusion” (Okunola, 2021). In addition to these cultural practices, Nigeria also has one of the lowest rates of female parliamentary representation in the world. Between 2010 and 2020, there were a total of at least 84 PVTW events recorded in Nigeria. While the upward trend was driven largely by anonymous or unidentified armed groups, the spike seen in 2020 was driven primarily by Katsina communal militias. For example, on 6 August 2020, Katsina communal militias invaded the Dutsin-ma, Safana and Danmusa local government areas of Katsina State, displacing about 200 women and children.

Figure 4
Attacks targeting women in West Africa by country, 2010-20



Source: The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). ACLED data is publicly available.

In Burkina Faso, there were a total of at least 28 events recorded between 2010 and 2020, predominantly perpetrated by Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), which drove the trend seen in 2020. For example, on 23 September 2020, presumed ISGS militants entered the market in Takatami, wounding and assaulting several women. In Mali, there were a total of at least 19 such events recorded, driven predominantly by the Al Qaeda-affiliated Group for Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) and its affiliates, as well as a spike in activity by anonymous or unidentified armed groups. For example, on 24 March 2020, presumed Katiba Macina militants (a JNIM affiliate), entered the market of Ambiri-Habe, whipping market-goers, particularly women, to enforce strict dress codes.

In addition to these three countries, this type of violence was also the primary form of violence targeting women in Ghana, Senegal, Guinea Bissau, Togo, and Mauritania. In Ghana, 45% of violence targeting women took this form. For example, on 29 September 2019, a woman journalist was beaten by affiliates of the New Patriotic Party (NPP), and their 'Invisible Militia' when covering parliamentary primaries in Tamale. In Senegal, half of all violence targeting women was non-sexual attacks. On 1 October 2020, police officers beat up a female journalist and broke her equipment as she

was recording the arrest of an activist in Dakar city. In Guinea Bissau, half of violence targeting women also took this form. Around 21 August 2020, agents of the Police National Guard beat and injured some women and the chief of the Madina Atche village. Meanwhile, in Togo, all violence targeting women recorded took the form of non-sexual attacks. On 15 April 2020, military forces beat and injured an old woman in Devikinme village, near Aneho town, for violating the coronavirus curfew. Similarly, in Mauritania, where only non-sexual attacks were recorded, on 23 April 2005, 20 women were injured and arrested during the raid of a mosque by police in Nouakchott.

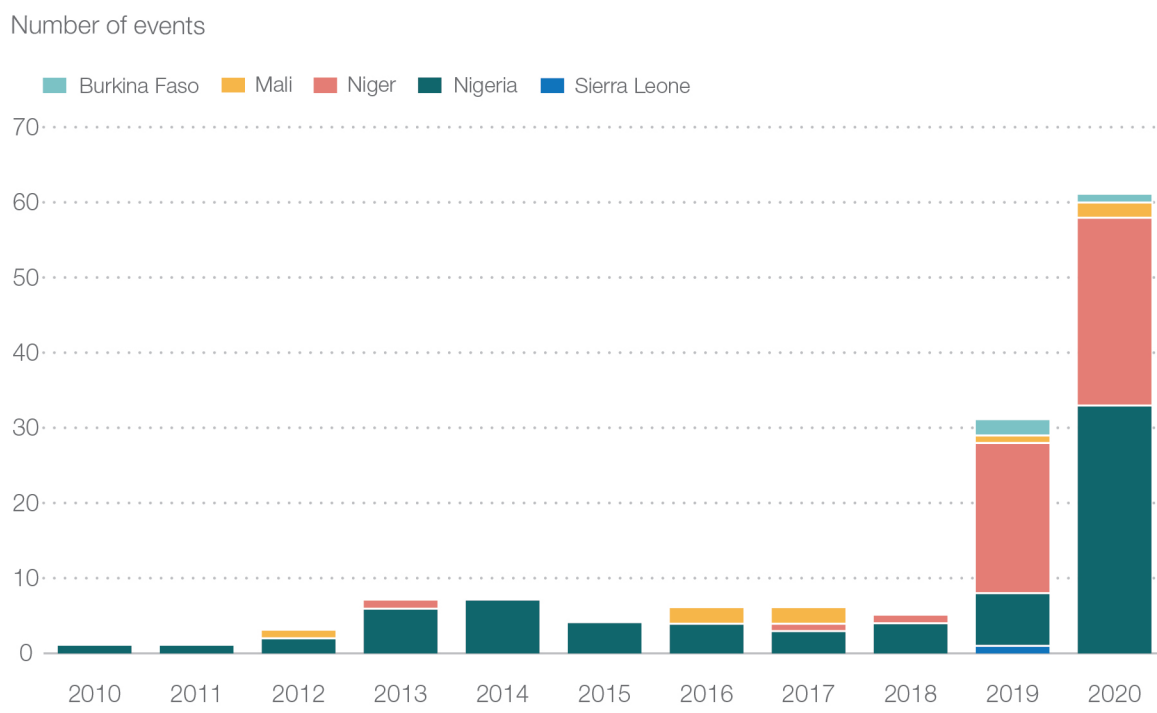
ABDUCTIONS AND FORCED DISAPPEARANCES

Abductions and forced disappearances comprise kidnappings “without reports of other physical violence... State-sanctioned arrests are not included here unless they are reported to have been conducted extra-judicially” (Kishi et al., 2019). Nearly one-third of the events targeting women between 2010 and 2020 in West Africa took this form – meaning that such violence disproportionately targeted women in the region (Figure 2). Abductions and forced disappearances increased in West Africa after 2018 (Figure 5), driven by an upward trend in Niger since 2019, almost entirely due to abductions perpetrated by Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), as well as a spike in such violence in Nigeria in 2020.

While abductions were not the most common type of violence in Nigeria, the country was home to the most abductions targeting women and girls across all of West Africa between 2010 and 2020 – which is not surprising given its geographical size and population. At least 72 such events took place. The primary perpetrators of this violence were anonymous or unidentified armed groups, as well as Fulani ethnic militias who increasingly engaged in such violence in 2020. For example, on 13 April 2020, suspected Fulani militias abducted the wife and daughter of a local monarch in Igbole village of Igbo Ora community.

This type of violence was the primary form of violence targeting women in Niger, where 79% of events took this form. On 3 February 2019, presumed ISWAP militants abducted seven girls in the village of Maniram. On 15 July 2019, suspected ISWAP or Boko Haram militants abducted three women among the displaced population in the village of Kilbouwa in Bosso. On 13 December 2020, suspected Boko Haram militants abducted eight girls in Ngagam in Diffa.

