

A Gender-Responsive Approach to Addressing the Impact of Terrorism and Violent Extremism in Africa

Background

Across Africa, ongoing terrorist threats intersect with complex insecurity challenges, socio-economic instability, and climate-related crises that disproportionately impact women and girls. Despite extensive regional and global commitments emphasizing the essential role of women in peace and security efforts, their participation in counterterrorism (CT) and prevention of violent extremism (PVE) decision-making processes remains limited.

Recognizing this gap and building on previous global and regional convenings on the gendered dimensions of CT/PVE, UN Women organized an interregional symposium in Nairobi from 7-9 October 2024 to discuss the situation of women in CT/PVE governance, policy and practice in Africa. The event brought together over 40 representatives of civil society and women's rights organizations working in contexts impacted by terrorism and violent extremism in the Sahel, East Africa, Horn of Africa, and Central and Southern Africa.

The symposium aimed to enhance interregional dialogue, facilitate knowledge exchange, and consolidate partnerships and networks to increase inclusive, gender-responsive approaches to security services provision in general, and to counterterrorism and PVE given the specific context in Africa. The convening was also intended to assist participants to identify joint priorities and strengthen their awareness and capacity to engage effectively in security sector discussions in contexts impacted by terrorism and violent extremism, and to contribute effectively to CT/PVE processes and mechanisms at all levels. The event entailed active and inter-generational discussions with strong calls for increased solidarity through integrated civic engagement, given the common challenges identified.

The event culminated in a joint public statement urging regional actors and the international community to consolidate efforts to uphold women, peace, and security (WPS) commitments and to ensure a gender-sensitive approach to increasing human security through CT/PVE efforts. The public statement emphasized the call to strengthen cross-regional partnerships, including through funding collaborative initiatives bridging civil society groups across regions and increased investment in capacity building for women's rights-focused civil society organizations.

Public Statement by Civil Society

PREAMBLE

At the Interregional Symposium on "Women's Situation in Counterterrorism and Prevention of Violent Extremism Governance, Policy and Practice in Africa," held from 7 to 9 October 2024 in Nairobi, Kenya, we, representatives of civil society organizations and women's rights groups from across Africa, stand united to address the interconnected crises of terrorism, organized crime, and climate disruption.

These crises disproportionately impact women and children, who are often the primary victims of sexual and gender-based violence perpetrated by designated terrorist groups. Despite women's essential roles as peacebuilders, their participation in CT and PVE efforts remains limited.

This communiqué highlights the need for comprehensive, gender-responsive solutions that ensure the full participation of women in CT, PVE and broader security decision-making, and foster improved communication and dialogue on regional strategies to enhance the effectiveness of CT and PVE efforts.

SITUATION OVERVIEW

Terrorism, violent extremism, organized crime, and climate crises pose significant threats to security across regions. In the Sahel, East Africa, the Horn, and Central and Southern Africa, socio-economic hardships and weak governance exacerbate these threats. Porous borders and limited infrastructure provide fertile ground for violent extremist movements and organized crime, further worsening conditions for vulnerable populations, especially women and children.

Despite international frameworks recognizing the need for gender inclusion in peace and security, women's participation in these processes often remains tokenistic. Moreover, civil society organizations working on WPS lack adequate access to information and training on CT/PVE strategies, limiting their ability to engage meaningfully in national and regional initiatives.

KEY POINTS FOR ACTION

To address the shared security and climate challenges facing the Sahel, East Africa, the Horn, and Central and Southern Africa, we urge national governments, regional bodies, civil society organizations, and international partners to take the following actions:

