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# Conflict and forced displacement erode the gains made against gender-based violence and harmful practices in areas of Burkina Faso affected by insecurity

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## Abstract

# Background.

Between 2010 and 2021, Burkina Faso recorded measurable declines in gender-based violence and harmful practices. Female genital cutting among girls aged 0 to 14 fell from 13.3% to 9.4%, marriage before 18 among women aged 20 to 24 from 51.6% to 38.2%, and physical intimate partner violence from 20.3% to 8.4%. A national system combining law, coordination and community mobilization produced these gains. Since 2015, conflict has displaced two million people and removed the highest-prevalence regions from state control.

# Methods.

An explanatory mixed-methods design was used. The quantitative strand is a secondary descriptive analysis of three national surveys, the 2010 and 2021 Demographic and Health Surveys and the 2015 continuous multisectoral survey, covering cutting, child marriage and intimate partner violence. The qualitative strand draws on 21 semi-structured interviews with national key informants, analysed thematically.

# Results.

Gains are real but uneven. Cutting and child marriage fell by about a quarter. Physical violence dropped sharply. Emotional violence rose, from 16.8% to 20.5%, and sexual violence stalled near 2.8%. Burden concentrates where conflict is worst, cutting reaching 41.7% among girls in the Sahel. Interviews document four erosion mechanisms: dismantling of the national coordination secretariat, rupture of community vigilance chains, re-emergence of child marriage as a survival strategy, and normative re-legitimation.

# Conclusion.

The erosion described is a mechanism-based prediction, not an established fact, and the next national survey will test it. Three actions cannot wait: re-anchor the response institutionally, rebuild community monitoring under displacement, and separate endogenous values from harmful practices together with authorities and religious leaders.

## 1. Introduction

In the Sahel and across the West African conflict belt, the intersection of forced displacement, institutional attrition and normative regression has emerged as one of the most pressing challenges to sustained gains against harmful practices (here understood as encompassing female genital cutting and child marriage, forms of GBV rooted in gender inequality and maintained by social norms) [1] and gender-based violence (GBV) more broadly. [2, 3] Burkina Faso illustrates this dynamic with unusual acuity: it entered the current crisis with measurable, system-produced gains and the same system that produced them has since been weakened on all three of its pillars. Between 2010 and 2021, the Burkinabe indicators of gender-based violence (GBV) and harmful practices fell across almost the whole board. The prevalence of cutting among girls aged 0 to 14 dropped from 13.3% to 9.4%; marriage before 18 among women aged 20 to 24, from 51.6% to 38.2%; reported physical intimate partner violence, from 20.3% to 8.4% [4, 5]. Among women aged 15 to 49, the prevalence of cutting fell from 75.8% to 56%, extending a decline that began at the turn of the 1990s and is documented across several successive series [6, 7].

This retreat was produced by a system built over two decades. A law has penalised cutting since 1996, followed by Law No. 061-2015/CNT on violence against women and girls [8]. A Permanent Secretariat of the National Council to Fight the Practice of Excision (SP-CNLPE) handled coordination and knowledge capitalisation. Focal points sat in the sector ministries. Defence and security forces (DSF) and magistrates were trained. Mobile court hearings were held. A community mesh of relays, mentors and public abandonment pledges came with local watch committees. This system was cited as a model across the sub-region [9, 10].

Since 2015, insecurity has tipped that context over. More than two million people have been displaced, about 80% of them women and children [11]. Displacement first concentrated in the Sahel and the Centre-North before spreading to other regions, with the East holding most of the movements in 2024 [11]. Data from the GBV sub-cluster indicate that women and girls make up 97% of survivors among reported cases and that 91% of reported incidents involve internally displaced persons [12]. United Nations reports document abduction and sexual violence as attack tactics of armed groups in remote areas, with girls as young as eleven among the victims [13]. Schooling, the main protective factor identified in the Burkinabe literature on the abandonment of cutting and the postponement of marriage [6], has receded at the same pace. Burkina Faso alone concentrates a large share of the school closures in West and Central Africa, whose number has nearly doubled since 2019 across the region [14]. Girls pay the heaviest price for these closures. At the same time, national protection actors describe, in the areas outside state control, a resurgence of child marriage and cutting that no national survey has yet been able to measure.