Figure 5
Abductions targeting women in West Africa by country, 2010-20



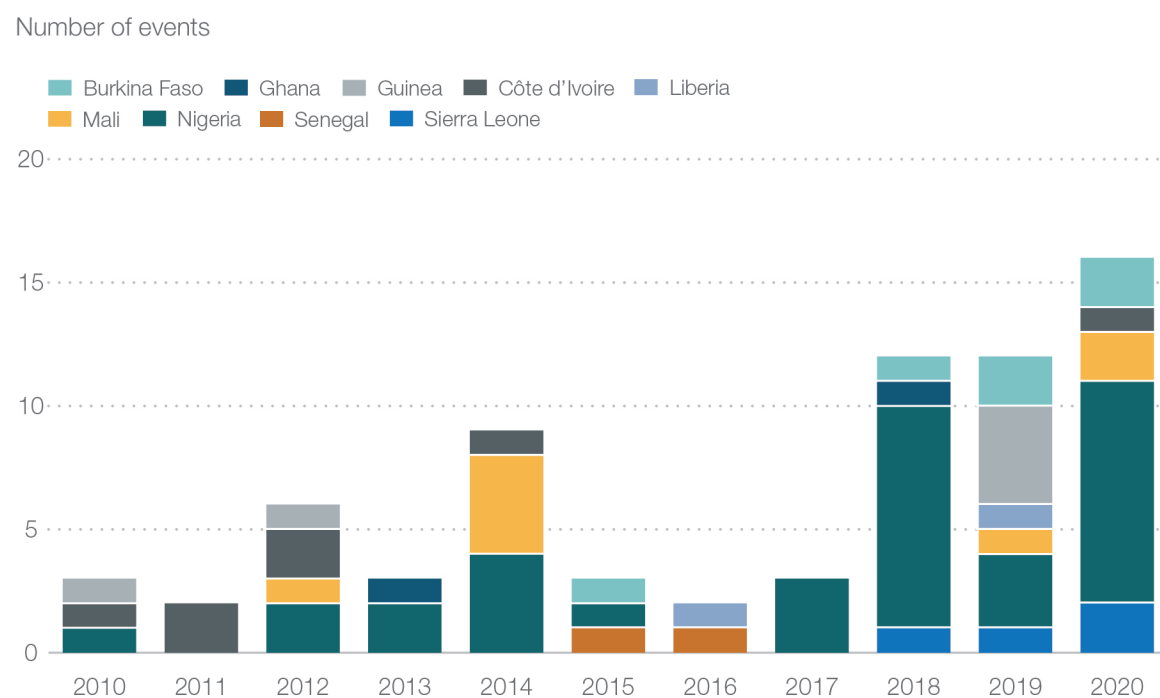
Source: The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). ACLED data is publicly available.

SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Sexual violence refers to “any action inflicting physical harm of a sexual nature, regardless of the age of the victim (i.e. including, but not limited to, rape)” (Kishi et al., 2019). While it is often considered in women, peace, and security debates as the primary form of gender-based violence, it comprised 16% of PVTW in West Africa between 2010 and 2020 (Figure 2). Sexual violence generally increased between 2010 and 2020, with trends driven by spikes in such violence in Nigeria, particularly in 2018 and 2020 (Figure 6).

While sexual violence was not the most common type of violence targeting women in Nigeria, the country was home to the largest number of events in West Africa between 2010 and 2020, where at least 34 such events occurred. This trend in Nigeria, especially in 2018, was driven primarily by targeting at the hands of Fulani ethnic militias. For example, in early November 2018, members of a pastoralist militia, thought to be Fulani, attempted to rape a woman in Ewu-Urhobo; when she resisted, they attacked her with a machete, resulting in injuries and later death.

Figure 6
Sexual violence targeting women in West Africa by country, 2010-20



Source: The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). ACLED data is publicly available.

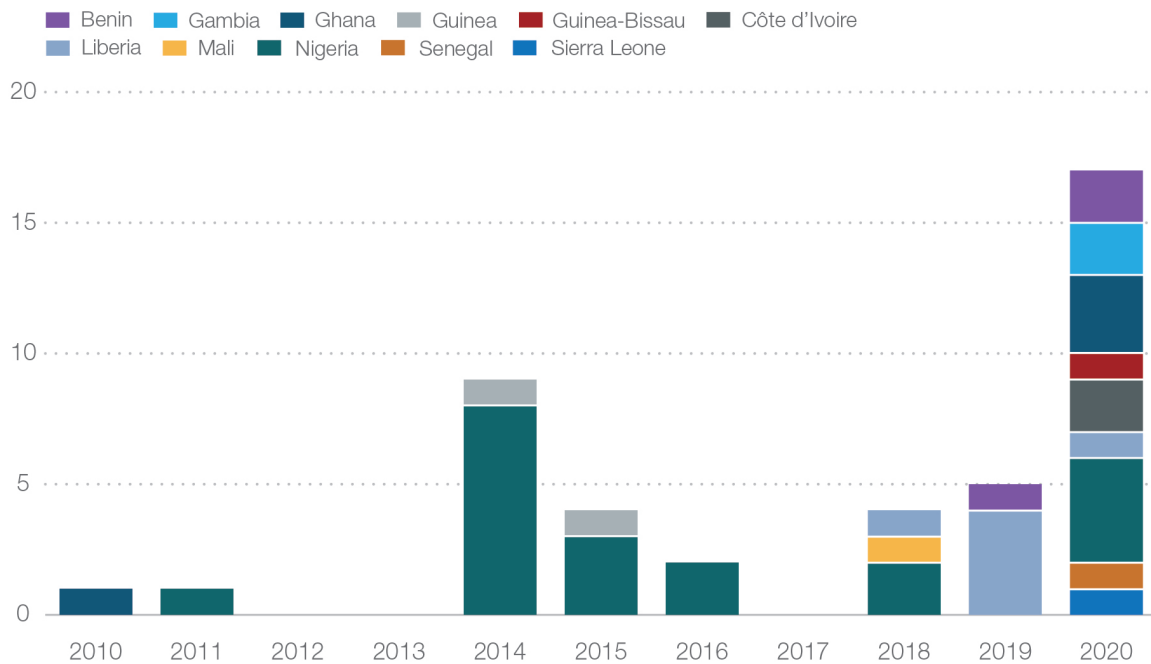
Unlike in Nigeria, sexual violence was the primary form of violence targeting women in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire. In Liberia, 44% of violent events targeting women was sexual in nature. On 26 August 2019, unidentified armed men poisoned and raped a woman in Monrovia after she had posted a video online accusing the mayor of Monrovia of murder and of hiding weapons. In Sierra Leone, 63% of violent events targeting women was sexual in nature. On 11 January 2020, members of the Poro sect attacked the house of the Paramount Chief of Kpanda-Kemo chiefdom in Bonthe Town; they broke her window, took away valuables, and gang-raped and subsequently abducted the chief's sister. The chief believes she was targeted due to her opposition of the sect recruiting under-aged boys. In Guinea, 53% of violent events targeting women was sexual in nature. On 24 April 2019, a soldier raped a woman in Popodara, in Labe state; some months later, in the same state, on 10 June, a soldier and a gendarmerie raped a young girl. In Côte d'Ivoire too, 53% of violent events targeting women was sexual in nature. On 6 July 2020, members of a local family attacked the house of the chief of Fizanigoro village in Seguela over a land dispute, raping the chief's daughter and damaging his house.

