



REGIONAL PAPER

CIVIL SOCIETY VOICES ON VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND COUNTER-TERRORISM RESPONSES

REGIONAL PERSPECTIVES FROM
WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA



UNITED NATIONS
OFFICE OF COUNTER-TERRORISM
UN Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT)



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**WOMEN, PEACE AND
SECURITY SECTION
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This report is informed by the contributions received from 80 civil society representatives from 33 countries, who shared their views, challenges and recommendations on the gendered dimensions of violent extremism and counterterrorism during the [Global Digital Consultation “Voices and perspectives of civil society on the gendered dimensions of violent extremism and counterterrorism responses”](#) (Global Digital Consultation). The Global Digital Consultation was organized by UN Women on behalf of the Working Group on Adopting a Gender-Sensitive Approach to Preventing and Countering Terrorism (Gender Working Group) of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact between 25 May and 5 July 2020. The Global Digital Consultation is an initiative of the Gender Working Group and funded by the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre in the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism.

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The regional paper and feature stories were informed by a collaborative process involving participants in the Global Digital Consultation, UN Women Regional Office for West Africa, UN Women Country Office staff across the region, including in Mali, Senegal, Niger, and Nigeria, as well as UN Women’s Women, Peace and Security and Communication teams in headquarters.

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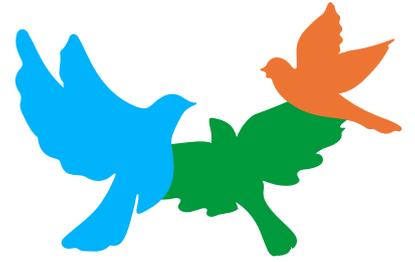
GLOSSARY

CSO	civil society organization	UNCCT	United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre
CT	counter-terrorism	UNGCTCC	United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact
DDRR	Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration and Reinsertion	UNOCT	United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism
GWG	Gender Working Group	UNSCR	United Nations Security Council resolution 1325
IDPs	internally displaced persons	VEO	violent extremism organization
ISS	Institute for Security Studies	VAW	violence against women
NAP	National Action Plan	WPS	Women, Peace and Security
PVE	preventing violent extremism		
SGBV	sexual- and gender-based violence		
UN	United Nations		

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INTRODUCTION



UN Women, on behalf of the Gender Working Group of the United Nations' Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact, organized the Global Digital Consultation on “Voices and perspectives of civil society on the gendered dimensions of violent extremism and counter-terrorism responses” between 25 May and 5 July 2020. The initiative was conducted as a joint project of the Gender Working Group, funded by the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre in the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT).

The consultation was open to participants from civil society organizations (CSOs), including independent women's and women-led CSOs, CSOs with strong credentials as gender equality advocates, and independent women's human rights and/or gender equality activists. Participants were offered a safe space to discuss their engagement in contexts affected by violent extremism conducive to terrorism. More than 140 CSO representatives from 43 countries worldwide participated. A total of 80 participants from 33 countries posted 393 comments, sharing their views, challenges and recommendations on the gendered dimensions of terrorism and counter-terrorism (CT), and the impact of existing measures to prevent violent extremism (PVE) on their work and human rights.

Civil society participants and moderators summarized their views and recommendations in a [Public Statement](#) based on their discussions in the consultation. Although views and recommendations were similar across countries and regions, as each region also has its particularities. As such, UN Women commissioned a set of regional papers to identify specific views and recommendations, in addition to those captured in the Public Statement.

The present paper focuses on West and Central Africa and the contributions of participants from countries in the region. The participants from West Africa and Central were the most numerous group of the consultation, with 23 active participants that made significant contributions.¹ For this reason, this paper is somewhat longer than the other regional papers.

¹ Participants that made contributions were from the following countries: Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Ghana, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The West and Central Africa subregion is experiencing a considerable losses of lives, massive displacements, extensive destruction of infrastructure and services, and grave human rights violations, including sexual and gender-based violence, in areas affected by violent extremist organizations (VEOs). Women and girls bear the brunt of those violations, with new forms of violence against women (VAW) appearing. Violence experienced by women is linked to deep structural gender inequalities and marginalization across the region – women do not fully enjoy their rights to education, health care and livelihoods. Prevalent patriarchal norms were described by participants as a major obstacle for women and girls to enjoy their fundamental human rights, and as a driver of VAW.

VEOs are both a symptom and a consequence of structural inequalities that profoundly affect the population in the subregion. Poor governance, notably the insufficient redistribution of natural resources and basic social services to the population, grave human rights violations and horizontal inequalities form the bedrock of violent extremism. Global stressors – such as the climate emergency and pre-existing conflicts – were also identified as a major enabling factor. Intra- and inter-communal conflicts, land disputes, electoral violence, political instability and farmer/herder conflicts create a vacuum that is rapidly filled by VEOs. Participants said existing CT/PVE militarized approaches fail to address violent extremism and are often counterproductive as they threaten fundamental freedoms and restrict the democratic space. They are also disconnected from the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. Participants called for a radical change of paradigm.

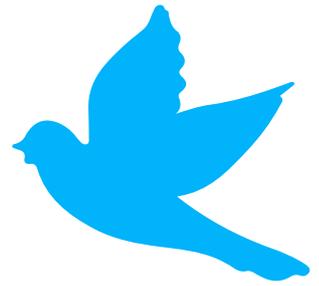
Local populations know their problems and are best-placed to define appropriate strategies and actions to address the challenges they face. Participants highlighted the major role played by civil society, notably CSOs that focus on women's empowerment. They called for increased support to women-led CSOs and women human rights defenders with flexible, long-term resources. They also recommended working with women religious leaders.

The different roles that women play in relation to violent extremism were discussed – as peacebuilders, victims and perpetrators – and participants emphasized the need to see women's experiences with VEOs beyond the binary prism of victims or perpetrators. In contexts where VEOs are present and recruit, often forcibly, women's experiences are diverse and

non-linear. Participants lamented that, unfortunately, existing CT/PVE responses do not acknowledge the variety of roles women play. Demobilization, disarmament, reintegration and reinsertion (DDRR) processes focus on men/boys and their methodology and criteria remain opaque. The difficult reintegration of women and children in their communities also remains unaddressed.

Participants recommended a multidimensional approach to CT/PVE that addresses structural inequalities. They called for improving democratic governance and tackling the profound gender inequalities, including the absence of women in decision-making and in peace processes. They said that States should deliver basic services rather than focusing on “State authority”. Governments across the region should develop their economies in a way that prioritizes the creation of jobs for marginalized groups, notably women and youth, and prevents them from being tempted by violent extremism or migration. Quality education should be accessible to all, particularly to girls living in rural areas. Education systems and curricula should include content and teaching that promotes tolerance and acceptance of gender equality and human rights, regardless of social, religious or ideological differences, in order to build peaceful societies. Justice is another necessary cornerstone of any peaceful society. Participants also called for transitional justice processes and for greater accountability of CT/PVE responses, notably in relation to compliance with human rights and gender equality obligations. Last but not least, they said CT/PVE approaches should be evidence-based and informed by research in order to be effective and not reinforce existing gender inequalities.