On child marriage, work among Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey describes families who marry their daughters to reduce the household burden, protect family honour and prevent a perceived sexual risk [15]. The same mechanism appears among Rohingya adolescents in Bangladesh [16], in Yemen [17], and among Somali refugees in Dollo Ado in Ethiopia, where the authors link the practice both to household decapitalisation and to the reshaping of marital trajectories in camps [18]. In Uganda, conflict produced similar effects by another route: broken schooling, family separation, weakened intergenerational communication, and therefore earlier and more informal unions [19]. The Girls Not Brides synthesis on conflict and crisis settings draws one operational conclusion from this body of work. As long as basic needs go unmet, work on norms yields little [20].

On female genital mutilation, the scoping review by Elnakib and Metzler concludes that displacement can just as easily weaken the norms that sustain the practice, through exposure to non-practising groups and the breakdown of the authorities that impose it, as it can ease their transfer and reconstitution in host settings. The effect of crises on incidence therefore remains largely undocumented [21]. Observations from the Horn of Africa during the 2022 drought indicate a rise in harmful practices among displaced populations in several Ethiopian regions, with both child marriage and FGC reported by UNICEF field services; though these are service data, not population surveys, with the detection biases that implies [22]. In short, on FGC in crisis, only signals are available, not measurements.

On GBV in African conflict settings, a recent scoping review spanning twenty-four years of output describes a continuum running from sexual slavery and war rape to ordinary intimate partner violence, and identifies weak reporting systems, stigma and the collapse of services as recurrent obstacles [23]. Work by Ellsberg and colleagues in South Sudan shows that intimate partner violence, often treated as a backdrop to conflict-related violence, is in fact its most widespread form [24]. In Ethiopia, a mixed-methods study of 1,863 displaced women in Debre Berhan finds nearly one third of women having experienced GBV, including 19.1% forced marriage, an order of magnitude that no Burkinabe survey provides today for displacement sites [25].

Interpreting these dynamics calls for a framework. Since Mackie, cutting has classically been analysed as a social convention. It holds because each family expects the others to practise it and to sanction deviation, so that none can renounce it alone without compromising a daughter's marriage prospects [26]. Bicchieri gives the formulation most used today: a social norm holds through two expectations, empirical (others do this) and normative (others think I should do this) [27]. Public abandonment pledges derive from this framework. They make the decision to renounce visible and shared, so as to shift expectations all at once.

The framework has been seriously debated. Efferson and colleagues show, in Sudan, an intra-community heterogeneity incompatible with a clean collective tipping point [28]. Bellemare and colleagues, then Novak, reach a neighbouring conclusion in West Africa. Household characteristics weigh more than community ones, and abandonment thresholds are heterogeneous rather than shared [29]. This literature does not destroy the normative intuition; it corrects its mechanics. One point is especially useful for the present purpose. If reciprocal expectations hold the practice in place, then any signal perceived as a rehabilitation of the old order can re-arm those expectations, and the signal need not target the practice to produce that effect. Work by Shell-Duncan and colleagues on the role of older women in contesting or maintaining norms in Senegambia shows the same thing by another route. The reference group is not the abstract community; it is a narrow and identifiable network [30]. Displacement disperses precisely those networks.

Finally, work by Sripad and colleagues in Niger adds a directly transposable piece. In the Sahel, the norms that sustain early marriage are largely carried by fear of a damaged reputation, and men adhere to them more than women [31]. An intervention that

reaches only mothers therefore misses part of the normative apparatus.

What this literature does not contain is an analysis of the dismantling of the institutional response system. It attends to communities, to norms, household strategies and vulnerabilities, and treats the state apparatus as context, rarely as a variable whose degradation is tracked. Reviews of GBV interventions in West Africa do flag problems of law enforcement and coordination [32], without documenting the case where a functioning coordination structure is abolished by administrative decision, at the very moment the crisis was raising the need for it. The Burkinabe system was weakened at once along three distinct and unrelated paths: the abolition of its coordination structure, the rupture of community vigilance chains under displacement, and a new discursive environment that blurs the line between endogenous values and harmful practices.

This research pursues three aims: (i) to establish the state of the gains as the surveys measure them up to 2021; (ii) to document, from interviews with national protection actors, the erosion mechanisms at work since 2015; and (iii) to articulate the two so as to distinguish what is known, what is predicted and what remains to be measured.

## 2. Materials and methods

# 2.1. Study design

The study rests on a convergent, explanatory mixed-methods design. The quantitative strand establishes levels and trends. The qualitative strand interprets the mechanisms.

