

**Security Council**

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**Letter dated 7 July 2025 from the Permanent Representatives of
Denmark, Sierra Leone and the United Kingdom of Great Britain
and Northern Ireland to the United Nations addressed to the
Secretary-General**

Denmark and Sierra Leone, as Co-Chairs of the Informal Expert Group on Women and Peace and Security and in close cooperation with the United Kingdom, would like to share the summary note of the meeting of the Informal Expert Group on the situation in the Sahel (see annex).

We would be grateful if the present letter and its annex could be circulated as a document of the Security Council.

(Signed) Christina Markus **Lassen**
Permanent Representative of Denmark to the United Nations

(Signed) Michael Imran **Kanu**
Permanent Representative of Sierra Leone to the United Nations

(Signed) Barbara **Woodward**
Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom to the United Nations



Annex to the letter dated 7 July 2025 from the Permanent Representatives of Denmark, Sierra Leone and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

Informal Expert Group on Women and Peace and Security of the Security Council

Summary of the meeting held on 12 June 2025 on the situation in the Sahel

On 12 June 2025, the Informal Expert Group on Women and Peace and Security convened its first meeting on the situation in the Sahel region. The members of the Security Council were briefed by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), Leonardo Santos Simão, and the Special Coordinator for development in the Sahel, Abdoulaye Mar Dieye, accompanied by United Nations colleagues from the region. The briefings were followed by an overview of key recommendations for the Security Council by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) and additional observations on conflict-related sexual violence by the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict.

Questions from members of the Security Council

Members of the Security Council raised several questions regarding women's participation and civic space in the Sahel region, as well as whether there had been any recent positive developments in the situation of women and girls in the region. They requested information on United Nations efforts to support women's political participation and women's mediation efforts at the local level, including through the region's rapid response team of women mediators, and asked whether UNOWAS was working with governments to protect women and girls targeted by violent extremist groups. Other questions were focused on how and whether gender-specific protection needs were being integrated into counter-terrorism strategies in the region, whether governments in the region had taken measures to address the impacts of climate change on women and girls and whether the region's national action plans on women and peace and security included measures to hold perpetrators of conflict-related sexual violence accountable. Lastly, Security Council members asked about development and humanitarian financing and the prospects for peace in the region, as well as whether the recently created consultation framework to coordinate efforts on the promotion of women's rights and gender equality among Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger had progressed, and whether the United Nations had been able to raise the women and peace and security agenda in its dialogues with the Central Sahel countries.

Overview of the situation

- The Sahel region is grappling with intersecting political, security and economic challenges compounded by the impacts of climate change and the proliferation of violent extremism and terrorism in the Central Sahel. These crises are having a devastating impact on civilians, especially women and girls. Women and girls are directly and indirectly affected by the activities of violent extremist groups, such as through the rigorous social rules imposed by non-State armed groups that suppress women's human rights, the abduction of women and girls by non-State armed groups, widespread sexual and gender-based violence, and

attacks on schools and hospitals. Forced recruitment by non-State armed groups, including forced recruitment of children and the use of child soldiers, continues.

- Between 2020 and 2025, the number of internally displaced persons and refugees in the Sahel region has more than doubled, from 4.5 million in 2020 to over 9.2 million in 2025. Sixty per cent of them are women and girls, and they often lack access to basic services, including education and healthcare, and economic opportunities. Due to the conflict in the Sudan, the number of refugees in Chad, for example, has been increasing, with high numbers of single mothers, widows, mothers and unaccompanied adolescent girls arriving in the Goz Amir and Ourang camps.
- The Sahel region is one of the three areas in the world most likely to collapse due to environmental stress, with temperatures rising 1.5 times faster than the global average and with heat-related mortality estimated to increase by four times by 2080. Fifty-two million people in West Africa and the Sahel are projected to be food insecure between June and August 2025. The region is also struggling with access to safe drinking water.
- Over the past two years, development assistance to the Sahel region has decreased by almost 20 per cent. This has disproportionately affected women's education, health and livelihood programmes. In Burkina Faso, for instance, funding cuts have led to the suspension of 45 per cent of community-led women's empowerment projects. In the Niger, the funding cuts coincided with a 37 per cent increase in maternal deaths in rural areas, mainly due to the collapse of donor-funded clinics, highlighting the impact on gender equality.
- There have been some recent initiatives aimed at building trust among the countries in the region. For instance, the leaders of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) met with the authorities of Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger in May 2025, marking the first official summit between the two blocs since Mali, Burkina Faso and the Niger announced their withdrawal from ECOWAS. The meeting was focused on re-establishing diplomatic dialogue and exploring avenues for continued regional cooperation. Key outcomes included a shared commitment to maintaining the free movement of people and goods, discussions on coordinated security efforts against terrorism in the Sahel, and an openness to legal and economic collaboration despite political differences. The talks signaled a cautious but important step towards preserving regional integration and addressing common security and development challenges. In addition, the Accra Initiative, launched in 2017, brings together the countries of the Central Sahel and the coastal States to counter the spread of violent extremism and address transnational organized crime.

