The Production of Gendered Knowledge of War

Women and Epistemic Power

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Malian women's experiences with violent extremism

What is known and how is it known?

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Introduction

In policy-making and practice on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE), why are women always portrayed in gender-stereotypical and limited ways – either as victims or as saviours? Although early accounts and research on women's roles in violent extremism (re)produced essentialist accounts of women as victims (cf. Jackson et al. 2011; Poloni-Staudinger & Ortbals 2013), this has been challenged by feminist International Relations research that, since the 1980s, has focused on deconstructing essentializing views of women's roles in conflict (Elshtain 1987; Enloe 1989; Tickner 1992; Shepherd 2016). Research now increasingly recognizes that women take on multiple roles in extremist groups, including as perpetrators or supporters, and that their motivations are complex (Bloom & Lokmanoglu 2023). Still, despite these advances, the policies and programmes developed to prevent and counter violent extremism by governments, international organizations and NGOs continue to portray women's roles in highly gender-stereotypical ways (Skjelsbæk et al. 2020; Lorentzen 2021). In this chapter, I suggest that these limitations in how women's roles are understood are related to whose voices are heard, and how knowledge is produced and circulated. I show this through an analysis of the knowledge production on Malian women's experiences with violent extremism in the context of the global agenda on P/CVE.

Since 2012, Mali has been caught up in a complex conflict with Tuareg separatist groups and various jihadist groups affiliated with the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. The international community has engaged extensively in solving the conflict and stabilizing the country and surrounding region, including interventions specifically aimed at combating the threat of terrorism and extremism (Baldaro & Strazzari 2023). Despite these efforts, the situation has gradually deteriorated, and the levels of violence and insecurity have continued to increase. While the international community has been forced to shut down most of its military operations in the country, counterterrorism is as high on the agenda of the Malian authorities as ever (Armstrong 2022). This has created a situation where the civilian population is exposed to increasing levels of human rights abuses, and women risk being victims of violence or caught between extremists and counterterrorism efforts. The 'hard security approach' which has dominated the responses by both Malian authorities

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and the international community in recent years is one where women's experiences and voices are often marginalized.

This chapter contributes to the discussions in this edited volume on gendered knowledge production of war, which tend to ignore or marginalize women's experiences and ways of knowing. I draw on feminist International Relations scholarship, which emphasizes the necessity of identifying silent and silenced voices and argues that conflict and insecurity cannot be fully understood unless they are studied through how people experience them (Enloe 1989; Sjoberg 2018; Sylvester 2013; Tickner 1992; Wibben 2011). I understand the P/CVE agenda as a global episteme, i.e. a system of knowledge that establishes the dominant ways of thinking about and understanding something (Foucault 1972). Similarly to how the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda can be understood as a site for (gendered) knowledge production, produced through various actors forming an epistemic community, the global P/CVE episteme is produced through various knowledge claims about threats and solutions to international peace and security and exists in the same 'power-knowledge' system as the WPS episteme.

Epistemes are the site of power struggles over what is legitimate knowledge, what counts as knowledge and whose voices are heard. Epistemic power, understood as "the ability to produce what we know and how we get to know it" (Björkdahl and Mannergren, Introduction this volume), allows actors to define what is the legitimate knowledge that constructs the episteme. However, epistemic power also comes with the ability to exert epistemic violence, understood as "violence that is exercised in relation to the production, circulation and recognition of knowledge" (Björkdahl and Mannergren, Introduction this volume). Epistemic violence can be deliberate or consequential and comes in many forms, including stereotyping, misrepresentation, as well as silencing and omission of other perspectives.

Starting from an understanding of omissions and silences in the global P/CVE episteme as forms of epistemic violence, this chapter analyses the ways in which knowledge about women's experiences with violent extremism is produced and circulated. The P/CVE agenda has been shaped by actors with high epistemic power. However, dominant knowledge, and ways of knowing, can be challenged. In the analysis, I, therefore, explore the ways that knowledge about Malian women's experiences challenges, expands and feeds into the P/CVE episteme (or not). The ability to challenge and rectify the epistemic violence and injustices in the P/CVE agenda through knowledge production is analysed through the theoretical lens of epistemic agency, defined as "a subject's capacity and will to act in the world and achieve transformation through knowledge production" (Björkdahl and Mannergren, Introduction this volume). By analysing how knowledge on Malian women's experiences with extremism is produced and circulated, I show how this knowledge sometimes challenges and expands the knowledge in the P/CVE agenda. I also show the power of the episteme, and how the sources of the epistemic power (coming from its state-centredness) at times restrict the epistemic agency of Malian women whose experiences are still only partially known. The analysis is based on a combination of sources, including reports and published accounts, reports from

international and Malian human rights NGOs and statements by Malian activists to the United Nations (UN) Security Council.

The emergence of an episteme: the global agenda on preventing and countering violent extremism

The episteme that in this chapter is referred to as the global agenda on P/CVE, emerged in response to ineffective and counterproductive counterterrorism approaches that seemed to generate even more grievances (Ní Aolàin 2016). In 2015, the UN General Assembly adopted a Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism that included addressing "the underlying conditions that drive individuals to radicalize and join violent extremist groups" (United Nations 2015, p. 10). In response, global, regional and national P/CVE policies and programmes to prevent radicalization and foster social cohesion have become a key component of many conflict-affected states' counterterrorism strategies. These programmes range from promoting religious dialogue and education to creating jobs that increase livelihood opportunities (Giscard d'Estaing 2017). Significantly, women have been recognized as having a special role in developing strategies to counter terrorism and violent extremism, according to UN Security Council Resolution 2242.

