

# 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 women 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 Samar Muhareb: “Every woman should feel the impact of the National Action Plan on her daily life”

*Samar Muhareb is the Chief Executive Officer of the Jordan-based Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development (ARDD), an NGO she co-founded in 2008 in response to the Iraqi refugee crisis. Through ARDD, she works to promote and protect human rights in the Arab world. ARDD is also a long-standing partner of UN Women on efforts to promote the role of women and women-led CSOs in building peace.*



ARDD CEO, Samar Muhareb during a field visit to Al Zaatri camp. Photo: ARDD

“Violent extremism has generated a fair amount of global, national and local interest because of its devastating impact on individuals, communities and entire societies. In these discussions, women are usually seen as either the victims of extremist ideologies or as contributors to them. Little attention has been paid to the role of women in preventing violent extremism in Jordan particularly, and in the region as a whole. This is why at ARDD we have focused on the under-tapped

potential of women to contribute to social cohesion and build peace in their communities and countries.

We also believe that, even when women are active agents in these ideologies, more often than not it is because they are victims too. They are victims of an environment that politically, socially and economically marginalizes them. Marginalization often begets violent extremism.



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Women are critical to the formation of social networks and relationships which are the building blocks of social cohesion in our societies.

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I believe the more closely knit this societal fabric is, the more resilient it becomes to violent extremism. Women are vital to promoting a gender-sensitive response to crisis and advancing women's participation in peacebuilding in their communities. This is why it is essential to look into the reasons that stop women from playing such a vital role. How can we create a social, legal, political and economic environment that allows women to contribute to the prevention of violent extremism and to preserving social cohesion and peace? The Women, Peace and Security agenda of UNSCR 1325 is one important way to enhance women's participation in peacebuilding in their immediate surroundings. The National Action Plan (NAP) is also an excellent starting point for increasing Jordanian women's participation in peace and security in their country. Over 40 women-led NGOs working to advance the Women, Peace and Security agenda in Jordan were involved in the consultation phase.

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I do not believe that every woman in Jordan is expected to understand what the NAP is and how it helps her contribute to peace and security. Instead, every woman should feel the impact of the NAP on her daily life.

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To implement the NAP in a way that makes real change in women's lives and makes their communities more resilient to violence, we need to work more with women-led civil society organizations that have the intimate knowledge of women's realities and challenges in their respective localities to shape the NAP. For example, through ARDD's humanitarian work with Syrian refugee women over the last decade, we have learned about their needs, fears and concerns in times of crisis. We now know how refugee women are often victims of violent extremism, recruitment and enslavement. They can also be survivors of conflict-related violence. We have heard and documented many such tragic stories. This has helped us ensure that the NAP also supports this vulnerable group and addresses their needs.



ARDD CEO, Samar Muhareb during a field visit to Al Zaatri camp. Photo: ARDD

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With UN Women, we have also set out to work with women-led NGOs throughout the country and ensure that they have the capacity to deepen their understanding of the social, economic and political drivers of violent extremism in their respective communities, on the one hand, and of the Women, Peace and Security agenda on the other, so they can 'own' the NAP in Jordan.

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Since then, many studies have been conducted and many initiatives have contributed to increasing social cohesion, particularly in host communities where Syrian refugees live and where competition over scarce resources can create tension and insecurity. For example, with UN Women, we have worked on an initiative in the Za'atari Refugee Camp that engaged Syrian men and boys in advocating for the elimination of gender-based violence and inequality, which is essential for social cohesion.

We have come a long way in deepening our understanding of what may lead to violent extremism, its impact on women and girls and their essential role in addressing it. Jordan's National Action Plan is definitely a milestone on our path towards addressing such phenomena and empowering women to be builders of social cohesion. But the path is still long and requires our long-term commitment. New crises should not distract us from older ones. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted much of our work, but should not make us shelve our Women, Peace and Security agenda to empower women. ”

## In the words of Haniya Salem Abukhirais: “I want to show that Libyan women are capable of leading and effectively participating in political decision-making”

*Haniya Salem Abukhirais is a member of the Libyan Women’s Network for Peacebuilding, a new network of women representing a broad social, political, generational and geographic spectrum of war-divided Libya. The network was created with support from UN Women in July 2019.*



