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Navigating Political Fragility: The Challenges of Women Peacebuilders in Militarised Political Contexts in Africa

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Abstract

Considering that unconstitutional changes of government (UCGs) border around the human and political security of the continent, a crucial question is, what are the challenges women peacebuilders face following UCGs? Using Chad and Niger as case studies and drawing on feminist theory, this paper examines the challenges women encounter in the execution of their peace work in countries that have experienced UCGs. This work includes mediation, community mobilisation, education, and raising awareness of income-generating activities, amongst others. This paper finds that although women are actively participating in fostering peace at the grassroots level, UCGs make their work more challenging due to rising insecurity, suppression of freedoms, and exacerbation of systemic gender discrimination. It notes that without a resolution to the broader issue of UCGs, women peacebuilders will find it challenging to participate in peacebuilding in these contexts. Finally, the paper concludes that addressing the challenges women peacebuilders face and adopting a human security approach to UCGs are essential for sustaining women's contribution to peace and security.

Keywords: Africa, Women, Peacebuilding, Security, Government.

Introduction

Unconstitutional changes of government (UCGs), especially military coups, have become a common phenomenon in the Sahel, undermining political stability, peace, and security in the region (Monyae and Ndzendze, 2024; Albert and Albert, 2022). Duzor and Williamson (2023, para. 1) specify that “there has been a significant rise in coups in the last three years,” with military takeovers in Niger, Chad, Mali, Burkina Faso, Sudan, and Guinea. These UCGs pose a serious threat to human security and political stability, as they lead to the suspension of the constitution, suppression of fundamental freedoms, prolonged transitional agreements, and a wider militarisation of the political system (Amani Africa, 2024; APRM, 2023). Moreover, several of the countries where UCGs have taken place were already experiencing conflicts, and UCGs have only exacerbated this fragility. Thurston (2024, p. 8) states that “the Sahel is worse off since the coups, as the negative impact can be seen in terms of declining political space, human rights, civil freedoms, security, and economic fallout.” These impacts also have a clear gendered dimension, including the rollback of women’s rights and exclusion of women from participating in the public sphere.

Women’s participation in peacebuilding in the region has been historically limited by a range of challenges, such as exclusion from decision-making processes, and sociocultural constraints (Jessen and Hudson, 2022; UN Women, 2025). Cultural beliefs often dictate that peace and security are male-dominated spheres, relegating women to secondary roles in peace processes (Olaitan, 2023). Even when women do engage in peacebuilding, their efforts are dismissed as “soft” diplomacy compared to the formal peace talks led by male political and military leaders (Sapiano et al., 2022). According to the United Nations (UN) (2024a, p. 9), “in 2023 women made up only 9.6 percent of negotiators, 13.7 percent of mediators, and 26.6 percent of signatories to peace and ceasefire agreements.”

Given the wider consequences of UCGs and the existing limitations women face in peacebuilding, this paper examines the impact of UCGs on women peacebuilders. It asks: what are the challenges women peacebuilders face following unconstitutional changes of government? Although numerous works have been written on women in peacebuilding (see Nortvedt, 2021; Adeogun and Muthuki, 2018; Andersson, 2024; Tripp et al., 2025), their focus is usually on democratic systems. This paper, by contrast, makes a unique contribution by interrogating the specific issues women peacebuilders face in newly militarised political contexts. Drawing from this, the paper advocates for new and innovative approaches to facilitating the promotion and protection of women peacebuilders following UCGs. The structure of the paper is as follows: The rest of this section outlines the methodological

and theoretical framework of the study. Section two provides an overview of unconstitutional changes in Chad and Niger and their impact on political instability. The third section examines the role of women in grassroots peacebuilding in the selected case studies to demonstrate their contribution to peace. The fourth section highlights the challenges that women peacebuilders face in the execution of their work in Niger and Chad. The final section provides relevant recommendations and concludes the paper.

Methodological Framework

This paper employs a qualitative methodology based on a case study approach to examine the challenges that impact the work of women peacebuilders in militarised contexts. It uses Chad and Niger as cases because both countries have experienced unconstitutional changes of government in recent years. The paper applies a thematic analysis to the secondary literature on both cases to identify the key challenges women peacebuilders face and how these have been exacerbated by UCGs.

