



REGIONAL PAPER

CIVIL SOCIETY'S VOICES ON VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND COUNTER-TERRORISM RESPONSES

REGIONAL PERSPECTIVES FROM THE ARAB STATES



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



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FROM THE ARAB STATES



**WOMEN, PEACE AND
SECURITY SECTION
UN WOMEN**

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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.

The report is specifically based on the contributions made by participants from the Arab States (Middle-East and North Africa). We would like to thank all of them for their continuous engagement and insightful contributions in the consultation.

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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 Arab States/ North Africa Regional Office, UN Women Country Office staff across the region, including in Jordan and Libya, as well as UN Women’s Women, Peace and Security and Communication Teams in headquarters.

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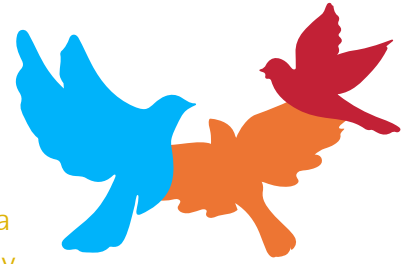
GLOSSARY

CSO	civil society organization	UNCCT	United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre
CT	counter-terrorism	UNGCTCC	United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact
CT/PVE	counter-terrorism and prevention of violent extremism	UNOCT	United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism
FTF	foreign terrorist fighter	UNSCR 1325	United Nations Security Council resolution 1325
GBV	gender-based violence	WPS	Women, Peace and Security
GWG	Gender Working Group		
NAP	National Action Plan		
PVE	Preventing Violent Extremism		
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 a [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 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.

The consultation was open to participants from civil society organizations (CSOs), including independent women's and women-led CSOs, organizations 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 civil society 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, and the impact that existing measures to prevent violent extremism (PVE) have had 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. The views and recommendations expressed were similar across countries and regions. However, as each region had its particularities, UN Women commissioned regional papers to identify and bring to light these more specific views and recommendations, in addition to the overall findings and recommendations captured in the Public Statement. The present paper focuses on the Arab States region, which is also known as the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and the contributions of participants from these countries.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Most participants emphasized that existing counter-terrorism and prevention of violent extremism (CT/PVE) laws and policies would benefit from placing women's human rights and gender equality at their core. Women-led CSOs detailed the challenges they face in participating in PVE policy discussions and decision-making. While government-led consultations on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) National Action Plans (NAPs) or CT/PVE policies in the region have involved CSOs, religious leaders, media and, in fewer cases, affected communities, the participation of women within these groups has been limited, according to the online consultation participants. Although an increasing number of countries in the region have adopted WPS NAPs, participants expressed concerns about the implementation of those plans and the lack of progress to translate them into concrete gains for women.

Many Arab States participants noted that gender-based inequality and discrimination interact with political, economic, religious and cultural factors, creating an environment conducive to violent extremism. Participants detailed the daily violations that women and children face in their respective countries, which are linked to inequalities in the law and institutional barriers, as well as to conservative norms; and are experienced as daily violence. According to most participants, there is an obvious correlation between gender-based violence (GBV), women's rights laws and policies and the recruitment of women by violent extremist groups. Violent extremist groups are specifically manipulating social constructions of masculinity and femininity to promote their agenda and impede demands for gender equality. Tackling violence against women and girls is thus an important route to preventing extremism and breaking cycles of violence in the region. Another concern raised by participants is that violence against women, particularly in conflict zones, has received little attention in national policies and plans.

Participants emphasized that CSOs are important actors in building peace, adding that women's

engagement takes place at different levels and should be better articulated with the work of institutions. Participants equally emphasized the importance of understanding the multiple types of violence that target women activists and leaders, particularly in contexts affected by conflicts where women human rights defenders, who are challenging gender norms, are particularly at risk.

Many participants expressed the need to clarify or redefine key concepts related to violent extremism and that there are risks of human rights violations when the terms 'extremism' or 'radicalization' are applied to non-violent activity.

By organizing the Global Digital Consultations, UN Women provided a safe space for all participants to engage in an open dialogue about women's rights, violent extremism and CT/PVE, share best practices and develop networks to promote a culture of trust and communication. However, creating more permanent safe spaces where women living in conflict zones can heal from the effects of trauma, access knowledge, network with other women and learn skills is becoming a critical priority for women who are at the forefront of preventing violent extremism.

