

Katiba Macina and Boko Haram

Including women to what end?

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This report analyses why women are associated with katiba Macina in Mali and Boko Haram in Niger, and their place and role in the recruitment, implantation and operation strategies of these violent extremist groups (VEGs). It is the first of two reports based on interviews with women and men who are or have been associated with these groups. The second report examines the implications of the study's findings for policies and strategies for preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE) in Mali and Niger and provides recommendations for stakeholders.

Key findings

- ▶ Women associated with katiba Macina and Boko Haram play multiple roles that provide the groups with significant advantages. They constitute strategic human resources, act as vessels for recruitment, facilitate the implantation and sustenance of the groups, contribute to the conduct of their operations and ensure their survival.
- ▶ Interviews with women associated with Boko Haram reveal three main avenues of association: i) voluntary, ii) coercion by a family member, and iii) kidnapping by group members.
- ▶ Although women are generally not physically present in katiba Macina camps, they facilitate the group's implantation within communities. This enables the group to gain practical advantages and generate financial resources.
- ▶ There are diverse and interconnected reasons for women's association with these groups. Among these, family and marital ties with male relatives who are group members were key to women's association with the groups. Additional reasons include the need to preserve their lives and those of their loved ones, find a husband, learn the Koran, or commit jihad. Association also provides women with much-needed protection, enables them to preserve economic activity, and even exact revenge.
- ▶ Various social actors, including family members, traditional and administrative authorities as well as shepherds from the Fulani community, play important roles in helping some women escape from the groups.
- ▶ Several reasons account for the departure of women from the groups. Among them in Niger are the need to escape a forced and abusive marriage with Boko Haram member, and disillusionment with the group. Other reasons include the inability to continue to bear difficult living conditions and the fear of being killed either by group members or during military operations. In Mali, women's association with katiba Macina was disrupted following severed ties with the male relative affiliated with the group.

Introduction

The aim of the research work, which forms the basis of this report, was to generate empirical data on the association and non-association of women with violent extremist groups (VEGs) operating in the Mopti and Ségou regions in central Mali and in Niger's extreme eastern region of Diffa. The resultant analysis is to inform decision-making processes aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE) in both countries, taking into account how VEGs interact with women and vice versa.

The association of women with the main factions of Boko Haram (Jam'āt Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād, or JAS, and the Islamic State West Africa Province, or ISWAP) in the Lake Chad Basin is well documented.¹ Women are involved in the activities of the group and are often forced to play a variety of roles, including carrying out suicide attacks.

Several kidnappings of women and girls attributed to Boko Haram took place in the Diffa region. Those with the greatest impact were carried out in Toumour and Nglewa² where, respectively, 37 women and 15 girls were kidnapped on 2 July 2017 and on 24 November 2018. At least seven suicide attacks³ perpetrated by women were recorded in the region. Also, several women and girls were among the individuals associated with Boko Haram who voluntarily surrendered and were taken into a dedicated reception centre⁴ in December 2016.

In Mali, women are hardly visible in VEGs. In April 2018, the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM) issued a statement denying the involvement of a female suicide bomber⁵ in an attack it had carried out on 14 April on the United Nations Integrated Multidimensional Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and the French forces of Operation Barkhane in the Timbuktu region.

The GSIM states that its ideology is incompatible with women's participation in combat operations, arguing that the 'Muslim nation' still has enough brave men ready to fight.⁶ Based on the group's rhetoric, therefore, combat functions remain the exclusive preserve of male members. This is not the case in Niger where Boko Haram assigns women to a multiplicity of operational

and other functions, thereby challenging the traditional gender roles in combat situations.

Despite GSIM's denial, several security incidents since 2018 in which women were involved drew attention to their association in the activities of VEGs that are active in Mali, particularly in the central regions where katiba Macina operates. As such, the group's rhetoric could also be part of a deliberate strategy to hide women's association with it and involvement in its activities.

In July 2018, Malian intelligence officers arrested a woman accused of supplying katiba Macina with fertiliser used in the manufacture of improvised explosive devices (IEDs).⁷ This was followed by the Malian army's first public announcement on 19 October 2019 of the participation of women in the 30 September 2019 attack on military posts in Mondoro and Boulikessi in the Mopti region.⁸ In May 2020, the army also announced that it had freed a woman held hostage in Kouakourou,⁹ in the central delta during an operation. She had been shackled and used as a sex slave¹⁰ by katiba Macina. Aside from these incidents, research conducted by ISS and other research organisations on violent extremism (VE) in Mali have confirmed the involvement of women in VEGs operating in that country.¹¹

There is little in-depth research based on interviews with women associated with such groups

Even so, in-depth research¹² based on interviews with women associated with VEGs operating in Niger and Mali, particularly with regard to their involvement and experiences, is limited. In the case of Boko Haram, research on women's participation mostly focuses on Nigeria.

This report presents a field research methodology and provides an overview of the security context in central Mali and the Diffa. It analyses the presence of women and the reasons for their association with katiba Macina and Boko Haram, their pathways and roles in these groups, and the advantages which the groups derive from them.

Methodology

The research was launched in March 2017 and took the form of interviews with a total of 86 women and men who are or have been associated with katiba Macina in central Mali and the Boko Haram factions (JAS and ISWAP) in the Diffa region. Interviews were also conducted with women living in the areas where these groups operate and who were the subject of unsuccessful recruitment attempts. The data collected from the latter provide information on the groups' recruitment strategies and the roles they seek to assign to their female recruits. The data collected from men currently or formerly involved complemented the information collected from women on their association or non-association with the groups.

A total of 274 individual, semi-structured and open-ended interviews were conducted with interviewees, including 45 women, belonging to four target categories identified for the purposes of the research (see Infographic 1). Relatives of women currently and formerly associated, and any other persons having information on whether or not women were associated with these groups, were

also interviewed. For ethical reasons, the research team did not interview minors.