A Feminist Analysis of Militarism

This paper uses a feminist approach to the analysis of militarism as its theoretical framing to ground its analysis of how UCGs, by virtue of their militaristic traits, exacerbate the challenges women face in grassroots peacebuilding. A feminist approach to the analysis of militarism brings into focus the mutually reinforcing relationship between militarisation and patriarchy and how this relationship sustains gender inequality. Feminist scholars argue that militarisation is both the product of patriarchy and simultaneously perpetuates patriarchal institutions and norms that stereotype women as subordinate, subservient, and in need of protection (Enloe, 1983; Reardon, 1985). Khalid (2015: p. 4) states that “militarism through military institutions reinforces the notion that social stability is best achieved through hierarchical gender relations.” Enloe (1983), a prominent feminist scholar, argues that militarisation affects women’s lives in the public spheres of states. She explains that increased militarisation translates into higher military spending, which reduces expenditure on non-military sectors such as education and healthcare, on which women are more dependent. Connell (1987) highlights how militarisation is associated with a hegemonic masculinity, which maintains a strong emphasis on submissive femininity and is used to perpetuate violence against women.

Feminist scholars argue that militarisation is linked with gender relations and stress the interconnectedness between militarisation, patriarchy, and the underrepresentation of women in

society. This theoretical framework is relevant when trying to understand the effects of UCGs on women's participation in grassroots peacebuilding, as UCGs in the Sahel have led to an increased militarisation of the political system and society more broadly. Drawing from Enloe's (1983) thesis that the oppression of women is a fundamental part of militarism, not just a consequence of it, we argue that the oppression and underrepresentation of women are constitutive of militarised political contexts, including where UCGs have occurred. Thus, a feminist analysis of militarisation posits that the increased militarisation of society reinforces restrictive patriarchal norms, which in turn perpetuate the subjugation of women and underrepresentation of women in different spheres. This thesis is central to this paper's argument on how UCGs affect women's participation in grassroots peacebuilding.

Unconstitutional Changes of Government and Political (In)stability

The Sahel is currently embroiled in a complex crisis as a result of repeated military coups, prolonged political transitions, and a surge in terrorist activities (Amnesty International, 2024; Ferdjani, 2024). In addition, three Sahelian states withdrew from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), further worsening political instability in the region (Kanté et al., 2024). Nyinevi & Fosu (2023) have highlighted how the recent wave of military coups have been central to growing insecurity and political instability in the Sahel. UCGs both threaten peace and security and, importantly, lead to a further deterioration of democratic values (Monyae and Ndzendze, 2024). Efforts by other actors, such as the African Union (AU) and ECOWAS, to enable transitions from military leadership to democratically elected governments have either fallen apart or been delayed (ISS, 2024). The AU's response is especially worth considering, given the frequency of UCGs in the Sahel, their impact, and the heightened tension arising from them (Kanté et al., 2024). The African Union has several frameworks that guide its definition of UCG and outline the actions to be taken when a UCG takes place. Notable among these are "the AU Constitutive Act, Peace and Security Council (PSC) Protocol, the 2000 Lome Declaration, and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance (ACDEG)" (Nyinevi & Fosu 2023, p. 96). These frameworks elucidate a set of penalties for governments established through UCGs, and individuals who might have participated in the violation, and state that UCGs should be met with immediate sanctions without exception (Amani Africa, 2024). However, the AU has often deviated from this commitment (Nyinevi and Fosu, 2023). Ndzana (2025, p. 3) argues that, instead of drawing from these frameworks, the AU's response "is characterised by ambivalence reflecting the tension between the AU's commitment to democratic principles and its respect for member states' sovereignty."

There have been nine successful military coups in Africa since 2020, with most of them being in the Sahel (Vines, 2024). In Mali, a history of violence arising from terrorist insurgencies and weeks of public protests against the government of President Ibrahim Keïta were key catalysts for the coup on August 18th 2020. Thurston (2024, p. 24) similarly notes that violence that was rife in Mali before the 2020 coup was due to “jihadist violence, political repression, and executive overreach.” The coup also followed the post-election crisis that resulted from legislative elections earlier in the year and a wider political environment saddled with scandals and nepotism (Kanté et al., 2024). In Guinea, Diallo (2021) has described the UCG as “palace coup” that followed fierce opposition by political parties and civil society organisations to President Alpha Condé’s attempt at constitutional reforms, a move disguised to extend his stay in office for a third term. In Burkina Faso, the coup that overthrew President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré happened in January 2022, with a counter-coup in September of the same year led by Captain Ibrahim Traoré.