VIOLENT EXTREMIST ORGANIZATIONS AS SYMPTOMS AND CONSEQUENCES OF STRUCTURAL PROBLEMS



The massive impact of violent extremist organizations, notably on women and girls

Participants described in great detail the massive impact that VEOs have on communities and individuals in the region, starting with the colossal loss of lives, massive displacement of populations, and extensive destruction of infrastructure and services such as health, education and facilities, as well as homes. They also highlighted the damage to socio-economic resources and the loss of livelihoods. They pointed out the breakdown of community-based protection mechanisms and social safety-nets following displacement and the impact of large-scale human rights abuses and public insecurity on the physical and emotional well-being of their people. The very social fabric of communities, families and households is severely damaged. Entire regions are in need of immediate humanitarian assistance, with women and children being particularly affected.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and host communities face difficult conditions, as IDP camps are overcrowded and devoid of basic amenities in situations where aid from humanitarian organizations and government agencies has become “irregular, inadequate and unpredictable” (participant from Nigeria). Women and girls make up the highest number of refugees and displaced persons. They often experience discrimination, notably in IDP camps where women tend to be tagged as “wives of extremists”, including by officials. They are exposed to the risks of

sexual harassment, assault and rape, including from security personnel and vigilantes.

Participants said that women and girls have paid a heavy price in conflicts and wars that have ravaged the West Africa subregion. In contexts affected by VEOs, the violations of women’s human rights are multiple. “In times of crisis, the battle is usually taken to women’s bodies to spite the opposing group,” explained a participant from Nigeria. Women and girls endure kidnapping, forced marriages, as well as high levels of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), including rape. Those assaults result in sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS and other health complications. Women experience brutality by both VEOs and security personnel. In some instances, even community security mechanisms such as vigilantes exploit and take advantage of the people they are supposed to protect and aggress women.

With conflict, new forms of violence against women are appearing. When individuals are considered as “collaborating”, their wives are subject to reprisals from the opposing side. Participants notably mentioned cases of rape of women/girls from the Diffa region by elements of Boko Haram as a form of punishment. On the other hand, girls and women were said to be “engrossed” by state security personnel in missions and left to her own fate when they leave the area. Many women who are raped or suffer sexual violence are rejected by their spouses and communities, which affects their mental health. Women and women’s organizations have also been targeted by terrorist and extremist groups as a way of attracting global attention and negotiating with States. A participant



Photo: UN Women/Ryan Brown

from Nigeria mentioned notably the abduction of the Chibok girls, Dapchi schoolgirls, and other women development workers across the country.

VEOs also violate the freedom of movement and the right to education, health care and livelihoods of women and girls. Women's livelihoods are particularly affected in those contexts, as trading activities are disrupted and farming activities become very dangerous to undertake – with many women attacked, raped or even killed when going to farm. Women descend rapidly in poverty and are impacted in both their physical and mental health. VEOs also undermine the recent gains made by women in those countries, particularly in terms of women's empowerment and participation. As a matter of fact, participants emphasized that violence experienced by women in areas affected by VEOs is linked to deep structural gender inequalities and marginalization across the region. In areas affected by VEOs, women have often been subjected to extreme poverty and profound gender inequalities for decades. Participants described a continuum of violence – “women experience sexual violence within the household, family, and all warring parties” said a participant from Nigeria. Systematic and engendered forms of violence against women are expressions of a deeper societal disregard and discrimination against women. Prevalent patriarchal norms were particularly described as a major obstacle for women and girls to enjoy their fundamental human rights and as conducive to violence against women.

Communal and environmental factors conducive to violent extremism

There was broad agreement that poor governance, insufficient redistribution of natural resources and access to basic social services such as water, health, energy, etc. get coupled with profound inequalities to form the bedrock of violent extremism. The marginalization of communities and social groups, notably women and youth, as well as the loss of human dignity, particularly among women, were often mentioned as critical factors leading to violent extremism and violent conflicts.

Participants highlighted violations of fundamental human rights and injustice as major factors leading to violent extremism. They said that extra-judicial killings, imprisonment without a fair trial, human rights abuses, torture, impunity and violations of the rule of law by state actors were major factors enabling violent extremism.² As a matter of fact, VEOs reportedly extol discourses that propose an alternative to the State and other opinions centred on violence to confront injustice and all kinds of abuses of power. As explained by a participant from Ghana: “the [...] breakdown of law and order and governments' inability to deliver on the dividends of democracy creates a situation for non-state actors to take control of state sovereignty”. VEOs deliver such messages at both local and national levels.

² Some participants qualified such human rights violations as “State-sponsored terrorism”. These contributions are in line with the UNDP report: UNDP. 2017. *Journey to Extremism in Africa*. Available [here](#).



Photo: UN Women/Ryan Brown

Pre-existing conflicts were also identified as a major enabling factor for violent extremism. The West Africa subregion faces wars and conflicts manifested in the form of intra- and inter-communal conflicts, chieftaincy and land disputes, electoral violence and political instability, among others. This situation is further exacerbated by the heightened farmer/herder conflicts raging, particularly in the Sahel countries. These protracted conflicts result in human suffering and a breakdown of law and order where States are debilitated and can no longer protect their citizens or provide the necessary peace and stability. As States continue to fail in their duties, the vacuum created becomes interlinked with other drivers to provide a fertile breeding ground for violent extremism. Some participants described in detail the mechanisms at play in situations where VEOs take advantage of inter-community conflicts. When a long-standing conflict persists (as in the case of communal conflicts) and does not find a just resolution, one of the protagonists may side with an extremist group for the sole purpose of seeking revenge. VEOs were also said to take advantage of inter-community conflicts to mobilize youth, notably through identity-based causes. A participant from Mali said that VEOs such as Katiba Macina were able to mobilize youth from communities frustrated by natural resource mismanagement. Similarly, Boko Haram was said to use inter-community efforts to mobilize youth in the Diffa region by taking advantage of tensions between ethnic groups.

The climate emergency contributes to increased violent conflicts. The Lake Chad region – which is

located at the conjunction of Chad, Cameroon, Niger and Nigeria – was mentioned as an example where the climate emergency has led to growing food and water insecurity, a severe decrease of economic activity, declining livelihoods and an increase of community-based conflicts, armed conflicts and the emergence of VEOs. Participants mentioned farmer/herder clashes in the various countries of the region as a result of desertification caused by increased temperatures and low rainfall, which limit grazing land for nomadic herders, leading some of them to encroach on farmland. Such conflicts provide a fertile ground for VEOs.