MOB VIOLENCE

Mob violence refers to a spontaneously organised, unarmed or crudely armed crowd of people which engages in violence. This includes ‘vigilantes’ who often have links to political parties or religious groups. Given the ‘informal’ nature of these groups, such violent actors are often excluded from analysis around gender-based violence (Kishi and Olsson, 2019). In West Africa, 10% of violent events targeting women took this form (Figure 2). While mob violence generally increased between 2010 and 2020, this trend was driven primarily by a spike in Nigeria in 2014, a spike in Liberia in 2019, and the culmination of such violence across a number of states in 2020 (Figure 7).

Figure 7
Mob violence targeting women in West Africa by country, 2010-20

Number of events



Source: The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). ACLED data is publicly available.

Nigeria was home to the most mob violence targeting women and girls between 2010 and 2020; at least 20 such events were reported. The spike in 2014 in Nigeria primarily involved vigilante mobs. For example, on 22 August 2014, in Abeokuta, a vigilante mob captured a suspected kidnapper and set her alight, accusing her of hypnotising and attempted kidnapping of a woman. In Liberia, in addition to vigilante mobs, violent mobs were primarily associated with Congress for Democratic Change (CDC) in 2019. During the week of 14 August 2019, CDC supporters threw rocks at many women who had gathered in support of the coalition of opposition groups, including at the Liberty Party headquarters, in Logan Town, Monrovia, injuring several. Around that same time, CDC party supporters demonstrated against an opposition candidate in Monrovia by throwing rocks at her vehicle, injuring her driver before police were able to intervene.

Women who are targeted by violent mobs are often targeted due to accusations of witchcraft or sorcery. Belief in witchcraft is widespread across Africa. It is often used as “a means of explaining the unequal distribution of good and bad fortune, and the occurrence of otherwise inexplicable misfortune” (La Fontaine, 2012). “Vigilante groups often carry out ‘justice’ against alleged witches, even in cases where ‘witchcraft’ is illegal and ‘justice’ can be enforced by state agents” (Kishi, 2017).

Mob violence was the primary form of violence targeting women in Guinea Bissau, Gambia, and Benin between 2010 and 2020. In Guinea Bissau, half of violent events targeting women were carried out by violent mobs. On 11 September 2020, a woman was killed using sticks and machete blows by a group in Ndaliel village near Buba over witchcraft accusations; after killing her, the group cut out her essential organs. In Gambia, all violent events targeting women were mob violence. In mid-May 2020, youths attacked a group of female sex workers in Sere Kunda town in Kanifing state after accusing them of engaging in immoral trade. Lastly, in Benin, three-quarters of violent events targeting women was mob violence. On 7 November 2019, villagers in Tchanwassaga, in Atacora state, killed an elderly woman accused of sorcery; the following year, in the same state, on 13 July 2020, two individuals beat a woman to death who they accused of sorcery in the village of Pourniari.

EXPLOSIONS AND OTHER FORMS OF REMOTE VIOLENCE

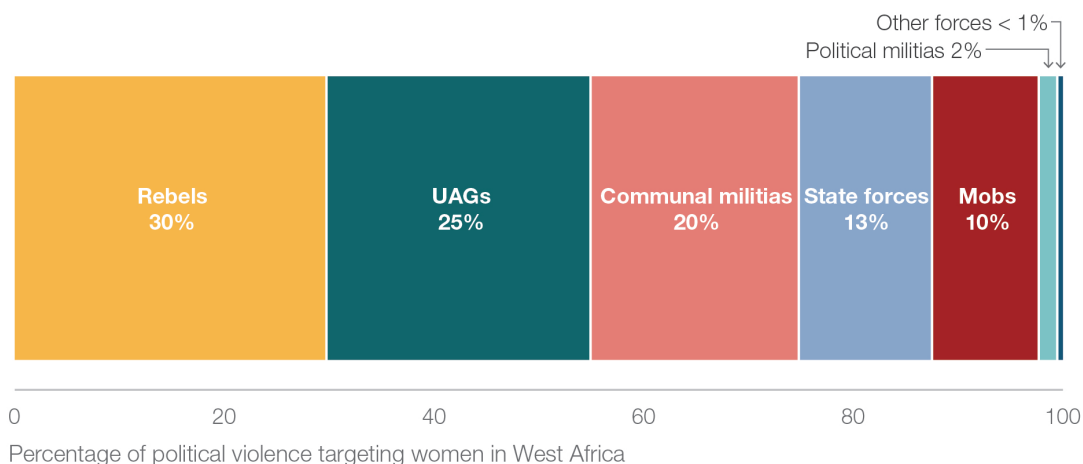
Explosions and other forms of remote violence refer to one-sided violence in which the tool for engaging in conflict creates asymmetry by taking away the ability of the target to respond (ACLEED, 2019). The tools used in such instances are explosive devices; suicide attacks implicating the use of bombs also fall under this category. Given the less targeted nature of this violence, it is less commonly used in targeting women around the world.

Less than 1% of violent events targeting women in West Africa between 2010 and 2020 took the form of explosions or other forms of remote violence (Figure 2). When incidents were reported, they often took the form of suicide bombings. There were only singular cases of such violence being used to target women and girls in West Africa between 2010 and 2020. On 30 July 2014, a Boko Haram suicide bomber killed and injured a number of people at a college campus in Kano, in Nigeria – the fourth such attack in Kano in a matter of days – with all victims in this attack being female. On 18 May 2017, three male suicide-bombers, suspected to be Boko Haram, were killed, and others injured, while attempting to attack a female hostel in Maiduguri during the evening hours.

Perpetrators of political violence targeting women across West Africa

The perpetrators of PVTW can vary widely. In addition to state forces and rebels, which are often the primary perpetrators considered in women, peace, and security debates, political militias, identity/communal militias, violent mobs, and anonymous or unidentified armed groups (UAGs) are also responsible for PVTW (Figure 8).

