



## THE ROLE OF GENDER IN VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN BURKINA FASO

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Violent extremism per se is a life-threatening and onerous global phenomenon, bringing about glaringly obvious effects across various countries, including the countries of the Sahel. The actions of extremist groups in the Sahel communities threaten social order; violent extremism is no longer short-lived and ephemeral; rather, it makes up a source of concern for the countries of Liptako-Gourma (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger). The secrets of the scourge have not yet been unlocked. Extremism was previously a dominantly patriarchal phenomenon. However, reality reveals that women have jostled for robust engagement in armed groups, which make it a mooted point for further research and investigation. Data constantly confirm that a spate of women have joined armed groups, as revealed by the OXFAM 2020 REPORT and the International Alert Report (DOGMATIC OR PRAGMATIC? VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND GENDER IN THE CENTRAL SAHEL). Therefore, it is unsurprising to argue that violent extremism is going into the feminization stage of the Sahel, especially Burkina Faso.

### Women and Terrorism

If the involvement of women in armed groups in the Sahel seems to be a new phenomenon given the poor necessary data for such an issue before, it is a clear strategy applied by Boko Haram in battles. Women in the Sahel carried out more than 430 suicide attacks between 2011-2017, whether they did so voluntarily or not. Beyond a shadow of doubt, the presence and participation of women had a noticeable impact on the level of communication and propaganda for organizations to gain unprecedented social credit. One can easily understand the potential effects of this strategy for other armed groups in the Sahel, which have become an inspiration. This requires us to reconsider our situations and concepts about violent extremism.

### Impact of Women Participation

This article analyzes the impact of gender on violent extremism in Burkina Faso and learns about the relevant role of women, who are traditionally presented as the main

victims of armed conflict. Research in specific areas, like the contribution of women in existing conflicts, may help us to understand the plans to exploit women in terrorist groups and construct a discourse that demythologizes misrepresentations. At THE LEADERS SUMMIT TO COMBAT ISIS AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM, October 2015, former US President Barack Obama stressed the following: We do not fight ideologies and doctrines with guns; rather, we fight them with better ideas and a more convincing and attractive vision. Therefore, a better understanding of women involvement in violent extremism can correct the perception of the situation of women and promote their role in preventing violent extremism.

Four main topics will be further explained to make it clearer: the impact of the deteriorating security environment on gender conditions in Burkina Faso; gender as the main victim of violent extremism; methods of women involvement in armed groups in Burkina Faso; women empowered as tools of peace.

### **Impact of Deteriorating Security Environment on Gender Conditions**

The security environment in Burkina Faso has sharply deteriorated, and insecurity has widely been rampant, whether related to deteriorating social and economic conditions, conflicts over territory and pastures, or tribal, sectarian, political and armed conflicts. Violent extremism mushroomed and gradually contributed to the loss of security in the coastal regions, then snowballed into other regions, especially the north, center, east and the Mohun belt region, where armed groups are wreaking havoc; part of the region has become under the effective control of terrorist groups, where victims suffer, survive or die.

In addition to the multifaceted armed violence, there are local and societal conflicts alongside threats of progressive radicalization of women. The common ground of all such forms of affliction is the use of violence. Such attacks affect the authority, stability and safety of the state, destabilize the country and threaten development projects. It seriously doubts the state's ability to guarantee its sovereign function throughout the region and to protect women from acts of violence.

### **Gender as Main Victim of Violent Extremism**

Over time, extremist groups developed their own strategic plans for violence. When the crisis broke out, extremist groups in Burkina Faso targeted the government representatives, community leaders and civilian victims; women were not within the reach of such groups at the time. December 24 of 2019 is a watershed day in the history

of the absence of security in Burkina Faso; women became direct targets of terrorists. The media reported that 31 women were killed in an attack on a military base in Arbinda. Since that date, women have become among the key victims of violent extremism.

The attacks of extremist groups have severely affected the livelihoods of women and children; they are the cause of huge losses in human, material, natural and financial resources, and remain the main cause of mass displacement of populations (IDPs and refugees). The impact of women on violent extremism is manifested in various direct and indirect forms. Notoriously, women were kidnapped or raped, sustaining forced marriage, sexual slavery, and murder. It is one of the main causes of the spread of psychotic disorders, with a significant impact on the changes that occur in society. This includes changing the code of dress, dropping out of school, and destroying some vital and practical activities. There are various other types of horrific practices, which is the most terrifying manifestations that women may be exposed to.

People fleeing in search of safety increases the vulnerability of poor groups, particularly women and children. The May 2020 study by Oxfam confirms this dire situation; women have identified so many priority needs, such as access to water, security, food, shelter, education, and the like. Against such a backdrop of chaos, insecurity becomes infamously rampant. All the actors and women who were consulted confirm the extent of the psychological trauma resulting from the increasingly worsening conflict driven by forced displacement and severe deprivation.