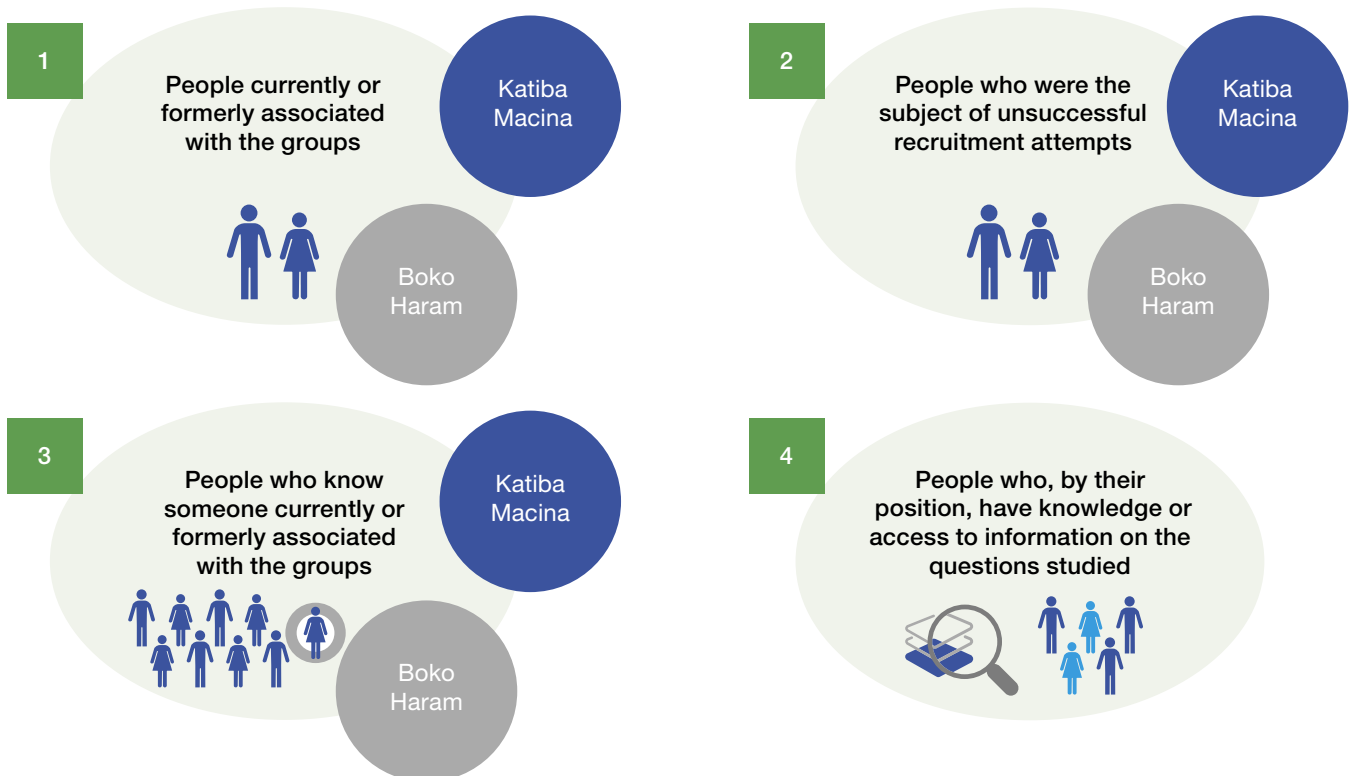
Conceptually, the team relied on operational definitions developed through analysis of the realities in the field rather than on fixed theoretical notions.

There is no precise and unanimous definition of **'violent extremism'**. In this research, the phenomenon was approached from the perspective of the membership or association of individuals (men and women) with groups described as violent extremists, terrorists or 'jihadists'.¹³

The research team analysed the reasons why women became associated with katiba Macina,¹⁴ a member of GSIM,¹⁵ in the central regions of Mali, and with the different factions of Boko Haram (JAS, and ISWAP) operating in the Diffa region of Niger. While 'Boko Haram' is used in this report to refer to both JAS and ISWAP, in certain cases, on the basis of the data collected, a distinction is made between these two groups in order to underline specific elements of analysis for each one.

In order to take into account the diversity of situations relating to the presence of women in these groups, the term 'association' with a VEGs was chosen instead

Infographic 1: Categories of interviewees



of 'engagement', which may relate to a voluntary act, or 'radicalisation', which refers to a process of ideological or religious indoctrination. In this study, 'association' refers to the presence and/or participation of women in the activities of VEGs. The data shows that this association is not always voluntary. Many women joined the groups under duress, often as a result of kidnapping. However, other than ideology or religion, there were several reasons that led to voluntary association. Moreover, the women involved in the activities of the groups were not always physically present in them.

The women involved in the activities of the groups were not always physically present in the groups

In Mali, the field research was conducted in the districts of Macina (commune of Kolongo Tomo) and Niono (communes of Niono and Diabaly) in the Ségou region, and in the districts of Djenné (commune of Fakala and Kewa), Tenenkou (commune of Tenenkou, Diafarabé, Toguéré-Coumbé and its environs) and Mopti (Sévaré, Dialloubé, Nantaka, Bargondaga, Soufroulaye, Korientzé) in the Mopti region. In Niger, interviews were conducted in the Diffa region, specifically in Chetimari, Diffa, Kablewa, Mainé Soroa, N'guigmi, Tam and in the Goudoumaria camp, a reception centre for people associated with Boko Haram who have voluntarily surrendered. Interviews were also conducted in prisons in Mali and Niger. Key stakeholders and people originating from the regions covered by the research were also interviewed in Bamako and Niamey.

Several factors accounted for the choice of research sites. Key among them were that they were places where VEGs were present, and also places where attacks, including some carried out by women in the case