During this period Chad also experienced political instability, terrorist insurgencies, communal violence, and political power struggles (Vogel, 2024). In 2021, the abrupt death of Idriss Déby Itno, after three decades in power, led to the sudden dissolution of constitutional governance (Amani Africa, 2024). The dissolution of the government and suspension of the constitution were followed by a declaration establishing the transitional military council (TMC) to oversee the governing of the country, headed by the son of the former president, Mahamat Idriss Déby (Chin & Kirkpatrick, 2023; Handy & Hoinathy, 2021). Chad had previously experienced UCGs before this event, in 1975 and 1990. However, the categorisation of events in 2021 has been heavily contested. In Chad, the move was widely regarded as a military coup, despite the military’s justification that it was necessary to maintain stability (Handy & Hoinathy, 2021). The 2021 military-backed handover of power also intensified ongoing tensions between the government and rebel groups, as opposition players and civil society contested the legitimacy of the transitional government (Amnesty International, 2022). The AU, however, was reluctant to definitively condemn the event of April 2021 as a UCG, contrasting with its response to similar changes of government in other countries. The AU PSC, citing the ‘complexity of the current political and security situation’ in Chad (African Union, 2021, p. 2), did not clearly designate the change as a UCG. This stance has been criticised for contravening the various AU instruments banning UCGs and outlining the subsequent actions to be taken (Amani Africa, 2024). Nonetheless, external actors saw the handover of power as necessary for political stability and addressing the security volatility. In particular, Chad was not suspended or sanctioned by the AU, as it sought to balance concerns for regional stability and democratic governance (Okechukwu, 2023).

Subsequent events in Chad have also impacted how its change of government has been characterised. As part of the transition to civilian rule, a presidential election was conducted in May 2024 (Human Rights Watch 2024). Mahamat Idriss won, but his victory was contested by the opposition candidate, Prime Minister Succes Masra, who alleged elections irregularities (Human Rights Watch 2024). The election was also seen as a move by Mahamat Idriss to legitimise his rule after he was installed by the military (Dickow, 2025). Regardless, although a semblance of constitutional governance has been restored in Chad, it is clear that the process that ushered in the leadership of Mahamat Idriss as leader of the TMC was unconstitutional (Amani Africa, 2024).

In Niger, Aksar et al. (2023) explain that the country remains under the control of the established military leadership, in contrast to countries with similar experiences of coups. Niger has experienced five successful military coups since its independence in 1960 and three attempted coups (Duzor & Williamson, 2023). In July 2023, President Bazoum and his family were detained by the presidential guard following a coup launched by General Abdourahamane Tchiani. Nsaibia (2023) notes that growing dissatisfaction with the ruling party leadership and palace politics catalysed the coup. The 2023 coup enjoyed support from many Nigeriens, who protested against what they perceived as the governance deficit of the previous administration. The previous government was characterised by enduring corruption and “entrenched clientelism within the Nigerien Party for Democracy and Socialism, associated with previous presidents Bazoum and Mahamadou Issoufou” (Aksar et al., 2023, para. 1). Obiezu (2025) argues that the political crisis in Niger exemplifies a wider phenomenon in the Sahel, in which military coups develop as a response to rising Islamist threats and mounting discontent with civilian administrations.

In response to the August 2023 coup, Niger was suspended by the AU “under Article 4(p) of the AU Constitutive Act, Article 7(g) of the PSC Protocol, and the ACDEG from all its institutions and operations until the effective restoration of constitutional order” (African Union, 2023, p. 3). Nonetheless, the military leadership continued to strengthen its control over the opposition, civil society, and independent media rather than address insecurity (Amnesty International, 2024). In tandem, Niger experienced a worsening of socio-economic problems such as inflation and price increases and electricity outages following the sanctions imposed by the AU and ECOWAS (Nigerien National Institute of Statistics, 2023; Ferdjani, 2024). In February 2024, ECOWAS sanctions were lifted on “humanitarian grounds” to ease the suffering caused by the sanctions (AFP, 2024). The military government is also not keeping to its promise to combat corruption as an order was signed in February 2024 eliminating all restrictions on military spending, signifying the erosion of

accountability (Amnesty International, 2024). Along with other Sahelian states, Niger has joined the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), a strategic partnership made up of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, aimed at combating terrorism.

