Women, Violence and Terrorism in West Africa and the Sahel Region: Towards a Regional and International Response

High Level Event

Dakar, Senegal, April 10 – 11, 2018

SUUCINT REPORT

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I. <u>Introduction</u>

1. The High Level Event on "Women, Violence and Terrorism in West Africa and the Sahel region: Building a Regional/international Response" was organized by the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) in collaboration with the Economic Commission of West African States (ECOWAS), the G5 Sahel, the Mano River Union, the Working Group on Women, Youth, Peace and Security in West Africa and the Sahel, UN WOMEN, the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) and agencies of the entire United Nations system in the region.

2. It was convened in Dakar, Senegal, from 10 to 11 April and was attended by over 150 actors and experts working on peace and security.

3. The deliberations during the two-day consultations are covered in this succinct report.

II.   Report on the High-Level Event on "Women, Violence and Terrorism in West Africa and the Sahel region: Building a Regional/international Response"

The terrorist threat in the West African and Sahel region

4.   Sustainable development, peace and security of the countries in West Africa and the Sahel are undermined by violent extremism and terrorist attacks. This stems primarily from Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, groups loyal to Al-Qaida and, more recently, Daesh, and their ability to collaborate with local and transnational terrorist groups such as Boko Haram. The merger of AQIM and several other Al-Qaida-linked groups under the umbrella of Jema'ah Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen reflect their adaptability to work across borders, mandates, and cultures. They have effectively latched onto local conflicts throughout the region, such as the conflict between herders and farmers. In the Lake Chad Basin, despite the efforts of the Multinational Joint Task Force, Boko Haram continues to adapt its modus operandi. They have recently showed their ability to execute large-scale operations such as the kidnapping in February 2018 of 39 schoolgirls from Difa in Niger and over 105 in Dapchi, Nigeria.

5.   The countries in West Africa and the Sahel are further confronting interconnected threats, particularly the growing nexus between terrorism and organized crime, notably drug trafficking, weapons and human trafficking as well as the laundering of the proceeds of crime. Organized crime groups for trafficking of different illicit commodities also commonly engage women.

Terrorist group's strategy to subjugate women

6.   AQIM and other Al-Qaida-linked groups have placed the subjugation of women and girls at the forefront of their strategy. This implies restrictions on women and girls' rights, forced marriages, kidnappings, and sexual violence and abuse. At the same time, recruitment of women in these groups as fighters is increasing. Boko Haram uses a range of strategies to recruit women and girls, including kidnaping, coercion or exploitation of economic hardship. Some 4,000 women and girls have been abducted thus far.

Terrorist groups exploiting women as perpetrators of terrorist acts

7.   Several participants referred to the recruitment, indoctrination and radicalization of women and the role they were playing in taking up arms as perpetrators of violent crime and acts of terrorism, as well as serving as cheap labor for Boko Haram. They are used to infiltrate communities, to work as spies and collect information on security and military positions as they draw limited suspicion. They also indoctrinate women, recruit new adherents and, willing or unwillingly, serve as suicide bombers for soft targets, such as mosques or market places.

8.   Over the years, Boko Haram suicide attacks carried out by women and girls have dramatically increased. Since 2011, young girls have been committing four times as many suicide attacks as young boys. It was indicated that 66 percent of the recent 434 terrorist attacks were carried out by women suicide bombers, resulting in over 2000 deaths and many more wounded. Some participants considered that some mostly young women are engaged in violent extremism due to their socio-economic conditions and status, particularly abject poverty, high illiteracy rates, and subservient roles in a patriarchal society.

Women as Survivors of terrorism

9.   Women and girls, women's associations and networks play a critical role in the prevention of violent extremism and countering terrorism, particularly at the grassroots level. Women are victims of terrorism. The High-Level Event noted the differential impact on the human rights of women and girls of terrorism and violent extremism, including in the context of their health, education, and participation

in public life, as they are often the primary targets of terrorist groups. Women, as heads of households, are affected by the collapse of public services, such as schools and hospitals, in regions affected by terrorism. They are also subjected to inhuman treatment, such as forced marriage, sexual exploitation, intimidation and gross abuse of their human rights. In north-east Nigeria, over 2 million people, mostly women and girls, had to flee from their homes and rural communities and are now in Internally Displaced Camps (IDPs) or in camps for refugees in neighboring countries. Several representatives expressed concern over the on-going kidnapping of women and girls, particularly juveniles, often at gunpoint. This was a daily occurrence in some rural communities; abductions of minors were also taking place in public places and public view with little support for the victims due to the intimidating influence of perpetrators of such crimes.