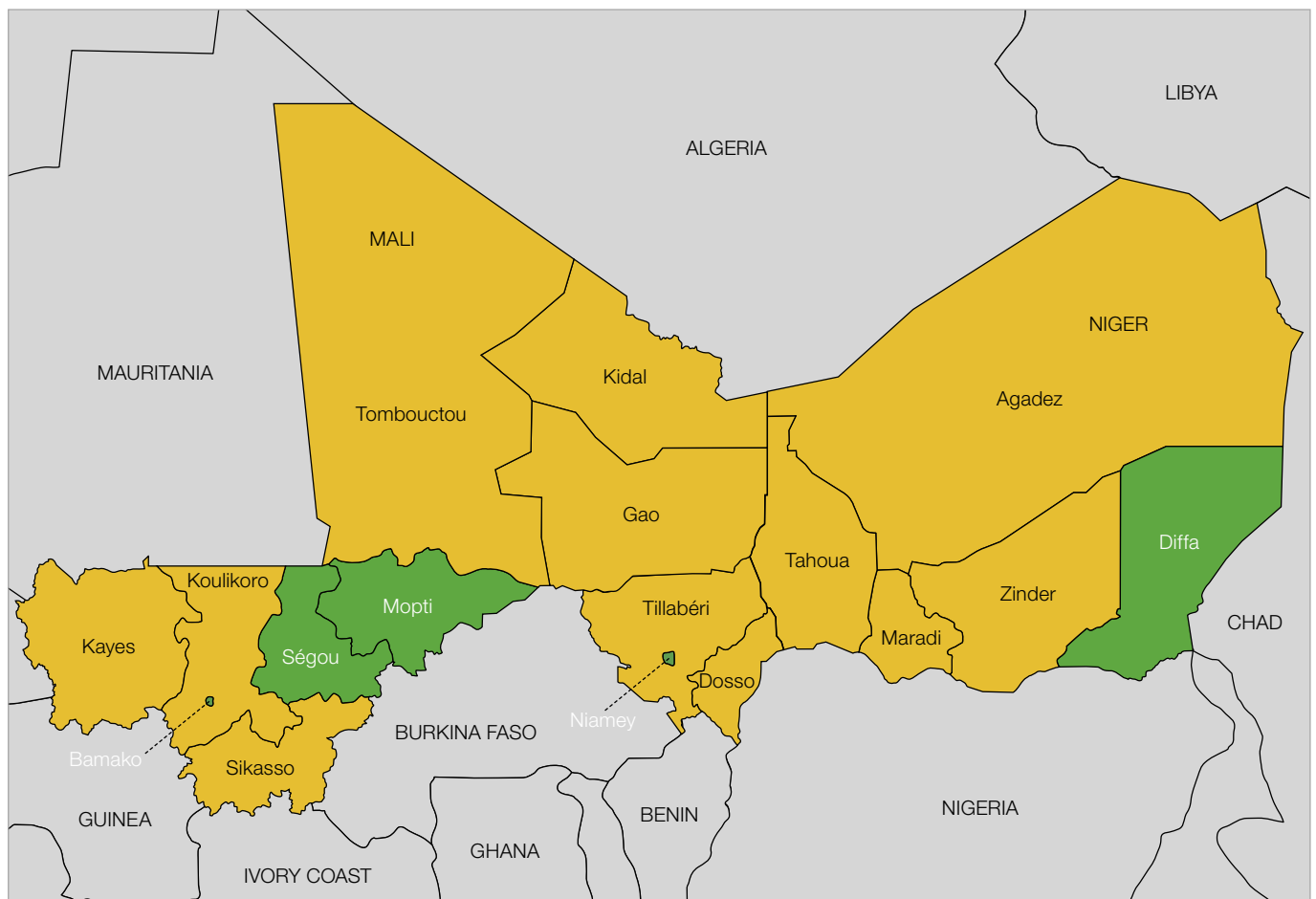
Infographic 2: Research contact persons



of Niger and attributed to or claimed by the groups, were carried out. In Mali, the central regions are plagued by high levels of insecurity linked in particular to the activities of katiba Macina and those of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), based in the Gourma region and affiliated to Islamic State (IS). While the ISGS was already operating in the eastern and Sahel regions of Burkina Faso, its establishment in 2019 in central Gourma, considered to be GSIM territory, fuelled tensions between the two groups, leading to deadly clashes.¹⁶ In Niger, the Diffa region is on the front line of the nearly 12-year Boko Haram insurrection through its various factions established in the countries of the Lake Chad Basin.

The research was conducted by a team of 15 researchers from the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), research associates and research assistants. Data were collected in several phases between January 2018 and January 2020,¹⁷ with interruptions due to growing insecurity and the imposition of a state of emergency¹⁸ in the research areas, the conduct of military operations, and the intensification of local conflicts, particularly in the central regions of Mali. This limited and interrupted access to interviewees as the mobility of the research team was restricted, thereby necessitated an extension of the time allocated for the field research.

Infographic 3: Geographical scope of the research



Presence and experiences of women associated with katiba Macina and Boko Haram

The research data highlight the association of women with katiba Macina and Boko Haram. The team gathered from interviews in Niger with women associated with Boko Haram that while some joined the group voluntarily, others were forced to do so by their husbands or relatives affiliated to these groups. Other women were kidnapped¹⁹ and forced to live in the villages occupied by the group on the islands of Lake Chad. The kidnappings generally occur not only in the bush when the women are labouring in the fields or collecting wood or water, among other chores, but also during attacks or raids on villages.

‘Boko Haram kidnapped me at the age of 12 with four other girls (aged 13 and 14), on the way to the field, not far from our village. They threatened us with death.’

(Woman, Diffa, Niger, 9 June 2018, Boko Haram)

In Mali, the data do not suggest any physical presence of women in the bush or in the *markaz* (camps) of the small groups affiliated to katiba Macina operating in the central regions. However, it showed that women collaborate with members of the group and are involved in its activities. They stay in villages, hamlets or huts near the camps where their husbands or relatives who are members of the group visit them. There are some accounts, however, of women visiting group leaders in camps and others visiting their husbands, brothers and other relatives. In addition, interviewees affiliated to katiba Macina confirmed the findings of research by other organisations²⁰ that there is a small group of women who are married to combatants and live in their own mobile settlements close to the camps in the bush.

‘I collaborate with the group but I don’t live with them.’

(Woman, Mopti, Mali, 15 February 2019, katiba Macina)

‘In my group, there are only men. The women don’t live with us in the bush.’

(Man, Ségou, Mali, 24 February 2018, katiba Macina)

‘I’ve been in contact with katiba Macina and supplying the group for over two years now, but I’ve never seen any women there.’

(Man, Ségou, Mali, 4 September 2018, katiba Macina)

Interviewees noted that the need to protect those who have family and matrimonial ties with the members of the group account for the absence of women in the *markaz*.²¹ This might also reflect the group’s effort to limit its vulnerability in the event of attacks on its positions.

How and why I became associated with the group

The data collected reveal a variety of often interrelated reasons and circumstances that resulted in women becoming associated with the groups and continuing such association.