Resolution 2242 was in fact meant to merge the P/CVE agenda and the WPS agenda at the UN, a development that caught the attention of many feminists. Its emergence challenged the ways that the WPS agenda had sought to make women's diverse war experiences visible. This in turn led to reactions from actors within the WPS community, and as a consequence, we have seen a growing body of literature critiquing many of the assumptions and silences in the P/CVE agenda about women's roles in violent extremism. On one hand, activists, practitioners and scholars welcomed the recognition of women as agents in the fight against violent extremism, and research has shown that the participation of women's organizations in countering violent extremism activities may generate positive results for gender equality in politics and society (Nwangwu & Ezeibe 2019). On the other hand, much feminist scholarship has criticized the way gender and women have been integrated into discourses on P/CVE, arguing that it instrumentalizes women and women's rights and uses them to justify measures and interventions, with the result of essentializing women and entrenching gender stereotypes, and of reinforcing a binary understanding of gender (Ní Aolàin 2016; Giscard d'Estaing 2017; Heathcote 2018). For example, when the UN's Counter-Terrorism Committee held its open briefing on the role of women in countering terrorism and violent extremism in 2015, it identified the role that women, in particular mothers, might play in preventing the radicalization of their children. As we can see, the episteme is further characterized by an epistemic community where some of the key actors produce expert knowledge and hold particularly high epistemic and definitional power. These powerful actors sometimes hold limited knowledge about how women experience violent extremism, and yet, they want women to contribute to preventing it.

Recent research on the impact and unintended consequences of linking WPS with countering violent extremism on the ground in different contexts further suggests that

this contributes to gender stereotyping, exclusion and increased insecurity for women (Aroussi 2021; Lorentzen 2021; Berlingozzi 2022, 2023). These studies have found that women are considered 'assets' in programmes to fight violent extremism; their increased participation in the security field is understood in terms of their use-value and justified through references to women's empowerment (Lorentzen 2021; Berlingozzi 2022, 2023). This not only compromises women's organizations and leaders associated with such programmes (Coomaraswamy 2015, p. 229; Ní Aolàin 2016; Aroussi 2021), but is also ethically questionable and reinforces gender stereotypes of women as inherently peaceful. Further, when P/CVE policies recognize the role of women as supporters or perpetrators of extremist violence, they often portray these women as brainwashed or instrumentalized, and thus ultimately, as victims (Lorentzen 2021).

The research reviewed here shows how the global P/CVE agenda has tended to stereotype and essentialize women and their contributions. Emphasizing women's roles as victims or as peace agents who will support the state and the international community in the fight against violent extremism, the P/CVE episteme contains silences on women's roles and experiences with violent extremism that do not conform to such gendered stereotypes and expectations. From a knowledge production perspective, the practices of stereotyping, the silencing of alternative views on women's roles, as well as the omission and absence of important aspects of women's lived experiences can be understood as forms of epistemic violence in this context. Further, the work of feminist scholars has contributed to identifying and challenging this epistemic violence and silences, contesting the knowledge produced and circulated by the P/CVE agenda, seeking to expand it in ways that take women's knowledge and experiences into account. Their work has taken place alongside efforts to understand and document women's roles and the gendered dimensions of violent extremism among activists, practitioners and policy-makers. Knowledge production about Malian women's experiences with violent extremism can thus be derived from different actors and sources bringing the contextual knowledge in conversation with global knowledge on P/CVE. In the following analysis, I draw on some of these efforts to analyse the different ways knowledge about Malian women's experiences challenges, expands and feeds into the P/CVE episteme (or not).

What is known? Expanding and deepening knowledge of women's experiences with violent extremism

Early accounts of extremist violence: the occupation of Northern Mali 2012–2013

In 2012, Mali experienced a coup d'état and a subsequent occupation of the North by Tuareg separatists and jihadist groups, which became the beginning of a lasting conflict in the country. These events were followed by unprecedented international engagement, including French military intervention, the establishment of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and an internationally mediated peace process that resulted in the 2015 Agreement for

Peace and Reconciliation in Mali (Algiers Agreement). During the occupation of the North in 2012–2013, reports of extremist violence reached national and international media outlets (Bouhlel et al. 2017). After the occupation, it became important to document the violence that had taken place.

In 2014, Fatoumata Keïta, a Malian scholar and author, published an account of the violence that took place during the occupation of the Northern regions in 2012–2013. The account was published in French as a small booklet and is based on field research that took place right after the initial occupation with the support of a small research team. The team conducted semi-structured interviews and a survey in Gao and Tomboctou, in areas that had been under the (sometimes shifting) control of Tuareg separatist armed groups, mainly the Mouvement de Libération de l'Azawad (MNLA), and extremist Islamist groups, including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa, and Ancar Ad Dine (Keïta 2014, pp. 21–23). The study excludes Kidal as it was inaccessible due to high levels of insecurity. This account gives an overview of the types of violence, the actors/perpetrators and the reasons behind the violence. As one of very few scholars who have written on conflict-related violence against women in the Malian context (cf. De Jorio 2019), Keïta's account is an important contribution.

