



Women and the Peace Process in Mali

After the outbreak of civil war and a coup d'état in 2012, an internationally supported peace process was launched in 2013 to support Mali's transition. Peace negotiations were held in Algiers in 2014–2015, resulting in the signing of the Bamako Agreement between the government and rebel groups in May and June 2015. While the transitional period was originally designed to cover 2015–2017, the implementation of the Bamako Agreement has been slow and incomplete. Research has shown that conflict and its aftermath may sometimes offer a window of opportunity to reshape gender relations and promote women's rights (Tripp 2015). Further, commitments outlined in international frameworks such as UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security seek to promote women's participation in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Still, women have been marginalized throughout the Malian peace process and their inclusion has received little priority. This policy brief takes a look at women's inclusion throughout the different stages of the Malian peace process, and identifies some windows of opportunity for increasing women's participation and advancing their empowerment going forward.

Brief Points

- Throughout the Malian peace process, women's inclusion has not been a priority and women were marginalized during both peace negotiations and the implementation of the peace agreement.
- This marginalization has taken place despite mobilization by women's organizations, MINUSMA, and UN Women, and despite international frameworks such as UNSCR 1325, which both the international community and the Malian state have committed to.
- Further, there are national legal instruments and policies that can be drawn on to support the promotion of women both within the peace process and within the Malian state.
- The international community and Malian stakeholders should consider the delay in the peace process as an opportunity to promote women's participation.
- However, these opportunities must be seized before it is too late and the peace process moves onto the next stage.

Background on the Conflict

In 2012, Mali plunged into a crisis from which it has yet to recover, involving a coup d'état and a secessionist civil war in the north, followed by a deep political and humanitarian crisis. Tuareg uprisings in the northern part of the country have been a part of the political landscape in Mali for a long time. However, in early 2012, Tuareg rebels as well as foreign and local *mujahideen* occupied an increasing part of Mali's northern territory. At the same time, disgruntled junior officers in the capital Bamako improvised a coup d'état that ousted the already weakened president Amadou Toumani Touré. Combined, this led to the collapse of the Malian army and most of its institutions. On 6 April, the *Mouvement National de liberation de l'Azawad* (MNLA) occupied a large part of Mali's northern territory and declared its independence under the name of "Azawad" (Boutellis and Zahar 2017).

Faced with a political stalemate and a progressive worsening of the security situation, as well as the persistent Islamist threat in the north, France intervened militarily in January 2013 with *Opération Serval* on the Malian government's request. They successfully fought back Islamist groups and regained control of important town centres. The UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was authorized by the UN Security Council on 15 April 2013, and deployed on 1 July. MINUSMA has become known as the deadliest mission in UN history, and conducts its operations in parallel with other ongoing counter-terrorism operations.

The Ouagadougou Preliminary Agreement was signed on 18 June 2013 between the Malian government and two Tuareg armed groups. It established a ceasefire which made it possible to hold presidential and parliamentary elections in July and August 2013, with the election of Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta as president marking the return of constitutional order. The agreement, however, focused on short-term goals, and failed to address difficult issues regarding the future status of the northern territories and rebel combatants. Amidst increasing tensions and clashes in Kidal, Algeria began discussions with armed groups in northern Mali in January 2014. The Algiers negotiations took place in Algiers in five phases, with Algeria as chief mediator. The Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali

("Bamako Agreement") was signed in two turns in Bamako in May and June 2015 between the Malian government and two coalitions of armed groups, the Coordination (groups that took up arms against the government in 2012) and the Platform (groups that did not) (Boutellis & Zahar 2017).

The peace process has been criticized for being highly internationalized, rushed, and for reflecting the mediators' own interests, seeking to strengthen the institutions and actors of a corrupt political elite rather than to effectuate meaningful political change. It has been argued that the agreement prioritizes the return of the state authority to the north in military and security terms, without proper attention to the role of the state in delivering much needed basic services to the population. From day one, the negotiations were accused of lacking in inclusivity, with representatives from civil society, women's and youth groups struggling to access and influence the negotiations. Implementation of the agreement has been slow and difficult, with continued clashes between the parties in the north threatening the collapse of the peace process (Boutellis and Zahar 2017; International Crisis Group 2015).