Marital and family ties play an important role in women’s association with the groups. In Mali, most of the women interviewed became associated and collaborated with katiba Macina through male relatives (husband, father, son) who were members of the group. In Niger, some of the women interviewed joined Boko Haram in the hope of finding a husband, while others followed their husbands, boyfriends, relatives or children, either willingly or unwillingly. This demonstrates women’s exposure as mothers, wives, sisters or daughters of group members, to the ‘knock-on effects’ of men exercising some form of authority over them, in line with established social norms.

There are also documented cases in which parents who are sympathetic to katiba Macina and Boko Haram decide to ‘give’ their daughters in marriage to combatants. Some katiba Macina members married off their daughters and sisters to their brothers-in-arms in order to strengthen the bonds between them and facilitate the implantation of the group. Parents gave their daughters in marriage to members of katiba Macina, often under duress, as a contribution to the group and as a means of protecting themselves. Some women associated with Boko Haram were often forcibly married off by their parents to a member of the group and thus found themselves compelled to join the group. Given the sociocultural context and the gender inequalities that exist in Mali and Niger, it was not always clear whether girls ‘given’ in marriage by their parents or brothers had been consulted and/or had consented to these decisions.

'It has become a family affair. The women who collaborate with the group have one or more family members in these groups.'

(Woman, Mopti, Mali, 15 February 2018, katiba Macina)

'They were the wives of men who were not initially committed (at the time of their marriage), but who later became involved, so they had no other choice. As the saying goes, a married woman must follow her husband everywhere.'

(Man, Mopti, Mali, 26 January 2018, katiba Macina)

'My sister had just married a member of Boko Haram and unfortunately she decided to follow him.'

(Woman, Diffa, Niger, 9 June 2018)

'A week after he joined Boko Haram, my son returned to fetch his wife and child.'

(Man, Diffa, Niger, 23 May 2018)

'A year after I joined Boko Haram, I returned to the village to fetch our mother and bring her close to us because six of her seven children had joined the group.'

(Man, Diffa, Niger, 5 June 2018, Boko Haram)

The violence and insecurity caused in particular by katiba Macina in central Mali and Boko Haram in the Diffa region of Niger also played a decisive role in the association of women with the groups. For these women, their association or collaboration provided them with the needed protection. For example, the research team documented cases in which women joined Boko Haram after they had been instructed by the group to do so. These women and their relatives were also threatened with death if they refused to join. For these women, joining the group was about preserving their own lives and those of their families.

In the case of katiba Macina, some women's collaboration was a negotiated agreement and a way of protecting themselves from on-going violence and insecurity in their communities due to the presence of VEGs, self-defence groups, armed bandits, and other violent actors operating in central Mali. For other women, 'giving' a male member of their family or encouraging them to join katiba Macina was a way to foster peaceful coexistence with the group and ensure their safety and that of their families through the group's support and protection.

'One day, when my parents were not there, my husband came with two other people. He took me aside and asked me to follow them, otherwise his companions who had seen our house would come back to kill my parents and the other members of my family.'

(Woman, Diffa, Niger, 5 June 2018, Boko Haram)

'My husband came at night with nine other combatants, all armed. He ordered me to follow them and had already put our children on donkeys.'

(Woman, Diffa, Niger, 9 June 2018, Boko Haram)

Other women collaborate with katiba Macina as a way of exacting revenge. These are women who lost loved ones as a result of violence attributed to the defence and security forces or traditional hunting group operations (dozo)²². They provide katiba Macina with information, particularly on the whereabouts of these forces. On several occasions, the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA) has been accused of committing many abuses²³ including extrajudicial executions, enforced disappearances, torture, and arbitrary arrests of suspected VE collaborators during military operations against VEGs in central Mali.²⁴

'The son of a woman in my village was killed by the army during a search and sweep operation in the area. To avenge him, she made every possible effort to get in touch with katiba Macina. She said she was ready to give information on the army's positions so that the group could kill even one soldier to avenge her son.'

(Man, Mali, Bamako, 10 April 2019)

The data also points to instances where women collaborated with katiba Macina to protect their business activities. In one instance, a woman was only able to continue her fabric trading business within a geographic limit set by katiba Macina after agreeing under duress to supply food items to the group.²⁵

'After they occupied the area, Hamadoun Koufa's group banned women from trading. One day, his men intercepted the vehicle that was transporting us and took our goods on the grounds that we had disobeyed their orders. After half a day's negotiation, they told me: "We'll give you back your fabrics if you agree to do us a favour. As you are a trader, you will bring us rice and shea butter every week. We will pay you. But we will only let you trade in Diafarabé and Tenenkou." I agreed.'

(Woman, Mopti, Mali, 15 February 2018, katiba Macina)

Furthermore, in few cases women interviewed in Niger noted that they joined Boko Haram for religious and ethical considerations. Specifically, they expressed the desire to not only learn the Koran, but to participate in jihad and die as martyrs, or to contribute through jihad to purify Islam and society. In the latter case, jihad is perceived not as an end in itself, but as a means of ridding society and religion of 'impurities' and practices regarded as harmful. There were also cases in which women were manipulated by marabouts, who allegedly promised them paradise if they joined the group.

'My girlfriends suggested I go and take part in jihad and die a martyr's death. All they talked about was the need to take part in jihad to purify Islam of everything that tarnished it. They said that our leaders are all criminals who don't give a damn about religion. We needed to fix religion and set people right.'

(Woman, Diffa, Niger, 6 June 2018, Boko Haram)

'There are some women who are convinced that they are doing a good thing because of God. This is the case of women who volunteer as suicide bombers. They are not forced; they are volunteers. Furthermore, not all of them are accepted.'

(Man, Diffa, 6 June 2018, Boko Haram)

I stayed in the group because ...

Women remained in Boko Haram and katiba Macina for reasons related to those that underpinned how they became associated with them. This is particularly the case for women who became associated through matrimonial and family ties and those who were forcibly recruited or forced to collaborate with the groups. Continued association with katiba Macina was also due to the need for self-preservation, but also for the protection of an income-generating activity.

Similarly, self-preservation also accounted for continued association with Boko Haram, even for women who voluntarily joined the group. To ensure women remained in its fold, Boko Haram closely monitored them at all times, required them to obtain permission for any movement, and threatened to punish them with death if they attempted to flee. Some women remained out of fear that they would be arrested or killed by Boko Haram or defence and security forces if they attempted to escape. A few women who had joined for religious reasons mentioned that they stayed in the hope of reaching paradise.