Patriarchal values and gender stereotypes were highlighted as a major challenge for women in the subregion, making it challenging for women to have any agency, whether at local or national levels. Traditional gender norms result in women being excluded from decision-making on peace and security issues, including PVE responses. Traditional gender norms are also defining CT/PVE interventions – as predominantly militaristic – and how women are perceived by CT/PVE policies – mainly as victims instead of active individuals and leaders in their own right. A participant from Nigeria said: “when women [will be] considered leaders in the society, their participation in decision-making and policy will not be undermined.” On the other hand, participants tended to downplay the role of religion as a factor influencing individuals to join VEOs. While religious leaders were said to be influential, they said research conducted in the region tends to demonstrate that religion occupies a marginal position in the motivations of youth. When it does play a role, it is the case for individuals who had little religious education or individuals who joined in order to benefit from religious education.³

Participants also mentioned specific factors such as porous borders, the proliferation of arms, weapons and ammunition, and linkages with transnational organized crime that further strengthen the spread of VE. They also highlighted the use of media by some actors, including diasporas, to spread violent messages in the region. Social media is reportedly being used by influencers to call for increased acts of violence, whether among VEOs or state actors.

3 Participants mentioned research conducted by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS).

EXISTING APPROACHES FAILING

PVE laws and policies are violating human rights and aggravating gender inequalities

Participants across all countries of the subregion submitted an extremely large number of contributions on how and why existing CT/PVE responses are failing or becoming counterproductive. They said that existing responses, which are focused on reacting and therefore using force to counter violence, have been unable to address the root causes of violent extremism, and are the opposite of what women who work on peace and security promote – i.e. women’s rights, justice, education, employment, structural and social justice.

Participants were unanimous in saying that existing militarized approaches are doomed to fail and create more problems than they pretend to solve across the subregion. “The military ‘hardware tactics’ response on CT/PVE, which is not complying with rule of law, coupled with poor criminal justice systems, has further created more problems,” said a participant from Nigeria. “Think beyond the military response and adopt multidimensional approaches,” said a participant from Senegal. Participants said these measures do not deter extremist groups from carrying out their threats and recruiting new adherents, and even questioned the tactical benefits of such approaches in the context of asymmetrical warfare. Existing CT/PVE laws and policies – such as state of emergency and curfew measures – are likely to increase hostility towards governments. Likewise, situations of injustice and human rights violations resulting from militarized responses nurture violent extremism in high-risk areas and in communities where old community-related disputes (land conflicts, conflicts around water points, farmer/pastoralist conflicts, etc.) and/or horizontal inequalities have not yet been adequately addressed. Militarized approaches also lead certain communities to see VEOs as benefactors. A participant from Niger explained that in conflict



Photo: UN Women/Ryan Brown

areas, vulnerable groups and women see extremist groups as benevolent actors who can substitute local authorities that are struggling to help them or are absent. In some places, VEOs become an alternative to state institutions.

A major concern expressed by participants is that existing PVE responses expand the military space, threaten fundamental freedoms and restrict civic spaces. Moreover, military institutions are not seen as transparent or inclusive. “Communities become highly militarized, instilling more fear and causing trauma than the problem it was created to solve,” expressed a participant from Nigeria, mentioning notably the operations “Crocodile smile” in the south and “Python dance” in the south-east of the country.⁴ Such situations make it much more challenging for women human rights defenders to operate. CT/PVE agendas have also been used to justify heavy-handed crackdowns on civilian populations, notably on organized civil society and women’s rights activists. They have also dealt a severe blow to the principle of free movement of people, goods and trade, as in several countries, the first CT/PVE measures taken are curfews and states of emergency. Participants also mentioned the adoption of laws on cybercrime and electronic communications, notably in Niger, as tools to muzzle voices opposed to the political regime in place.

4 “Crocodile smile” and “Python dance” are operations conducted by the Nigeria Army in certain regions of the country. They have been described in several media reports.

Participants also complained that PVE laws are enacted without due and meaningful consultation. Some participants mentioned ‘public hearings’ on CT/PVE bills, which were convened in less than 24 hours, making it very challenging for women leading peace-building organizations to submit their positions or inputs, or to engage in advocacy or lobbying activities.

In practice, CT/PVE laws and policies have negatively impacted women’s human rights. Women are most often excluded from the process of enacting those laws and policies. Their rights to have a say on PVE is usually denied. Another major issue is that CT/PVE laws and policies are gender-blind, therefore primarily targeting men and boys, strengthening gender norms and further aggravating existing gender inequalities. “Public policies and laws that focus on counter-terrorism and PVE [are designed] without taking into account the inequalities that already exist between men and women” emphasized a participant from Niger. Besides this, when men and women are subject to the same measures, this further aggravates existing gender inequalities. For example, laws restricting freedom of movement in conflict zones mean women can often no longer work. Those who are forced to move to safer places to avoid abuses by extremist groups find it difficult to adapt in new communities, while women’s organizations struggle to assist survivors.

Gender-blind laws and policies also affect the very efficiency of CT/PVE responses. “Without an adequate gender analysis couched in a rights-based framework, any law and/or policy developed is flawed,” said a participant, citing the example of the 2017 *Nigerian Policy Framework and National Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism*. The framework reportedly does recognize women and girls as victims of violent extremism. It highlights the role they can play in PVE because of their roles as mothers and wives. However, issues of security, disarmament, rehabilitation and reintegration are still very much seen as a masculine endeavour. Because of the perception of CT/PVE in a masculine context, many women’s organizations – particularly those working at community and grass-roots levels – are not as supported (resources, capacity) to carry out the work they are doing. Another negative effect of gender-blind policies is that they tend to consider women for their instrumental roles in collecting information. Women undertaking informal intelligence-gathering

within the community for State actors are not only at-risk, but they risk the safety of their families and love ones.

Another major criticism of existing CT/PVE approaches is that they are disconnected from the WPS agenda and obligations. CT/PVE are not informed, nor do they reflect National Action Plans (NAP) on United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325). “It’s almost like they are separate documents”, said a participant from Nigeria. A sociological reason may be at heart, namely that CT/PVE strategies reside in male-dominated institutions, such as Ministries of Defense and the Army, while WPS NAPs are traditionally designed by Gender/Women’s Ministries. Participants noted that Ministries of Women’s Affairs are usually not associated with CT/PVE laws and policies. “The laws are male-tailored and engineered,” voiced one participant from Nigeria.