Women's Rights and Roles in Mali

Mali has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), as well as the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol), without reservations. The Malian constitution of 1992 guarantees equal rights to all citizens regardless of sex, and Mali adopted a national gender policy in 2010. In 2012, Mali launched its first National Action Plan for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (1325 NAP). The second 1325 NAP was launched in 2015, for the period 2015–2017. Finally, a law securing a 30% gender quota in appointments to national institutions and legislative bodies was adopted in December 2015.

The population in Mali is socially and ethnically diverse, and Malian society is highly stratified and hierarchical based on age, gender, ethnicity and socio-economic background. Despite its great diversity, Malian society has been known for inter-ethnic and inter-religious tolerance. This is, however, changing with developments

related to the ongoing crisis. This diversity of Malian society also implies that the roles women play within their communities varies. While women among the Tuareg traditionally enjoy a strong position within their communities, women from many other groups hold a much more marginalized position (Lackenbauer et al. 2016).

While the Malian state is secular, Islam plays an important role in society and more than 90% of the population is Muslim. Islam in Mali has tended to display tolerant Islamic traditions that reflect mystical beliefs mixed with animist beliefs, occupying the personal and social sphere. More conservative versions of Islam have however gained a stronger position in Malian society over the past decade, with religious leaders exerting increasing influence over political life. Some of these powerful religious actors openly oppose measures to promote gender equality and women's rights, and have repeatedly succeeded in blocking legal reform (Lackenbauer et al. 2016). The government thus increasingly finds itself in a squeeze between donors pressuring for reform and religious leaders pressuring for conservatism.

Peace Negotiations

Even though Malian women are often excluded from formal decision-making processes, they are very active in associations and networks at the local level, and in NGOs at the national level. These organizations serve many different purposes depending on location and needs. During the crisis, women organized to put pressure on the political and military actors to end the conflict and return to the constitutional order. As negotiations were to take place in Ouagadougou, women were not invited. Without even knowing the venue of the negotiations upon their arrival, four women from civil society travelled to Ouagadougou to demand a seat at the table and an end to the fighting. Although they had to force their way in, they succeeded at both getting a seat at the table and ensuring many of their concerns were included in the agreement.

Despite mobilization by women's organizations, with support from UN Women and MINUSMA, women's inclusion in the Algiers negotiations was never given priority. Among approximately one hundred delegates from the three parties who participated in the negotiations, there were five women. Civil society participation in

Algiers was also limited, and the parties were not in favour of the participation of civil society in the actual negotiations. Still, delegations with representatives of refugees and the diaspora, traditional leaders, women, youth and religious leaders, were invited to one week of civil society “hearings” during the second phase of the negotiations (Boutellis and Zahar 2017: 40).

While the Bamako Agreement contains provisions regarding the protection of women and the fight against impunity, it remains vague on other issues pertaining to gender, women’s rights, and their participation in the peace process. However, some gains seem to have been achieved in 2015. One of these is the 2015 adoption of a 30% gender quota for appointed officials and electoral lists. Mali also adopted its second National Action Plan for the implementation of Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (1325 NAP) in June 2015. The NAP covers the period 2015–2017, which overlaps with the transitional period outlined in the Bamako Agreement, and was based on a list of priorities drafted during a meeting of 200 women in Bamako in June 2015. Efforts to implement the 1325 NAP are ongoing, but suffer from a lack of coordination and funding (United Nations 2017b).

Implementing the Bamako Agreement

The implementation of the Bamako Agreement has been slow and has suffered from regular setbacks. There seems to be a lack of political will among the parties, and insecurity is growing also in the centre of the country. Although the political dialogue continues, as recently as July 2017 there were renewed clashes between the armed group signatories.

The overall goal of the 1325 NAP is to promote women’s participation in the implementation of the Bamako agreement. Still, women have been underrepresented in the mechanisms tasked with implementing and monitoring the peace agreement, and many women express frustration about their continued exclusion from the peace process. Among these mechanisms are the Agreement Monitoring Committee (CSA), the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) Commission, the National Council on Security Sector Reform (SSR), the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission (CVJR), and the establishment of interim authorities in the North. There are currently no women



Young woman reads Peace Caravan flyer in Gao, Mali. Photo: UN Photo / Marco Dormino

on the Agreement Monitoring Committee, and only one woman has been appointed to the interim authorities. The DDR commission also has one woman, while the National Council on SSR has four women members. On average, women’s participation in the mechanisms for the implementation of the Bamako Agreement rests at approximately 3%. While most of the mechanisms have been established and are operational, much of the work remains.

