

# Women and the Katiba Macina in Central Mali

*Natasja Rupesinghe & Yida Diall*

## Key points

- ⇒ Controlling gender relations and women is central to the Katiba Macina's rule, and helps the insurgency show its authority in the community.
- ⇒ Women have not been actively recruited as combatants, but they participate in the insurgency in multi-faceted ways. They play key supporting roles, for instance as wives or as informants in an informal surveillance system.
- ⇒ Women are more likely to participate when they are bonded to the insurgency through family ties.

## 1. Introduction

The Katiba Macina, is a jihadist insurgency active in central Mali since approximately 2015. Over the past years, it has progressively established deep social control over the population, by providing some rudimentary governance services in areas long-neglected by the state as well as through its coercive practices.<sup>1</sup> Some research has examined the emergence and dynamics of the insurgency,<sup>2</sup> but few have thus far addressed the gendered aspects of its rule, and specifically its policies towards, and treatment of, women.

This policy brief examines the local rule of the Katiba Macina from a gender perspective and addresses the question of women's participation in the insurgency. It is based on field research conducted in Bamako in April and May 2019, and several research visits to Mali between 2017-2019. It draws on 23 in-depth, semi-structured interviews and three focus groups (including two with displaced women). The interview pool consisted predominantly of Fulani community members from Mopti (although people from the Dogon and Bozo ethnic

groups were also interviewed), including displaced persons and seasonal workers currently residing in Bamako, but which have direct experience living in areas under jihadist influence.<sup>3</sup> Therefore the representativeness of this study is limited. Gaining access to women, particularly those who are in some way associated with, or living in areas where 'jihadists' are active, is extremely challenging and imposes considerable risks. This has limited the type of interviewees we have had access to. Thus, the main purpose of this study is to illustrate some aspects of a very complex picture.

The key findings can be summarised as follows. First, controlling gender relations is an important element of the Katiba Macina's rule, allowing the insurgency to demonstrate its authority over the community. Second, its rule has also had a gendered impact, which has restricted livelihoods in ways that threaten not only women's socio-economic security, but also their way of life and identity. Third, women, like in most other jihadist insurgencies, are not recruited as combatants,<sup>4</sup> but have multi-faceted supporting roles as wives of 'men of the bush' and as informants in informal surveillance mechanisms that pass on information and contribute to maintaining law and order. Moreover, women are more likely to actively participate when they are bonded to the insurgency through familial ties.

## The Katiba Macina insurgency in Central Mali

The Katiba Macina has become one of the most prominent jihadist insurgencies in Mali. It is led by a well-known Fulani Islamic preacher, Hamadoun Kouffa from Mopti, who over decades has amassed a large following in the region. While it is linked to the Al Qaeda-affiliated *Group for Support of Islam and Muslims*, its agenda is primarily local in nature.<sup>5</sup> Initially it claimed to restore the Dina – a theocratic Fulani empire (1818-1862) established through a jihad led by Shékou Amadou. In 2015 it launched a campaign of targeted violence to force state representatives to flee the region. In doing so, it was able to expand its influence, strategically establishing its strongholds in the inundated zones of Mopti.

The insurgency has exploited widespread grievances against what they perceive as a predatory and corrupt state, which has not been able to deliver basic services, manage inter-communal conflicts or provide equitable justice.<sup>6</sup> It has recruited from all ethnic groups but has had most traction among Fulani pastoralists.<sup>7</sup> Its membership consists of mainly young male combatants residing in training camps located in the bush, ‘*markaz*’, which is why they are known as ‘men of the bush’. It resembles a decentralised network of fairly autonomous battalions (‘*katibas*’), with Kouffa providing directives from the top,<sup>8</sup> surrounded by a hierarchy of chiefs who manage the training camps.

### Gender and the rule of the Katiba Macina

The Katiba Macina has become entrenched among the local population by applying a combination of coercive methods, instrumentalising inter-communal cleavages, and providing some basic governance services.<sup>9</sup> Drawing on a Salafist-jihadi inspired ideology, they impose Sharia law on the population, proselytising and preaching at mosques to spread their religious message. They have suspended unpopular tax collection and have reintroduced the ‘*zakat*’, an Islamic custom that requires families to give up a portion of one’s wealth to the poor,<sup>10</sup> as one means of financing their activities. They have established a crude system of justice in the bush camps delivered by ‘*qadis*’ (Islamic judges), and lowered fees for non-indigenous pastoralists to access dry-season pastures in the Delta. Civil liberties and traditional customs such as smoking, drinking, music, cultural festivities, civil marriages have been forbidden.<sup>11</sup>

