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.