Based on collected testimonies from victims and survivors, Keïta's report describes the violence that the populations endured during the occupation of the North in 2012–2013, including detentions, flogging, amputations and killings. It also describes and relays testimonies of rape. Some testimonies of collective rape are also conveyed in Keïta's account, such as the following testimony by a young woman:

> They dragged me to their police station by force. They took me to their prison; they threw themselves onto me. I screamed with all my might. I'm twenty years old. And I had never done that. There were four of them. I fainted …
>
> (Keïta 2014, p. 54)[1]

Marrying local girls was an important strategy for jihadist groups in order to integrate themselves into the community. The testimonies explain how parents often felt pressured to give their daughters in marriage to the jihadists, and many of the marriages happened without the consent of the girl. Such forced marriages were a widespread practice in both Gao and Tomboctou. In some cases, documented only in Tomboctou, victims told about collectively forced marriages resembling practices of sexual slavery:

> When they married me, every evening it was a new man who came to share my bed; When I complained, one of them told me that they had helped pay my dowry. I ended up running away.
>
> (Keïta 2014, p. 55)

In many ways, the focus on documenting violence against civilians reinforces the emphasis on women as victims of extremist violence to be found in the P/CVE agenda. The report is however clear that victims described how violence, including

rape, was perpetrated both by Tuareg separatists and jihadists. However, the report states that the violence perpetrated by Tuareg separatists was unstructured, irregular and often bore the characteristics of vengeance. The violence perpetrated by jihadist groups, on the other hand, was organized and often intended to govern the behaviour of populations. This characteristic supports notions of jihadist groups as a major security threat (cf. Hernann 2016). It is however important to note that there was great variation in the governing systems and the uses of violence among jihadist groups during the occupation of Northern Mali, despite drawing on similar jihadist ideology (Bouhlel & Guichaoua 2021).

While very few accounts from the occupation focused explicitly on women's experiences or a gender perspective, a report by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue focused on the role of women in the establishment of jihadists during the 2012–2013 occupation (Possémé-Rageau 2013). This report draws on the testimonies of 28 men and women and concludes that jihadists used marriage as a strategy to build alliances in order to integrate into local communities and that these alliances may have contributed to changing the communities' perceptions of jihadists. The report goes a long way in assigning some degree of responsibility to women. According to witnesses, "Pretty much everywhere in the northern regions, there were cases of single women who married jihadists to gain respectability; because, in some circles, for a woman to be unmarried is frowned upon" (Possémé-Rageau 2013, p. 139). Further, the report states that Malian women were reluctant to address this issue, rather focusing on violations committed against women and other civilians. This is argued to be related to how the wounds at the time were still raw, and that in many cases the women who entered these marriages did not have a choice (Possémé-Rageau 2013). The report speaks back to the global episteme by breaking with the idea that women were simply victims or brainwashed, or that their roles are primarily related to the prevention of violent extremism. Both these reports from the initial occupation in 2012–2013 are important as they contribute to documenting the violence and experiences of the civilian population, in particular women, during the occupation. They represent local, contextualized knowledge; however, their audience and reach are uncertain. Keïta's report was published in French by a regional publishing house, and it is unclear how widely circulated the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue report was, although this is expected to have reached a number of policy-makers given the organization's position in the conflict resolution field. At the time, accounts of female suicide bombers in Boko Haram and female foreign fighters in the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria received a lot of attention and contributed to an increased interest in the gender dimension and role of women in violent extremism. Even if this did not have an impact on the attention of these particular publications, it is likely to have affected knowledge production on women's experiences with violent extremism in Mali, and elsewhere, in the following years.

Increased knowledge production on extremist violence in Central Mali since 2015

After the signing of the Algiers Agreement in 2015, and while the international community was preoccupied with solving the conflict in the North, Central Mali

(Mopti, later also Segou) experienced an increase in violence and insecurity. Because of the conflict in the North, state services and representatives were largely absent from these regions, and jihadist groups were able to instrumentalize local conflicts, inter-communal and inter-ethnic cleavages, to their end (Rupesinghe & Bøås 2019, pp. 3–4). The populations have experienced high levels of violence and control by jihadists, armed self-defence militias and the Malian Armed Forces (FAMa). The most well-known jihadist group is the Katiba Macina, led by Hamadoun Kouffa, a Fulani Islamic preacher from Mopti. Katiba Macina is linked to the al-Qaeda–affiliated Group for support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM), yet its agenda is mainly local, and it has gradually expanded its influence in Central Mali since 2015 (Rupesinghe & Bøås 2019; Rupesinghe & Diall 2019).

In recent years, much of the knowledge production on extremist violence thus covers events in Central Mali. Human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch, International Federation for Human Rights, Association Malienne des droits de l'Homme and MINUSMAs Human Rights Division monitor the situation and have regularly conducted fact-finding missions and published reports about human rights abuses (e.g. FIDH/AMDH 2018, 2022; HRW 2017; MINUSMA 2020; UNHCHR 2023). The reports document violence against civilians and human rights violations (including rape and other forms of sexual violence), and the alleged perpetrators thereof. As these reports are focused on documenting violence and human rights abuses, they produce *local and contextualized knowledge*, and we hear directly from the victims in the form of quotes from testimonies collected, such as the following statement given during an interview that took place in Sévaré in 2018:

> My husband was away when I was raped. When he got home, he asked me, and I explained what had happened. He said he could not keep me. For three days, I stayed at my husband's older brother's house. I know that several people, including my husband's own parents begged him to keep me, but he did not want to. So, I had to leave his older brother's house to stay with my older sister, who looked after me for two days. Then I was told to go to my aunt's house in Sévaré. When I arrived in Sévaré, I was able to go to the health centre. They took X-rays and blood tests and told me that I did not have an STD but that I was pregnant. After being raped, my life was destroyed.
>
> (FIDH/AMDH 2018, p. 42)