Figure 8
Political violence targeting women in West Africa by perpetrator, 2010-20



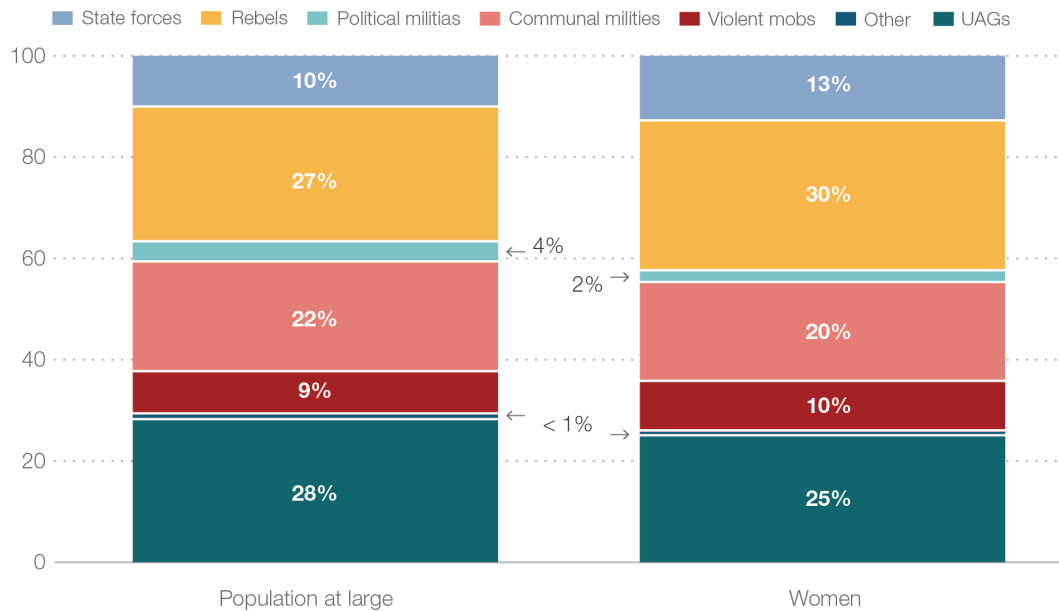
Note: The countries covered in this report are: Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Nigeria, Niger, Mali, Mauritania, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo.
Source: The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). ACLED data is publicly available.

While trends around violence targeting women tend to reflect the larger political violence landscape, some perpetrators are more likely to target women than civilians at large in the West African context; these include state forces, rebels, and violent mobs (Figure 9).

Figure 9

Rates of political violence targeting civilians in West Africa, by perpetrator, 2010-20

Percentage of political violence targeting civilians



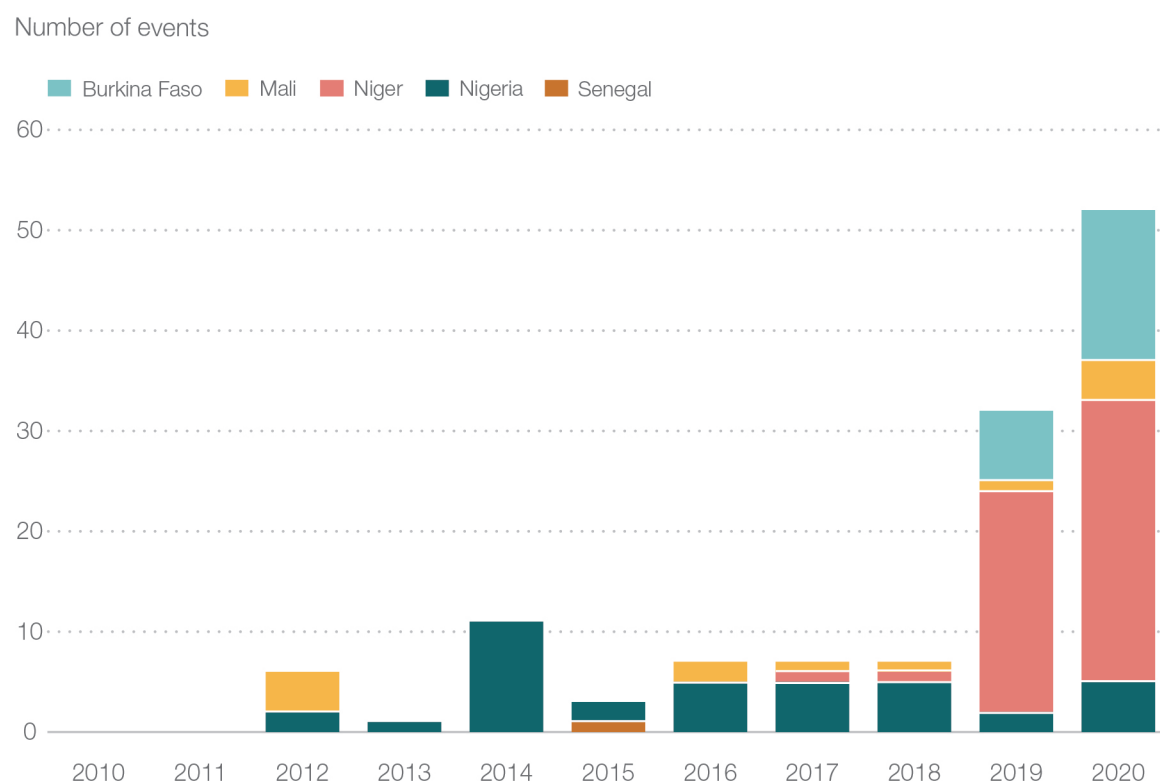
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 Source: The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). ACLED data is publicly available.

REBELS

Rebels refer to “political organisations whose goal is to counter an established national governing regime by violent acts. ... [and who have] a stated political agenda for national power (either through regime replacement or separatism), are acknowledged beyond the ranks of immediate members, and use violence as their primary means to pursue political goals” (ACLED, 2019). This includes jihadist groups, such as the Islamic State or Al Qaeda and their many affiliates, as well as separatist groups, such as the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (MFDC). Nearly one-third (30%) of violent events targeting women between 2010 and 2020 in West Africa was perpetrated by rebels (Figure 8), making them the most active perpetrator of violence targeting women in West Africa. This deviates from global trends, where anonymous or unidentified armed groups are the primary perpetrators of violence targeting women.

Violence targeting women perpetrated by rebels rose between 2010 and 2020, and especially since 2019, driven predominantly by violence in Niger, home to the largest number of violent events perpetrated by rebels targeting women, especially by Boko Haram and ISWAP (Figure 10). Rebels were the primary perpetrators of violence targeting women in Niger, where at least 52 events occurred between 2010 and 2020, often taking the form of non-sexual attacks. For example, on 20 March 2020, presumed ISWAP or Boko Haram militants abducted three women in the village of Kindjandi in Diffa.