WOMEN AND GENDER MAINSTREAMING IN EXISTING WPS AND CT/PVE EFFORTS IN THE REGION

Several governments in the MENA region have developed national action plans (NAPs) on the implementation of United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) on Women, Peace and Security (WPS). In early 2014, Iraq became the first country in the region to adopt a NAP (2014–2018).¹ Other countries followed rapidly: Tunisia, Palestine and Jordan (2017), Lebanon and Yemen (2019), while Iraq is working on its second-generation NAPs. Algeria, Egypt, Morocco and Syria have each expressed their commitment to launch a NAP process. Other Arab States may follow the same trend given the emerging interest in such plans across the region. Most countries in the region that have NAPs have not yet integrated ‘displacement’ meaningfully into their plans (internally displaced and/or refugee population are not considered as a target group of national action plans), despite having large numbers of refugee populations, notably women and children – with the exception of Jordan’s NAP.²

Challenges and strengths of existing CT/PVE and WPS frameworks

Existing laws and policies would benefit from placing women’s human rights and gender equality at the core of their efforts. Some of the CT/PVE laws and policies in North Africa assign a specific role to women and/or address gender equality issues. In Algeria, national authorities acknowledged the crucial role of women and families in CT/PVE efforts, and the work of the *mourchidates*, (female preachers) with young girls, mothers and prisoners. In Morocco, national authorities decided to empower female *mourchidates* and encourage them to play an important role in CV and PVE programmes.

That said, consultations in relation to peace and security laws and policies should be more participatory and inclusive. While consultations related to either NAP or CT/PVE policies have been held in most countries, among the involved civil society, religious leaders, media and, in fewer cases, affected communities, women’s participation was reportedly limited. Many

participants complained about the exclusion of women and youth from the process of discussing WPS NAPs as well as PVE laws/policies. Despite recent efforts, women-led CSOs have faced challenges to participating in PVE policy discussions and decision-making. Participants said that women’s associations in some countries were not given the opportunity to contribute to civil society consultations. Attention was drawn to the role of governments and donors, among other stakeholders in ensuring that all barriers that hamper the active participation of women in consultations are removed. They also called for more transparency in funding projects that focus on CT/PVE in their respective countries.

Another concern is the insufficient gender mainstreaming in existing policies. In particular, existing laws are not sufficiently gender-sensitive – for example, those dealing with women foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs). Available information suggests that despite international guidance on gender-responsive repatriation and reintegration of FTFs, these cases have been handled without applying a gender-lens. As a result, the lack of justice and rule of law may fuel motivations for ‘revenge’. A good practice in relation to

1 The present document uses UN Women “definition” of Eastern and Southern Africa that includes the following countries: Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Somalia, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda.

2 The Jordan NAP has a dedicated pillar on protection that includes issues related to refugee populations.

gender mainstreaming in CT/PVE policies can be found in Jordan. The Jordanian PVE NAP includes targeted measures on gender and PVE and the Jordanian National Action Plan for the Implementation of UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security has a dedicated goal on gender and PVE, which is a novel element that is in line with UNSCR 2242.

During the consultations, participants expressed concerns about the implementation of the WPS NAPs in their respective countries. The implementation of the Jordan NAP was recognized as a good practice, notably because it has dedicated funds for its implementation and specific results already achieved under four of its strategic goals; however, participants from other countries highlighted the lack of progress to translate their NAPs into concrete gains for women.

Several participants cited Jordan as a success story, with one stating:

“JONAP has been hailed to be one of the best practice examples when it comes to its inclusive drafting and national ownership for a comprehensive implementation. Also, JONAP has strategic goals, including one that is dedicated to gender and PVE”. Despite progress made, some Jordanian participants said the consultation process should also include, in the future, independent women-led CSOs that are critical of the NAP.

The need for countries to tackle broader peace, security and human rights challenges

Participants said that a number of countries of the region share similarities: challenges related to governance, insufficient service-delivery by the State, corruption, lack of opportunities, marginalization of women and youth, violations of human rights, disrespect for the rule of law, gender-based violence and violent extremism. In countries where armed conflicts are taking place, the efforts of state institutions to counter extremism have become more challenging as the rule

of law collapses, while women’s rights are violated and their roles insufficiently recognized.