Descriptions of violence committed by armed actors in Central Mali can also be found in grey literature such as research reports published by international NGOs and research institutes, some of which specifically focus on the experiences of women (e.g. Gorman & Chauzal 2019; Rupesinghe & Diall 2019; Raineri 2020; Abatan & Sangare 2021). These reports draw on surveys, interviews and focus groups with target communities, and thus relay accounts and insights from the populations, including women, themselves. While the fact-finding reports of Human Rights organizations provide more systematic documentation of human rights abuses, these reports explore and analyse the link between gender relations and violent extremism, including why women are associated with extremist groups and their place and role in the recruitment and operation strategies of these groups. The contextualized

knowledge is, here, put into conversation with transnational and regional knowledge. The fact that the testimonies are analysed by international experts, and the reports are published by well-known and established NGOs in the field, contributes to their epistemic power. I understand these as representing expert knowledge.

While such reports provide rich contextualized descriptions and analysis of the violence experienced by the civilian population in Central Mali, other sources again contribute a different type of knowledge. Using technical language and formal definitions of reported and verified incidents, an important source of knowledge on conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence (GBV) in Mali has been UN reports, including the quarterly reports of the UN Secretary-General on the situation in Mali, and the annual reports of the UN's Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) on conflict-related sexual violence. These reports are read by a large audience, including state representatives and decision-makers. They typically provide information about the number of verified and/or registered cases of sexual violence against women, patterns and trends in the violence itself as well as the reporting, who the alleged perpetrators are and the status of sanctions or judicial processes. They also report on the progress of legal reforms that may be underway, specific initiatives or interventions to combat GBV, as well as training of conflict parties, state agents or others. Due to the legitimacy and status of the UN, these reports hold a large degree of epistemic power, and they contribute to the production and circulation of authoritative knowledge on Malian women's experiences with violent extremism.

Alternative knowledge on women's roles in extremist groups: beyond mothers and informants for the state

The P/CVE agenda and its ideas of women using their maternal or marital roles to persuade men not to join extremist groups, or of women working as informers for the state, are challenged by the accounts of how Malian women are associated with, and support, extremist groups. The reports consulted here all found that women have not been recruited as combatants, and few women participate in violent actions, but they support the insurgency in other roles (Gorman & Chauzal 2019; Rupesinghe & Diall 2019; Raineri 2020; Abatan & Sangare 2021).

Women operate in support roles, traditional, domestic and reproductive roles, such as laundrywomen and cooks. This means that women continue to perform their usual and traditional domestic roles (Raineri 2020, pp. 48–49; Abatan & Sangare 2021, p. 14). Similar to the occupation in the North, a part of the jihadists' strategy has been to marry women from the communities where they seek to establish their rule. In most cases, the women stay in the villages, but some live near the camps in designated areas (Rupesinghe & Diall 2019; Abatan & Sangare 2021). The extremist groups also rely on women to supply necessities such as medicines and materials for their operations, which sometimes can involve purchasing ingredients to be used for making explosives, as well as organizing money collection for combatants (Raineri 2020, 48–49; Abatan & Sangare 2021).

Further, women share tactical information with their husbands or play roles as informants integrated in village communities (Raineri 2020, pp. 48–49). The extremist groups use women to gather intelligence on the activities and whereabouts of the

Malian Defense and Security Forces or self-defence militias, as well as their supporters in the communities (Abatan & Sangare 2021, p. 14). Finally, women may persuade or incite their husbands to join extremist groups (Gorman & Chauzal 2019, p. 19), and in some cases extremist groups rely on alliances with women, including influential women, to recruit from communities (Abatan & Sangare 2021, p. 12).

The reports all agree that it is very rare that women participate directly as armed combatants in extremist groups in Mali. They also mostly concur that women are not physically present in the bush or the camps of Katiba Macina (Abatan & Sangare 2021, p. 7; Rupesinghe & Diall 2019). The accounts of women's association with extremist groups as exclusively in non-combatant roles and the fact that they are hardly visible in violent extremist groups in Mali (Abatan & Sangare 2021, p. 3) resonates with gender-stereotypical ideas about women's roles as peacemakers or inherently peaceful found in the P/CVE agenda.

However, the authoritative knowledge on women's involvement in violence as they associate with armed groups is increasingly contested also in the Malian context. Gorman and Chauzal (2019, p. 15) found that several participants in their 2017 surveys and the facilitator of one commune in the Gao region reported knowing up to 30 women and girls to have joined an armed group. Further, Raineri (2020, p. 50) lists several violent events in 2018–2019 in which women were suspected or confirmed to have been involved in violent action, or as infiltrators who have been mobilized to help plot violent attacks (cf. Abatan & Sangare 2021, p. 17). The reports of women's involvement are usually circulated in the media, and extremist groups also issue communiqués where they take responsibility for specific events. In Mali, women's involvement is however sometimes denied by the extremist groups themselves, such as the GSIM that denies women's involvement despite security incidents involving women since 2018 (Abatan & Sangare 2021, p. 3; Raineri 2020, p. 50). According to the reports, this has to do with the group's ideology, as groups affiliated with al-Qaeda whose ideological position reflects a view of jihad as a collective responsibility, but one where women and men have different tasks and that women are excluded from direct combat actions (Raineri 2020, p. 51). Some jihadist groups operating in Mali thus seem to put great emphasis on maintaining an image of women as removed from their military operations, which adds further uncertainty to knowledge production on women's experiences with violent extremism in the country. The contextualized knowledge that emerges from the Malian women's experiences with violent extremism thus not only challenges and expands the expert knowledge in the global P/CVE episteme, but also that of some jihadist groups in Mali.