Figure 10
Rebels targeting women in West Africa by country, 2010-20



Source: The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). ACLED data is publicly available.

In Burkina Faso, 59% of violence targeting women between 2010 and 2020 was perpetrated by rebels, especially by ISGS and JNIM. On 12 July 2020, suspected ISGS militants assaulted a group of 19 displaced (IDP) women and girls in Poukillale. On 26 November 2020, presumed JNIM militants whipped several people in Mansila while enforcing the wearing of veils on women; one woman succumbed to her wounds. The same groups were also especially active in Mali, where 38% of violent events targeting women were perpetrated by rebels. According to a statement by the Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs, JNIM militants reportedly killed a female Swiss hostage at an unspecified location, believed to be Boughessa, in September 2020.

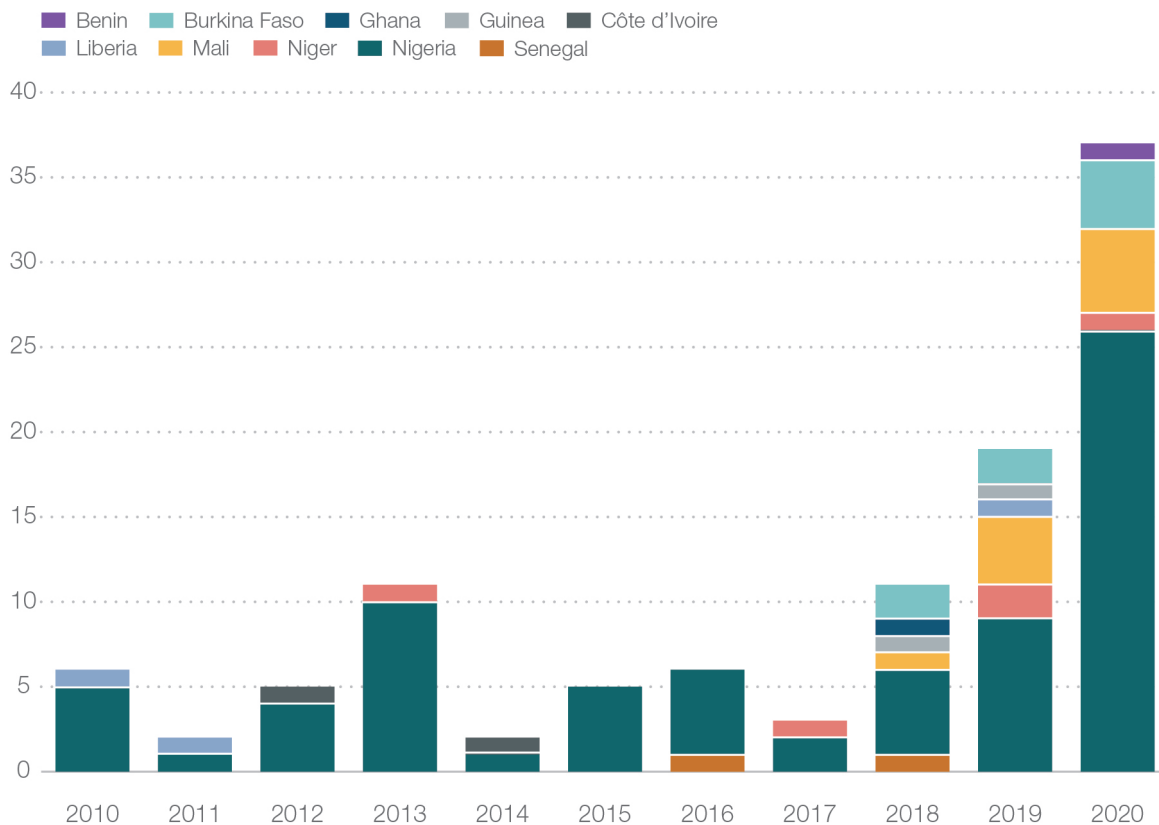
ANONYMOUS OR UNIDENTIFIED ARMED GROUPS

Anonymous or unidentified armed groups capture cases in which more information is not known about the perpetrator of a violent event targeting women. This is the most common category of perpetrators globally and was the second most prevalent category of violence targeting women in West Africa (Figure 8). More information about the perpetrator was not known in one-quarter of PVTW in the region. This lack of clarity in reporting is driven

by multiple reasons. One of these is “a lack of capacity to conduct gender-aware reporting or due to the complexity of crisis contexts,” which points to the need for further training (Kishi and Olsson, 2019). However, even more often, the reason for this opacity in reporting is the perpetrator’s strategic anonymity, where actors ‘outsource’ violence to avoid responsibility (Kishi, 2015). That one-quarter of all reported violence targeting women in West Africa between 2010 and 2020 was perpetrated by unidentified agents (Figure 8) underscores the importance of including such actors in data collection efforts (Kishi and Olsson, 2019). Violence targeting women perpetrated by anonymous or unidentified armed groups was on the rise between 2010 and 2020, especially since 2018 (Figure 11), driven largely by events in Nigeria.

Figure 11

Unidentified or anonymous armed groups targeting women in West Africa by country, 2010-20



Source: The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). ACLED data is publicly available.

Nigeria was home to the most violence targeting women perpetrated by unidentified or anonymous armed groups in the region between 2010 and 2020. Over half of this violence took the form of abductions or forced disappearances. In fact, anonymous or unidentified armed groups were the primary perpetrators of violence targeting women in Nigeria during this

time. For example, on 20 December 2020, unidentified gunmen abducted a female councillor near a wharf at Igbokiri area in Rivers, demanding a ransom. The upward trend of violence carried out by unidentified or anonymous armed groups was also driven by trends in Mali, since 2019, and Burkina Faso, in 2020. In both of these cases, violence targeting women by such actors largely took the form of non-sexual attacks. For example, on 17 May 2020, unknown gunmen killed a woman in Korientze, in Mopti, Mali; on 12 August 2020, the beheaded corpse of a 12-year-old girl working as a street vendor was found in Kongoussi in Burkina Faso, with the head taken away.

In addition to Nigeria, anonymous or unidentified armed groups were also the primary perpetrators of violence targeting women in Senegal, responsible for 40% of these events. On 1 November 2018, a female security guard at an INGO office was attacked by unidentified armed assailants and suffered knife injuries to her head and face.