According to participants, international assistance should not merely reinforce the capacity of governments to develop NAPs or CT/PVE policies, but also support them to become more accountable, transparent, respectful of human rights and compliant with the rule of law. For example, according to some participants, the major issue in Libya is the political vacuum and the overall lack of security and absence of the rule of law.

In Yemen and Libya, women activists are highly engaged at the grass-roots’ level. However, they do not seem to be considered as valuable participants in peacemaking, mediation, mitigation, conflict-resolution and other diplomatic efforts to respond to ongoing crises. In Yemen, the majority of women working on PVE are facing major challenges due to insecurity, human rights violations, lack of funding and violence. Besides, many women human rights defenders do not have access to the texts of the laws, policies and international decisions, for several reasons. Some texts are difficult to understand because of their format (i.e. they contain too much jargon), even for media. There has also been a proliferation in the sheer number of texts by the UN and other organizations, making it challenging for civil society actors to stay up-to-date and identify core messages. Activists working at the local level are reportedly less likely to be aware of laws and policies that could support their work.

In non-conflict countries of the region, CSOs and governments also face significant challenges to fulfilling their roles to implement NAPs. For example, although Lebanon has developed its NAP, the regional and international environment, as well as the grave political, social and economic crisis currently affecting the country is making it challenging to work on the implementation of the NAP.

Most participants from the Arab States region pointed out that gender-based inequality and discrimination interact with political, economic, religious and cultural factors, creating an environment conducive to violent extremism. According to most participants in the consultation, there is an obvious correlation between gender-based violence, women’s rights laws and policies, and the recruitment of women by violent extremist groups. Violent extremist groups are still manipulating social constructions of masculinity and femininity to promote their agenda and prevent demands for gender equality.

The absence, in some countries, of the necessary political will to develop a WPS NAP and ensure its effective implementation, and the lack of gender-sensitive national laws that promote and protect women's rights can leave women, girls and

children vulnerable to recruitment and contribute to the drivers of violent extremism. In some cases, women's rights groups and defenders are increasingly finding themselves victimized by counter-terrorism measures and laws.



Photo: UN Women/Christopher Herwig



Photo: UN Women/ Karim Selmaoui

Recommendations:

- Support the effective participation of independent women-led CSOs and gender equality activists when developing CT/PVE policies and responses, particularly young women, and guarantee their protection, especially in countries facing violent conflicts.
- Strive to reform CT/PVE legislation and adopt more holistic, coherent and sufficient strategies that address discrimination, gender- and sexual-based violence, promote gender equality, human rights and democratic principles, and do not reduce women to 'instruments' for CT/PVE.
- Build trust and confidence between law enforcement and communities.
- Urge greater United Nations support for national partners, including national human rights commissions and civil society, in their efforts for effective oversight and accountability of state institutions in charge of peace and security, in conformity with international human rights instruments, gender equality, and rule of law norms and standards.
- Encourage the development of national and (sub-)regional WPS and PVE NAPs, which reflect more local and regional contextual factors and priorities; while implementing existing NAPs in close partnership with affected communities.
- Introduce disengagement, rehabilitation and counselling programmes for persons engaged in violent extremism, which are gender-sensitive and include special programmes for women and children to facilitate their reintegration into society; ensure NAPs include and address issues related to displaced persons and refugees.

WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS ARE EXPERIENCED AS DAILY VIOLENCE

The consultation provided a safe space for women from Arab States to express themselves freely, talk openly about their feelings, fears, anxieties and hopes, as well as their needs. The vast majority of them claimed their right to be protected in the public space. While women in the region asked for a greater role in the workplace, as well as in politics and leadership, public spaces are becoming more and more unsafe. Women are exposed to various forms of harassment, including sexual harassment. The violation of their basic human rights limits their mobility, roles and their ability to exercise their agency.

The participants unanimously agreed that the deprivation of women's human rights has become a crucial problem in the region, resulting in increased violence and violent extremism across countries. They said the various human rights violations that women and children face in their respective countries – forced marriage, subordination, kidnapping, lack of opportunities, exclusion, gender inequality, etc. – are experienced as daily violence. Women living in conflict zones (such as Yemen, Syria and Libya) informed participants from non-conflict areas about what women and girls there endure in their everyday life. While women and girls are often subject to physical violence by violent extremist groups, they also feel the impacts of conflict in other ways. Displacement, the breakdown of rule of law, increasing crime and the normalization of violence are also affecting women's lives.