Women's participation in decision-making and conflict resolution

- Despite the adoption of quotas, legislation and strategies in many countries in the region to protect women and girls' rights and to promote their participation in decision-making, peace processes and conflict prevention, women remain underrepresented in peace processes, security institutions and political positions across the region. Pervasive structural barriers, including economic exclusion, discriminatory norms and insecurity, continue to hinder women's full, equal and meaningful participation. Civic and political space in the region is shrinking.
- In 2024, women held 27.3 per cent of parliamentary seats in sub-Saharan Africa, a 0.8 per cent increase from 2023. In Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, Chad and Gabon, women's representation ranges between 18 and 30 per cent. In Nigeria, women hold only 2.8 per cent of the seats in the Senate and 3.9 per cent in the

House of Representatives. Despite long-standing efforts, no law in the country promotes women's participation in decision-making. In Sierra Leone, women's participation increased to 29.5 per cent after the promulgation of the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act. In Benin, women's participation reached 26.6 per cent through the introduction of reserved seats for women. Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea-Bissau are expected to hold elections in the last quarter of 2025.

- There have been some other positive developments in the region. In the Niger, the creation of the new Ministry of Population, Social Action and National Solidarity in April 2025 reinstates functions previously abolished in the area of gender equality and the promotion of women, and a national strategy for women's economic empowerment was updated. In addition, the Government intends to establish a national women's council (*conseil national des femmes*), a platform for the discussion of women's issues and the proposal of solutions for women's inclusion in decision-making. In July 2024, the President of Ghana signed an affirmative action (gender equality) bill into law mandating that women hold 50 per cent of public and decision-making positions by 2030. Its full implementation will be a critical test for the new Government. In the Gambia, a bill aimed at repealing the 2015 ban on female genital mutilation was defeated in July 2024.
- Most countries in the region have adopted national action plans for the implementation of Security Council resolution [1325 \(2000\)](#) on women and peace and security; however, many such plans remain critically underfunded and national budgets rarely allocate sufficient resources for their implementation.
- In September 2023, the Working Group on Women, Youth, Peace and Security in West Africa and the Sahel, coordinated by UNOWAS and UN-Women, established a West Africa and Sahel women's rapid response team to support women's participation in peace and political dialogues and crisis response initiatives in the region, including through rapid deployment in emerging conflict situations. The trained women are active in mediation and peacebuilding in their countries and communities. However, the team's members have not yet been deployed to other conflict contexts due to lack of funding.
- Over 1,500 women mediators from Burkina Faso to Côte d'Ivoire trained by the United Nations and ECOWAS are facilitating peace dialogues, negotiating humanitarian access and building trust within communities. They often work in areas where State institutions are absent.
- UNOWAS continues to organize an annual high-level dialogue between the Special Representative of the Secretary-General and regional women leaders to create institutional space to amplify women's voices and influence in policymaking and decision-making.
- Under the framework of the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel, UN-Women, UNOWAS and the Office of the Special Coordinator for Development in the Sahel have developed and are currently implementing the Sahel Gender Compact, an initiative aimed at integrating gender equality and women's empowerment into development and crisis management initiatives in the Sahel, including through enhancing women's participation in decision-making processes and ensuring their safety in crisis contexts.

Sexual and gender-based violence, including conflict-related sexual violence

- Trends and patterns of conflict-related sexual violence in several countries in the region, particularly in Burkina Faso, Mali and Nigeria, are very concerning. In Burkina Faso, the United Nations has documented sexual violence in the context of abduction of women and girls living in remote and rural areas while carrying out essential livelihood activities. There has been an increase in such incidents since 2023. In 2024, most of these cases were committed by Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin.
- In Mali, there are reports of rape, gang rape, forced marriage and sexual slavery, along with concern about the situation of children born of conflict-related sexual violence. Monitoring, reporting and analysis on conflict-related sexual violence has become significantly more challenging due to the closure of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali and the dramatic reduction of the United Nations footprint in Mali. This has also negatively affected the delivery of services for sexual violence survivors. In Nigeria, there are reports of rape, forced marriage and other forms of sexual violence, particularly in the context of abduction of women and girls and recruitment of children by Boko Haram (Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad) and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP).
- In the Sahel region, non-State armed groups use sexual violence as a tactic to gain territorial control and intimidate populations, and as a means of rewarding fighters and incentivizing new recruits through forced marriage. In Nigeria, some families have resorted to forced marriage as a coping mechanism to avoid abduction. Sexual violence is an integral part of the political economy of these terrorist groups, and fighters sustain themselves by selling, trading and trafficking women.
- Access to justice and life-saving service delivery for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, including conflict-related sexual violence, remains very limited across the Central Sahel.
- The annexes of annual reports of the Secretary-General on conflict-related sexual violence include six parties, all of them non-State actors, that are responsible for patterns of rape or other forms of sexual violence in the Sahel region. Four of the six parties are also covered within the ambit of the Security Council's work on counter-terrorism and the sanctions regime pursuant to Council resolution [1267 \(1999\)](#). The adoption of Security Council resolution [2734 \(2024\)](#), which introduced provisions concerning sanctions designations and reporting on acts, patterns and trends of conflict-related sexual violence by individuals, groups and entities affiliated to Al-Qaida and Da'esh, can enhance prevention and deterrence.