COMMUNAL MILITIAS

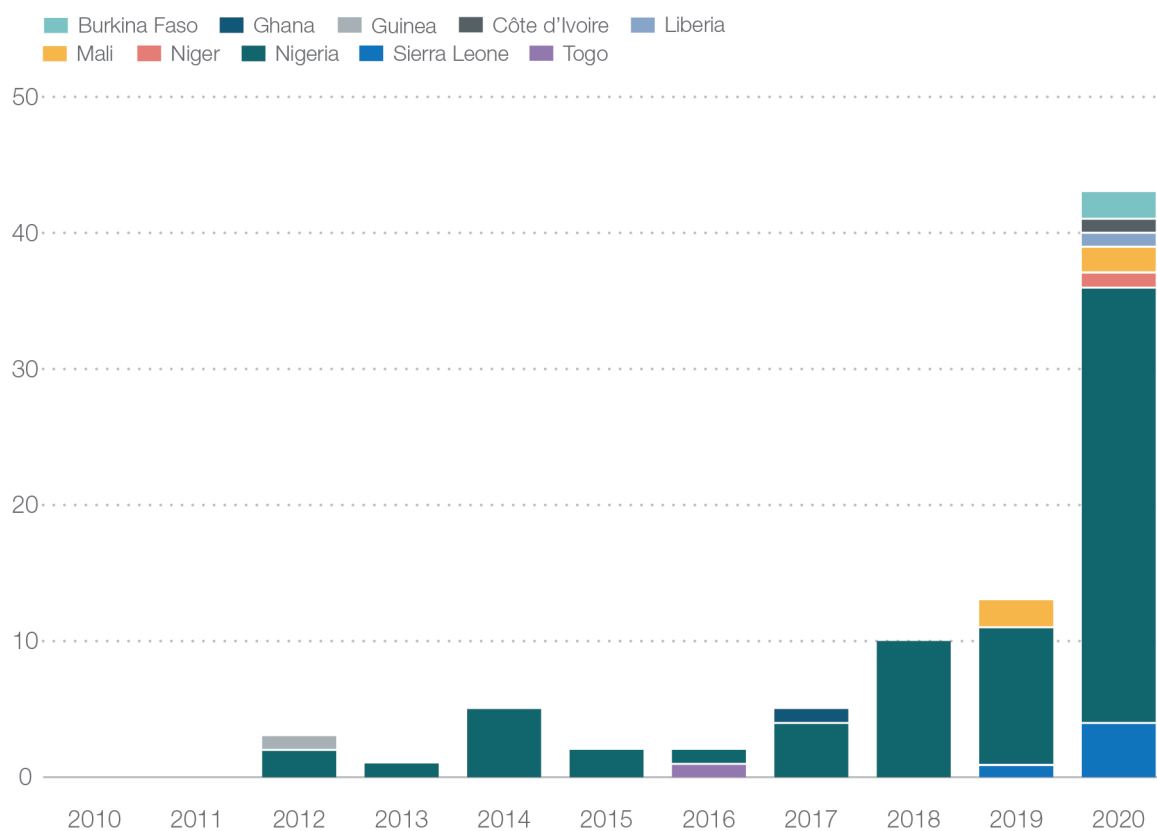
Communal militias refer to armed and violent groups that have organised around “a collective, common feature including community, ethnicity, region, religion or, in exceptional cases, livelihood” (ACLEDD, 2019). Such groups often engage in ‘communal violence’, in which they “act locally, in the pursuance of local goals, resources, power, security, and retribution. An armed group claiming to operate on behalf of a larger identity community may be associated with that community, but not represent it. ... Recruitment and participation are by association with the identity of the group” (ACLEDD, 2019). While such agents are not very active perpetrators of violence targeting women globally, in the context of West Africa specifically they were quite prevalent – responsible for one-fifth of all events in the region between 2010 and 2020. This included ethnic militias, like Fulani ethnic militias; sect militias, like the Bondo or Poro sect militias; and local security providers, like Volunteer for Defense of Homeland (VDP) in Burkina Faso, or the ethnic Dogon Dan Na Ambassagou in Mali.

Communal militias were responsible for 20% of violent events targeting women between 2010 and 2020 in West Africa (Figure 8). Such violence was on the rise during this time, and spiked in 2020 (Figure 12). Communal militias accounted for the greatest rise in violent groups in Africa in 2020. “Between 2019 and 2020, an additional 270 identity militias became active in Africa. Their violence is often localised, situational and limited” (Raleigh and Kishi, 2021).

Figure 12

Communal militias targeting women in West Africa by country, 2010-20

Number of events



Source: The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). ACLED data is publicly available.

The spike in violence targeting women by communal militias was driven primarily by trends in Nigeria, where the the largest number of violent events targeting women by communal militias in West Africa took place. Sixty-seven such events took place in Nigeria between 2010 and 2020, with 42% of this activity taking the form of sexual violence. This trend was driven especially by Fulani ethnic militias as well as Katsina communal militias. For example, on 22 July 2020, Katsina communal militias abducted 17 women from Zakka, in Katsina. Some months later, on 26 November 2020, suspected Fulani herdsmen abducted the wife of the Chief of Staff to the Ondo State Governor at Owena. Nigeria was not only home to “the greatest [rise] in the number of active identity militias between 2019 and 2020,” it was also one of the countries which “dominated the list of countries where violence escalated [in 2020, pointing] to the significant contribution these groups are making to conflict dynamics within countries” (Raleigh and Kishi, 2021). These signs point to the threat that such militias posed not only to populations at large, but also to women and girls specifically (Figure 9).

While violence targeting women by communal militias was prevalent in Nigeria between 2010 and 2020, communal militias were not the primary perpetrator in the country – anonymous or unidentified armed groups were. Communal militias were, however, the primary perpetrator of violence targeting women in Sierra Leone between 2010 and 2020, where they were responsible for 42% of all events. For example, around 29 January 2020, suspected members of the Poro secret society reportedly gang-raped a 60-year-old woman in Motoi village.