Alternative knowledge on why women support extremism: beyond brainwashed victims

Knowledge about Malian women's experiences with violent extremism expands and nuances conceptions of women who support or perpetrate extremist violence as brainwashed or instrumentalized that are sometimes found in the P/CVE episteme.

In Central Mali, as was also the case during the occupation of Northern Mali in 2012–2013, extremist groups try to govern gender relations by imposing restrictions

on the behaviour of men and women. This includes imposing rules on dress code, such as wearing the veil in public for women, with harsh sanctions (often violent) being directed at those who break the rules (Raineri 2020, p. 39). Their rule thus has had a gendered impact, affecting women's socio-economic activities and security, as well as their way of life and identity by governing the way they are supposed to dress or behave (Rupesinghe & Diall 2019, p. 2). In this context, why do women choose to support extremist groups?

Women in Mali report diverse motivations for associating with extremist groups. Some women associate with extremist groups because it offers them protection from violence by ensuring peaceful coexistence with the group, and/or because it allows them to continue their business activities. Other women support or collaborate with extremist groups as a result of lived experiences of violence committed by other actors such as the FAMa or self-defence militias (Abatan & Sangare 2021, pp. 8–9). Extremist groups also gain support because they question traditional customs and prohibitions regarding marriage. The presence of extremist groups and their views on inter-caste marriages, women's right to consent and ostentation and luxury (leading to reductions in bride price) have facilitated access to marriage for many young people, and people from lower castes (Raineri 2020, pp. 40–41).

These accounts go beyond representations of women who support extremists as 'brainwashed victims,' and rather emphasize the agency and choices women make, and the reasons behind these. Women's choices are often pragmatic, seeking security, financial opportunity, liberalization of rules of marriage and/or social redemption (in the case of sex workers) (Raineri 2020, pp. 54–55). Still, women are reported to support extremist groups because of their husbands or a family member, rather than being recruited independently (Raineri 2020, p. 52; Gorman & Chauzal 2019, pp. 18–19; Abatan & Sangare 2021, p. 7; Rupesinghe & Diall 2019). However, Gorman and Chauzal (2019, pp. 18–19) report that male respondents (similar to female ones) listed spouses as the most important influence, followed by religious guides and then parents (incl. mothers) on the decision to join a group. Rather than assuming that women's association with extremist groups simply results from being passive followers of their husbands' will, this indicates that the influence of the spouse bears importance on the decisions of both men and women.

What is less known? Difficulties in documenting violence against women and the ambiguous threat of extremist groups

In a study carried out in ten of Mali's regions in 2017, women (particularly unmarried women) and young girls were perceived among the most vulnerable to violence from armed and jihadist groups by respondents (Gorman & Chauzal 2019, p. 11). According to the report of the UN SRSG on sexual violence in conflict covering 2022, MINUSMA verified 98 cases of conflict-related sexual violence, and humanitarian service providers registered cases of sexual violence against 392 women and 294 girls that year. The alleged perpetrators included members of armed groups, militia and self-defence groups, members of the Malian Defence and Security Forces, as well as foreign security personnel involved in

military operations. These reports are an important source yet conceal the vast under-reporting of conflict-related sexual violence in Mali. According to the mentioned report, less than ten percent of victims file judicial complaints, primarily due to the proximity of militia groups and the related fear of reprisals. The fact that victims are reluctant to speak out about violence and suffering due to risk of social stigma or security risks, thus produces large silences in the global knowledge. In the national context, their epistemic power and agency are also limited by the failure to hold perpetrators to account. Impunity for such crimes is very high in the Malian context, illustrated by how four cases, involving 146 victims of conflict-related sexual violence from northern Mali, have been pending before the courts since 2013 (Office of the SRSG on Sexual Violence in Conflict 2023, p. 26).

Human rights organizations have documented high levels of violence, including abductions, killings and massacres in Central Mali since 2015. These reports have also documented and reported on sexual crimes committed against women (as far as I know, none have been able to verify cases of sexual violence against men). An ex-jihadist interviewed in 2018 also admitted that there were many rapes and that girls or women would regularly come to the camps to complain. The testimonies from women survivors describe instances of rape and gang rape taking place on the road or when women have gone to fetch firewood, as well as rape taking place in the victim's own home and in front of her children. In many cases, the women are left by their husbands, and ostracized by the community, and they receive extremely limited care and support. The collapse of the rule of law also means that they are deprived of the right to justice and reparations, adding to the psychological and social consequences of such acts of violence (FIDH/AMDH 2018, pp. 41–44). When women do not feel safe to report violent incidents, and in fact speaking up comes with an added punishment in the form of social stigma, they may choose to remain silent. This creates epistemic silences about the nature and extent of violence committed against women by extremist groups.