The insurgency has introduced policies targeting the visibility and mobility of women. They have enforced strict Islamic dress codes, such as the ‘*niqab*’, to shield women from view outside of the immediate family, in a region where women have generally worn headscarves or have not been covered at all. Traditional customs, like tattooing around the mouth of Fulani women after marriage, is prohibited, in keeping with the principles against bodily altering.<sup>12</sup> Women are no longer allowed to bathe in the river unclothed. They have been forced to stay at home and stop working. In some areas, women have been prevented from going to the weekly market for commerce or are confined to designated women-only areas where they must be fully veiled. Women who are not veiled have been publicly scolded, or hit with branches, sometimes with their husbands, instilling a sense of fear and forcing them to conform with the rules.

The Katiba Macina seeks to control gender relations in order to enforce its rule. Through banning ‘unlawful mixing of sexes’ (*inkhilat*),<sup>13</sup> they have tried to impose gender segregation. Women are not allowed to travel alone and must be accompanied by a male family relative as their guardian.<sup>14</sup> Fulani women have been forbidden from selling milk ‘door-to-door’ in calabashes, which is claimed to increase promiscuity.<sup>15</sup> Prohibiting the *Yaaral* and *Degal* festivals, which mark the crossing of the river during transhumance, aims to explicitly prevent young men from mingling and spending time with young unmarried women.<sup>16</sup>

Without the means to hold territory or set up comprehensive state-like institutions, controlling women and gender

relations are ways through which the insurgency very visibly displays its authority over the community. By punishing disobedience, they try to force the community to obey and follow their mode of rule. Ultimately though, it is difficult to surmise whether there is an explicit strategy behind these actions, or whether the jihadists are merely mimicking other jihadist insurgent practices.

These rules, which are explicitly gendered, impact on men and women differently. For example, Fulani women are no longer able to manage and sell milk, which is their primary responsibility in the family and community, and principal livelihood activity.<sup>17</sup> With these revenues, women buy food, clothes, basic amenities, and other consumer products for the household.<sup>18</sup> Restricting mobility means that women have not been able to provide for their households, putting families in a very precarious situation. It has also challenged how women define their social worth and identity, because the management of milk is a key identity marker.<sup>19</sup> As one woman described, ‘if there is no milk, you are no longer a woman, if there is no milk, you are no longer Fulani.’<sup>20</sup>

## 2. Women’s roles in the Katiba Macina

### *Non-combatants*

While classical Islamic texts are ambiguous with regard to the role of women in jihad, they rarely call on women to actively participate in combat. Women tend to be ascribed ‘supportive and facilitative roles, as mothers, daughters and wives of male fighters.’<sup>21</sup> The ‘*female jihad*’ it is argued, has been confined to the domestic sphere, where women are expected to educate, support and encourage their male family members.<sup>22</sup> While a few modern jihadist insurgencies like Da’esh, Al Qaeda and Boko Haram have re-interpreted these texts to legitimise women’s recruitment to combat roles, especially as suicide bombers, the majority of women who participate are confined to auxiliary roles.

Like in other Salafist-inspired jihadist insurgencies, who tend to exclude women from *jihad* through warfighting,<sup>23</sup> women in the Katiba Macina have not been recruited as combatants. Kouffa appears to uphold the principle of exempting women from participating in combat, but still underscores the collective responsibility of participating in *jihad*, and the different roles that women and men can play to that end. For example, he states in one of his preachings:

*‘Jihad is not mandatory for three types of people. That is, women, children and sick people (...) Anyone who can go to the field or graze their animals must do jihad.’*<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, he clearly still expects everyone (including women) to support ‘*jihad*’:

*‘to support jihad to bring about a change is obligatory for everyone, men and women’* and goes on to say ‘*luckily there are many different means of supporting jihad, you can even be in your house and support us simply by praying. You can also hide yourself somewhere and provide financial support.*’<sup>25</sup>

### *Wives of the 'bushmen'*

Marrying women has also been part of their strategy to form bonds with the community. The Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb also used this approach in northern Mali to facilitate their social integration.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, interviewees from different villages indicated that this varies at the local level. Some spoke of many women in the village marrying jihadists, others expressed that these marriages only occur by force, while some argued they have not heard of many such marriages.<sup>27</sup> One man explained that in his village, the chief had succeeded in blocking the jihadist's attempt to marry women.<sup>28</sup> In other areas, where the jihadists have developed a high level of integration with the community over time, anecdotal evidence suggested that the 'jihadists' were idolised because of their elevated social status.