# 2.2. Quantitative strand

The quantitative strand rests on a secondary descriptive analysis of the aggregate estimates published by the 2010 and 2021 Demographic and Health Surveys and by the 2015 continuous multisectoral survey (EMC) [4, 5, 33]. The analysis covers three families of indicators. The first brings together the prevalence of cutting among girls aged 0 to 14, nationally and by region. The second covers the share of women aged 20 to 24 who entered a first union before 15, then before 18. The third gathers the prevalence of physical, emotional and sexual violence among women in union. No individual-level data were used. No statistical test was therefore possible, and the differences discussed remain differences of point estimates.

Two properties of these indicators condition interpretation, and the analysis treats them as findings in their own right. The prevalence of cutting among girls aged 0 to 14 is a censored indicator. Some girls not cut at the time of the survey will be cut later. The observed level therefore underestimates the cohort's final prevalence, and temporal comparisons read as trends rather than as incidence. Marriage before 18 measured among women aged 20 to 24 is a retrospective indicator. The 2021 estimate aggregates unions contracted roughly between 2015 and 2021, a portion of which precedes the intensification of the crisis.

# 2.3. Qualitative strand

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 national-level key informants drawn from public administration, non-governmental organisations, civil society organisations (CSOs) and international organisations. These interviews were not conducted for the present manuscript. They were drawn from an existing, anonymized interview dataset collected during the commissioned study "In-depth and rapid analysis of UNFPA Burkina Faso country programmes aimed at resolving bottlenecks in the next 2027–2030 programme", and reused here as secondary data.

Interviews were audio-recorded, then transcribed in full. A directed content analysis was then applied to the transcripts. The first transcripts served to identify items, these items were grouped into categories, and the whole corpus was coded on the grid thus built [34]. For the present study, the corpus was analysed through the lens of gender-based violence and harmful practices. Segments bearing on the institutional response system, on community mechanisms, on the effects of the crisis and of mobility, and on the normative and religious environment were extracted and analysed. Interviews were conducted in French; the extracts reproduced below were translated into English for this article. Reproduced extracts carry no identifier, because the sample size and the prominence of the roles would make any attribution re-identifying.

# 2.4. Integration of the strands

Integration of the two strands follows three rules set in advance. A finding is called established when it rests on the survey series. It is called a documented mechanism when it rests on concordant testimonies from actors who hold distinct observation positions, corroborated where relevant by the document review or the literature. It is called a prediction when it names a trajectory inferred from documented mechanisms but not yet measured.

## 2.5. Ethical considerations

The quantitative strand rests on a secondary analysis of aggregate estimates already published in the final reports of the Burkina Faso Demographic and Health Surveys. In line with the standards governing the secondary analysis of public, fully anonymised aggregate statistics, this strand did not require review by an ethics committee. The original surveys obtained ethical approval and informed consent from participants at the time of data collection.

For the qualitative strand, the analysis draws on a pre-existing, anonymized interview dataset collected during the commissioned study “In-depth and rapid analysis of UNFPA Burkina Faso country programmes aimed at resolving bottlenecks in the next 2027–2030 programme”. No participants were recruited, contacted or interviewed for the present manuscript, and no identifiable personal data were accessed. The interviews were conducted under the mandate and procedures of the commissioning organization (UNFPA Burkina Faso), with voluntary participation and anonymized records. Because this manuscript constitutes a secondary analysis of previously collected, anonymized data, separate ethics approval and consent to participate were not applicable to the present study.

# 3. Results

## 3.1. The gains measured up to 2021

The prevalence of cutting among girls aged 0 to 14 fell from 13.3% in 2010 to 11.3% in 2015, then to 9.4% in 2021, that is − 3.9 points in eleven years, a steady relative decline of about 29% (− 2.0 points over 2010 to 2015, − 1.9 over 2015 to 2021). Among women aged 15 to 49, prevalence fell from 75.8% to 56% over the same period, confirming the cohort effect. In 2021, a regional analysis shows that the prevalence of cutting among girls aged 0 to 14 ranged from 1.4% in the Est to 41.7% in the Sahel, with the Nord at 21.1%. Only three regions (Est, Centre-Ouest, Centre) sit below 5%, and five (Centre-Nord, Nord, Sahel, Hauts-Bassins, Cascades) exceed 12%. The highest-prevalence regions (Sahel, Nord, Centre-Nord) are precisely the regions under strongest security pressure, where access is difficult and services are closed or running at a minimum.