According to the reports, it is not always clear who the perpetrators of these crimes are, but they appear to be from different armed actors operating in the region, as well as civilians. The ambiguities regarding who is behind perpetrating violence have been exacerbated alongside political developments taking place in the country since 2020. With the gradual deterioration of the security situation, popular discontent grew, and in August 2020, a military coup led by Colonel Assimi Goïta ousted the incumbent president Ibrahim Boubacar Keita. A transitional government consisting of military and civilian elements was established, and after an initial period of suspension of aid, international partners resumed most of their cooperation with the Malian authorities. In May 2021 Goïta staged another coup d'état (a coup within a coup), in which he got rid of the civilian elements of the transitional government (Wilén 2023). In the period building up to and following the 2021 coup, relations between Mali and its international partners and allies severely deteriorated. After increasing tensions and the expulsion of the French ambassador, French forces left Mali in 2022. Since then, the relationship between Mali and the UN peacekeeping mission grew increasingly tense. In May 2023 the Malian prime minister surprised the international community by requesting that MINUSMA

leave the country, leading to the swift formulation of a withdrawal mandate in June 2023, and the final exit of MINUSMA on December 31, 2023. In 2023, Mali also withdrew from the regional G5 Sahel Force, soon to be followed by its neighbours Niger and Burkina Faso (who experienced coups and put in place military regimes in 2022 and 2023, respectively), leading to the effective breakdown of the force.

As the Malian transitional authorities have turned away from their traditional (Western) partners, they have sought new partners and have found these in countries such as Russia and Turkey (Armstrong 2022). For example, personnel from the Russian private security company Africa Corps (formerly known as Wagner Group) operate in the country. According to Malian authorities, these perform tasks as military instructors, but it has also been established that foreign soldiers operate alongside the Malian Defence and Security Forces in counterterrorism operations, committing grave human rights violations against civilians (UNHCHR 2023). Partnering with the Africa Corps/Wagner group has been an important step in the transitional authorities' counterterrorism strategy, but this has been viewed with scepticism by Western governments. While the international community supported the Algiers agreement that recognized the Tuareg as legitimate political actors in the Malian context, there are strong indications that the transitional authorities prefer a military victory, and their counterterrorism strategy uses broader strokes. Since 2022, the Malian transitional authorities with the help of the Africa Corps/Wagner Group have led a military strategy to regain the control of territories in Northern and Central Mali, with large civilian causalities. In late 2023, the Malian authorities were able to establish themselves in Kidal, a traditional stronghold of the Tuareg rebel group MNLA (Armstrong 2022; Gouvy & Ellis 2024), and in January 2024, the Malian authorities announced the end of the 2015 Algiers Agreement and peace process with the Tuareg parties (Allegrozzi 2024).

Reports from more recent events in Central Mali confirm the continued and increasing occurrence of rape, sexual slavery and sexual violence, including rape being used as a weapon of war to incite fear, push civilians to flee their homes or demoralize the enemy. Again, the alleged perpetrators are various armed actors and groups, and since 2021 testimonies also identify international armed actors who work with the FAMa (FIDH/AMDH 2022, p. 35). This was the case during the massacre in late January 2022 in Moura village, which had been under the rule of the Katiba Macina. According to the FAMa, they conducted a counterterrorist operation, neutralizing 203 jihadists. According to reports by human rights organizations, testimonies indicated that victims were targeted and killed based on their ethnicity or the way they were dressed. Witnesses also described "soldiers with white skin" or "speaking a foreign language" that carried out the violence alongside the Malian soldiers. Testimonies also describe how these "white soldiers" committed sexual violence against civilians, including rape (UNHCHR 2023; FIDH/AMDH 2022, pp. 40–42). When it comes to sexual violence, the reports concur with official UN reports that it is difficult to know the extent of the problem. Incidents are likely under-reported due to the sensitivity of the subject, the social consequences that may be involved in talking or reporting an incident, the fact that most of the crimes are committed in areas submitted to the control

of armed actors or even the lack of services afforded to victims (FIDH/AMDH 2022, p. 34).

The uncertainty concerning the circumstances under which violence against women takes place is also illustrated in the findings from a study of two communities in Central Mali under the control of jihadist groups. The study did not find evidence of systematic campaigns of violence against women, and it found that abductions of women by extremist groups are largely unknown in Central Mali (Raineri 2020, pp. 33–36). It also found that women are mainly the indirect victims of extremist violence; for example, when their men flee and women are left behind, they may get attacked when armed groups cannot find the men they are looking for (Raineri 2020, p. 35). The report refutes any claims that rape and GBV is perpetuated on a large and systematically by extremist violent groups in Central Mali. The report goes far in saying that the extent of GBV perpetrated by extremist groups in the Sahel may have been overestimated, including biased accounts from alleged victims who may have been subjected to pressure to conform to the expectations of the international community. The study however finds that rape is being used strategically in the Malian context, linked to a logic of territorial control, if not systematically or coherently (Raineri 2020, p. 38).

Further, rather than jihadist groups, the participants in the study identified the self-defence militias, as well as the security forces of the state, as the main perpetrators of rape and GBV (Raineri 2020, pp. 37–38). It is important to note that this research was carried out in areas where the jihadist groups are well established. The report also studied an area in Burkina Faso that is more contested, and there the extremist groups are perceived as a threat and as perpetrators of violence, indicating that a high level of control exercised over the communities by jihadist groups reduces the need for and legitimacy of violence (Raineri 2020, p. 34). This insight speaks to the global P/CVE agenda, with its state-driven and state-centred aims, whose focus is mainly on the protection of the state from violent extremist groups. However, the sources and testimonies document that jihadist groups are not the only (and possibly not even the main) perpetrators of violence. All parties to the conflict commit serious human rights abuses, including jihadist groups, self-defence groups, ethnically based militias, FAMa and international armed actors working alongside the Malian army. The state-centredness of the P/CVE agenda not only makes invisible the abuse committed by state actors and contracted military partners but also allegations of serious misconduct, including sexual abuse, by UN peacekeepers (UN News 2013).