Participants called for a paradigm shift – to think beyond the military response and adopt multidimensional approaches. “Violent extremism threatens human peace and security. It does not understand and have respect for territorial boundaries, nor does it respect rule of law and human life. CT/PVE approaches should not tow the line of a terrorists and extremists’ approach but rather [be] an approach that applies the rule of law,” said a participant from Nigeria.

The need to change paradigms is also based on the analysis that “women and men’s motivations for associating with VEOs are multiple, overlapping and evolving,” voiced a participant from Senegal. It is therefore important to avoid reducing their engagement to “drivers”, whether economic or religious. Research in the region reportedly shows that unemployment as a driver of engagement in VEOs is one factor among many in a broader continuum of economic factors that include poverty, difficulty meeting basic needs or the lack of prospects.⁵

Response to the COVID-19 pandemic – another gender-blind approach to crises

Measures taken in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic have particularly impacted women living in contexts affected by violent extremism. “Things went from bad to worse in our many communities

5 Participants mentioned, notably, studies by the ISS and the Timbuktu Institute.



Photo: UN Women/Ryan Brown

as the COVID-19 barrier measures were added to the security emergency measures (closure of some weekly markets, ban on motorcycle traffic, curfew...)", as a participant from Niger prosaically describes. The socioeconomic impacts of these combined effects further impact marginalized groups, including women. The threat of violent extremism is exacerbated during crises. VEOs were said to take advantage of lockdowns, especially of young people that are more vulnerable to online propaganda.

Aside from immediate and direct effects, participants reflected on the broader impacts of the pandemic and patterns in State's responses to emergencies. They noted many similarities between State responses to violent extremism and to COVID-19. They highlighted that the response was to resort to the restriction of civil liberties, including the freedom to demonstrate in high-risk areas, the prohibition of gatherings, reduced mobility, and restricted access to public places. They added that the pandemic reveals challenges within the security and justice institutions to ensure the security and safety of the population while guaranteeing fundamental freedoms. They mentioned

numerous incidences of human rights violations by security agencies in their attempt to enforce lockdowns, including violations of the right to freedom of movement, unlawful arrests and detentions, seizure/confiscation of properties, sexual and gender-based violence, discrimination, inhumane and degrading treatment, torture and even extra-judicial killings.

Participants said that the COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated existing structural inequalities in areas affected by violent conflicts. Lockdowns have also reinforced traditional gender norms as women and girls have been forced to take on a larger role in caring for their families and communities in contexts where vital services such as schools, childcare centres, shelters, courts, social services and health facilities were closed and access to livelihoods were limited. For women engaged in daily subsistence living, their vulnerability has been magnified. Participants also remarked that women were excluded from decision-making in COVID-19 structures (task forces, committees, etc.) and that members of those structures did not apply any gender lens in the planning and implementation of services to tackle the pandemic.

NEED FOR A HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH

Transitional justice, addressing inequalities and guaranteeing access to education

Participants called for the promotion and respect for human rights and the rule of law to be at the core of any CT/PVE response, and for mechanisms to ensure compliance and penalties for non-adherence to these principles. They emphasized that justice is a necessary foundation for any effective response to violent extremist organizations, mentioning particularly the need for transitional justice processes and restorative justice approaches. Existing justice responses were said to oscillate between two extremes – punitive justice approaches to the detriment of social cohesion, or restoration for victims to the detriment of accountability for perpetrators. “Supporting transitional justice can be the first step in adopting a more comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy that targets the disease instead of the symptoms,” said a participant.

Participants also called on States to deliver basic services rather than to focus on state authority, to demonstrate their utility to the population and put beneficiaries at the core of the response. They urged authorities to develop the economy in a way that prioritizes the creation of jobs for marginalized groups, notably women and the youth. Efforts should focus on rural, very poor and conflict-affected localities to offer opportunities to women, youth and IDPs, so as to prevent them from being tempted by violent extremism or immigration. Increased incomes translate into increased resilience and response to shocks. Job opportunities also empower women and men who can become agents of change at local level. Participants from Burkina Faso and Niger also suggested addressing poverty through solidarity entrepreneurship – an economic model that ensures cultural, social and political empowerment and enables women and youth access to decision-making. Participants from Senegal and Niger also flagged the importance of addressing horizontal

inequalities, including gender inequalities, which are an indicator of wider inequalities within societies. They said that guaranteeing gender equality would have a “knock-on” effect on social exclusion.

Access to education was a major theme of discussion, often mentioned as a major foundation and priority for effectively addressing violent conflicts in the region. What is required is not just education, but “quality education,” participants reiterated. Quality education must be inclusive, accessible to girls and boys, in-school and out-of-school children, children living in urban and rural areas, and it should be adapted to specific contexts, notably to nomadic and pastoralist children. Such inclusivity is particularly important for girls, as educational opportunities remain a challenge for young women and girls. Quality education has the potential to tackle underlying factors that enable violent extremism, such as exclusion, discrimination, inequalities, and prejudices against diversity. Quality education can also shape pro-peace attitudes and behaviours. Participants called for education systems and curricula to include content and teachings that promote tolerance and acceptance of gender equality and human rights, regardless of religious or ideological differences, in order to build peaceful societies. On the other hand, school systems that do not provide quality education may encourage classroom discrimination or provide unequal access to education based on gender, further marginalizing girl-children and offering fertile ground for VEOs.

There was a concern that schools are becoming part of the battleground in contexts affected by violent conflicts. A participant from Cameroon spoke of schools being burned down and teachers being killed in a region affected by violent conflict. Another concern was that children living in rural areas are among the first deprived of education when their region is affected by violence. This particularly impacts girls, who already face obstacles to accessing education (intersectionality of rights). The lack of educational opportunities was said to serve as a factor in the recruitment of child soldiers.

Work with non-state and local actors for local solutions

Participants said their experience is that state-centred responses to violent extremism, through laws and national policies, are not ideal. They called on public authorities to take into account the realities on the ground and to adapt CT/PVE responses to local contexts so that they can become useful tools for all communities concerned. The first necessary step to considering local contexts is to involve communities and CSOs that are confronted with VEOs. Local populations know their problems better and are best-placed to define strategies and actions that are appropriate to address the challenges they face. They also should be given the opportunity to lead and manage peacebuilding programmes.

Participants said religious leaders should be included in peacebuilding projects and mentioned good practices – notably a project in Nigeria, where religious leaders were identified as part of the peace structures. Religious leaders are influential in the region and often revered by their adherents. As such, they can use their position to denounce false teachings and promote peace among their adherents. They also recommended working with women religious leaders, who are too often overlooked. Many religious organizations that are headed by women are doing commendable work in the area of women’s participation, especially to increase their participation in political and economic decision-making.