The occurrence of UCGs in the Sahel has a clear impact on peace, political stability, and security in the region. While there are contextual differences between each case, UCGs are associated with worsening instability, heightened tensions, an exacerbation of socio-economic problems, and a lack of sustainable peace. The negative impact of UCGs on democratic governance are particularly harmful to the prospects for peace. Without democratic institutions, the rule of law, and constitutionalism, it is difficult for peacebuilding to yield positive results. An unconstitutional change of government is fundamentally undemocratic because it is founded on the suppression of the constitution and the fundamental freedoms it guarantees. Moreover, governmental system that sets aside the constitution has little guiding framework as the basis for its action, which makes it difficult for the political system to function effectively. The repression of civil society is also particularly harmful to grassroots peacebuilding efforts, where women play a prominent role (African Union, 2020).

Women in Grassroots Peacebuilding: Issues and Debates

Women in grassroots peacebuilding play a crucial role in fostering stability, reconciliation, and community resilience in conflict-affected regions across Africa (Anweting & Ogar, 2018). Although high-level negotiations usually exclude women, grassroots peacebuilding is rooted in local communities, where women are able to leverage their social networks, cultural influence, and indigenous knowledge to mediate disputes, prevent violence, and rebuild societies (Adeogun & Muthuki, 2018; Olaitan, 2020). Their roles in peacebuilding are often informal because formal peace processes fail to integrate their efforts into broader national and regional peace strategies (Autesserre, 2014; Olaitan & Isike, 2019). These informal peacebuilding activities include: mediating local disputes; providing psychological and social support to victims of violence; and advocating for ceasefires and reconciliation. Women's grassroots peace efforts and their importance for achieving sustainable peace are recognised under the AU's Continental Framework on Women, Peace, and Security (African Union, 2020). In an attempt to formalise women's participation in peacebuilding, the AU implemented the FemWise-Africa network (African Union, 2018). FemWise-Africa, which is part of the African Peace and Security Architecture, is intended to facilitate the participation of women in all peace processes by providing training opportunities, capacity-building workshops, and

access to a network of women peacebuilders. FemWise-Africa works with the PSC and the AU Panel of the Wise. In 2023 it decentralised its structure, through the establishment of regional and national chapters (Vern, 2024).

Further, infrastructure poses a risk, as rural and low-income areas may lack the infrastructure required to support new energy technologies, potentially perpetuating disparities in energy access (UNDP 2022). In addition, the shift away from traditional energy sources may disrupt established livelihoods, particularly in communities dependent on biomass. To address these disruptions, the Zambian government must implement supportive measures and transition strategies that mitigate adverse effects, such as community participation and capacity building (Energy Regulation Board, 2023). These measures should ensure that communities effectively use and maintain new energy technologies. Without proper training, the benefits of renewable energy may not be fully realised, potentially limiting its positive impact (UNDP, 2022).

Women peacebuilders engage in different peacebuilding activities, from mediation and conflict resolution to promoting social cohesion and reconciliation. They play key roles in fostering peace in communities by organising dialogue sessions, establishing peace committees, and engaging in cultural practices that promote reconciliation (Mohamed & Ramadhan, 2024). Additionally, women's grassroots organisations work to influence local and national policies related to peace and security, including by advocating for gender-sensitive policies in peace agreements. Another crucial aspect of their work is providing psychological support and trauma healing for conflict-affected communities, through counseling and creating safe spaces for victims of war crimes, sexual violence, and displacement. Recognising that poverty and economic disenfranchisement fuel conflicts, women's groups also engage in economic empowerment initiatives, such as leading cooperative societies and microfinance programs, to help prevent radicalisation and contribute to long-term stability (UNDP, 2022). Despite their essential contributions, women peacebuilders face systemic barriers that limit their impact and visibility (Anderlini, 2020). These challenges will be discussed further below, but include sociocultural restrictions, political marginalisation, lack of resources, security threats, and exclusion from formal peace processes (Lwamba et al., 2021).

In Niger and Chad

This section discusses the role of women peacebuilders in Chad and Niger in greater detail. Despite being largely excluded from formal peace processes and political decision-making, Chadian women have leveraged traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, community engagement, and advocacy to mitigate violence and promote sustainable peace (UN Women, 2024). In the face of worsening communal clashes and heightened violent conflicts arising from the UCG in 2021, the work of women peacebuilders has been especially vital in addressing some of these negative impacts (United Nations, 2024b).