The difficulties in accessing and verifying information about violent events, and about sexual violence in particular affect how knowledge is produced and circulated. This is important because getting and verifying information about violent events in Mali has always been challenging. An important part of UN's work in Mali has been the monitoring of the human rights situation. Over the last years, this job has become increasingly difficult, in part due to the reasons already mentioned, but also in part due to the efforts of the Malian transitional authorities. With the recent departure of the mission, access to information about human rights abuses in the country is expected to become more difficult. The use of propaganda and disinfor-

mation by the Malian transitional authorities and their partners is also complicating this situation (Wassim 2022). It is likely that this situation will lead to the production and circulation of knowledge being more ad hoc and anecdotal, characterized by under-reporting and partial knowledge rather than verified, expert knowledge.

How is it known? How knowledge circulates

The epistemic community that produces the P/CVE episteme consists of actors with different access to epistemic power, and who produce different types of knowledge. Local, contextualized knowledge often circulates as it is picked up by more powerful epistemic agents, producing expert knowledge. The higher the legitimacy of the agent, and the more technical and verified/verifiable the knowledge, the more authoritative is the knowledge produced and the more likely it is to circulate widely.

In the Malian context, it is a major challenge to hear the voices of women who live in conflict zones or in areas under jihadist rule, as these are not easily accessible. While the media and the international community may exaggerate extremist violence against women, official numbers in UN reports fail to capture the real scale of the problem because of problems with reporting and verification, and stigma preventing survivors from reporting. NGO reports and fact-finding missions relay women's experiences with extremist violence and are an important source of knowledge about this. In these reports, we can read about the testimonies of women's experiences with violent extremism, anonymously or under pseudonyms.

The experiences of women are thus often relayed through the accounts from international organizations, NGOs, researchers and others writing on the topic, and we rarely get to hear experiential knowledge directly from women themselves. On some occasions, however, women representing civil society are given the opportunity to speak directly to decision-makers. In recent years, civil society representatives have been increasingly asked to brief the UN Security Council (Obermeier & Olsson 2022). Between 2013 and 2023, Malian women civil society representatives briefed the Council on six occasions (Diakité 2013; Diakité 2015; Diallo 2019; Cissé 2021; Maiga 2021; Dicko 2023). This represents a unique opportunity for these women to speak directly to the highest level of security decision-makers, and to affect the global discourse. This emerging practice can be interpreted as an effort to correct previous gendered epistemic injustices involving the exclusion of women's voices and their experiences of war from being heard in these forums. In their statements, many of these women also highlight and recognize the unique opportunity that this represents, such as Aminata Dicko who briefed the Council in January 2023, when she opened her remarks by pointing out that this involves "a great responsibility - that of carrying the voice of the voiceless" (Dicko 2023).

The statements generally follow a relatively similar script: they highlight key issues that they want the council to pay attention to, often highlighting violence against women, several specifically refer to gang rapes, early and forced marriages, as well as abductions of women and girls for the purpose of sexual slavery.

Assitan Diallo, President of Association des Femmes Africaines pour la Recherche et le Développement, Mali, who spoke at the UN Security Council meeting on the situation in Mali stated that "As has been well-documented, gang rapes, early and forced marriages, as well as abductions of women and girls for the purpose of sexual slavery are part of a broad pattern of gender-based violence (GBV) in Mali" (Diallo 2019). Fatima Maiga, president of a coalition of women from the signatory groups of the Peace Agreement, spoke at the UN Security Council meeting on the situation in Mali in 2021, highlighting that "hundreds of thousands of girls and women are today deprived of access to schools, health centers, markets or fields. In addition, too many of them continue to suffer sexual violence, including gang rape and sexual slavery" (Maiga 2021).

The statements usually also highlight the lack of judicial process for sexual and gender-based crimes. Saran Keita Diakité, President of Réseau Paix et Sécurité des Femmes de l'Espace CEDEAO Mali, stated at the UN Security Council's Open Debate on conflict-related sexual violence in April 2013 that:

> In Mali, for example, we need a collective recognition of the crimes of sexual violence that have been committed during the conflict. In the absence of this recognition, women who attempt to seek justice often have great difficulty accessing courts, and many of whom are themselves reportedly accused of being prostitutes. Survivors of sexual violence must not be blamed and victimized when they seek services and justice.
>
> (Keita 2013)

Similar concerns have been echoed in the other statements, for example, Diallo's (2019) remarks where she said that:

> No perpetrators of the sexual violence carried out during the crisis in 2012 and 2013 have been held accountable and complaints filed on behalf of 115 victims remain pending; only about 10 to 20 percent of women and girls who have suffered GBV have access to protection and judicial assistance.
>
> (Diakité 2013)

The statements also provide recommendations for action (usually for the Security Council). Talking about involving the concerned communities in the prevention of radicalization and violent extremism, Nana Aïcha Cissé stated that:

> The women of the Sahel simply need us to count on them and involve them on all levels, so they can prevent and resolve conflict. We are talking about showcasing their innate savoir-faire and skills. And also to strengthen their capacity to carry out analysis and make proposals.
>
> (Cissé 2021)

Her statement very much aligns with the focus on women's prevention roles in the global P/CVE agenda.