Participants highlighted the major role played by CSOs in building peace in contexts affected by violent extremism, notably CSOs that focus on women’s empowerment. They said that CSOs were among the few actors that address psychological and emotional violence and assist survivors of conflicts with trauma healing. They called for increased support for women-led CSOs and women human rights defenders, particularly with flexible resources. They said such resources were necessary to support women human rights defenders, to provide capacity-building and training; to fund litigations and other judicial cases; and to offer psychosocial counselling and self-care. Participants also called on donors to consider longer-term funding for local CSOs. Such funding would enable CSOs to conduct comprehensive peace, conflict and gender-sensitive assessments, and work closely with local communities to identify their needs and channel resources in a coherent and sustainable manner.



Photo: UN Women

Participants equally encouraged donors and UN entities to actively involve local CSOs. Too often, CSOs that participate in the drafting of such laws and frameworks are reportedly not operating on the ground in areas where violent conflicts are most intense and prevalent. On the other hand, many CSOs that operate at the local level are excluded from existing national frameworks and may not have access to CT/PVE strategies and action plans. “We have had incredible feedback from women and [local] structures active in the field... but these elements do not appear in the country reports in the preliminary studies to the national plans,” said a participant from Senegal. There is a need to strengthen the capacities of local leaders and community activists on existing tools and strategies, particularly among women’s groups that live in areas affected by VEOs. Participants gave the example of communities in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria (states of Bayelsa and Rivers), where authorities have adopted NAPs on UNSCR 1325 but awareness about these plans remains low among civil society and women.

They also called for the establishment of multi-stakeholder platforms at the local level, to facilitate intra-community dialogue. This would help local CSOs, actors and survivors of violent conflicts to gain access to national and regional platforms. They would also enable evaluation of the efficiency and effectiveness of CT/PVE responses. Local platforms would notably benefit women and empower them to become agents instead of being viewed and perceived as mere victims. “Many women still operate at the level of being victims because they lack the information and tools to function as change-agents,” said a participant from Nigeria. Participants called for improved partnerships between grass-roots organizations and policy organizations that operate at the national level. Grass-roots organizations and movements originating from

conflict-affected contexts play an important role in initiating change within communities; while policy organizations contribute to change at the national level. Better articulation between those organizations would notably facilitate women to participate in and benefit from CT/PVE responses.

The need for women's meaningful participation and leadership in peace and security

Women and youth are excluded by design or default from peace processes by male leaders across the region, undermining their capacities for peacebuilding. This situation happens even in countries that adopted WPS NAPs. Also, themes discussed in such national initiatives usually do not include issues of concern for women and youth. A participant from Cameroon explained that women and youth remain underrepresented in the so-called national dialogue established by authorities in 2019 to address the violent conflict in the North-West region of the country, with only 5 out of the more than 65 participants being women, and with no youth present. Among the eight themes addressed in the dialogue, there were allegedly none related to women, youth or children despite the fact that these groups were greatly affected by the violent conflict and related outcomes, including violent extremism.

The invisibility of women is particularly striking at the local level and in rural areas. While many women are active in peacebuilding structures and initiatives in their communities, villages and towns, their experiences and recommendations are not included in reports and national action plans. Women-led CSOs at local levels are very active but struggle to receive the necessary resources to carry out their activities. A participant from Nigeria gave the example of a local CSO in Maiduguri, Borno state, the epicentre of the Boko Haram insurgency. This organization allegedly serves over 3,000 widows and children that are stigmatized, rejected and excluded by society. Yet, it has not received funding from any donor yet, striving for individual contributions. Working with such limited support and resources can lead, and has led, to many women human rights defenders experiencing burn-out, high levels of stress, poor health and a whole host of economic-related deprivations. Funding and capacity are crucial to the work of women-led organizations, especially in the area of WPS in order to

promote gender equality and protect women's human rights. A participant from Nigeria said: "women-led organizations are like farmers who have been given a land to farm, with the design and beautiful ideas of the crops to grow but given no implement/money to bring the fallow land to farmland." The invisibility of women is also obvious in certain age groups. Young women are said to be particularly deprived of their rights and excluded from public life. As pointed out by a participant, the term "youth" is often understood to refer only to male youth.

Participants insisted that major efforts are required to ensure women's full and equal participation in peace processes, including in relation to CT/PVE. This is especially true for rural women. Such participation is a *sine qua non* condition for CT/PVE responses to be successful as women are active peacebuilders in their communities. Women's participation in policy formulation also provides gender perspectives that are currently missing, including in relation to gendered impacts of violent extremism on girl child education, maternal mortality (which is exacerbated in violent situations), sexual and reproductive health, and sexual- and gender-based violence.

Participants made concrete suggestions to enable women to have their voices heard in the public space, to improve the representation and meaningful participation of women in peace processes, and progressively overcome sociocultural, religious and political obstacles to their full participation in public life. Recognizing women's leadership was considered a first important step to allowing women to be part of official peace processes, as explained by a participant from Burkina Faso. Participants recommended offering platforms and communication channels to women and women-led CSOs so that they can become more visible and increasingly accepted as leaders, and to communicate with local communities in local languages. Such support could also empower women to share their experiences and views and to challenge gender norms in their environment. Such visibility translates, over the years, into the appointment of women in local institutions. Participants mentioned cases of women starting to get chieftaincy titles in communities and nominations to peace committees and community development committees. Economic empowerment programmes, notably for young women that are encouraged to become entrepreneurs, are equally commendable. Supporting the establishment of



Photo: UN Women/Catianne Tijerina

platforms and frameworks where women can network and expose their experiences was also considered a good practice. Participants recommended providing women with the technical skills required to participate in national peace and security processes – notably in relation to early warning, reporting, negotiation, mediation and advocacy – including on thematic issues related to security so that an increased number of women would gain expertise in that area. They also recommended that WPS NAPs be implemented, which is rarely the case in the region. A participant from Senegal also recommended that security institutions should develop and implement gender strategies.

Participants mentioned good practices in relation to training young women to become leaders. A participant from Niger reported how her CSO trained young women to become leaders capable of taking an active part in responding to violent extremism in their communities. Such actions have liberated the voice of women within communities and encouraged many women and girls to express themselves, which is considered a major achievement in that region. A participant from Niger mentioned the platform of women G5 Sahel as a good practice to feature the work of women-led CSOs in peace and security.

The need for better accountability and results

CT/PVE responses should be evidence-based and reflect the latest research, notably in relation to the gender dimensions of violent extremism and the role of women in relation to VEOs. Participants particularly called for evidence-based approaches for

the engagement of women in order to ensure that DDDR activities are evidence-based and do not further aggravate gender inequalities and the marginalization of women. In this regard, there is a need to conduct further studies and research, notably in relation to women's involvement in violent extremism. To effectively prevent and counter women's associations with VEOs, it is important to understand why and how they come to associate with violent extremist groups and/or why they do not associate with them.