'I stayed in the group because as soon as they suspect you of desertion, they kill you.'

(Woman, Diffa, Niger, 5 June 2018, Boko Haram)

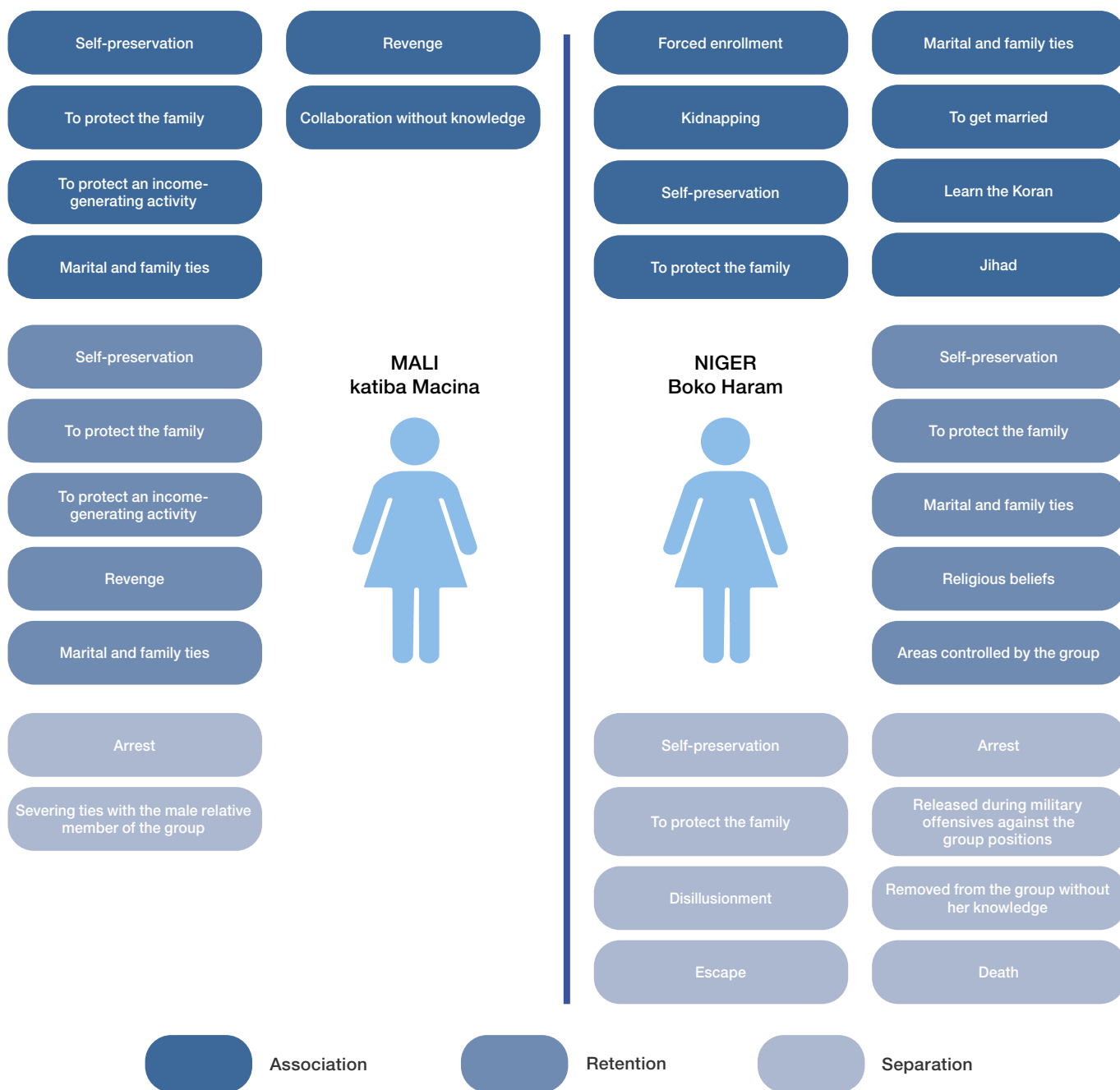
'At first I was afraid to collaborate with katiba Macina because the army was patrolling the area. After a while, I told myself that I wasn't doing anything wrong, since my role is limited to supplying them with food. Of course, I could stop doing that, but at the moment I don't know what I would do if I stopped.'

(Woman, Mopti, Mali, 15 February 2018, katiba Macina)

'Just as the state does not like young people to join Boko Haram, they do not like people to leave the territories under their control.'

(Man, Diffa, Niger, 6 June 2018, Boko Haram)

Infographic 4: Reasons why women become and remain associated with the groups, and why they leave



I am no longer in the group because ...

This research team documented several cases in which women whose links with katiba Macina and Boko Haram were severed either of their own accord or for reasons beyond their control. In the latter case, it is difficult to determine from the available data whether or not these women were pleased that the ties were severed or whether or not they would consider returning to the groups if they had an opportunity.

In the case of katiba Macina, there were two cases in which ties were severed after the women were arrested by the FAMA. In another case, a woman who collaborated with katiba Macina through her husband, a combatant in the group, was repudiated by the latter.

Some women fled Boko Haram in order to escape a forced and abusive marriage with a member of the group. Other women mentioned that they

fled because they were disillusioned with the deterioration of their living conditions within the group and restrictions on their freedom and movement, particularly for those who had been forced to join the group. They also cited the brutality of group members and the death of relatives who had led them to join the group as reasons for their fleeing.

Importantly, the offer of amnesty and reintegration by the Government of Niger in December 2016²⁶ as a way of encouraging members of Boko Haram to voluntarily surrender also provided a way out for some women. While a few women fled the group alone, most deserted with their husbands who fled the group as a result of a deterioration in living conditions in the group, including lack of treatment for combat injuries. Some husbands also fled, after the split within Boko Haram in August 2016 that resulted in the creation of the two factions JAS and EIAO.²⁷ This split revealed certain inconsistencies regarding the merits of the combat conducted and a disconnect between the group's discourse and its practices.

Some women fled the group without their husbands' knowledge, taking advantage of their absence to escape

The women who left Boko Haram, including those who left with their husbands, took advantage of flaws in the group's surveillance. They escaped during military offensives against the group's positions, when the sentries were asleep, or early in the morning when the guards were praying.