One of the key ways women in Chad have contributed to grassroots peacebuilding is through local mediation and conflict resolution. Women-led organisations and community leaders have stepped in to mediate disputes between conflict parties - including ethnic groups, pastoralists and farmers - and even between security forces and civilians (International Crisis Group, 2024). Their ability to foster trust and promote non-violent solutions has been instrumental in preventing localised conflicts from escalating into more widespread violence. For example, Cellule de Liaison des Associations Féminines (CELIAF), a network promoting women's rights in Chad, provides legal aid and mediation service, to support access to justice amongst women and marginalised groups (Girls Not Brides, 2022). The UN Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) has also begun supporting 34 small peacebuilding initiatives led by 110 women. These women have facilitated the peaceful resolution of nearly 30 local conflicts (United Nations, 2024b). In addition to mediation, women's grassroots peace work in Chad involves promoting social cohesion and dialogue. Women's groups organise community forums, workshops, and intercommunal dialogues that bring together different ethnic, religious, and political groups to discuss grievances and find common ground (Fédération internationale pour les droits humains, 2022).

Chadian women peacebuilders have also been at the forefront of providing other essential support to communities affected by armed conflicts, displacement, and human rights abuses (Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund, 2025). Women-led initiatives provide trauma healing, psychosocial support, and livelihood programs to women and children impacted by violence. For instance, in the wake of the displacement crisis in the Lake Chad region in 2023 due to ongoing Boko Haram attacks, women's organisations provided trauma counseling and vocational training to displaced women. This helped them rebuild their lives and reduce their vulnerability to exploitation and recruitment by armed groups (Aina, 2023). Women in Chad also play a vital role in advocating for inclusive governance and policy

reforms, such as increasing the role of women in peace processes and government (FHI360, 2023). Through sustained advocacy, they have pushed for the implementation of national action plans aligned with the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, particularly that peace agreements and security sector reforms consider the needs and rights of women. In 2023, following advocacy by women's groups, the Chadian government committed to increasing women's representation in the TMC, although this commitment was not actualised (EISA, 2024).

In Niger, women's organisations such as Femmes, Actions et Développement (FAD) protect and promote women's rights through sustainable development initiatives. To help women in need, FAD set up shelters for those who are having social or financial difficulties. In addition to providing this assistance, they offer training in management, entrepreneurialism, and non-violent conflict (Peace Direct, 2019). Women's organisations also work on addressing prejudice and violence against women in all its manifestations and advocating for their rights. In the South Kalley community, this entails educating women and girls about their rights and responsibilities, as well as recourse in the event of violence. In culturally conservative communities, women participate in community mobilisation and business endeavours that they would not otherwise engage in to increase income-generating activities amongst women. By teaching other women and young people how to earn a livelihood, women peacebuilders help them deal with the consequences of conflict and provide them alternative options to joining jihadists armed groups (Peace Direct, 2019). The PBF supports women-led grassroots peacebuilding work, as well as that of youth, that concentrates on addressing the triggers of instability such as: poverty; marginalisation; and communal clashes over access to natural resources (United Nations, 2021).

Across these streams of work, women peacebuilders are concerned with the fundamental problems of impunity, tribalism, and corruption that contribute to violence and instability. They also seek to address restrictive gender roles and how they impact women's visibility. Women peace activists have been forced to rely on themselves due to the significant setbacks of peacekeeping efforts in the Sahel. For instance, Tripp et al. (2025, p. 7) note that protracted conflicts have altered women's responsibilities in fragile communities, arguing that "because so many men have been killed, joined the insurgents, been kidnapped, or left the area for security reasons, women have been left to take care of their houses almost entirely by themselves." In response, women established advocacy groups that promoted respect and peace, organised peace demonstrations, and provided psychosocial help to women who had been abused. Hassia Isaa, a member of Millenium Africa, a women's organisation in Niger, states that "Nigerien women have been involved in instituting peace in the country as a

means to alleviate the hardships caused by terrorist activities and the July 2023 coup” (quoted in Stropasolas, 2025). In the same vein, the Confederation of Women Combatants and Pan-African Leaders advocated for the end to the sanctions on Niger, imposed by ECOWAS (ibid.). Women’s groups have also been part of broader mobilisation efforts calling for a resolution to the political and economic crises in Niger. In September 2023, a digital campaign was launched by more than 40 women’s organisations and 30 young girls under the hashtag ‘Girls4peace’ (UN Women, 2023).