Participants insisted that what matters is the effective implementation of measures and recommendations. They mentioned that a number of public statements in relation to violent extremism and terrorism have been published in the region, starting with the Declaration of Bamako on 22 February 2017, as well as statements made during the regional forum of N'Djamena, the meeting of Niamey, and by the platform of the G5 Sahel women.⁶ They also pointed out many texts and resolutions adopted by the United Nations that remain to be implemented effectively. They called for the establishment of mechanisms to translate such texts into practice, monitor their implementation and evaluate their effectiveness.

There is a need for indicators to measure the compliance of CT/PVE responses with human rights and gender equality obligations. A key indicator of PVE responses should be the extent to which human rights and gender equality have been factored into the design and implementation of policies and programmes. Also, the impact of CT/PVE strategies, programmes and activities should be measured in relation to their impact on gender equality and human rights.

One of the problems encountered in the development and implementation of PVE strategies is the multiplicity of actors, partners and projects in a dispersed and uncoordinated manner, which does not facilitate the implementation of the action plans of different countries. Participants suggested developing coordination frameworks and building bridges between the various programmes and actors to facilitate the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the projects. An option would be to refer to the resolutions and various strategic recommendations of the United Nations and regional organizations. Convergence, cooperation and partnerships at the subregional level should be also encouraged.

⁶ The Declaration of Bamako (22 February 2017) is available [here](#).

GENDER ROLES AND STEREOTYPES

The diversity of roles undertaken by women

Participants insisted that women play different roles: they can be peacebuilders, victims and perpetrators. Most importantly, it is critical to see women's experiences with violent extremist organizations beyond the binary prism of victims or perpetrators. In contexts where VEOs are present and recruit, often forcibly, women's experiences are diverse and non-linear. During times of conflict, women's roles are often transformed – a transformation that applies to gender roles as well. While they are traditionally caregivers and nurturers for their families and communities, they are also involved in “co-producing security”, as described by a participant. They might even be actively engaged in providing information to security actors. However, such roles were said to expose women to great risks.

The diversity of gender roles applies to women perpetrators as well. As described by a participant from Nigeria: “Women and girls still play their gender roles of caring, nurturing and providing sexual satisfaction. Through the performance of these roles they learn self-defense in case of attacks, they act as spies, get information, assist the perpetrators of violence to move weapons from one point to the other without suspicion, provide strategy and are involved in rituals.” The same participant described how women's role can evolve over time and transform: “from self-defense they graduate into launching attacks [...].At this stage they can negotiate their freedom because they can fight and change camps”.

Women are also effective peace-brokers, especially in communal conflicts. Participants said that throughout history, women have always mediated in such conflicts in the region, albeit informally, bringing different perspectives and helping to achieve lasting solutions to conflicts. Women have notably been promoting dialogue and mediation processes in communities – critical tools for conflict resolution because it is an inclusive process that involves all

sectors of society and leads to identifying and implementing workable solutions. However, these efforts are rarely documented or reported and go unnoticed.

To be effective, CT/PVE policies, strategies and programming must be grounded in a better understanding of the diverse and context-specific experiences of women. It is important to understand why and how women find themselves associated with VEOs. Beyond women's motivations to join these groups, it is important to understand why VEOs include women in their ranks and their activities and why some do not.

Women are absent from DDDR processes

Although women are also perpetrators of violence, they are rarely included in demobilization, reintegration and rehabilitation and reinsertion (DDRR) processes in the region.

The acceptance of women and girl returnees who have been associated with insurgents remains a major obstacle for reintegration. When it comes to the women who have been associated with Boko Haram and gone through screening, initially they were released into their communities where they faced suspicion, rejection and even violence by their families and communities. There is always a perception and suspicion that women associated with VEOs remain close to these VEOs and act as “spies”, irrespective of the paths that led them to those organizations. Because conflicts are ongoing, and VEOs militants remain active, communities do not trust returnees and defectors, so they face the risk of retaliatory violence.

Often, communities are said not to be “ready” to accept returnees, because of the grave human rights violations triggered by conflict. One participant said “the pain is still too much to talk about reintegration.” Many people view returnees as a direct threat, fearing that they have been “radicalized” and could recruit



Photo: UN Women/Ryan Brown

others. There is also resentment from other community members as specific support is given to returnees while victims of the VEOs might be neglected. “Some people feel that violence is being rewarded and not peace” said one participant. The stigmatization of those associated with VEOs can extend to their families, making families even more reluctant to accept them back. Some communities are willing to accept their daughters but not the children they come back with or pregnancies (according to them it is “bad blood”). As a matter of fact, children born out of the sexual violence face stigma because people believe that they have inherited their fathers’ murderous traits. Participants said that women who are returned without properly informing members of the communities would usually be considered as “radicalized”.

Participants were very critical of the DDRR processes conducted in their respective countries. They complained that the screening carried out by police or military officials remains opaque. The criteria used to conduct screenings are not made public. Participants lamented that humanitarian actors do not have access to the information that is used for identification nor to the screening centres. There is no independent

oversight of those processes. A Nigerian participant mentioned the “Operation Safe Corridor” programme as an illustration of the secrecy that surrounds DDRR processes, with no public information on the activities conducted as part of this programme. This lack of transparency and information is a major obstacle for successful reintegration, as it generates misconceptions and mistrust from the public.

Participants mentioned initiatives by authorities in a few countries that have opened rehabilitation centres catering to women, children and the elderly who that have been associated with VEOs and mentioned good practices and recommendations. Many organizations are reportedly implementing programmes such as community dialogues and family-support sessions, direct support to returnees (especially women and girls abducted by VEOs), trainings for community leaders on reconciliation and conflict resolution, and radio programmes that try to build support for the reintegration process, livelihoods support, etc. Some of these are said to yield positive results. However, participants insisted that existing programmes are just “the tip of the iceberg against the background of the huge number of women and girls abducted” and

should be replicated at a large scale. Most importantly, they recommended support for former combatants and those associated with armed groups, with parallel assistance for affected population groups, such as youth with similar socioeconomic profiles, IDPs and other vulnerable groups.

There are a few DDDR projects in the region, but most of them exclude women. Nor is gender seen as a priority in the rare reintegration or DDDR operations. Those often, they focus on short-term objectives and are set up at times when States place the immediate security of populations and territories above all other considerations. The success of gender-sensitive reintegration processes will require personalized and adapted treatment at two levels: the status of women, with its implications in the societies of origin; and the diversity of experiences, lived and suffered in terms of violence. Moreover, CT/PVE strategies should address the perceptions of host communities by documenting their evolution through field surveys and qualitative interviews. Another major obstacle of existing DDDR programmes is that they focus almost exclusively on the problem of “de-radicalization”. This was considered problematic as not all deserters are “radicalized”. The fact that women sometimes even consider returning to the ranks of Boko Haram highlights the need to articulate linkages between DDDR and PVE programmes.