The share of women aged 20 to 24 married before 18 fell from 51.6% in 2010 to 51.3% in 2015, then to 38.2% in 2021. Marriage before 15 receded from 10.2% to 8.9% then 7.8% over the same period. The stock remains considerable: about 2.8 million women and girls married before 18, of whom some 600,000 before 15.

The three forms of violence measured among women in union follow three diverging dynamics between 2010 and 2021. Physical violence collapsed, from 20.3% to 8.4%, a relative fall of 59%. Emotional violence rose, from 16.8% to 20.5% (+ 22%), becoming the most frequent form. Reported sexual violence stalled, from 2.7% to 2.8%. Two readings of this divergence are possible, and they do not exclude one another. The first is substitutive. The overt, legally punished forms of violence recede in favour of insidious forms, less sanctioned socially and criminally. The second is declarative. The fall in physical violence blends a real decline with a shift in what respondents agree to report. The stalling of sexual violence at a level as low as 2.8%, in a country where the GBV sub-cluster documents a major protection crisis, most probably signals massive and stable under-reporting rather than a genuinely low prevalence.

Table 1
Trends in indicators of harmful practices and intimate partner violence, Burkina Faso, 2010 to 2021

| Indicator | 2010 | 2015 | 2021 | Relative change 2010–2021 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Cutting, girls 0–14 (%) | 13.3 | 11.3 | 9.4 | −29% |
| Cutting, women 15–49 (%) | 75.8 | – | 56.0 | −26% |
| Marriage before 18, women 20–24 (%) | 51.6 | 51.3 | 38.2 | −26% |
| Marriage before 15, women 20–24 (%) | 10.2 | 8.9 | 7.8 | −24% |
| Physical violence, women in union (%) | 20.3 | – | 8.4 | −59% |
| Emotional violence, women in union (%) | 16.8 | – | 20.5 | + 22% |
| Sexual violence, women in union (%) | 2.7 | – | 2.8 | ≈ 0% |

*Sources: 2010 and 2021 Demographic and Health Surveys; 2015 continuous multisectoral survey (EMC).*

## 3.2. Four erosion mechanisms documented by the actors

The interviews describe a degradation that does not yet show in the survey data, and they name its mechanisms with precision. Four stand out from the thematic analysis.

### 3.2.1. The dismantling of the institutional response

The mechanism described most precisely is the abolition of the Permanent Secretariat of the National Council to Fight the Practice of Excision (SP-CNLPE), whose responsibilities were transferred to the Directorate-General for the Family and the Child without additional resources.

The effects described form a chain. The capitalisation of data on FGM, child marriage and GBV was lost. Focal points disappeared in the partner ministries, notably Justice and Secondary Education, and within the defence and security forces. Continuing training for magistrates and police officers stopped. The monitoring of mobile court hearings weakened, even though the actors describe them as effective instruments of both awareness-raising and enforcement.

The most concrete operational consequence reported concerns the handling of cutting cases. Judicial police officers now handle them directly, without the competent administration being informed. Information is therefore lost at the very moment it should feed vigilance.

Monthly coordination forums are beginning to re-emerge, but they are not institutionalised. The interviewees explicitly link this disarticulation to an observed rise in cases. They describe the slackening not as a risk, but as a field observation.

### 3.2.2. The rupture of community vigilance chains

The second mechanism operates at the community level. The Burkinabe model of practice abandonment rested on a mesh of proximity: discussion groups, trained relays, mentors following families, public abandonment pledges backed by watch committees, positive pressure from opinion leaders, women’s groups and youth ambassadors. This mesh presupposes residential stability. Mass displacement has broken it.

With the disappearance of the SP-CNLPE, proximity actions and relay training fell at the very moment internal displacement was multiplying breaks in follow-up. The actors describe the result as a vacuum of collective vigilance. Public abandonment pledges are no longer followed, positive-pressure mechanisms have weakened, and a quiet resumption of practices is setting in. The phrasing deserves attention. The word quiet names exactly the kind of resumption that weakened surveillance systems do not detect and that surveys will measure only years late.

### 3.2.3. The economic reconfiguration of the practices

The third mechanism transforms the social function of the practices. In the accounts gathered, child marriage in a displacement setting is no longer chiefly a matter of tradition. It is a survival transaction.