10.   Women are also directly or indirectly affected by counter-terrorism measures, including through military operations or restrictions on freedom of movement and economic activity. It was also indicated that women were victimized when it comes to the distribution of humanitarian assistance. The most vulnerable often do not benefit from such assistance. The practice of "sex for food" in some IDP camps by security and military personnel were unacceptable and criminal.

Addressing the root causes and conditions conducive to terrorism

11.   There is an international consensus that military force, law enforcement measures, and intelligence operations alone are not sufficient to stop the spread of terrorism and violent extremism. The conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism must be addressed and integrated in national and regional strategies to prevent violent extremism and combat terrorism. This is reflected in the UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, which stipulates that narratives of grievance, actual or perceived injustice, promised empowerment and sweeping change, become attractive where human rights are being violated, good governance is being ignored, and aspirations are being crushed. Terrorist groups were prospering where the State was absent or weak and civil society dysfunctional, such as in Northeast Nigeria and some parts of the Lake Chad basin. Several participants considered that the deficiencies of Government must be addressed, with priority given to the implementation of policies that promote social cohesion and an inclusive society that does not discriminate against women. They referred to the new initiatives of their Governments to improve the services provided by the State, particularly in education, health and agricultural services.

12.   Several participants highlighted the need to strengthen efforts for the peaceful resolution of prolonged conflict, promoting the rule of law, the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, good governance, tolerance, sustained economic and social development, and inclusiveness. Such approaches were considered essential complement to investment in the military and law enforcement apparatus.

Human rights: access to justice and combating perpetrators of crime against women and girls

13.   The promotion and protection of human rights for all and the rule of law are essential components of strategies to prevent violent extremism and counter terrorism. There was a call for Member States to strengthen access to justice particularly through the prompt investigation, prosecution and punishment of perpetrators of sexual and gender-based violence and providing reparation for victims. It was recalled that acts of sexual and gender-based violence are part of the strategic objectives and tactics of certain terrorist groups. Several participants expressed their regret that too many perpetrators of the most serious crimes committed against women and girls were still benefiting from impunity. They reported on the need to forcefully fight impunity and uphold accountability, particularly for groups of young men involved in kidnapping young girls for trafficking and prostitution. The need to promote and protect the

rights of women and girl's victims of terrorism was emphasized, especially those defecting from the grip of terrorist groups and frequently facing rejection and stigmatization in their communities. There was strong support for women defecting from Boko Haram and other terrorist groups often accompanied by their children; they should be provided support for their insertion into society. The national action plan of Niger, for example, provided for the integration of women in training centers for demobilized Boko Haram fighters with a focus on their social and professional integration.

Empowering women through representation and equality

14. The empowerment of women and girls was of critical importance. Gender blind policies and practices have failed to holistically address the multi-faceted factors contributing to violence against women. They are ineffective and negatively impact on women and girls' rights. In this regard the Event noted the frequent under-representation of women in many formal processes and bodies, the relatively low number of women in senior positions in political, peace and security-related national and regional institutions, the lack of support for women's leadership roles in these settings and insufficient financing for women organizations, particularly at the grassroots level. Greater emphasis should be placed on achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, with a dedicated commitment to women's participation and human rights, and support to build women's engagement in all levels of decision-making.

15. The engagement by men and boys as partners in promoting women's participation in the prevention of violent extremism was highlighted. However, women and girls should have their own voice and not serve as the mere implementers of decision, which man made in the patriarchal society which predominates in the region. Women and girls must speak out for themselves and make decisions by themselves at all levels, including in shaping the narrative to prevent violent extremism and counter terrorism, in cooperation with emancipated men. The 'Bring Back our Girls' campaign in Nigeria is a good example of women shaping the narratives to counter terrorism.