Besides highlighting violence against women and pointing out shortcomings in the international community's approach to handling the conflict and crisis in their country, the statements rarely involve testimonies of women's experiences. The knowledge production on Malian women's experiences with violent extremism discussed above nuances, expands and sometimes challenges assumptions found in the global agenda on P/CVE. However, the statements given to the UN Security Council deviate little from the global episteme, indicating that they follow a script that restricts what knowledge the women can share with the Security Council, and that women's epistemic agency may be somehow restricted by the space in which testimonies take place. Diplomatic political spaces have rules and norms for behaviour; these affect also other actors operating in these spaces, although arguably to different degrees and in different ways. There are examples of cases where women have been able to bring testimonies to the Security Council, as Nadia Murad did in 2015. Murad's testimony was however groundbreaking, and for this reason, received a lot of attention. At the time of delivering her speech, she was also residing as a refugee in Germany. In addition to restrictions to their epistemic agency shaped by the space where the statements are performed, it is therefore possible that women's epistemic agency may be affected by the Malian normative context, and the potential consequences bearing witness can have in that context.

As discussed above, speaking about and reporting sexual and gender-based crimes can have harsh social consequences for the victims, and rarely carry any benefits in terms of justice or reparations. Further, in the few instances where women have pushed the boundaries of what can be said, the consequences have been dire. The state-centred nature of the P/CVE agenda also leads to silences concerning the violence that civilians, and in particular women, experience as they are caught between extremist violence and harmful counterterrorist practices (FIDH/AMDH 2018, 2022). In her statement to the UN Security Council in 2023, Dicko emphasized this aspect and spoke about the Malian government's practices. She specifically pointed to mixed results in relation to human rights in the military operations of the Malian army, stating that:

> The Malian army has increased its military operations to combat terrorists. However, those military operations should be regularly re-evaluated in light of the mixed results noted in relation to human rights. It must be said that the presence of Russian military partners alongside our Malian armed forces, whose bravery is to be commended, far from help matters. Those actors are involved in committing serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law.
>
> (Dicko 2023)

In response to Dicko's statement, Malian diplomats sowed doubt about her representativeness and credibility, and attributed her statement to an "instrumentalization of civil society for hidden agendas" (Monteau 2023). This immediate reaction drew on the epistemic power of Malian state representatives in order to exert epistemic violence in the form of delegitimizing and silencing alternative knowledge,

in this case, civil society perspectives. In the following weeks, Dicko became the target of threats and a misinformation campaign on social media, and a visit from the police to her home. A legal complaint is also reported to have been filed against Dicko in Bamako by the Collective for the Defence of the Military, which supports the Malian transitional authorities and armed forces (Security Council Report 2023). While Dicko showed great epistemic agency in the sense of a willingness to speak out and achieve transformation through the production of knowledge, the reactions to her statement represent epistemic violence as these clearly were meant to silence her and restrict her epistemic agency. The circumstances surrounding Dicko's statement and its aftermath are very concerning and follow a pattern of silencing and harassment of those who speak out about the Malian transitional government's human rights violations. Surely, Dicko's experience can make other civil society representatives think twice before speaking out. Members of the Security Council are also likely to discourage similar instances out of fear of putting women at risk. With the withdrawal of MINUSMA, which happened in response to the direct request of the Malian transitional authorities, Mali no longer occupies the same space on the Security Council's agenda. This in turn will effectively restrict the access of voices of Malian civil society representatives in that forum.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed how knowledge of Malian women's experiences with violent extremism is produced and circulated against the background of the global episteme on P/CVE. It finds that this knowledge production happens through the production of different types of knowledge, including authoritative (expert) knowledge (in the form of UN reports), expert knowledge (in the form of analysis and research reports by international NGOs), local, contextualized knowledge (through accounts of testimonies) and experiential knowledge (UN Security Council briefings). This knowledge interacts and circulates, and through this process, it can nuance, expand and sometimes challenge assumptions found in the global agenda on P/CVE.

Local and contextualized knowledge about Malian women's experiences with violent extremism provides alternative knowledge of their roles in extremist groups that goes beyond roles such as mothers and informants for the state. Despite women barely being visible in violent extremist groups in Mali, they provide a range of services and support for the groups, including cooking, cleaning, provision of materials and gathering of intelligence. Knowledge of women's involvement in violent acts is not common but is particularly contested in Mali, with some extremist groups denying their involvement. Further, the testimonies indicate that women support extremist groups for various reasons, challenging assumptions found in the global P/CVE episteme of women who join or support extremist groups as 'brainwashed victims.' Women's choices are often pragmatic, seeking security, financial opportunity, social mobility and/or social redemption.

The analysis reveals major challenges concerning access to information, reporting and verification on sexual and GBV in the Malian context, challenges that are

expected to increase as the security situation worsens and with the changing political situation in the country. The analysis further shows that while the state-centred nature of the P/CVE agenda directs our attention to extremist groups as perpetrators of violence, the reality on the ground indicates that violence and human rights violations are perpetrated by most, if not all, armed actors operating in Mali, including also self-defence groups, ethnically based militias, state security and military forces and international military partners who operate alongside the FAMa. The chapter further demonstrates the challenges involved for women who speak out on the role of the Malian transitional authorities in committing human rights violations as they are conducting their counterterrorist operations, and the impact this can have on their epistemic agency.

The P/CVE episteme is characterized by several epistemic silences, created through processes of epistemic violence. This includes silences on alternative roles and motivations for women who decide to support extremist groups, on the violence that women experience and on the roles of different actors as perpetrators of violence. The chapter has demonstrated the important efforts that organizations and individuals carry out to document Malian women's experiences with violent extremism. As a result, we know a lot more about women's experiences today than we did when the conflict broke out in 2012. These efforts are however carried out under challenging circumstances, and the chapter identifies several serious challenges to the access, production and circulation of knowledge on Malian women's experiences with violent extremism in the future.

Note

1 Where relevant, quotes have been translated from French into English by the author.

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