This shift of register, from norm to necessity, carries a heavy programmatic implication. The instruments that drove the practice down, such as awareness-raising, abandonment pledges and the religious argument, target the norm and not necessity. A displaced family that marries its daughter to reduce the mouths to feed or to secure a bride price will not be reached by a sermon. It will be reached by a cash transfer, by keeping the girl in school, by an income-generating activity. The interviewees stress in the same direction that poverty makes cutting itself more resistant where it conditions access to social status. They add that girls pushed out of school by the crisis, or gone to towns and gold-panning sites, often employed as underage domestic workers without protection, accumulate exposures.

## 3.2.4. Normative re-legitimation

The fourth mechanism is the most diffuse and the most original in the corpus. It works on the environment of meaning that surrounds the practices, through two distinct channels. The first channel is discursive. The authorities' call for a return to ancestral endogenous values does not target harmful practices, but in its community reception it blurs the line between positive traditions, such as social cohesion and respect for elders, and the practices the law condemns. Some communities read this discourse as an implicit legitimation of old practices, and the actors explicitly link this confusion to the slackening of abandonment dynamics. The mechanism is that of a productive misunderstanding, since a national political framing produces effects in a domain it did not target. The actors draw a strategic consequence from it. Setting modernity against tradition becomes counter-productive, and the work required is instead a fine demarcation, within the communities themselves, between what of the heritage is kept and what is abandoned.

The second channel is violence itself. In the areas outside state control, sexual violence is used as a weapon of war, and the exposure of women and girls rises even in the daily chores of fetching water and firewood. Reports of the United Nations Secretary-General document abduction and sexual violence as elements of an attack pattern by armed groups in the country's remote areas. This regime of violence renormalises what two decades of work had denormalised. Where violence becomes an ordinary fact of existence again, the trivialisation of so-called ordinary GBV, both marital and emotional, finds a reconstituted ground.

Table 2 shows that the gains measured up to 2021 rested on three pillars. The first was a state apparatus made of law, coordination, training and enforcement. The second was a community vigilance carried by relays, mentors and monitored pledges. The third was a normative environment in which the condemnation of the practices was gaining ground. The four mechanisms documented by the interviews strike, respectively, the first pillar through institutional dismantling, the second through the rupture of vigilance chains, and the third through economic reconfiguration and normative re-legitimation. No pillar is spared, and all three give way in the areas where the burden was already heaviest.

The series establish the gain up to 2021 and its internal fragility, with emotional violence rising, sexual violence escaping measurement and the burden concentrated in areas now inaccessible. The interviews, for their part, document erosion mechanisms in operation, supported by concordant field observations such as the rise in cases, losses of information and the quiet resumption of practices. Neither strand, however, establishes the scale of the phenomenon, and the reversal of the national curves remains a prediction that the next survey will allow to be tested. This study accepts that asymmetry, because in public health, waiting for statistical confirmation of an erosion whose mechanisms are documented amounts to choosing to act too late.

Table 2
The three pillars of the gains and the four documented erosion mechanisms

| Pillar of the gains | Documented erosion mechanism | Origin of the shock | Reported field observations | Epistemic status |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| State apparatus (law, coordination, training, enforcement) | Abolition of the SP-CNLPE; responsibilities transferred without resources | Administrative decision (reorganisation) | Loss of data capitalisation; cases handled by police without reporting up; DSF and justice training halted; mobile court hearings no longer monitored | Documented mechanism (concordant testimonies + document review) |
| Community vigilance (relays, mentors, monitored pledges) | Rupture of monitoring chains through displacement; fewer proximity actions | Security crisis + institutional weakening | Abandonment pledges no longer followed; quiet resumption of practices; broken mentor-family contact | Documented mechanism (concordant testimonies) |
| Normative environment (growing social condemnation) | Economic reconfiguration: child marriage as a survival transaction among the displaced | Security crisis (household decapitalisation) | Displaced parents giving their daughters in marriage to meet needs | Documented mechanism + convergent with comparative literature |
| | Re-legitimation: confusion of endogenous values and harmful practices; sexual violence as a weapon of war | National discursive framing + areas outside control | Loosening of abandonment dynamics; renormalisation of violence | Hypothesis held by actors (discursive channel); UN-documented (weapon of war) |