Participants also clearly articulated the daily violations they face linked to inequalities in the law and to institutional barriers. Despite Personal Status Codes and existing economic and political empowerment measures, women in the Arab States region are still fighting for their rights. A Jordanian activist pointed out that in rural areas, women are trapped because “three sources of law govern their every daily life: customary laws, religious laws and civil laws”. Other activists mention that many women in the region, especially in rural areas, do not know their rights and are not familiar with existing laws and policies to protect them from violence and violent extremism. According to a respondent from Lebanon, violence against women

is related to structural legal violence as “there is no civil law for personal status, but only courts related to religious groups [...]. The laws in such courts are always on the side of men”. According to some participants, serious gaps exist in the family law system and patriarchy remains “an overwhelming problem that must be overcome”.

Another concern raised by several participants is that the violence exerted against women, particularly in conflict zones, has received little attention in national policies and plans. Long before violence against women and violent extremism became a concern for the international community, women's human rights defenders had warned about its escalation and impact, particularly on women's everyday lives. They showed how media sometimes play a role in trivializing or amplifying such violence, youth issues and social tensions through biased coverage reflecting their own commercial and/or political priorities. Participants said that tackling violence against women and girls is an important route to preventing extremism and breaking cycles of violence in the region and beyond.

Participants highlighted similarities between the situation of women in conflict-affected countries of the region, notably in Libya and Yemen, where conservative norms and traditions have regulated the role of women in the private sphere and denied them the right to work or to implement their roles as agents of change. Extremist groups have violated the rights of women and girls – through kidnappings, forced

marriages, the marriage of minors and sexual violence, as well as by infringing on their freedom of movement, right to worship, right to an education, as well as their economic, social and political rights. War has created a rule-of-law vacuum where other emerging narratives (religious, ideological, moral, etc.) have been used to attack women's human rights. Both wars have also resulted in women's human rights being questioned, undermined and violated, causing significant setbacks. In Yemen, for example a proposed law setting 18 as the minimum age for marriage and for girls to remain in school has been abandoned. In Libya, before the war, women were increasingly involved in the country's political processes, securing their recognition as agents of change. Today, they are excluded, humiliated and abused. Deprivation in times of war has thus compromised women's advancement, empowerment and



Photo: UN Women/ Christopher Herwig

The COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating existing challenges

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, participants said that women's human rights violations have increased. They added that violence against women also increased during lockdown periods in many countries, while access to justice and legal services were affected or suspended in some cases. Participants said a breakdown in the rule of law has also contributed to an environment of impunity, where there are no consequences for men who commit acts of violence. They added that many extremist groups are aware of the potential to benefit from these disruptions, and in some cases, are already taking advantage by providing public health services and immersing themselves in local communities. Participants expressed their concern that the impacts of the pandemic may also exacerbate some of the underlying drivers for radicalization to violent extremism, such as the need for protection and resources. Additionally, women who are raising awareness about violent extremism affirm that because of social distancing measures, they have not been able to work in different areas.

participation in public life. Moreover, participants from Yemen and Libya expressed their concerns about the future of their children and the violation of their rights to health care, education and protection. They stated that the growing number of children who are being kidnapped and/or raped by extremist groups has implications for the entire region. According to them, kidnapped children will be groomed to become key players in future terrorist attacks.

Some participants (from Morocco and Tunisia, for instance) paid attention to the relationship between masculinity, violence and violent extremism. Men can construct their masculinity through increased decision-making power, having authority over their own social and political affairs, and protecting families, whereas these options are often more restricted for women. Participants emphasized that improving human rights and challenging conventional masculinity and gender norms may make some difference.

According to most participants, the need to improve the status of women in the region has become an urgent matter. In this sense, a human rights approach is required to put the unique needs of women and girls at the centre of policies. If States fail to protect women's lives and rights, participants warned that the international community will not be able to fight violent extremism groups.