*After years of conflict and the occupation of ISIS, Sirte’s infrastructure has been heavily damaged. Haniya Salem Abukhirais, a member of the Municipal Council, has been leading reconstruction efforts in the city. Photo: Courtesy of BENDALLA*

“One of the political novelties in Libya after the 2011 Revolution was the introduction of municipal elections marking the first major attempt to make a clear break from the past in local governance and a step towards democracy. For the first time, the Local Administration Law allocated at least one out of seven municipal seats to women and another to people with disabilities. On the ground, it was interpreted that all other five seats were reserved for men. Although the ratio of men to women was still grossly unfair, at least now there was a quota guarantying one seat for women, so I decided to run for office in my city, Sirte, in 2014.

There was no fierce competition among female candidates. The other women ran rather timid media campaigns because the public was not used to seeing posters of female candidates in the streets, and none

of us dared to put up billboards with our faces. While the other candidates ran their campaigns only on radio and social media, I decided to visit some schools and speak to the teachers and students to understand their demands and concerns. I was very happy and excited when I won that one seat.

Just before I could start my work at the municipality, ISIS took over Sirte. To rule the city, the group spread fear and terror in the hearts of Libyans through public beheadings, including of women, children and the elderly.



Instead of helping govern the city, I found myself unable to leave home alone without a relative male companion. Women were ordered by ISIS to wear a niqab or face public beating and punishment.

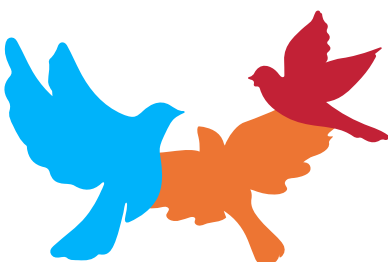
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Sirte was finally liberated from the extremist group in 2016. I could only officially start my job in 2017, three years after my election. I was full of enthusiasm but also I felt a huge responsibility.

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After being ruthlessly ruled by ISIS, we needed to bring life back to the city and its people. We needed to revive the institutions and services of the city. I was very happy to be part of this transition, but this was not easy for a woman. Several religious organizations in Sirte rejected me simply because of my gender. My biggest problem was to learn how to show the male members of the municipal committee that I had the same status as them: I am an elected member and have a popular base; I have rights, duties and can be voted for. With the law on my side, I managed to exercise my right to serve the people of the city.

Since 2017, I have worked on several municipal projects – including health, public safety, labour and social affairs. I held many dialogues to discuss the needs of women and how to achieve their demands through the municipal council. Most importantly, I have been responsible for the most crucial and challenging portfolio: the file of architecture and reconstruction, which allowed me to work on the Rapid Mapping and Monitoring System for Sirte, an initiative sponsored by UN-HABITAT and UNFPA. After the 2011 Revolution and the occupation by ISIS, much of the city's public infrastructure was destroyed. Reconstruction needed to take into consideration the demographic changes resulting from forced displacement, the extent of the damage, the social and economic implications induced by the conflict, and coping strategies adopted by the population. Libyans are adamant about rebuilding and reviving the city in a way that reflects the needs of all of its inhabitants, including women and the youth.



Haniya Salem Abukhirais. Photo: Courtesy of BENDALLA

I found a way to cooperate with women in both organizations and with a lot of patience and determination, we overcame many challenges and obstacles.

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Probably the hardest challenge I faced was when five Council members created a petition to try to undermine my appointment to the reconstruction portfolio. But again, with law on my side, I continued to work on the project.

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Through my work, I want to show that Libyan women are capable of leading and effectively participating in political decision-making.

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Women's participation in social, economic and political life is the best way to challenge stereotypical views of women that negate our inability to lead.

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To achieve peace and transition towards democracy, Libya needs to enhance women's participation in all aspects of peacebuilding, transition and governance. Our biggest challenge is that women still face many hurdles in accessing the basic skills needed to engage in political and administrative institutions. That's something we need to work towards now: how to empower women – half of society – to be part of peacebuilding and reconstructions efforts. ”