

The role of women and gender policies in crisis and conflict situations: the case of Sahel and West Africa

Nicoletta Pirozzi, IAI

Due to multiple security threats that weigh on its internal dynamics, the West Africa and Sahel region appears to be particularly vulnerable and politically unstable. The security context is marked by a number of intertwined challenges: intra-State instability ranging from insurgencies in Mali, Niger and Mauritania to low intensity conflicts in Ghana, Nigeria and Senegal, lagging development and persistent poverty, unaccountable governance and corruption mixed with societal tensions, absence of the rule of law that has favoured the flourishing of terrorism – from Al-Qaida in the Maghreb (AQIM) to Boko Haram – and the action of armed groups, climate change migration, drugs and arms trafficking, pandemics.

Unlike traditional conceptualizations of security that aim at securing national borders from external military threats, security challenges in the region have to be addressed through a human security approach, which places the individual at its centre and includes everything that constitutes freedom from want and freedom from fear. In line with this approach, crisis management has to range from the identification of the root causes of conflicts in order to prevent them; to the implementation of civilian tasks aimed at facilitating the de-escalation of a crisis and its transformation; to the building or reconstruction of democratic and stable institutions that can ensure resilience in the long term.

The gender dimension must be understood as an essential element of this comprehensive rethinking of the concept of security. The role of women as agents of change should be promoted at all levels and the gender perspective should be incorporated in all security strategies, planning and interventions. Women have to play an increasingly important role – both individually as i.e. decision-makers, mediators and members of the armed forces, and collectively as i.e. women's groups, associations and grass-root organizations – by supporting the democratization process, the establishment of the rule of law, the respect of human rights, the participation of civil societies and the settlement of viable administrations.

United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1325 (2000) and related resolutions represent a formidable instrument in order to achieve these objectives. A number of States in West Africa have already adopted 1325 National Action Plans (NAPs), including Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, but its implementation requires additional efforts.

The primary objective should focus on the promotion of a gender-sensitive approach to security, in particular by:

- Increasing the number of women in decision-making positions, especially in the executives, which are still the main actors in peace and security matters, and in particular as ministers responsible for foreign, defense and interior policies;
- Promoting a multidimensional approach to security, which goes beyond the purely military aspects to entail economic development, social justice, environmental protection, democratization, disarmament, respect for human rights and the rule of law, and takes into consideration the disproportionate impact of conflicts and insecurity on women and girls;

THE SAHEL & WEST AFRICA WEEK

26–30 October 2015 — Milan, Italy

EXPO
2015

- Advocating for the inclusion of grassroots women's organisations, associations and groups in the planning and implementation of gender-sensitive strategies to address security challenges;
- Campaigning for the adoption and improvement of National Action Plans that match overarching policy elaboration with concrete indicators, monitoring mechanisms and financial resources;
- Linking the national and regional dimensions of gender mainstreaming in peace and security matters by exercising political control and pressure on national governments and their positions in regional organizations dealing with peace and security.

Nicoletta Pirozzi is a Senior Fellow at the *Istituto Affari Internazionali* – Institute of International Affairs (IAI)