Recommendations¹

The Security Council should extend the mandate of UNOWAS and request the Secretary-General to ensure that its functions continue to articulate women and peace and security priorities. In addition, in any other decisions and statements on the Sahel region, the members of the Security Council should:

- Urge all relevant actors in the countries of the region, including governments and regional and sub-regional organizations, to ensure women's full, equal,

¹ These recommendations are prepared by UN-Women as the secretariat of the Informal Expert Group, in consultation with other United Nations entities, including the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict.

meaningful and safe participation in transitional structures, governments and peace and security efforts; ensure the full implementation of affirmative action laws; and safeguard an enabling environment for women's organizations and networks.

- Reiterate the need for gender equality to be duly prioritized in national and regional peace and security planning, early warning, and prevention initiatives.
- Call on the authorities in each country to duly investigate reports of sexual and gender-based violence, including conflict-related sexual violence, and allegations of abuses by security forces, and urge all relevant actors to adopt measures to prevent such violations and ensure that survivors have access to comprehensive services.
- Recall the recommendation of the Secretary-General that at least 15 per cent of funding from the international community for efforts to prevent violent extremism be targeted specifically at initiatives that advance gender equality.
- Call for the development of gender- and age-responsive climate risk assessments, strategies and initiatives to strengthen women's roles in climate action and sustainable peace, building upon the recognition of the impacts of climate change on women, peace and security in Security Council resolution [2242 \(2015\)](#).
- Call for the roll-out of regional monitoring, reporting and analysis arrangements on conflict-related sexual violence to provide the Security Council with timely and reliable information on incidents, trends and patterns of conflict-related sexual violence committed by United Nations-designated terrorist entities and individuals in the Sahel region.
- Call for the swift deployment of one or more women's protection advisers in UNOWAS to monitor and report on cross-regional trends and patterns of conflict-related sexual violence and to engage with involved parties to adopt time-bound commitments to address conflict-related sexual violence.
- Call for the strengthening of the capacity of the United Nations system in all countries in the Sahel region to work on gender equality and women's empowerment, including through the gender- and age-responsive delivery of humanitarian assistance, the protection of women and girls in conflict-affected areas and the promotion of women's participation in conflict resolution.

In addition, the members of the Security Council could:

- Urge the international community to fully fund humanitarian response plans in the region, with special attention given to addressing all forms of sexual and gender-based violence and stronger investments in sexual and reproductive healthcare, mental health and psychosocial support; access to education in emergencies; mainstreaming of gender equality throughout the humanitarian response; and ensuring women's participation throughout the humanitarian planning cycle.
- Call for international partners to provide direct, flexible and consistent funding to women-led and women's rights organizations to support local grass-roots peacebuilding efforts, livelihood opportunities and the delivery of humanitarian assistance, including through mechanisms such as the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund, the Peacebuilding Fund or the Spotlight Initiative.
- Support programmes that advance the implementation of the Sahel Gender Compact and of a charter on the girl child in the Sahel, and promote

concessional financing towards gender-sensitive recovery and integrated national financing frameworks with a strong focus on gender equality.

- Request the Council's subsidiary bodies, including the Counter-Terrorism Committee, to provide updates on the implementation of gender-related recommendations made in the Council's previous resolutions, recommendations and country assessments, including on women's representation in defence and security services; on the participation of gender experts and women's civil society organizations in the design and implementation of national policies to counter terrorism and violent extremism conducive to terrorism; on the investigation, prosecution and adjudication of terrorism cases involving sexual and gender-based violence and human trafficking; and on the return and reintegration of women and girls from areas controlled by designated terrorist organizations, with a focus on their needs and experiences.
 - Request relevant United Nations representatives, including the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, to share relevant information on incidents, patterns and trends of conflict-related sexual violence in the Sahel region with the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions [1267 \(1999\)](#), [1989 \(2011\)](#) and [2253 \(2015\)](#) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals groups, undertakings and entities.
 - Request an update from subregional organizations on their implementation of the women and peace and security agenda as part of their interventions.
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