Some women took advantage of the absence of their husbands and fled the group without their knowledge. In other cases, guards were less watchful of a woman who was in the final stage of pregnancy, thereby enabling her escape without their notice.

However, cases of women escaping the group alone are in the minority. In most documented cases, the women's exit from Boko Haram was dependent on that of their husbands. Their escape was the result of a combination of motives and interests linked to the need to flee from their living conditions, and was

the subject of negotiations and planning between the couple to avoid any suspicion while concealing the escape plan which is punishable by death. Nevertheless, the research documented at least one case where a man removed one of his wives from the group by taking her back to her parents, without her knowing that it was desertion. He feared that she would expose his escape plans if she knew about them. He had planned to flee and was convinced that she would not want to leave her parents in Nigeria to follow him to Niger.

In addition, some women were released and others arrested during military offensives against the group's positions, constituting other experiences of exit from the group.

'My friend and I failed the first time we tried to escape from Boko Haram. Some members of the group met us on the way and took us back with them. As a punishment, my husband deprived me of food and water.'

(Woman, Diffa, Niger, 9 June 2018, Boko Haram)

'I left the group one night with my husband who had broken his arm in combat. We walked for three days in the bush. My husband was able to call the district chief of N'guigmi. He told us about the government's reintegration programme and asked us to go to the authorities so that we could be taken care of. We ran a great risk in leaving Boko Haram because they punish deserters severely.'

(Woman, Diffa, Niger, 5 June 2018, Boko Haram)

'Before joining the group, my husband told me that we weren't going to stay long and that I had to keep this secret to myself, because if his friends had known, they would have killed us. Ten months later he decided we would move. The group members didn't suspect that we were preparing to leave because I was almost at the end of my pregnancy.'

(Woman, Diffa, Niger, 5 June 2018, Boko Haram)

In some documented cases, the exit from Boko Haram was facilitated by the intervention of outside actors. Some men fled the group with their spouses after getting guarantees from their families that they would be accepted by the community in their village, and others got guarantees from the traditional and administrative authorities in Niger that they would be looked after once they had surrendered.

Others left the group with their husbands following pressure from family members with whom they had maintained contact. This was the case of a Boko Haram member injured in combat. He organised his own escape and that of his wife and children after his father threatened to disown him if he did not leave the group. Some women also benefited from help from Fula shepherds who were familiar with cross-border transhumance routes.

Lastly, some women lost their lives in the group. These include women who were deployed on suicide bombing missions or killed during aerial bombardments against the group's positions.

The roles of women in katiba Macina and Boko Haram and the resulting benefits to the groups

For katiba Macina and Boko Haram, the association of girls and women with their activities, whether voluntary or not, fulfils short, medium and long-term objectives. Their involvement in the groups' activities offers the group significant strategic and operational advantages. Boko Haram and katiba Macina recruit women for a variety of reasons that depend on and evolve according to the group's strategies, needs and the context in which they operate. For example, women are used as agents and channels for recruitment, as support staff for group operations, and for activities that allow them to assume roles previously fulfilled by men.²⁸

Women as agents and channels for recruitment

The groups use women's 'interpersonal skills'²⁹ to recruit and mobilise human resources within their families and communities. This enables katiba Macina and Boko Haram to expand their ranks. For example, katiba Macina relies on alliances with women, including influential women, to recruit from communities. The group encourages its members to

marry in the communities where they are deployed, including locations where the group encounters hostility. For instance, in 2017, a katiba Macina leader was reported to have married the widow of a village chief from an influential marabout family in the Mopti region.³⁰

These alliances, whether formed by agreement or by force, aim to promote the implantation of the group, to secure the active or passive support of the population and to extend the group's influence. These women are encouraged to convince their relatives to join the group, persuade other women to marry group members or get them to persuade their husbands to join the group.

'A marabout, who joined katiba Macina, came to preach in my village. He asked us to encourage our husbands, children and brothers to respond to the call of jihad. He even pointed at some of them, saying: "From among your children, you can give this child or his younger brother." The most important thing is to be willing to join and/or "give" a suitable member of your family.'

(Woman, Ségou, Mali, 10 August 2018, katiba Macina)

'My friend, a member of Boko Haram, asked me to join the group and help her to persuade others. She told me that I would have a lot of money and that I would take part in jihad.'

(Woman, Diffa, Niger, 25 October 2018, Boko Haram)