*DSF, defence and security forces; FGM, female genital mutilation; GBV, gender-based violence; SP-CNLPE, Permanent Secretariat of the National Council to Fight the Practice of Excision.*

## 4. Discussion

The gains of Burkina Faso against harmful practices rank among the clearest in the region between 2010 and 2021, and they were produced by a system rather than by a spontaneous trend. That system was weakened on its three pillars at once. Its institutional coordination was abolished by administrative decision. Its community base was dispersed by displacement. Its normative environment is worked on by a discourse of return to ancestral values and by the renormalisation of violence in conflict zones. If the retreat of cutting is taken as the effect of a general modernisation carried by schooling, urbanisation and media exposure, then the crisis only slows it. If that retreat is taken as the product of sustained institutional and normative work, then its interruption does not slow the decline but removes its engine. The available work on Burkina Faso supports the second reading. It shows that the profiles of early adoption of abandonment remain strongly structured by education and setting, that is, by gains that are themselves reversible when schools close and households decapitalise [6].

The SP-CNLPE case documents the destruction, through a reorganization, carried out in 2021 as part of a broader ministerial restructuring, unrelated to the crisis, of the coordination function that held together the data, the training, the justice system and civil society. Coordination is a function, and a function without an institutional home ceases to be exercised. Its effects then spread in silence, whether losses of information, unreported cases or halted training. No published study documents such a dismantling in the field of GBV in West Africa. Sub-regional intervention reviews describe enforcement failures and chronic under-funding [32], but they start from the implicit assumption that the architecture exists.

The interviewees report a particularly concrete observation, that of cutting cases handled directly by judicial police officers without the competent administration being informed. It deserves to be set against what the scoping review on GBV in African conflict zones identifies as a central obstacle, namely the weakness of reporting and referral chains [23]. The difference is that in the contexts studied by that review, in Tigray, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the chain had most often never been complete. In Burkina Faso, it was, and it was undone. This opens a rarely treated methodological question. How does one assess the loss of an institutional capacity, when the data that would allow it to be measured are precisely those the abolished structure produced?

The overlap between the map of the cutting burden among girls aged 0 to 14, with 41.7% in the Sahel and 21.1% in the North, and the map of inaccessibility should be treated as a first-order problem by the next surveys. This point goes beyond Burkina Faso. It holds for Mali and Niger, where the border areas most affected by insecurity are also those where early marriage is most frequent [31], and it holds for any monitoring system that relies on household surveys in a partly inaccessible country. The literature on FGM in humanitarian settings makes the same point in another form when it calls the effect of crises on incidence largely undocumented [21]. This is not only a shortage of studies, but also an effect of the way measurement is done.

The economic mechanism of child marriage that the interviewees describe stages displaced parents who marry their daughter to reduce the mouths to feed or to secure a bride price. These results and the work on Syrians in Lebanon [15], Rohingya in Bangladesh [16], Yemen [17] and Somali refugees in Ethiopia [18] converge on the same chain, made of lost livelihoods, debt, perceived insecurity, then recourse to marriage as a coping and supposed protection mechanism. The comparison has a limit that must be named. In the Syrian and Rohingya contexts, the practice pre-existed at a moderate level and the crisis pushed it back up. In Burkina Faso, the practice pre-existed at a very high level and was falling. The trajectory is therefore not the same, and the mechanism may produce less a rise than a halt in the decline, or a stabilisation at a high plateau in the regions concerned. This distinction has practical consequences. In the first case, the relevant indicator is the level. In the second, it is the slope. A survey that found marriage before 18 stable in the Sahel between 2021 and 2027 should be read as a signal of failure rather than a sign of maintenance. The second lesson of the comparison is programmatic, and it is firmly established. In crisis settings, normative engagement stays limited as long as basic needs go uncovered [20]. The instruments that drove the practice down in Burkina Faso, namely awareness-raising, abandonment pledges and the religious argument, target the norm. A displaced family that marries its daughter out of necessity is not reached by a sermon. The point is banal, but its budgetary translation is much less so.