Need for further research and studies

The involvement of women in VEOs is still understudied in the region, particularly in the Sahel region. Only the Boko Haram case, with the media coverage of the Chibok girls case, has attracted enough attention for study. In order to better prevent and respond to violent conflicts in the region, more in-depth studies must be conducted to understand the involvement of women in VEOs: their motivations or constraints, the specificity of their recruitment, voluntary or not, as well as the difficulties in disengaging and reintegrating.

There is also a need to better define the motivations for recruiting women into VEOs: which groups recruit them most, why others do not recruit women, what are their roles within VEOs, etc. Further research on the subject will provide a more refined vision of the role of women in VEOs, as well as the means and tools to prevent this phenomenon. This will make it possible to better explain that women are not always victims, but that they can be active agents in VEOs, sometimes playing important roles.

Such in-depth studies will also make it possible to move away from an exclusively victimizing paradigm and to document the real motivations for engagement beyond mere ideological or socioeconomic factors. The testimonies and experiences shared during the digital consultation alone show that ‘push and pull’ factors are multiple, overlapping and evolving. For example, in addition to poverty or socioeconomic vulnerabilities, there is the difficulty of accessing basic social services, lack of perspective, the desire to protect one’s person, family, community, professional activity, or simply the desire for revenge. Engagement factors also include, according to testimonies from CSOs in the region, human rights violations, protracted and unresolved conflicts and the dissatisfaction and frustration that may be associated with them are also key factors. The religious factor seems marginal in the majority of cases.

In addition, studies dedicated to the specific relationship of women to violent extremism and the fact that they are so far less engaged than men would also be an opportunity to focus more on the issue of resilience, which has received little scientific interest compared to the factors driving radicalization. Also, the poorly documented nature of the gender dimension in reintegration strategies and processes of women who were formerly engaged by or hostages of VEOs should lead to research projects on mutual perceptions between host communities and ex-combatants or hostages in order to better understand the origin of stigmatization and document the obstacles to acceptance and the willingness to reintegrate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Participants from West and Central Africa formulated a series of recommendations that are relevant to their region:

Recommendations:

Improve good governance and address structural inequalities:

- Improve the good governance of countries and institutions, notably to guarantee provision of basic social services and the equitable redistribution of natural resources.
- Identify and tackle horizontal inequalities – whether social, ethnic, gender, age, income, or geographic; and address the marginalization of women and youth.
- Put beneficiaries at the core of peace and security responses.
- Prioritize the creation of jobs for marginalized groups, notably women, youth and IDPs, but also in marginalized areas, such as rural ones.
- Address the climate emergency that leads to an increase of community-based conflicts.



Photo: UN Women/Amanda Voisard

Recommendations:

Promote gender equality and guarantee the meaningful participation of women and youth in peace and security:

- Address structural gender inequalities and marginalization. Ensure that the promotion of gender equality is grounded in the dignity of each woman and the community they represent.
- Address gender norms, including patriarchal values, and remove the sociocultural, religious and political obstacles to women's full participation in public life.
- Address the gendered impacts of violent extremism on women and girl children
- Ensure that national peace and security initiatives include issues of concern for women and youth, and the meaningful participation of those groups, including young women and rural women.
- Promote women to decision-making positions, notably in peace processes and security institutions and support young women leadership programmes.
- Implement NAPs on WPS.

Recommendations:

Invest in quality education:

- Invest and guarantee access to quality education for all children, particularly in rural areas, and for girls.
- Support educational curricula and systems that are inclusive, accessible to both girls and boys, and adapted to specific contexts, notably to nomadic and pastoralist children.
- Develop educational systems and curricula that promote tolerance and acceptance of gender equality and human rights, regardless of social, ethnic or religious differences.

Recommendations:

Invest in a culture of human rights and justice:

- Move away from military and security-centred approaches that infringe on fundamental freedoms and are often counterproductive. Instead, support policies and strategies that are based on human rights and democratic principles.
- Organize meaningful consultations and dialogues with populations and civil society when designing and implementing CT/PVE responses. Guarantee the participation of marginalized groups.
- Support the rule of law, investigate and tackle gross human rights violations committed by state actors.
- Establish and support transitional justice processes. Guarantee access to justice for all, particularly for victims of human rights violations, whether they are committed by state and/or non-state actors.
- Address community-based conflicts, including land-rights, farmer/herder conflicts and others.

Recommendations:

Support participatory and inclusive approaches to peace and security:

- Involve local communities and CSOs when designing CT/PVE responses and give them the opportunity to lead and manage peacebuilding programmes.
- Include religious leaders in peacebuilding projects, notably women religious leaders.
- Support women-led CSOs, women human rights defenders and women peacebuilders, notably with flexible resources. Provide local CSOs with long-term funding.
- Conduct comprehensive conflict- and gender-sensitive assessments; identify needs with local communities.
- Develop partnerships between grass-roots organizations and policy organizations.

Recommendations:

Develop rights-, gender-, evidence- and results-based approaches to CT/PVE:

- Produce gender analysis and adopt a human rights-based approach when designing CT/PVE responses.
- Ensure that CT/PVE approaches are informed by the WPS agenda and human rights obligations.
- Guarantee the participation of all actors involved in WPS issues when designing and implementing CT/PVE responses.
- Support security institutions to develop and implement gender strategies.
- Conduct research about why some groups include women within their ranks and in their activities while others do not. Conduct further studies and research into women's involvement in violent extremism, including their motivations and constraints.
- Develop indicators to measure the adherence and impact of PVE responses in relation to human rights and gender equality obligations.

Recommendations:

Disarmament, demobilization, reintegration and reinsertion:

- Include women in DDRR processes and programmes.
- Develop DDRR programmes that inform communities about the participation of women in VEOs and address the stigmatization of women associated with VEOs.
- Ensure the transparency and accountability of DDRR programmes. Make the criteria used to conduct screenings public. Share the information with humanitarian actors.
- Guarantee independent oversight of DDRR processes.
- Conduct research on perceptions to better understand the origin of stigmatization and document their obstacles to acceptance and the willingness to reintegrate.

Recommendations:

Disseminate the outcomes of the Global Digital Consultation

- Present the outcomes of the Global Digital Consultation to civil society.
- Use the outcomes of the Global Digital Consultation, notably its Public Statement, to generate a policy dialogue between national institutions and civil society organizations.