Challenges for Women Peacebuilders in Niger and Chad

In This section discusses the challenges that women face in grassroots peacebuilding after UCGs, drawing on a feminist analysis of militarisation and the understanding that women’s underrepresentation is constitutive of militarisation.

Worsening security threats and heightened instability

UCGs have coincided with an increased militarisation of the political system that has led to a deterioration in security, adding to existing threats from terrorists and insurgents. This is unlikely to change. Thurston (2024, p. 8) argues that “levels of violence will remain high due to the military’s lack of credible plans to address the violence in the Sahel.” ISS (2024) similarly explains that UCGs often become highly repressive and violent in order to hold on to power.

The detrimental impact of the militarised context on achieving sustainable peace supports the feminist proposition that militarisation, patriarchy, and gender inequality are co-constitutive (see Connell, 1987). Women peacebuilders working in these militarised political contexts face constant threats from armed groups, political actors, and their communities. In Niger and Chad, especially, women activists are harassed, intimidated, or attacked for their advocacy work (BTI Transformation Index, 2024). Women peacebuilders working in conflict-afflicted areas are also vulnerable to targeted violence, abductions, and sexual exploitation by both insurgent groups and state security forces (United Nations, 2024a). This hostile environment discourages women from participating in peace efforts and puts the lives of those who do at risk. New threats to women peacebuilders from UCGs add to those already posed by insurgent groups, such as Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) remain active. As Hassia Issa states, “the violent actions of Islamic fundamentalist groups in Niger have led to the massive displacement of rural families, leaving thousands of women and

children homeless. Women...are all worried because they are the ones living with terrorism. They face terrorism and social injustice” (quoted in Stropasolas, 2025).

Deepening systemic gender discrimination

The structural and systemic gender discrimination that excludes women from actively participating in peacebuilding is another cause for concern. Chad has made commitments to the WPS agenda, yet implementation remains weak (UN Women, 2025). For instance, during the intercommunal clashes in southern Chad in 2022, women-led organisations attempted to mediate between farming and herding communities (Crisis Group, 2024). However, local male leaders initially dismissed their efforts, refusing to recognise women as legitimate mediators. Even when women were allowed to participate, their input was often overlooked in final decisions. This exclusion weakens the impact of women’s grassroots peace initiatives and limits the scope for inclusive, community-driven solutions. Prior to the coup in 2023, Nigerien women were already subject to patriarchal norms that restricted their participation in the public sphere, but the coup has further exacerbated this predicament (Stropasolas, 2025; UN Women, 2023). Increased militarisation has clearly led to a consolidation of systemic and structural discrimination against women. This relationship between militarised political contexts and the consolidation of patriarchal norms is manifested in this skew in gender relations.

Deterioration of human security

Following UCGs, there has also been a clear deterioration in human security. This includes an increased rate of gender-based violence, and a higher incident of forced and child marriages as the education sector suffers from the military government’s lack of focus on development (Zuva & Ojo, 2023). This follows from the feminist notion that militarised societies spend more on the military, whilst reducing expenditure for sectors such as education and healthcare. These reductions affect social welfare services and, by extension, women peacebuilders who rely on these services for some of their work. At the same time, an increase in conflict increases the problems that women peacebuilders have to address, such as rates of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). In Chad, the TMC’s restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly subjected civil society actors to suppressive tactics such as arrests and violence, which directly limited the space for women-led CSO advocacy work (Human Rights Watch, 2024). For instance, women activists in N’Djamena organised peaceful demonstrations in October of 2022, demanding accountability for state-led violence against civilians, but security forces violently dispersed the protests, leading to several arrests and threats

against women leaders (Amnesty International, 2023). This demonstrates how militarised societies seek to close down civic space, further affecting women's participation in grassroots peace work.

Repression of women's rights

Increased militarisation negatively affects the protection and promotion of women's rights. This makes it increasingly difficult for women to engage actively in public activities, such as peacebuilding. As UCGs attempt to close down civic space, women peacebuilders are forced to find alternative ways to continue their peace work. This is especially the case because women's rights are often the first to be shelved by repressive regimes, which deny women's agency (Olaitan, 2024). For example, in Chad during the transition process coordinated by the TMC, the number of female ministers in the cabinet was reduced (Kindzeka 2024). This was heavily criticised by women leaders. For example, Amina Tidjanii Yaya, coordinator of Voix De La Femme, a Chadian women's rights organisation, states, "Female leaders and activists do not understand why Chad's new prime minister decided to reduce the number of female ministers from twelve to eight" (quoted in Kindeka, 2024). Similarly, women's organisations in Niger note that women have been excluded from political leadership following the July 2023 coup (Stropasolas 2025). After UCGs, when militarisation based on hegemonic masculinity requires women to play a minimal role in the public sphere, women find themselves excluded from decision-making in politics and peacebuilding.