While most women who have married jihadist combatants tend to stay in the village, a number of them have reportedly been brought to female-only designated areas near the bush training camps. Some 'committed' women live with their husbands in the bush.<sup>29</sup> Here, as one community member described, they function mostly as 'cleaning ladies' for the combatants, cooking, cleaning and washing clothes.<sup>30</sup> The wives of the jihadists are however put under much stricter control than others. They are not allowed to leave the house or to be seen in public. To what degree these women can be considered to actively participate in the insurgency remains an open and complicated question. Some may be ideologically committed and their participation could be more voluntary, while others do what is asked of them, but still engage in silent resistance.

In this way, the Katiba Macina creates a 'society in the bush' where women and men contribute to the sustenance of the insurgency in different ways.<sup>31</sup> While men are trained for combat and other functions, women provide the support needed to make life in the bush bearable, and to maintain the war machine.<sup>32</sup> Keeping women close to the bush camps could be one way of attracting young male combatants and to keep them content. But it could also be for more ideological reasons: creating a society in the bush isolates the combatants from their previous life and helps cultivate the new jihadist identity.

### *Women as informants*

Women have played a crucial role as informants. The Katiba Macina has developed an informal system of surveillance, by appointing individuals known as 'dormant cells' (*cellules dormantes*), or crooks ('*les escros*'), who tend to be supported by a circle of accomplices.<sup>33</sup> Women are considered to be effective in these roles, because they are more discrete than their male counterparts. Their primary tasks include monitoring and informing on the community and collecting money from those who cannot fight. If someone has disobeyed the rules, the jihadists will then arrive the next day on motorbikes and either issue a warning, punish the individual on the spot or kidnap them to the bush for a few days to determine their punishment. These '*escros*' are often more feared than the combatants themselves, because of the perception that they could be anywhere and 'nobody knows who is whom'.<sup>34</sup>

Following the re-deployment of the army in some areas of Mopti, which restricted the combatants' freedom of movement, and forced them to retreat to their bush enclaves, women have played a role in supplying combatants with basic amenities. In isolated cases, ardent female supporters may facilitate recruitment (by encouraging people to join) or may preach and proselytise on behalf of the insurgency. In one rare preaching circulated as an audio message, a female supposedly preaching about 'jihad', appears to put forward similar ideas as those espoused by Kouffa, about women's supportive roles as wives:

*'My dear Muslim brothers and sisters hate anyone who does not love the God. We women can rise up. How do we rise up? Our husbands have risen up to fight jihad, we women must also obey them. We women cannot go to fight but thank God our husbands are still fighting.'*<sup>35</sup>

Our research suggests that women take on specialised tasks in support of the insurgency when they are 'socially bonded' to the jihadists through familial ties.<sup>36</sup> Women have not tended to be recruited, even for auxiliary roles independently. The majority of recruitment also takes place at mosques, where women are not present. Several interviewees explained that if women do participate as informants, it tends to be because one of their family members has joined. Others noted that women are involved 'by implication', and out of loyalty to her husband or a family member who has joined the insurgency.<sup>37</sup>

### **Conclusion**

This policy brief has examined the rule of the Katiba Macina from a gender perspective, and in particular looked at their policies towards women. Controlling the visibility and mobility of women, and imposing gender segregation is one effective way of visibly demonstrating their authority at the local level. Given that they have not built up territorial control or comprehensive formal institutions and are largely confined to bush enclaves, this creates the perception that they rule the population. Policies that target women and confine them to the domestic sphere, have put family livelihoods under strain, and undoubtedly make women more vulnerable and marginalised. Nevertheless, it is important not to overstate the 'women as victims' narrative, or remove their agency, given that women participate in subtle, but diverse ways to support or resist the war effort.