The divergence between physical violence, down 59%, emotional violence, up 22%, and sexual violence, stable at 2.8%, calls for a joint reading. If the fall in physical violence were entirely real, one would expect at least a partial movement in the other forms, so correlated are they in the literature. A third reading, specific to the Burkinabe context, deserves to be named: mass displacement may have introduced a demographic selection effect into the national aggregate. The regions driving the highest physical IPV prevalence in 2010 (Sahel, Centre-Nord) are precisely those from which internal migration has since been heaviest, and physical violence among women is structurally lower in urban and peri-urban settings where many displaced households have relocated. Part of the observed national decline may therefore reflect a compositional shift in the survey population rather than a genuine normative change, a distinction with direct implications for the interpretation of any future stable or rising urban prevalence. All three readings find support in the available evidence. The observed profile shows the opposite. The most visible and most punished form drops, the most insidious form rises, and the most taboo form does not move by a tenth of a point. That is exactly the profile a combination of real progress, displacement toward less sanctioned forms and a reporting floor on sexual violence would produce. Regional comparison makes the hypothesis of a genuinely stable sexual prevalence at 2.8% hard to hold. The GBV sub-cluster surveys record 91% of incidents involving displaced persons [12]. Qualitative work conducted in Kaya describes a trivialisation of GBV embedded in social structures, including among displaced women themselves [36]. The case study of displaced survivors documents sexual-violence trajectories that survey modules do not capture [37]. Outside Burkina Faso, the orders of magnitude are on another scale than 2.8%. In Debre Berhan, one third of displaced women are affected by GBV, including 10% by sexual violence [25]. In South Sudan, prevalences are higher still, and intimate partner violence dominates the picture [24]. The methodological implication is that the GBV modules of household surveys do not suffice. Dedicated victimisation surveys are needed, with reinforced confidentiality protocols and including displacement sites. As long as they do not exist, the most favourable indicator in the Burkinabe series will also remain the least reliable, and the country will keep reporting on sexual violence a figure that no field actor holds to be true.

The effect of a national political framing, that of the return to endogenous values, on the community reception of abandonment messages is documented nowhere else for Burkina Faso. Recent work on the abandonment of cutting locates change in individual characteristics and education [6]. The national discursive channel escapes it, for want of being captured by the existing survey instruments. This is presented as a hypothesis held by well-placed actors, consistent with what social norms theory predicts. If a norm holds through reciprocal expectations [26, 27], then a signal perceived as an official endorsement of old practices re-arms those expectations, even when it does not target them. The mechanism is that of a productive misunderstanding, since a political framing produces effects in a domain it did not target. The correction brought by Efferson and Novak, who stress heterogeneous thresholds and the weight of the household rather than the community [28, 29], does not weaken the hypothesis but sharpens its

expected reach. One should observe a differentiated effect, more marked in households whose abandonment threshold was already fragile, rather than a wholesale tipping. A strategic consequence follows, and the interviewees formulated it first. Setting modernity against tradition is counter-productive. The work required is a fine demarcation, within the heritage itself, between what is kept and what is abandoned. The literature on community value deliberations points the same way, showing that change is better achieved by building on endogenous values than by confronting them head-on [38].

Four operational implications follow from the documented mechanisms, and each targets a specific mechanism. First, give the fight against harmful practices an institutional home again. Form matters less than function, whether by recreating the SP-CNLPE or by setting up an equivalent arrangement. The function consists of capitalising data, training the DSF and magistrates, monitoring mobile court hearings and circulating information among the police, the justice system, health services and associations. Interviewees report that informal coordination forums are beginning to re-emerge, which they interpret as evidence that the institutional demand persists. What is missing is institutionalisation and resources. Second, rebuild community vigilance in displaced mode. The mesh of mentors and watch committees was designed for stable populations, and it presupposes an identifiable reference group, that is, what the norms literature names as the very condition of their transformation [30]. Its transposition to displacement sites and host communities is an engineering task to build rather than a simple extension. It runs through relays recruited among the displaced themselves, through safe spaces and through a monitoring of abandonment pledges portable from one locality to another. Third, treat the economic component as such. Where child marriage is a survival transaction, the response must be economic. It runs through transfers conditioned on keeping girls in school, through income-generating activities for displaced households and through direct support to girls at risk. Awareness-raising remains necessary for the normative component, but it is inoperative on the necessity component. Keeping girls in school deserves a special mention here, since it acts on both components at once and its degradation is massive and documented [14]. Fourth, carry out the normative demarcation work upstream and with the authorities. The endogenous-values discourse is not reversible by protection actors, but its reception is. Explicit work with authorities, chieftaincies and religious leaders costs less than managing the cases its absence produces. The interviews recall, moreover, that these leaders themselves affirm that neither the Quran nor the Bible prescribes cutting or child marriage. The Nigerien results on male adherence to marital norms [31] further suggest that this work must target men and community decision-makers as much as mothers.