Lack of support and access to resources

The impact of UCGs on women's access to resources and support for women's peace initiatives is also a major challenge. Merkel (2021, p. 6) notes that one of the key factors contributing to the gaps in the implementation of the WPS agenda is "the lack of funding for women's organisations working in grassroots peacebuilding." Limitations of funding are especially stark in conflict situations. Moreover, the work of women peacebuilders in fragile contexts takes an immense psychological and emotional toll. Many women in this field lack the support they require after experiencing high levels of trauma from witnessing firsthand the devastating effects of war, displacement, and sexual violence (Zuva & Ojo, 2023). However, there are no adequate support systems for local women peacebuilders due to their unique contexts and their erasure from formal peace processes. Prior to UCGs, women peacebuilders were not privy to adequate support and access to resources as part of the broader issues that women in grassroots peacebuilding face. Hassia Issa attests that "In Niger and the Sahel in general, you need a lot of financial resources to be able to do what you want, to be able to campaign

and convince people to vote for you. So, the obstacle of financial resources and social norms limits women's participation" (quoted in Stropasolas 2025). This issue is exacerbated after UCGs as military governments increase military spending, remove accountability mechanisms, and reduce spending on social services (Enloe, 1983).

Conclusion

UCGs, such as those that have occurred in Niger and Chad, clearly generate a number of challenges for women's participation in grassroots peacebuilding. These challenges stem from repression of freedoms and rights, systemic and structural gender discrimination, heightened violence and increased security threats, and limited access to resources. This politically fragile context reduces the already limited space for women peacebuilders to work, particularly those working at the grassroots level. A feminist approach to the analysis of militarism highlights how the challenges women peacebuilders face as a consequence of UCGs stem from the links between militarism, patriarchy, and gender inequality. Concerted efforts are required to address the recent wave of UCGs and wider conflict in order to alleviate the challenges women peacebuilders face. This year is the 25th anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on WPS. The agenda informs international and regional advocacy efforts promoting the participation of women in peace and security. However, several factors impede the actualisation of the WPS agenda, especially women's grassroots peacebuilding.

Grounded in a feminist analysis of militarism, this paper argues that UCGs make it increasingly difficult for women to foster peace at the grassroots level. This occurs as a result of increased security threats, suppression of freedoms, regression in women's rights, and consolidation of systemic and structural discrimination. This paper highlights several interrelated challenges. Firstly, it argues that the suppression of constitutional freedoms through a UCG restricts civic space. This curtails the work of women peacebuilders, who require a conducive political climate to thrive. Secondly, due to increased security threats, UCGs expose women grassroots peacebuilders to the double hurdle of having to first navigate political fragility caused by heightened violence and, second, engender peace. The paper finds that increased militarisation deepens gender inequality as a result of the patriarchal norms inherent to military institutions. Policy discussions related to women in peacebuilding must acknowledge how repressive regimes and UCGs contribute to their underrepresentation.

Although the AU and ECOWAS have taken some action against UCGs in the Sahel, we recommend a shift towards a human security-based approach rather than a condemnatory approach. This should be guided towards facilitating the transition of these governments to a democratic one. At the same time, there is also an urgent need for awakened consciousness by these regional organisations to enhance the effectiveness of women's grassroots peacebuilding efforts. Deliberate strategies that promote their inclusion, security, and access to resources must also be adopted. One of the most important steps for achieving this would be institutionalising women's participation in peace processes. Security sector reforms should also incorporate gender-sensitive approaches to ensure women in peacebuilding are not criminalised. At the same time, stronger policies must be put in place to protect women peace activists from harassment, violence, and intimidation. Supporting local women's networks and peace committees is equally important for driving grassroots-driven solutions to security challenges. Addressing the challenges that women peacebuilders face is essential for sustaining and expanding women's contributions to peace and security. Without greater support and protection, women peacebuilders will continue to face barriers that undermine their ability to create lasting stability and reconciliation in Africa.

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