



THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN MALI - MAGNITUDE AND IMPACT

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Sparked by the Tuareg Rebellion, the 2012 Mali Crisis was escalated by the violent activities of a temporary alliance of separatist and violent extremist groups. The alliance however deteriorated over divergent interests. In 2017, however, Ansar Dine, the West African branch of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Katiba Macina and Al-Mourabitoune formed a new coalition known as the 'Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin' (JNIM) (Support Group for Islam and Muslims).

WOMEN AND TERRORISM

JNIM intended purposefully to be re-strategizing and prioritizing, emphasizing that in spite of the propaganda by JNIM that it does not use women to play frontline roles, the seemingly 'passive' contributions that women make to the group has facilitated the group's strategic agenda. The participation of women has allowed the group to operate with minimum risks and maintain their influence in its operational areas .

The paper is divided into two main sections. The first section is an attempt to delve into the different roles that women play to facilitate the activities of violent extremist groups. The second section explores the question about the possible 'push' and 'pull' factors that increase the propensity of women to support the agenda of violent extremist groups .

The author believes gendered stereotypes depict women as inherently peaceful. These stereotypes do not take into consideration the changing and diverse roles women play in conflict situations. Women have a great capacity to play crucial roles, as spies, informants and pressure groups, that serve the strategic interests of violent extremist groups .

ACTIVE AND MULTIPLE ROLES OF WOMEN

Typically, because of the stereotypical assumptions that portray women as weak and passive, they are planted into society to provide intelligence to violent extremist groups

(VEGs). It is easier for women to get into places where they can supply valuable information to VEGs without being suspected of engaging in any criminal act. There are reports that reveal that without leaving their homes to join VEGs in their bases, some women are making essential contribution to the violent activities of VEGs by collecting valuable information on the presence of international law enforcement agencies and planned offensives against VEGs.

Women are used as a pressure group to put pressure on government and other target audience. Usually, these women engage in demonstrations which promote the cause of VEGs. In the city of Kidal, for instance, which is accessible only by air, women are stationed at airports to demonstrate and sometimes throw stones at officials in order to sell the propaganda messages of VEGs.

LOGISTIC GROUPS AND MOTIVATIONS

The involvement of women in the activities of VEGs come with low risks to the VEGs. Women who are deployed by VEGs are not easily suspected and their criminal activities are not easily detected. Some women are therefore involved in activities such as planting explosive devices in communities. Usually, the women who are involved in this activity are reported to be women who gather and crack stones for sale. Under the pretense of undertaking their economic activities, these women are employed to dig holes and plant bombs and IEDs (a growing tactic used by violent extremist groups to attack national and international forces) for the VEGs. More so, some women are caught carrying arms and ammunitions. In 2018, for example, it is reported that a woman was arrested by Mali's intelligence services for supplying fertilizer meant for the production of explosives to Katiba Macina, a VEG in Mali.

Therefore, it was very important to explain the phenomenon of women joining violent terrorist acts by extremist groups, as it is linked to the tendencies and motives, and it is imperative to reveal such conditions and the social and family reasons that make women resort to this thorny path.

FAMILY TIES

Most women become facilitators and sympathizers of VEGs because of their familial ties with some members of these groups. Sometimes their brothers, husbands, children and other close and long-distant relatives are members of these groups. It therefore becomes very difficult for them not to collaborate or protect members of

these groups. There are other times when they are forced into collaborating with these violent groups.

Sometimes their close relatives – husbands, sons, and other members of their community - are kidnapped and they are asked to perform certain roles in order for their relatives to be released; namely, singing songs, accolades and preaching that celebrate martial values, stigmatize weakness and encourage men to demonstrate their bravery. In other cases, members of these VEGs take advantage of the ignorance of some women and men regarding their misunderstanding of the teachings of the Holy Quran. These women are indoctrinated with false teachings and are forced to support these groups.

SURVIVAL

Due to the chaos and destruction that accompany the violent activities of these violent extremist groups, people lose legitimate opportunities for survival. In order to survive, some women are forced to collaborate with VEGs in order to have access to welfare services provided by some of these violent extremist groups to the local communities. These welfare services provide the opportunities for some women to satisfy their basic needs. There are also reports of some girls whose applications to several state security services are rejected and they are forced to join these VEGs out of frustration .

Other girls are also reported to join these armed groups with the hope that when they survive, and a disarmament, demobilization, reintegration and rehabilitation (DDRR) are conducted, they will get the opportunity to be integrated into state security services which was their original dream. In most cases, these dreams are left unfulfilled .

SOCIAL STATUS

Due to the patriarchal nature of the Malian society, women are considered as subservient to men. Based on their social status, they can be used or forced to perform certain roles without their consent. There are certain clans who regard women as slaves 'koran sio'. So as slaves, they do not have any 'value' and can be violated and used to perform any activity. Women are raped and used as sexual objects because, according to the men (who abuse the women), women are second-class citizens .

These perceptions of women are carried by these violent extremist groups who display the same attitudes to women. It is reported that increasingly women and girls are being maltreated and shot indiscriminately by these VEGs .

CONCLUSION

Though they are yet to be seen performing frontline roles as combatants, women play active roles as informants, logisticians and pressure groups which have furthered the strategic goals of violent extremist groups in Mali .

This paper unpacks the various roles that women play and the various reasons that explain their involvement in the activities of violent extremist groups. To confront the growing threat from the role of women in the expansion of violent extremism, the government of Mali has put in place a number of policy interventions, namely the national policy for the prevention and the fight against violent extremism, national policy for transitional justice and the gender quota bill. Efforts by the various implementation committees of these national policies continue to produce uneven results .

There is the need for a strong partnership among government, civil society and other international stakeholders that moves beyond the rhetorical flourishes in these policies to ensure a rigorous implementation to better achieve the goals that enhance the status of women in Mali.