The CVJR is the one mechanism where women’s representation is slightly better, and 4 out of 25 commissioners are women (16%). The CVJR is a truth commission tasked with investigating human rights violations (individual and collective), and especially those committed against women and children. This means paying special attention to gender-based and sexual violence. A sub-commission on gender has been established to support this special attention to gender in its mandate. The work of the CVJR is currently in the phase of collecting testimonies from victims, and according to the CVJR they have made sure that there are female officers in place to receive testimonies from female victims in all the regional offices that have been established throughout the country. Further, the members of the CVJR were nominated by different actors in Malian society, including civil society, which might partly explain why women are better represented in the CVJR than in other mechanisms.

While the 2015 quota law was relatively successfully applied to the 2016 municipal elections,

it is not being applied to the implementation mechanisms, and women’s activists in Bamako are currently trying to lobby for the application of the law to the mechanisms as well. However, the fact that Mali will hold presidential elections next year means that the current political climate is not favourable to the advancement of this agenda, particularly since the president will need the support of an increasingly conservative religious community in order to be re-elected. During fieldwork in Bamako, informants expressed that they do not expect to see high-level decision-making on issues related to women’s rights until after the elections.

What Do the Women Want?

Women’s activists in Bamako explain that during the initial phases of the Malian peace process, their requests were for the women to be included in the peace negotiations, and for their needs, experiences and recommendations to be considered.

Ever since the signing of the Bamako Agreement, Malian women have demanded a greater role for women in all instances of its implementation, and especially in the different mechanisms. They also asked that the presidency of the implementing bodies be allocated based on a principle of parity. When the quota law was adopted, this was considered a major gain, and many hoped this would create an opportunity to increase women’s participation in the peace process as well. While it is considered great progress, many women’s activists also

express disappointment that the law is not being applied, especially to the mechanisms for implementation of the peace agreement.

Women who are engaged with the peace process are also concerned that the contents of the Bamako Agreement are not known to many people in Mali, including women. They therefore consider it important to keep working on sensitizing the population to the contents of the agreement and the peace process. They further argue that women need to play a role in the monitoring of the implementation of the Bamako agreement. This can be done by making sure women are represented in the Agreement Monitoring Committee, as well as by creating parallel mechanisms that can monitor progress using gender indicators.

For many women's activists in Mali, the struggle to access the peace process appears to constitute a continuation of a long-term struggle to promote women's rights. Women were central in the popular demonstrations that led to the transition to democracy in the early 1990s, and after the transition there was an explosion in the number of women's associations who work to promote women's rights and empowerment. The quota law has a much broader application than the peace process, and it was something the women's movement had worked to achieve even before 2012. Further, women's activists have been working for many years to reform the family law, with recent efforts to propose a law against gender-based violence which would raise marriage age to 18 years and prohibit marital rape and other forms of gender-based violence.

Remaining Challenges

- **Continued insecurity**, especially in the northern and central regions, remains a challenge. Many of the interviewees pointed to how the security situation prevents

women from moving around safely, accessing markets, and organizing themselves across communities. Women are at risk of experiencing violence when leaving their homes or their communities.

While it is important that women's participation and rights are not neglected due to a focus on security, security is also central to women's participation and a functioning civil society that is able to keep its governments to account.

- **The exclusionary nature of the peace process** is not only a challenge for women's participation, but also for the prospects for peace and future stability of the country.
- **With presidential elections coming up in 2018**, we can expect little traction on women's rights before then, as the President will need the support of religious actors in order to be re-elected. Some of these religious actors openly oppose measures to promote gender equality and women's rights.
- **Existing legal frameworks and policies are not being implemented/applied.** Importantly, existing legislation on a quota for women's participation is in place, but its application is incomplete. The 1325 NAP has only been partially implemented, mainly due to a lack of coordination and funding.

Windows of Opportunity?

- Legislation and policy frameworks for women's representation and empowerment exist, but these are not being implemented.
- There is a large number of women with long experience from civil society and organizations that have been promoting

women's rights in Mali since the 1990s.

- The inclusion of gender in the mandate of the CVJR could be built upon and extended to other parts of the peace process.
- Many of the mechanisms for the implementation of the peace agreement still have much of their work ahead of them. The slow overall implementation of the Bamako Agreement should be considered as an opportunity to push for increased participation of women and other marginalized groups in the peace process. ■

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