## Endnotes

1. Natasja Rupesinghe and Morten Bøås. *Local Drivers of Violent Extremism in Central Mali*. UNDP Policy Brief, Addis Ababa: UNDP, May 2019.
2. Morten Bøås, 'Crime, Coping, and Resistance in the Mali-Sahel Periphery,' *African Security* 8, 4 (2015); Luca Raineri and Francesco Strazzari, 'State, Secession, and Jihad: The Micropolitical Economy of Conflict in Northern Mali,' *African Security* 8, 4 (2015); Morten Bøås and Kevin Dunn, *Africa's Insurgents: navigating an evolving landscape* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2017); Tor A. Benjaminsen & Boubacar Ba, 'Why do pastoralists in Mali join jihadist groups? A political ecological explanation,' *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 46, 1 (2018); Rupesinghe and Bøås, *Local Drivers of Violent Extremism in Central Mali*.
3. All interviews have been anonymised to protect the identity of participants for security reasons.
4. Nelly Lahoud, 'The Neglected Sex: The Jihadis' Exclusion of Women from Jihad', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 26:5 (2014): 780-802.
5. Bøås and Dunn, *Africa's Insurgents: navigating an evolving landscape*; Rupesinghe and Bøås. *Local Drivers of Violent Extremism in Central Mali*.
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9. Ibid.
10. Marjam de Bruijn, 'The Sahelian crisis and the poor: the role of Islam in social security among Fulbe pastoralists, central Mali,' *European Journal of Anthropology* 22/23, 47 (1994): 51.
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12. Wendy Wilson-Fall, 'The Motive of the Motif: Tattoos of Fulbe Pastoralists' *African Arts* 47, 1 (Spring 2014): 54-65.
13. Brynjar Lia, 'The Jihadi Movement and Rebel Governance: A reassertion of a Patriarchal Order?' *Die Welt des Islams*, 57 (3-4), 2017: 458-479, 464.
14. This has also been noted by International Crisis Group, *Speaking with the "Bad Guys": Towards Dialogue with Central Mali's Jihadists*. Crisis Group Africa Report No. 276, International Crisis Group: Brussels, 28 May 2019, 18.
15. Two Fulani community members interviewed in Bamako, 30 April 2019 from Toguere Combé, 'cercles' of Ténénkou and Dogo in the district of Youwarou. These districts are both considered to be under quasi jihadist occupation.
16. Interview with Fulani pastoralist trader, Bamako, 7 May 2019.
17. Mirjam De Bruijn, 'A pastoral women's economy in crisis: the Fulbe in central Mali,' *Nomadic Peoples* 36, 37 (1995): 84-104, 90.
18. Ibid., 91.
19. Ibid.
20. Focus group with displaced women from Bankass and Koro, Bamako, 1 May 2019.
21. Seran de Leede. *Women in Jihad: A Historical Perspective*. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, the Hague, 2018.
22. Katharina Von Knop, 'The Female Jihad: Al Qaeda's Women', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30, 5 (2017): 397-414, 410.
23. Lahoud, 'The Neglected Sex: The Jihadis' Exclusion of Women from Jihad', 783
24. Preaching from Hamadou Kouffa, estimated 2016/2017. The preaching has been translated from Fulani to French to English, retrieved through audio messages which circulate on WhatsApp.
25. Ibid.
26. Bøås. 'Crime, Coping, and Resistance in the Mali-Sahel Periphery', 299-319, 312
27. Interviewee, community storyteller (*griot*) from Dialloubé, 3 May 2019, Bamako.
28. Focus group with displaced men from Mopti, 6 May 2019.
29. FIDH/AMDH, *In Central Mali, Civilian Populations Are Caught Between Terrorism and Counterterrorism: Fact-finding Mission Report*, FIDH/AMDH: Bamako, November 2018, 36.
30. Interviewee, community storyteller (*griot*), 3 May 2019, Bamako, from Dialloubé.
31. Zoe Marks, 'Gendered Dynamics in Rebel Groups', in Rachel Woodward and Claire Duncanson (eds.) *The Palgrave International Handbook of Gender and the Military* (Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2017), 442.
32. Ibid.
33. See also International Crisis Group, *Speaking with the Bad Guys*, 5.
34. Phone interview with NGO worker in Mopti, Bamako, January 2018. This view was expressed by several interviewees who have lived in areas under jihadist influence in our interviews in April-May 2019.
35. Preaching of a suspected female 'jihadist' in the circle of Douentza, date unknown. The preaching has been translated from Fulani to French to English, retrieved through audio messages which circulate on WhatsApp.
36. Interviews with community members from Mopti in Bamako, 24-30 April 2019.
37. Interview, representative from Djenné, Bamako, 25 April 2019; Interviewee, community storyteller (*griot*), 3 May 2019, Bamako, from Dialloubé; Focus group, displaced men from Koro and Bankass, 6 May 2019.

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Norwegian Institute  
of International  
Affairs



NUPI

Norwegian Institute of International Affairs  
C.J. Hambros plass 2D  
Postboks 7024 St. Olavs Plass, 0130 OSLO  
www.nupi.no | post@nupi.no

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Natasja Rupesinghe is a Research Fellow in the Peace, Conflict and Development Group at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs. Rupesinghe's work focuses predominantly on conflict dynamics, insurgencies and peace operations in Africa, particularly in the Sahel region.

Yida Seydou Diall is a doctoral candidate in private law at the Higher Institute of Training and Applied Research in Bamako. Since 2013 he also works as a temporary lecturer at the University of Legal and Political Sciences in Bamako. He is an independent consultant in the field of security and migration in Mali and the Sahel.

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