- 1. Adopt gender-responsive approaches in counterterrorism and prevention of violent extremism:** Counterterrorism and PVE efforts must reflect the experiences and needs of women and girls. We urge gender-sensitive policies to ensure women play a vital role in shaping and implementing security strategies. Protecting women's rights and amplifying their leadership is essential for building more resilient and peaceful communities.
- 2. Increase women's representation in decision-making:** Despite existing commitments at the global, regional, and national level, women's participation in peace and security efforts remains minimal. We urge governments to prioritize women's inclusion at all levels, from local peacebuilding to regional security councils. Women must also support each other ("*she for she*") to enter political spaces and decision-making roles.
- 3. Foster interregional collaboration:** Security threats across Africa require a unified response. We urge increased interregional cooperation to share knowledge, best practices, and coordinated responses. Cross-regional collaboration with a gender focus is essential to addressing the cross-border nature of terrorism, organized crime, and climate threats.
- 4. Strengthen capacity and awareness raising efforts:** Civil society organizations and women's rights groups must be better equipped to support the implementation of regional CT/PVE strategies and frameworks. Governments and international partners should invest in capacity-building programs, including cross-country exchange visits, to empower CSOs with the necessary tools and knowledge to inform and contribute to the implementation of regional frameworks.
- 5. Promote civil society networks and coalitions:** To enhance cross-regional collaboration, we emphasize the role of funders and international partners in financing CSO networks across regions. Support should include creating networking hubs and facilitating cross-regional workshops to ensure women's voices are central to developing gender-responsive CT strategies. CSOs should also leverage existing networks to provide training to their counterparts.
- 6. Establish a community of practice:** A community of practice model such as the Sisters Without Borders network in the Horn of Africa, could serve as an example of cross-regional cooperation, providing a framework for continuous learning, knowledge-sharing, and collaborative problem-solving among CT and PVE stakeholders across Africa. Strengthening the knowledge base of such networks so they can enhance their knowledge across regions is crucial.
- 7. Foster intergenerational collaboration and knowledge exchange:** Young women and men must have opportunities to learn from and engage with experienced leaders. We call on the creation of platforms where young women and men can learn and contribute to CT and PVE strategies alongside experienced leaders.
- 8. Protect civil society and human rights defenders:** Counterterrorism legislation should not be used to stifle civil society or undermine human rights. We call on governments to protect civil society organizations, including women's rights groups, from undue restrictions. The work of human rights defenders is vital to accountability and inclusive peacebuilding.

9. [Leverage technology for advocacy](#): Digital platforms are crucial for advocacy, awareness-raising, and community mobilization. We urge the use of social media and other digital tools to amplify women's organizations, particularly in advocating for gender-responsive CT/PVE efforts. Governments and civil society should collaborate on campaigns that engage women and girls, youth and wider communities in CT/PVE efforts, ensuring a principled, "do no harm" approach.
10. [Address organized crime](#): Organized crime, including human trafficking, drug smuggling, and arms trafficking, fuels terrorism and violent extremism. We call on governments to work closely with civil society and regional bodies to address these linkages. Interventions must consider the gendered dimensions of organized crime, ensuring women's rights are protected.
11. [Integrate climate resilience into security planning](#): Climate crises in regions such as the Sahel and the Horn exacerbate vulnerabilities in communities already weakened by conflict. We urge urgent action to integrate climate resilience into CT and security strategies, with women empowered as leaders in these efforts, given their role in fostering community resilience and sustainable development.
12. [Promote positive masculinity](#): We advocate for community programs and educational campaigns to reshape social norms around masculinity, fostering gender equality in CT and PVE efforts. Addressing toxic masculinity is crucial to changing societal perceptions that fuel violent extremism. Programs that encourage men to support gender equality in CT/PVE contribute to more inclusive and sustainable peace efforts.
13. [Advance collaborative research on gender-responsive counterterrorism and prevention of violent extremism strategies](#): Collaborative research across regions can improve the understanding and effectiveness of gender-responsive PVE strategies. Supporting research initiatives will ensure policies and programs are grounded in current and context-specific data.

CONCLUSION

The convergence of terrorism, organized crime, and climate change across regions in Africa presents complex challenges that demand coordinated, holistic, and gender-responsive solutions. Women and girls remain disproportionately affected by these crises, yet their roles as citizens, peacebuilders and political agents are often undervalued.

We reaffirm our commitment to advancing gender equality in the security sector governance and practice, including in counterterrorism and the prevention of violent extremism. We call on all stakeholders to fully integrate women into decision-making processes at all levels. Through sustained political will to integrate gender equality perspectives, robust collaboration, appropriate funding, and strengthening capacity building, we can build safer, more resilient communities across Africa.

We urge governments, civil society, and international partners to join us in this critical effort to ensure that women are not only protected but also empowered as leaders in addressing the intersecting challenges of terrorism, violent extremism, and broader security issues.

UN Women exists to advance women's rights, gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. As the lead UN entity on gender equality, we shift laws, institutions, social behaviours and services to close the gender gap and build an equal world for all women and girls. We keep the rights of women and girls at the centre of global progress – always, everywhere. Because gender equality is not just what we do. It is who we are.