POLITICAL MILITIAS

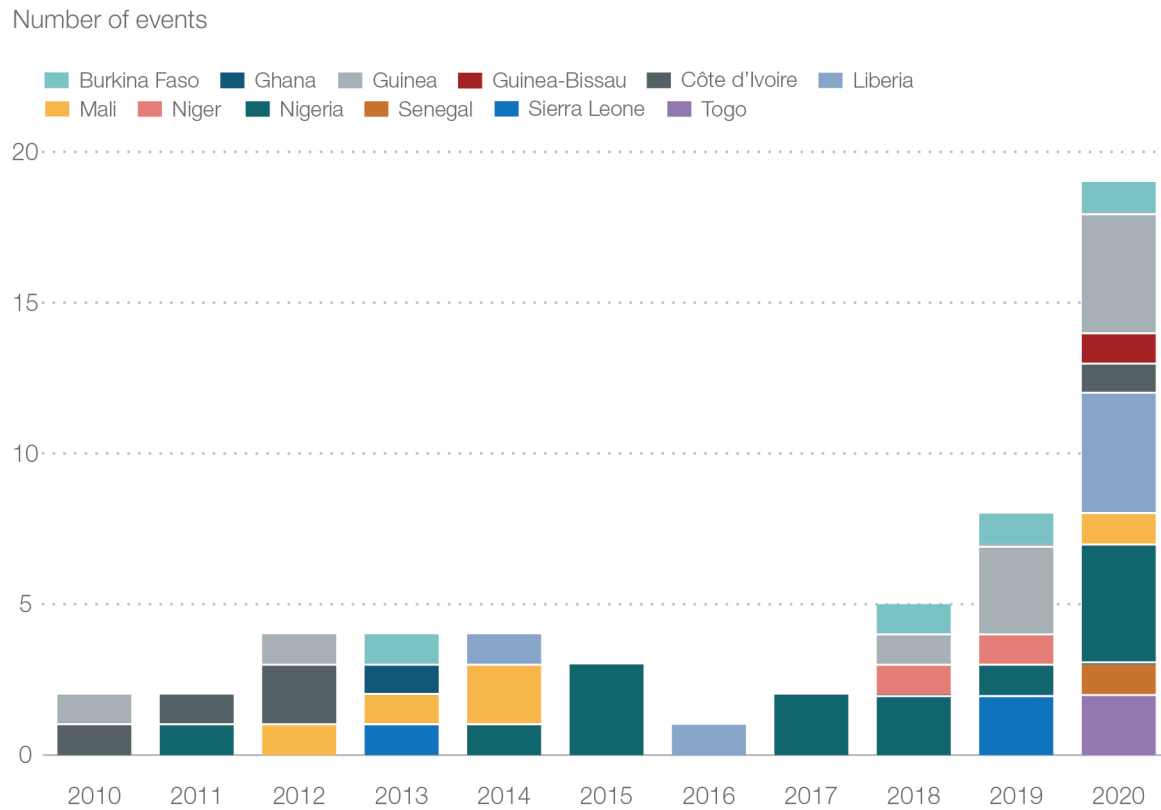
Other militias in the region include political militias. Political militias are armed, organised political gangs. These groups act on behalf of political elites, including elites who are in power, and are often created for a specific purpose or during a specific time period, and for the furtherance of a political purpose by violence. Such groups do not challenge the state as they do not seek to overthrow regimes. While such groups are highly active across much of Africa, and carry out a significant proportion of violent events targeting women globally, they played a relatively more limited role in West Africa between 2010 and 2020 – responsible for 2% of events. This included violence perpetrated by political parties and their violent affiliates, such as the All Peoples Congress (APC) or Sierra Leone Peoples Party (SLPP) in Sierra Leone, or the National Democratic Congress (NDC) in Ghana. Political militias are responsible for all violent events targeting women reported in Mauritania between 2010 and 2020, specifically via non-sexual attacks. For example, on 21 October 2015, while the Initiative for the Resurgence of Abolitionist Movement (IRA) leaders deny involvement, authorities claim members of the IRA kidnapped and tortured a young girl.

STATE FORCES

State forces refer to the formal state security apparatus of the state, which includes military and police units and divisions therein, such as the National Guard or the Gendarmerie. State forces were responsible for 13% of violent events targeting women in West Africa between 2010 and 2020; this represented a higher rate of targeting of women and girls relative to targeting of the population at large, suggesting that state forces disproportionately targeted women in West Africa (Figure 9). Such targeting spiked in 2020, driven by trends across a multitude of countries (Figure 13).

Figure 13

State forces targeting women in West Africa by country, 2010-20



Source: The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). ACLED data is publicly available.

State forces were the primary perpetrators of violence targeting women between 2010 and 2020 in Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Ivory Coast, Liberia, and Togo. In Guinea, two-thirds of violent events targeting women was perpetrated by state forces – including police, military, and gendarmerie – and primarily took the form of sexual violence and non-sexual attacks. For example, on 24 April 2019, a soldier raped a woman in Popodara, in Labe. Months later also in Labe, on 10 June 2019, a soldier and a gendarmerie raped a young girl. In Guinea-Bissau, half of all violent events targeting women were perpetrated by state forces and took the form of non-sexual attacks. For example, around 21 August 2020, agents of the National Force beat and injured some women alongside an attack on the chief of the Madina Atche village. In Côte d'Ivoire, 45% of violent events targeting women were perpetrated by state forces, including military and police, and primarily took the form of sexual violence. For example, on 25 February 2011, Human Rights Watch documented the rape of nine politically active women. In Liberia, 38% of violent events targeting women were perpetrated by state forces – specifically by the police – and primarily took the form of non-sexual attacks. For example, on 26 April 2020, officers of the Liberia drug enforcement agency beat up a pregnant woman in Kakata

town for violating the counter coronavirus lockdown measures. Days later, on 28 April 2020, police beat up a businesswoman in Monrovia city because she was not wearing a face mask. Lastly, in Togo, two-thirds of violent events targeting women were perpetrated by state forces, specifically the military, and took the form of non-sexual attacks. For example, on 15 April 2020, soldiers of the special anti-coronavirus forces beat up and injured a woman accused of violating the curfew in Lomé city; elsewhere in Aneho town the same day, military forces beat and injured an old woman for violating the counter coronavirus curfew.