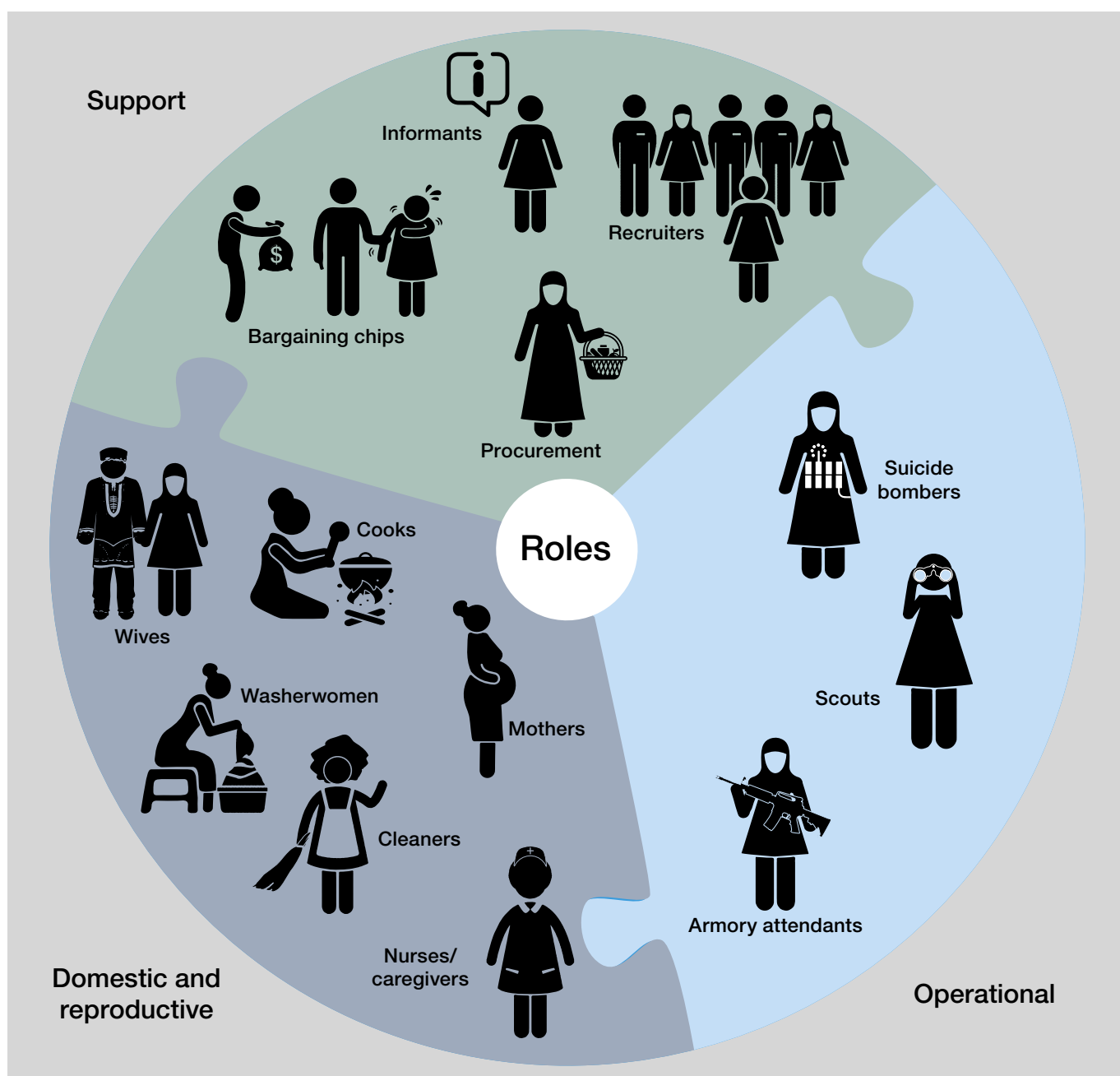
The presence of women is a determining factor in the decision of some men to join the groups. In Niger, the majority of the women we spoke to had been kidnapped, forcibly married to members of Boko Haram, and then married off again in the event of divorce or the death of their first husband. The group uses women as 'bait' to lure men in search of wives. This use of women as 'reward' for group members also fulfils the need to comfort them and encourage them to maintain their loyalty to the group.³¹ However, according to interviewees who joined the group in the hope of getting married, finding a 'wife' in the group is, in fact, reserved for only a privileged few.

In Mali, a few cases of men joining katiba Macina to get a wife were also documented. For example, a young man joined the group to protect the livestock of the family of a young woman he coveted in the hope of increasing his chances of gaining the consent of her family. For this young man, joining the group was a means of gaining combatant status, benefits and access to resources, including a weapon to guarantee the protection of the property and family of the woman he hoped to marry.

'I wanted to marry a girl whose family owned a lot of livestock and who needed to protect it. I decided to join katiba Macina. In the absence of the State in many places, everyone protects themselves as best they can. It has also become a quick way to get a woman's hand in marriage, especially if her family owns a lot of animals.'

(Man, Mopti, Mali, 27 July 2016, katiba Macina)³²

Infographic 5: Association of women with katiba Macina and Boko Haram: Roles and strategic benefits



Finally, by playing a reproductive role, women ensure the sustainability of the groups. As ‘wives’ of members of Boko Haram and katiba Macina, women are responsible for breeding and educating the next generation of combatants, as well as women for them, thereby ensuring the generational renewal and sustainability of the groups. Most of our interviewees associated with Boko Haram gave birth within the group or shortly after fleeing.

The association of women as a way to promote the conduct of activities and operations

The groups also involve women in their activities for practical reasons as women enable them to obtain operational, logistical, financial and subsistence resources needed for their operations and activities.

Support roles

As wives, sisters or daughters, and when they live with or have the opportunity to visit their male family members in the group, women primarily perform domestic tasks such as housework, cooking and washing, and are also responsible for bringing up children. These roles are derived from their marital and family ties with groups’ members and reflect traditional domestic and reproductive roles. Women also provide care for family members wounded in combat, thereby enabling them to return to combat; this role has both a domestic dimension and an added value for the operational activities of the groups.

‘The men are more motivated when they join the group with their wives, because the latter support them and provide a family framework.’

(Woman, Diffa, Niger, 6 June 2018, Boko Haram)

Women also perform roles related to the functioning and operational logistics of the groups. For example, both katiba Macina and Boko Haram rely on women for the supply of basic necessities such as food and medicines, as well as materials for group operations. An illustration of the role they play in group logistics is the alleged involvement of a female trader in the supply of fertiliser used by katiba Macina in the manufacture of IEDs.³³ Although she admitted selling

fertiliser to ‘the people of Mopti’, she claimed to be unaware of any possible links between her customers and katiba Macina.³⁴

The use of women for sourcing supplies may be linked to a stereotypical perception on the part of the group that women are discreet, less conspicuous than men and therefore ‘naturally’ suited to such tasks. However, this role is not exclusively reserved for women. Male members of katiba Macina and Boko Haram also act as couriers or suppliers. Many of these group members, including women, were traders before their involvement in the group. Thus, using them as supplier could be a way for the groups to capitalise on their skills and their connection to commercial networks.

Women enable groups to obtain operational, logistical, financial and subsistence resources

In addition, both Boko Haram and katiba Macina use women to gather intelligence that enables the group to derive operational benefits and generate financial resources. For example, some women associated with katiba Macina inform the group about the activities of the defence and security forces, self-defence groups, including traditional hunters (*dozo*), their potential enemies and targets, but also about individuals who own livestock and money from whom the group collects *zakat*, a religious tax. Others collect intelligence that helps the group in its decision to release, or establish the guilt of, detained individuals. They provide intelligence to the leaders of katiba Macina, directly or through their male relatives who are members of the group. Women associated with Boko Haram are responsible for spying and collecting intelligence for the group before its members carry out attacks.