These implications sit in a funding context that is closing. The contraction of United States assistance in 2025 hit protection and reproductive-health programmes across the continent [39], and the interviewees already flagged funding instability as a constraint. The efficiency argument applies fully here, since the four actions above aim to preserve existing gains, whose reconstruction cost after collapse would far exceed the cost of maintenance.

**Limitations**

This research carries some limitations. The qualitative strand rests on 21 informants from the national level alone. This means the four erosion mechanisms are described exclusively from the vantage point of institutional actors, those who steer the response, rather than from the vantage point of those who live the practices. For an article whose central argument rests on the disruption of community-level normative dynamics, this is a substantive, not merely procedural, limitation. The obvious next methodological step is a community-based participatory study embedded in displacement sites and host communities, capable of capturing the micro-social dimension that the present design could only infer.

# 5. Conclusion

Burkina Faso has shown over two decades that a rapid retreat of harmful practices is possible. It is one of the few countries in the region where cutting, child marriage and physical intimate partner violence fell simultaneously and durably. That demonstration carries a corollary that the current crisis is testing, because what a system produced can be undone by the dismantling of that system.

The three pillars of the gains, namely institutional coordination, community vigilance and the normative environment, were weakened at the same time, and in the very areas where the burden is heaviest. National actors already observe the rise in cases and the quiet resumption of practices. Surveys will see it only in several years, and all the less well as the areas concerned move

out of their reach. Between the actors' signal and the confirmation of the statistics, there is a window. It is within that window that it will be decided whether twenty years of gains are preserved at maintenance cost or rebuilt at collapse cost.

Research has its part in this window. Its first task is to measure the real scale of the resumption in the affected areas, through methods suited to inaccessibility such as telephone surveys, sampling in displacement sites and the use of service data. Its second task is to test the discursive hypothesis, that of an effect of the endogenous-values framing on the community reception of abandonment messages. Both tasks are open, and both are urgent, since their value decreases with every year of waiting.

# Declarations

**Ethics approval and consent to participate**

Not applicable. This study did not involve any new data collection. The quantitative strand is a secondary analysis of aggregate estimates already published in the final reports of the Burkina Faso Demographic and Health Surveys. The qualitative strand is a secondary analysis of a pre-existing, anonymized interview dataset collected during the commissioned study "In-depth and rapid analysis of UNFPA Burkina Faso country programmes aimed at resolving bottlenecks in the next 2027–2030 programme". No participants were recruited, contacted or interviewed for the present manuscript, and no identifiable personal data were accessed. Ethics approval and consent to participate are therefore not applicable to this secondary analysis.

**Consent for publication**

Not applicable. No identifying personal information, individual clinical details or images are reported; all interview extracts are anonymized.

**Availability of data and materials**

The quantitative data analyzed are aggregate estimates published in the final reports of the 2010 and 2021 Burkina Faso Demographic and Health Surveys and the 2015 continuous multisectoral survey, all cited in the references and freely available from the listed sources. The qualitative data (interview transcripts) are not publicly available in order to protect participant confidentiality, given the small sample and the prominence of the roles, but anonymized excerpts are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request. The aggregate estimates were extracted from the final survey reports published by The DHS Program (Burkina Faso Demographic and Health Surveys), available from https://dhsprogram.com/methodology/survey/survey-display-528.cfm , and by the Institut National de la Statistique et de la Démographie (INSD) for the 2015 continuous multisectoral survey, available from https://www.insd.bf/ . The corresponding DHS individual-level datasets can be requested from The DHS Program data portal at https://dhsprogram.com/data/ .

**Competing interests**

The authors declare no competing interests.

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**Authors' contributions**

H.B. conceived and designed the study, conducted the analysis and drafted the manuscript. D.B. contributed to the interpretation of the results and to the critical revision of the manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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data. None of the institutional named above bear responsibility for the interpretations put forward, which remain those of the authors.

**Use of large language models and AI-assisted technologies**

An AI-assisted tool was used solely to support translation from French into English and to improve language and readability. It was not used to generate scientific content, to analyse or interpret data, or to draw conclusions. The authors reviewed and verified all text and take full responsibility for the content.

**Clinical trial number:** Not applicable

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