VIOLENT MOBS

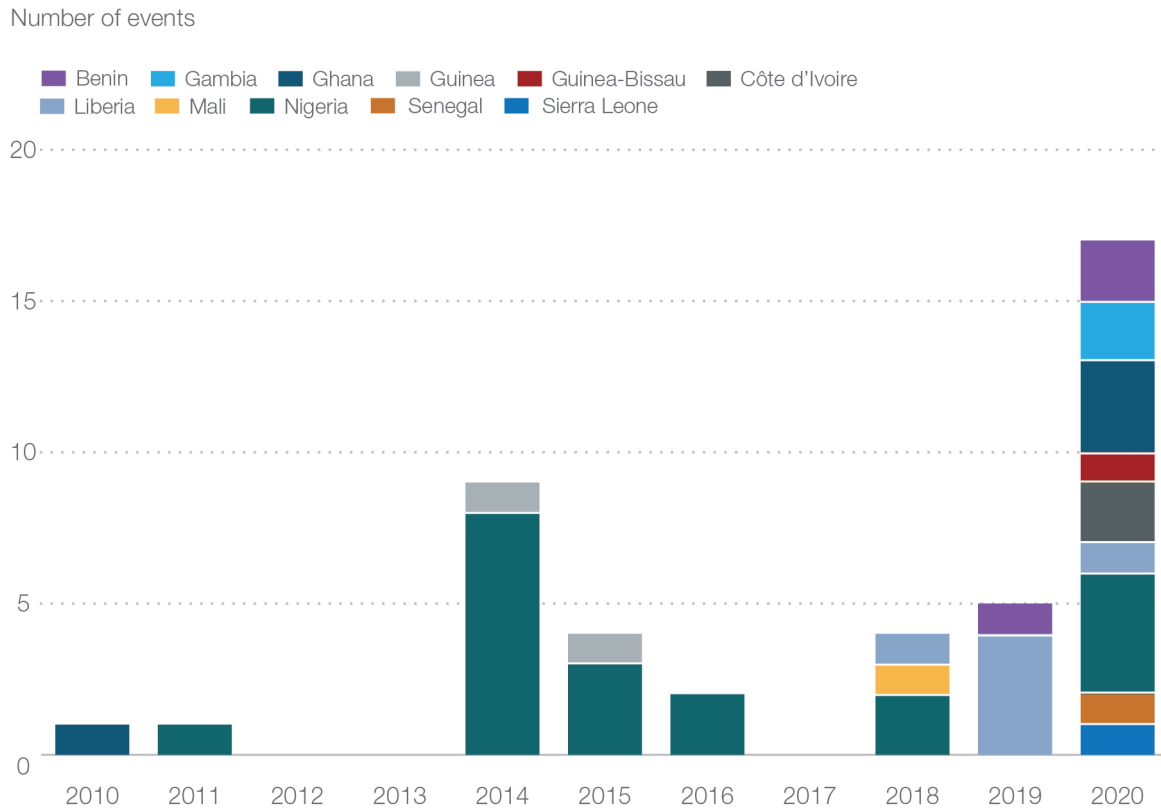
Violent mobs refer to spontaneously organised, unarmed (or crudely armed) mobs, often with links to political parties or religious groups. Such groups tend to be more clandestine given they do not always have formal links to named entities. Ten percent of violent events targeting women in West Africa between 2010 and 2020 can be attributed to such agents, who often act as ‘vigilantes’, seeking justice against perceived criminals or ‘witches’ (Figure 8).

Such targeting spiked in 2014 in Nigeria, and then again in 2020, the latter driven by trends across a multitude of countries (Figure 14). Nearly half (47%) of all violent events targeting women perpetrated by violent mobs in West Africa took place in Nigeria between 2010 and 2020. The country was home to 20 such events. Often, such violence involved vigilante mobs setting suspected child kidnappers ablaze. For example, a middle-aged woman was set ablaze by a mob in Abule Egba Area of Lagos State for allegedly attempting to kidnap some school pupils.

Violent mobs were the primary perpetrators of violence targeting women in Benin, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, and Liberia between 2010 and 2020. In Benin, 75% of violent events targeting women were perpetrated by violent mobs, often targeting women accused of sorcery. For example, on 13 July 2020, some individuals beat a woman to death who they accused of sorcery in the village of Pourniari. In Gambia, all violent events targeting women were perpetrated by violent mobs, targeting sex workers. For example, on 14 July 2020, at least a dozen youths assaulted female sex workers in Sere Kunda town. In Ghana, 40% of violent events targeting women were perpetrated by violent mobs; such violence often targeted women thought to be involved in witchcraft (Dowuona-Hammond, Atuguba, and Tuokuu, 2020). For example, around 23 July 2020, a mob lynched and killed a woman suspected of witchcraft in Kafaba. Lastly, in Guinea-Bissau, half of violent events targeting women were conducted by violent mobs over witchcraft accusations.

Figure 14

Violent mobs targeting women in West Africa by country, 2010-20



Source: The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). ACLED data is publicly available.

OTHER AND EXTERNAL FORCES

Lastly, other and external forces capture all other perpetrators of violence targeting women. Less than 1% of violent events targeting women in West Africa between 2010 and 2020 was attributed to such agents (Figure 8). These can include foreign militaries or private security forces. Violence involving such actors was reported in Burkina Faso and Ghana between 2010 and 2020. In Burkina Faso, such violence involved external forces: for example, two French soldiers allegedly sexually molested two young girls at a swimming pool in Ouagadougou. Meanwhile, in Ghana, such violence involved other forces: for example, on 1 September 2020, armed land guards attempted to assault the queen mother in Ngleshie-Amanfro in Greater Accra during an attack on her residence.

Conclusion: Different threats across different countries

The trends outlined in this paper help to explore how women and girls in West Africa were targeted, and *who* the primary perpetrators of this targeting were between 2010 and 2020. These findings help to shed light on the distinct threats that women and girls in West Africa face, underlining *how* these vary across the region.

In addition to the differences in the threats that women face across different countries, there are also differences between the threats that women and girls face relative to the threats that the population at large faces. Understanding these differences is an important step towards *security equality*, “meaning that different groups should be equally protected from the threats that affect their security” (Kishi and Olsson, 2019; see also, Olsson, 2018). Only after understanding that the threats that women and girls face vary not only by context but also by gender identity, can steps be taken to ensure their safety.

Beyond the normative value of ensuring the security of women and girls, this also has important implications for women’s political participation. Violence targeting women thwarts women’s political participation through fear and intimidation (IPU, 2016; IFES, 2021; NDI, 2019). Even in cases where women do seek increased engagement in political processes, securing political representation can usher in more violence targeting women (Matfess, Kishi, and Berry, 2022). These findings are important in an effort to monitor trends, such as in countries where gender quotas have been established, like in Ghana (Burgess and Ayentimi, 2020). More largely, violence targeting women can have implications for state stability “societies that treat women badly are poorer and less stable” (Hudson et al., 2014).

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Political violence targeting women in West Africa

Women around the world are facing unprecedented levels of targeted political violence. This is also true in West Africa. Women can be targeted in a myriad of ways, by an array of types of perpetrators, during and outside of periods of conflict and contentious crises. The result though is consistent: such targeted violence has worrying implications for women's political participation as well as their involvement in the public sphere. Political violence targeting women (PVTW) in West Africa has become increasingly common, with this trend increasing even more dramatically in recent years. The threat and risks, however, have not been uniform: different types of violence and different primary perpetrators dominate the gendered violence landscape across countries. Using data from ACLED, this paper tracks how women are targeted, and who is targeting women. Only by understanding how threats and risks that women face differ across countries can strategies be created to protect women.

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