Last but not least, girls and women kidnapped by Boko Haram in the countries of the Lake Chad Basin, and those kidnapped by GSIM member groups, particularly Westerners, are used as bargaining chips for the release of their members and to generate financial resources through

ransoms. Despite the Nigerian government's denials, there is still speculation that ransom payments were made for the release of the kidnapped Chibok girls on 14 April 2014, as well as the Dapchi girls kidnapped by ISWAP on 19 February 2018.³⁵ Moreover, for the release of four hostages on 8 October 2020, including the leader of the Malian opposition, the late Soumaïla Cissé, and the Franco-Swiss humanitarian Sophie Pétronin, GSIM is said to have obtained in return the release of more than a hundred of its members and the payment of a ransom.³⁶

Operational roles

In Niger, women fulfil operational roles for Boko Haram. Those associated with the Abubakar Shekau faction are reportedly trained in the use of firearms but also in archery to provide support during military operations. They act as armourers and scouts prior to military operations or are deployed on suicide missions. Although most of the documented cases are the result of coercion, there are also some who volunteer for these missions.

This is the case of women who volunteer but are in fact hoping to escape from the group to get away from the conditions they are living in. Once deployed, they surrender to security forces. Others, especially widows, volunteer for suicide missions deceived by the idea of joining their fallen spouses in paradise. Some are indoctrinated by the group and led to believe that dying as martyrs opens the gates to paradise for them.

However, it is sometimes difficult to establish the boundary between the willingness to act of the women who volunteer for suicide missions and the coercion of the group. In fact, it is part of the women's daily tasks to learn the Koran and religion in the learning centres run by the group. This obligatory worship routine is akin to an attempt at religious indoctrination designed to make them embrace the group's ideology.

'Some women put themselves forward to be suicide bombers. They are not forced, they are volunteers. But not all volunteers are accepted. Before their deployment, they are grouped together in a specific place without contact with the other women in order to be prepared for their mission.'

(Man, Diffa, Niger, 6 June 2018, Boko Haram)

'My second wife, whom I married in the group, had asked my permission to be a candidate for suicide bombing. I refused.'

(Man, Diffa, Niger, 6 June 2018, Boko Haram)



BETWEEN JUNE 2014
AND FEBRUARY 2018,
BOKO HARAM DEPLOYED
AT LEAST 469 WOMEN AND
GIRLS FOR SUICIDE ATTACKS
IN THE COUNTRIES OF THE
LAKE CHAD BASIN

‘The suicide bombers come from Abubakar Shekau’s group. After the death of their husbands at the battlefield, some women volunteer for suicide missions. The marabouts of Shekau impress upon their minds that they will join their husbands in paradise if they are willing to die as martyrs. Before going to accomplish their missions, some of them tell their children to do likewise so that they can meet again in paradise.’

(Man, Diffa, Niger, 8 June 2018, Boko Haram)

Between June 2014 and February 2018, Boko Haram deployed at least 469 women and girls³⁷ for suicide attacks in the countries of the Lake Chad Basin. The group uses women and children in its operations, particularly to carry out suicide attacks, because of their supposedly unthreatening nature and their perceived ability to evade security checks. It also deploys women and girl suicide bombers as communication and propaganda tools to gain media attention and notoriety. Interviews also showed that the use of women for these missions is a way of encouraging men to get involved by playing on their feelings of honour and pride. In fact, the deployment of women for these missions challenges gender stereotypes, which treat violence as an exclusively male domain and women as being incapable of committing violent acts.

Changes in both the needs of katiba Macina and the security context in which it operates could prompt it to use women in its operations

Since the internal split in Boko Haram in August 2016, and despite cases of suicide attacks by women in its areas of operation, ISWAP has reportedly not claimed any of them.³⁸ In fact, the deployment of women and girls as suicide bombers by Abubakar Shekau was one of the sources of discord that led to the split.

However, Islamic State, of which ISWAP is the West African branch, has reportedly used female suicide bombers in Syria and Iraq,³⁹ to address the issue of military pressure, the loss of territorial control, and the decline in the number of combatants. As a result, and also in view of the changing roles assigned to women by the faction led by Shekau, the position of ISWAP on the deployment of women for kamikaze missions may evolve.

In the case of Mali, the the denial of GSIM, the coalition to which katiba Macina belongs, of the use of women in suicide attacks could be explained by the need to maintain the support of the populations in the areas where it is established and to align itself with the roles traditionally expected of women. Nevertheless, as was the case with Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin, changes in both the needs of katiba Macina and the security context in which it operates could prompt it to use women in its operations. In fact, the data



CHANGES IN KATIBA
MACINA'S NEEDS AND THE
SECURITY CONTEXT IN
WHICH IT OPERATES COULD
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reveal that the group already uses women as scouts prior to attacks. In addition, instances have been documented of wealthy women traders reportedly being encouraged by katiba Macina to provide combatants with operational resources, including motorbikes, which are essential for the group's mobility and the conduct of operations.

Conclusion

The association of women with katiba Macina in Mali and Boko Haram in Niger stems from diverse, often interconnected, reasons and circumstances. Among those that have been documented, marital and family ties with men belonging to these groups (fathers, sons, husbands), as well as the need for women to protect themselves and their families, are determining factors. Their association and the various roles they play within the groups, whether voluntarily or under duress, provide important strategic and operational advantages for the groups.

Unmarried women are used as bait to attract combatants seeking wives into the groups. As mothers or wives, they carry out the domestic tasks necessary for the survival of the groups, participate in the creation of a family framework that motivates the men, and ensure generational renewal through motherhood and child-rearing. At the operational level, they contribute to the groups' intelligence network, support their

recruitment efforts and facilitate their establishment within the communities. They also contribute to ensuring the groups' logistical supply chain in terms of both basic foodstuffs and combat materials, such as fertilisers used in the manufacture of IEDs, and provide care for combatants injured in operations. In Niger, some women also take on a combat role, including in suicide missions.

These findings have implications for policies and strategies to prevent and combat violent extremism in Mali and Niger, which either insufficiently take into account the experience of women, or present them essentially as passive, unwilling victims. Indeed, the reasons for women's involvement and pathways in these groups, as well as the reasons why the groups use them, continue to be blind spots in policies to prevent and combat violent extremism.

In order to develop context-specific strategies to prevent and counter women's involvement in these groups, it is important to understand the reasons for their involvement, the strategic objectives that each group seeks to achieve by involving women in their activities, and the different visible and invisible roles they assign to women. This will be the subject of the second report, which will examine the implications of the study's findings for strategies and policies to prevent and counter violent extremism in Mali and Niger and make recommendations.

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