Strategies and resources for women initiatives and programs

16. Several participants considered that Governments and States in the region should pursue a gender parity policy and increase the representation of women, particularly women leaders, at all levels of decision-making in national, regional institutions and mechanisms established for the prevention of violent extremism. For girls, the goal is to increase girl-child education and empowerment; for women, the aim is to become decision makers, either as community leaders, parliamentarians, ministers or Presidents. There was an urgent need to ensure the meaningful inclusion and integration of women organizations and leadership in the development and implementation of policies and programmes, including their engagement in grassroots advocacy, countering incitement to commit terrorist acts, creating counter narratives, leading education campaigns, and other initiatives to prevent violent extremism and counter terrorism.

Resourcing the involvement of women

17. Several participants recalled that Governments and the donor community were providing very limited resources in support of women associations working at the grassroots level. Government budgets were mostly dedicated to support security and military operations rather than prevention measures, such as education and social services. There was a need for a change in the mind-set in order to remedy the current situation and the disproportionate allocation of resources to enable Governments to pursue their dual goals of development and security through an effective partnership between civil society and the Government.

Priority to be given to prevention strategies and support to women associations

18.   There was agreement that priority should also be given to efforts for the prevention of violent extremism and terrorism, particularly in countries, such as Benin, Ghana and Togo, which have thus far not been affected by terrorist attacks.   In this regard Governments should give greater priority to supporting women, women associations and leaders, as the critical civil society partners playing a key role in the prevention of violent extremism at the grassroots level.   Governments and regional entities were called upon to empower women by increasing their funding for programmes that further gender equality and women's empowerment. Women's participation, leadership and empowerment should be integrated at the core of national and regional strategies and collective responses to the threat posed by violent extremism and terrorism.

Measures taken by Governments, regional and international organizations

19.   The High-Level Event was informed of measures taken by Governments in preventing violent extremism and countering terrorism. Several representatives referred to the inclusion of women and women associations in the implementation of national strategies to prevent violent extremism. The Government of Nigeria was rebuilding infrastructures and launching programs in regions affected by terrorism acts, particularly in the Northeast with its large share of displaced persons and refugees. The comprehensive and inclusive national strategy adopted by Mali in 2018, integrated the role of women in the prevention of violent extremism at all levels. Such approaches, as in Chad, included the establishment of national units to counter radicalization by bringing together religious groups, women, women associations and youth. Several participants referred to initiatives to amend gender-blind legislative framework, including amending the penal codes, in their countries.   A network of women parliamentarians in Mauritania was reviewing legislation and the legal framework to replace gender-blind legislation.

20.   Chronic youth unemployment remains a major concern; making disenfranchised young people vulnerable to the narratives of terrorist groups, radicalization and recruitment. Young people were considered to be the main victims of terrorism in view of the seriously reduced employment opportunities and adverse economic situation in areas affected by terrorism, as well as their involvement in terrorist acts, such as serving as suicide bombers. In some countries, particularly in Niger, youth criminal organizations were involved in kidnapping of young girls and perpetrating acts of extreme violence. Several representatives referred to measures taken by their Governments to address youth unemployment through education and training programs. There was increased focus on civic education targeting both girls and boys.

21.   The high rate of illiteracy among women and girls, particularly in rural areas, made them vulnerable to the narratives of terrorists. Investing in education of girls was essential to countering terrorism and violent extremists as illiterate and uneducated women and girls did not understand or know their rights. Increased priority should be given to providing education for girls. In this regard the mandatory age for compulsory education for girls had been raised in several countries, such as Mali. This measure would also contribute to the prevention of early marriages and militate against the traditional view, in some communities, that girls are not entitled to education. Literacy programs and measures to protect the interest of girls in the education system would strengthen the resilience of women and protect their rights as fully emancipated citizens able to effectively engage in initiatives to prevent violent extremism and counter terrorism.

Religious leaders – actors in countering violent extremism

22.   Civil society organizations were striving to prevent the radicalization of youth. Strong support was expressed for the increased attention being given to the training and education of religious and traditional leaders, particularly regarding the importance of religious freedom and tolerance. They had key roles to play in countering the radicalization of young people by countering the misrepresentation of

Islam in local terrorist narratives. Was also expressed the need to engage Koran school for boys and girls and reference was made of good initiatives in Mauritania and Chad where curriculums are promoting gender equality and where girls are equally welcomed and knowledgeable in the Koran. Several networks and associations of Islamic clerics were engaged in this process. The importance of involving religious leaders in strategies to prevent violent extremism and terrorism was overall emphasized.