Recommendations:

In addition to the recommendations captured in the Public Statement, participants from the region recommended the following:

- Improve the status of women, promote and protect women’s human rights, support gender equality efforts and address structural gender inequalities.
- Mobilize and support women activists and women-led local CSOs to address the impacts of violence they are experiencing (from gender-based violence to violent extremism), including by providing resources, recognition, government support and protection.
- Co-design policies and programmes to support women human rights defenders hand-in-hand ‘with’ defenders themselves, rather than ‘for’ them.
- Promote women in political and religious leadership as well as women’s civil society groups working to advance PVE objectives.
- Address the issue of gender-based violence, and support local activists and scholars to identify its correlation with violent extremism and the implications for policymaking.
- Inform women about their rights, while promoting and protecting those rights, especially in developing and implementing PVE plans.



Syrian refugee women in Jordan Zaatari camp. Photo: UN Women/ Christopher Herwig

THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Participants emphasized the important role of CSOs in CT/PVE efforts. Women’s engagement takes place at different levels – peacebuilding, resilience and education – and should be better articulated with the work of institutions. A good practice from Lebanon was mentioned, whereby activists with the Lebanese Adyan Foundation are trying “to mainstream women’s religious representatives’ role by including women’s interpretations and highlighting women’s participation as religious representatives”.

According to participants, women human rights defenders in conflict-affected contexts, who are challenging gender norms and raising awareness about violent extremism, are also increasingly exposed to attacks. In Libya and Yemen, women have become specific targets of violent extremists. In some cases, “death threats, physical violence and social media defamation campaigns have forced women to stay at home and avoid addressing directly topics related to PVE in their respective countries”. There is no legislation that specifically protects them. Participants emphasized the importance of understanding the multiple types of violence that target women activists and leaders – not just physically or emotionally, but also symbolically.

Despite their opinions being overlooked, the devastation around them and the threats they receive in their own communities and leadership, women’s rights defenders affirm that they will continue fighting for their rights and security.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic is definitely a challenging time, some NGOs have succeeded in reaching vulnerable groups. They are continuing their work on PVE and awareness-raising campaigns about the impact of violence against women. Most participants asserted the need for more sustainable, long-term funding for CSOs working on CT/PVE, including women’s civil society organizations.

Recommendations:

- Create frameworks for collaboration between national and international CSOs.
- Urge international partners to guarantee the protection of women activists and women human rights defenders when organizing activities related to CT/PVE.
- Encourage donors to support organizations that have field expertise in relation to CT/PVE activities.
- Support women to engage more at the policy level and strengthen their collaborations with various stakeholders, including by developing cooperation with the private sector.
- Inspire younger generations – both boys and girls – from an early age to assume equally leadership roles and support civil society efforts in this regard.

THE NEED FOR EVIDENCE-BASED RESPONSES

Many participants expressed the need to clarify or redefine key concepts – such as ‘martyrs’, ‘Jihadism’, ‘radicalization’ and ‘violent extremism’ itself – and the need for evidence- and gender-based approaches. They emphasize that there are risks of human rights violations when terms like ‘extremism’ or ‘radicalization’ are applied to non-violent activity. In this regard, participants suggested that regional comparative studies in the field could be useful.



*Syrian refugee women in Jordan Zaatari camp.
Photo: UN Women/ Christopher Herwig*

Some activists and scholars (from Morocco and Tunisia) were in favour of including an analysis of masculinities in CT/PVC policies. They highlighted the need to understand the connections between violent extremism and constructions of masculinity and femininity. According to some participants, scholars should do more research, including comparative case studies, about the elements conducive to violent extremism in the

region, which could also focus on gender relations from a contextual and multidisciplinary perspective. In this sense, research could generate the required evidence needed to help inform systematic, coordinated and effective interventions against violent extremism.

In addition, studying stories of women returnees are fundamental in order to understand the dynamics of gendered power relations, women’s roles, and how extremists exploit gender norms, stereotypes of masculinity and femininity to manipulate and dominate women and to advance their objectives.

Scholars who participated in the digital consultation emphasized the need for qualitative and quantitative primary research in the region to enable comparative insights and to explore the relationship between gender and violent extremism. From their perspective, a deeper understanding of women’s involvement in violent extremism will allow more targeted counter-terrorism measures to be defined. It was noted that identifying lessons learned, sharing good practices and initiating critical studies on the phenomenon will help women working on CT/PVE and strengthen their work.