Photo: UN Women/Ryan Brown

FEATURE STORIES

The Public Statement of the Global Digital Consultation highlighted a wide range of issues and recommendations in relation to the gendered dimensions of violent extremism and counter-terrorism. UN Women conducted 11 interviews with human rights defenders and gender equality activists across five different regions (i.e. Arab States, Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, Western and Central Africa, and Eastern and Southern Africa) to illustrate how they work in contexts affected by violent extremism, the challenges they face and the efforts they make to build peace in their respective communities and countries.

In the words of Fatima Askira: “Women’s empowerment and increased representation begins with access to education”

Fatima Askira is a young leader, activist and peacebuilder. Born and raised in Maiduguri, a hotspot of Boko Haram insurgency in North-East Nigeria, she has been promoting the participation of young women in peace processes in contexts affected by violent extremism. In 2014, she founded the Borno Women Development Initiative (BOWDI), through which she leads innovative training and mentoring programmes for Nigerian women and girls, including rescued survivors of Boko Haram.



Fatima Askira. Photo: BOWDI

“When we think of women in contexts affected by violent extremism, we often think of them as victims, passive targets. But that does not reflect what we experience. Since extremist violence started to spread across Nigeria, we’ve seen women on the front lines,

acting both as peacebuilders and perpetrators of terrorism. Women have become actors of their own lives, and this change needs to be acknowledged and properly addressed.



Nigeria has long been a patriarchal society and, especially in the North-East of the country where I live, the gender gap is still far from being closed. Recently, the steady shrinking of women's places at the decision-making table, their progressive exclusion from political spaces and the ongoing lack of governance structures have created a fertile ground for violent extremism to flourish. More and more women are being recruited into these organizations, or they are pushed back into the house and away from public life.

On top of this, women are also faced with a lack of spaces and opportunities at the institutional level.

In a system that was not designed to account for women in the first place, we struggle to find our space and voice. This is especially true in the case of counter-terrorism (CT) and prevention of violent extremism (PVE) policies, as this is seen even more as an all-male area.

And this gap widens across generations: young female leaders struggle even more to get their fair share of representation.

In this context, more conflicts than ever before are arising. This is proof that existing responses are not working: we need new approaches, starting from creating more opportunities for women and giving them a seat at the decision-making table.

Women's empowerment and increased representation begins with access to education. .

Violence mostly starts at home, and education gives women a tool to understand the signs of radicalization, recognize the progressive suppression of rights and address violent extremism. Educated women also tend to be more confident and able to better negotiate their access to male-dominated political spaces, where they can play an active role in shaping the processes and policies that directly affect them.

This is why at BOWDI we support youth access to education and training. Our recent project on enrolling adolescent girls back into school, jointly run with the Malala Fund, has been very successful: not only have the girls performed very well, but it's also been a boost for the community. We also organize short-term trainings for young women in leadership, specifically to strengthen their advocacy skills and knowledge of the peace and security agenda. We have a predominance of female staff and the fact that we, as young women, are on the front lines doing advocacy work sends a positive message to the community. It says: 'We were born and raised here, we dress just like you, we speak like you – look what education has done for us! It has given us the opportunity to come and make a positive impact in your community. It could do the same for you and your children.'

Education, women's grass-roots mobilization and participation in peacebuilding processes all play a pivotal role in addressing violent extremism. Still, we must also continue to hold State actors accountable for the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda.

At the international level, there has been growing recognition and support of United Nations Security Council resolution 1325, which mandates women's inclusion in CT/PVE processes. However, at the national level, some governments are lagging behind when it comes to women's inclusion. We must continue to advocate to make sure governments are aware of these resolutions and implement them correctly. ”





In the words of Amina Niandou: “We must promote free speech and encourage women and girls to speak up for their rights”

Amina Niandou is a journalist, women’s rights advocate and President of the Niger section of the Association of African Communications Professionals (APAC). Her work is focused on exploring gender bias and improving women’s representation in the media.



Amina Niandou

“ In Niger, women are being failed by society as a whole: they’re caught between the violence of terrorist organizations and the inadequacy of government structures and policies, which systematically fail to protect them.

Nigerien State institutions have adopted a militarized approach to tackle the surge of violent extremism in the country, and this has negatively impacted communities, limiting freedoms and undermining human rights. More recently, in the context of COVID-19, measures have become even tougher: from the proclamation of a state of emergency to the introduction of curfews in high-risk areas and country-wide bans on demonstrations.

These measures have hit women the hardest: government laws have limited women’s access to transportation and their ability to attend weekly markets, making them unable to carry out income-generating activities.

State laws have also failed to take into account the specific vulnerabilities of women and girls without male protection, for example after the death of a husband or father. They are a main target of violent extremist groups and to escape this they have no choice but to leave their homes and move to another community. During conflict, we also see a spike in gender-based violence, including sexual violence. We see girls being sexually abused and impregnated by both state and non-state actors, who then leave the area and abandon the girls and children, exposing them to further social stigma.

In this context, violent extremist groups often exploit the social discontent and mistrust towards State actors in their favour and present themselves as an alternative to government institutions. They offer their protection to those most marginalized, including women.





Photo: UN Women/Ryan Brown

It's clear that States' hard-security approaches do not work. We need new strategies developed in discussion with communities, including women, and civil society organizations with a direct, local knowledge of violent extremism.

For example, at APAC we promote intra-community dialogue and an inclusive approach to violent extremism. We take into account the opinions of women as well as men, ensuring that differences based on age, ethnicity, race, religion, political choice, social class, physical disability or sexual orientation do not constitute a barrier in the search for possible solutions. We always strive to provide a response that is adequate to the local context. To do so, we first try to understand the social, economic, political and legal environment and the circumstances that contribute to the spread of violent extremism within a community. Then we come up with context-specific solutions and provide lasting support. This includes working with young women with a background as activists. We train them and strengthen their knowledge and awareness of violent extremism, and we empower them to become real leaders that are capable of influencing public opinion and making appropriate decisions.

Over the past two years, we have supported young women communicators to produce media content to raise awareness on the effects of violent extremism and strengthen resilience in the community. This, in turn, has helped promote free speech and created a different mindset among women, who now feel more comfortable and confident to put forward their opinions to influence policies and decisions.

We must promote free speech within communities and encourage women and girls to speak up for their rights. We need to invest in women's human rights and have women at the forefront of peacebuilding efforts, as well as in decision-making spaces at the State level.

We must encourage governments to move away from military responses to violent extremism and introduce measures that look at the peculiarities of women's condition, including in the context of COVID-19.

Only by promoting women's participation in decision-making and policymaking and by protecting their rights, can communities address violent extremism and thrive again. ”





Cameroon - UN Womens Gender Road Project (Photo: UN Women/Ryan Brown)



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