

# FEATURE STORY

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 Abdinasir Saman: “Women are instrumental in building peace in Wajir”

*Abdinasir Saman, 38, has been working for the Wajir Peace and Development Agency (WPDA) for the last 10 years. Founded by female community leaders in Wajir County, north-east Kenya, WPDA was established in the mid-1990s, at a time when the region was engaged in vicious clan conflicts. Since then, Wajir women and WPDA have been at the forefront of localized peace and security efforts and play a key role in tackling the threat of violent extremism in the region.*



*Abdinasir Saman, Wajir Peace and Development Agency, discussing the Wajir County Action Plan on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE). Photo: Courtesy of Wajir Peace and Development Agency*

“Just yesterday a woman’s body was found 700 meters from a local police station, tortured and sexually violated. Today an improvised explosive device went off at the border. Insecurity is part of everyday life in Wajir, and issues of peace and security are therefore very relevant.

Working in this field does not come without risks. Recently in Khorof Harar [a border town over 100 km from the centre of Wajir], we were trying to review a resolution between two communities. Members of the terrorist group infiltrated the meeting and recorded all our discussions. During the meeting, we were informed that it was not safe and told to leave before we could complete our work.



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Violation of rights is an everyday occurrence. But violence against women and girls—particularly sexual and gender-based violence and harmful practices, including early/child marriage – has increased with the rise of violent extremism

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Violent extremism has created regional conflict in which women are systematically targeted, both by extremist groups and security actors. This situation differs from previous conflicts linked to resources or community disputes. On the one hand, younger girls (20–30 years old) are forced to marry extremists. They are appropriated and expected to help support the cause, including by providing food and shelter for extremists. On the other hand, the disconnect between security actors and the community, caused by violent extremism, also puts women at risk. Security actors that come to Wajir County tend to perceive every individual as a member of a terror group – women are targeted, and sexual violence follows, without accountability.

Cases of sexual violence, as well as other community disputes, are brought before local ‘elders’ and regulated through a patriarchal conflict-resolution system known as ‘*maslaxa*’, an ‘alternative dispute resolution’ mechanism recognized by the State, county government and civil society organizations. Women are excluded from this decision-making process and their rights are often ignored.

Despite WPDA successfully campaigning to remove issues of violence against women from this traditional decision-making system, the rights of women remained ignored in *maslaxa*. The county is large – roughly 52,000 square kilometers – so it is hard to monitor and enforce away from urban centres.

Although their rights are regularly violated, women are instrumental in building peace in Wajir. Historically, they have played a key role in security: in 1994, when the region was engaged in vicious clan conflicts, female community leaders came together to create WPDA.

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The women of Wajir have been at the forefront of localized peace and security efforts and formed the blueprint for regional peace structures.

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*Abdinasir Saman attending a consultative dialogue forum with the Alfatah Council of Elders on Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) practices. Photo: Courtesy of Wajir Peace and Development Agency*

Community-level peace committees were born in Wajir and have become commonplace throughout Kenya, spreading into Somalia and Ethiopia. I was fortunate enough to be mentored by some of those peace pioneers – Nuria Abdullahi Abdi, Fatuma Mire and the late Dekha Ibrahim Abdi – and it has inspired me to work for the promotion of women’s rights and gender equality.

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Despite these successes, today I still attend meetings where I’m grappling with traditional perspectives.

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Men are expected to handle issues of conflict in community dialogues. They belittle women’s presence or feel that they simply don’t add value.

More recently, in March 2020, there was a meeting between two communities from Kenya and Somalia to address some crucial socioeconomic and security challenges along the border. The conveners of the meeting deliberately excluded women from the delegations, which included roughly 50 people from the Kenyan community and 100 from the Somali community.

We advocated heavily to include women in these talks, and this helped shape the course of the reconciliatory process and probably the subsequent acceptance of the resolutions reached. The women participating emphasized the destruction of war, reminding participants of a Somali saying, that ‘in war or conflict the son is killed, and no son is born.’ Wajir women also demanded that sexual violence perpetrators be subjected to the full force of the law and away from the alternative dispute resolution system.

Until the day-to-day challenges of women and girls are addressed, here in Wajir, violent extremism and conflict will continue to grow and exacerbate the violations experienced. Now more than ever, we need political commitment and sustained action from all stakeholders on the ground to respond to those challenges. ”