Recommendations:

- Conduct studies on masculinities and their connections with violent extremism.
- Conduct comparative studies in the region, both qualitative and quantitative, on interlinkages between gender equality and violent extremism, using multi-disciplinary perspectives.
- Conduct studies on women returnees.

RECOMMENDATIONS THAT SHOULD BE PRIORITIZED

Many recommendations were made throughout the course of the Global Digital Consultation. The author of the present document identified the recommendations most commonly mentioned that should be prioritized. The consultation revealed that participants from different countries agree on the role that States should play, such as in embracing comprehensive, inclusive and participatory approaches. Also, there was consensus among participants that States should focus on: eradicating poverty, inequalities and discriminatory laws and practices; and addressing socioeconomic vulnerabilities that prevent women, girls and boys from being recruited. There was also an underlying consensus among all participants on the importance of a gendered approach to CT/PVE. Participants from Arab States region presented some key recommendations as follows:

States should:

- Promote a culture of human rights, accountability and respect for diversity, critical thinking and innovation as a tool to prevent violence against women as well as violent extremism.
- Improve the status and conditions of women to enable their effective participation in political, economic, cultural and social spheres, thereby fostering sustainable peace, prosperity and well-being.
- Take measures to reduce gender inequality and ensure social justice.
- Invest in inclusive and quality education; promote gender equality in educational curricula; and encourage the culture of the rule of law to change mentalities and behaviours.
- Publish and share their national CT/PVE policies and strategies, and provide data and information about their monitoring and implementation processes as well as the impact of such policies.
- Involve women's grass-roots and civil society organizations in WPS and PVE NAP evaluation.
- Welcome critical analysis by civil society. Making governments accountable is useful to overcome shortfalls and rethink strategies and national priorities for peace and development.
- Investigate and prosecute all crimes against women, including all forms of violence against women, as well as crimes against women's rights defenders.

Non-governmental organizations should:

- Hold States accountable for their policies.
- Create frameworks and networks to ensure that branches of government are held more accountable for the allocation of funds for CT/PVE efforts so that these efforts can be as effective as possible.
- Increase cooperation among countries to make the region safer.
- Advocate for all crimes and all forms of violence against women, and particularly against women human rights defenders, to be investigated, prosecuted and adjudicated.

The UN should:

- Support States to evaluate the efficiency of their NAPs and PVE NAPs and policies against human rights and gender equality frameworks, with the participation of civil society.
- Evaluate NAP and current CT/PVE efforts – whether international, regional and/or national – in relation to human rights, including women’s and youth/children’s rights; as well as their gender sensitivity and the participation of women and youth therein.
- Provide more protection to women human rights defenders and women working on CT/PVE, as well as to the survivors of violent extremism and the families of victims. No one should be left behind.
- Acknowledge the role played by women during the COVID-19 crisis at all levels, and highlight the work of women and youth involved in peacebuilding, including CT/PVE programmes.
- Encourage research identifying the impact of counter-terrorism strategies and NAPs on the lives of women and girls in order to develop targeted and evidence-based policy and programme responses in the Arab States region.
- Encourage governments to involve researchers in the region to gather primary data and to analyse the roles played by women returnees, as well as to apply guidelines on gender-responsive screening, repatriation and reintegration, in particular in North Africa. These women are considered to be key to the survival of ISIS and radical groups in the future.
- Disseminate the Public Statement stemming from the consultation among Member States, civil society, regional intergovernmental organizations, stakeholders and the relevant private sector to ensure the broadest participation possible for the implementation of its recommendations.

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.



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

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.

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.

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

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.

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.

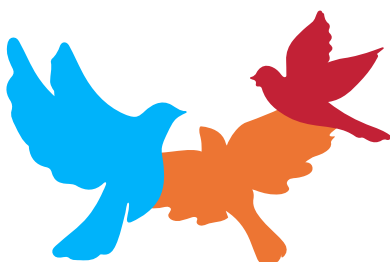


Instead of helping govern the city, I found myself unable to leave home alone without a relative male companion. Women were ordered by ISIS to wear a niqab or face public beating and punishment.

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.

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.

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.

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

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.

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. ”



Syrian refugee women in Jordan Zaatar camp. Photo: UN Women/Christopher Herwig



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