A major consequence of violent extremism in Burkina Faso is related to the disruption of the social order. In fact, many women have become widows. Accordingly, they are solely responsible for the family. The sudden change in social status resulting from violent extremism has dire consequences for women. The disintegration of the family resulting from the departure of men, who abandoned their families either voluntarily or by force, increases the fragility of the situation. Thus, women are constantly forced to perform dual tasks: the woman breadwinner of the family and the single mother.

Providing decent livelihoods prompts women to move to remote areas, which exposes them to all kinds of violence, whether in their villages, on the roads, or in areas of asylum. The increase in violence is taking a heavy toll on women. To make matters worse, sexual violence in particular has become a war instrumentalization and weaponization exploited by perpetrators of the violence, who are essentially unidentified armed groups seeking corruption in this part of the region where insecurity is increasingly mushrooming.

Economically, the destruction of the economic and social fabric has a profound impact on the living conditions of women; the security measures and the security situation do not encourage the realization of economic activities. There is no need to acknowledge here that the new jobs for women imposed by conflicts are a new challenge that they must face, and that knowledge of the factors of women's involvement in extremist organizations enables the necessary measures to be taken to prevent such practices.

### **Methods of Women Involvement in Armed Groups in Burkina Faso**

The process of women's regular involvement in armed extremist groups in Burkina Faso is still an area of investigation and research. Since women are usually the key victims of conflicts, their involvement in armed groups rarely reserves due discussion. However, this topic needs further reflection and consideration, in light of the exaggeration of violence and the opportunities to exploit the status of women in recruitment.

We must always remember that women, like men, may perform serious and influential tasks in spreading or combating violence. For example, according to an article published online at OUAGA NEWS, here are more than 2,000 women in KOGI-WÉOGO self-defense groups; women perform various security functions related to association administrative services, interrogation and intelligence operations, logistical support and patrols. In return, women who decide to join or cooperate with extremist groups can perform the same or more tasks.

It may seem useful to consider the factors of radicalization; it may ignore the gender dimension, as it may be identical with men's factors. Besides social and cultural reasons and poverty factors, women may join armed groups for other reasons. Hence, the social and cultural reality and the security environment determine the methods of recruiting women into armed groups. Things may not be very different from other countries, as is the case in Nigeria and Somalia.

According to the International Alert Report, women can perform functions of support, mobilization, facilitation, translation and education. With notorious insecurity coming into play in some areas, women may join armed groups due to duress or the necessity of survival, according to the Oxfam Report. In fact, the humanitarian response is insufficient given the scale of the needs. The report mentions priority needs, such as security, water, food, shelter, education and the elimination of harassment. Such basic

needs, along with the increase in violence, are among the reasons that can contribute to the recruitment of women in Burkina Faso.

Such reasons, especially those related to the social status of women, are also among the factors that armed groups may feed on to consolidate their presence and spread in societies. Recourse to women helps in all cases. It is a war strategy that allows armed groups to easily infiltrate societies and move freely without arousing suspicion. At the same time, extremist groups are practicing a full-fledged process of social change. Finally, given the important impact of women in society, obtaining their support will be a success in the policy of spreading violence.

Although there is currently little regular involvement for women in terrorist organizations, the issue deserves special attention to better understand the whole process more deeply and to optimize contributory responses. Women are no longer seen only as victims or perpetrators of violence; they can even be made partners in peacebuilding. This approach would give women's contribution more recognition and legitimacy at various levels to better promote peace and security.

### **Women as Peace Advocates**

The number of women in Burkina Faso is more than half of the population (52.67%). At the same time, we find that women are the largest part of the victims. Hence, it is necessary to better use the potential of women in combating fundamentalism and violent extremism to the fullest extent. Therefore, integrating the gender perspective into security policies in the Sahel is essential for development and provision of services, conflict resolution, protection of rights, justice, and peace building.

International bodies have considered the issue of women's position and function in political and social life; they have recognized that they assume an indispensable position in efforts to enhance social cohesion and local development issues. This also includes making their participation in political and public life a necessary precondition for economic growth and social progress.

There is a consensus in Burkina Faso that women can make a significant contribution to preventing and combating violent extremism, at the level of family, community and civil society organizations. It is related to prevention through early warning, community strategy, mainstreaming of the gender perspective in security methods, and security sector reform. It can also contribute early and with distinction to development, strengthening women's leadership and capabilities to be effective leaders, against

extremism. Taken together, we support the principle of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), which states explicitly: Peace is a far-fetched chimera without women.