Testimonies of victims of terrorist acts

23.   Representatives of Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Nigeria shared their experiences as victims and survivors of terrorist attacks. The testimonies of victims of terrorist acts were greatly appreciated. There was agreement that survivors of acts of terrorism should be provided adequate support. This included economic and financial support, medical and psychological assistance to assist them in their recovery from their tragic experience.

Research and data to ensure evidence-based policy and programming responses

24.   In order to develop targeted and evidence-based policy and programming responses to violent extremism and terrorism, it was essential to generate empirical qualitative data to undertake analysis and assessment of the role of women in the prevention of violent extremism and the impact of terrorism on women. In particular, gender-sensitive research and data needs to be gathered on the drivers of radicalization for women as well as the resilience factors. This would enable a better understanding of the impact of counter-terrorism strategies on women's human rights and women's organizations to inform government programmes, as well as the factors that drive some women to join terrorist groups. Some speakers considered that due to limited empirical data and analysis, some national or regional strategies were mostly a response to fear.

Terrorist narratives and use of social media and Internet

25.   Several participants indicated that, in recent years, there has been a growth of radical militant Islamist discourses in many countries of the region. The anti-establishment discourse of many extremist groups, denouncing governments as corrupt with no legitimacy are seductive when promises of social progress have not accompanied democratization nor addressed challenges such as chronic youth unemployment.

26.   Several participants expressed their grave concern that terrorists were crafting distorted narratives, which are utilized to polarize communities, recruit supporters, mobilize resources and garner support from sympathizers, by exploiting information and communications technologies, including through the Internet and social media. This had a major impact on those vulnerable in society, particularly vulnerable youth. The Internet was often the preferred media for the radicalization of young people and incitement to commit terrorist acts. There was a need for programs to support women, particularly in their roles as mothers, in continuing to play a critical role in countering the narratives of terrorists and terrorist groups in the region, as they seek to protect their children and family members.

Too many regional strategies – call for a coordinated response

27.   Some participants considered that there were too many uncoordinated regional and international strategies for the region, particularly for the Sahel, which led to fragmentation in efforts to support women's role in preventing violent extremism and counter terrorism. There was accordingly a need for greater integration by Member States and the United Nations of their agendas on women, peace and security, preventing violent extremism and countering terrorism in the West African and Sahel region.

The role of the United Nations and regional organizations and entities

28.   The role of the UN has been to affirm the primary role of Member States to implement fully the relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions on women, peace and security, and the important complementary role of United Nations entities and regional organizations. It was recalled that Security Council resolution 2242 (2015) and 2395 (2017), have called for greater focus on integrating gender as a cross-cutting issue throughout UN activities. The new UN Support Plan for the Sahel for the period 2018-2022 would include gender equality and women's empowerment as one of its five key priorities. The UN is working to support the G-5 Sahel in establishing its Joint Force to counter terrorism through a "regional Integrated Assistance for Countering Terrorism framework" developed with the G5 Sahel Permanent Secretariat.   Women and women leaders and associations should be included in the process. UN support for the ongoing development of an African Union/LCBC-led stabilization strategy for the Lake Chad Basin also represents an opportunity for the involvement of women in countering terrorism, promoting peace and development.

29.   The representatives of ECOWAS, the G-5 Sahel and Mano River Union referred to regional initiatives to support the inclusion of women in peace building, security and justice, and fair and inclusive development. They contributed to strengthen the capacity of countries in the region by developing guidelines and programs in support of Governments in the implementation of strategies to prevent violent extremism and combat terrorism while promoting the protection and rights of victims. They served as a legal framework and platform to address cross-border criminality and in integrating women associations and networks in peace building. Several representatives commended women associations, serving as volunteers, in promoting peace efforts in the region.

III. Adoption of the Dakar call

30.   The High-Level participants unanimously reviewed and adopted the Dakar Call for Action which includes nine (9) specific recommendations for actions to be taken by Regional Organizations, Member States, international and local CSOs and relevant United Nations entities, see attached.