



**West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP)**

**Women in Peacebuilding Program (WIPNET)**

## **ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION**

**Theme: Make it Happen: Women Unite Against Violent  
Extremism in West Africa**

**Date:** March 13, 2015

**Venue:** WANEP Office



### List of acronyms and abbreviations:

ALSHABAB	... ..	A Somalia-based militant Islamist group
ALQAIDA	.....	A radical Sunni Muslim organization
AQIM	.....	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
CSOs	.....	Civil Society Organizations
CVE	.....	Counter Violent Extremism
ECPF	.....	ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework
ECOWAS	.....	Economic Community of West African States
IWD	.....	International Women's Day
ISSI	.....	Islamic State of Iraq
KAIPTC	.....	Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre
MUJAO	.....	Mouvement pour l'Unité et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest
UNSCR	.....	United Nations Security Council Resolution
WANEP	.....	West Africa Network for Peacebuilding
WIPNET	.....	Women in Peacebuilding Program

## **Executive Summary:**

The 8 March of each year is recognized as International Women's Day. It is commemorated worldwide. A lot of events take place in institutions, governments, organizations, women groups, and Media's cooperation and among others to celebrate the socioeconomics and political achievements of women all over the world. The theme for the commemoration of the IWD this year is "Make it happen". In accordance with the global theme, organizations all over the world set their theme to commemorate this day.

It was in this same rationale that West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) through its program called Women in Peacebuilding Program (WIPNET) convened a round table discussion on March 13, 2015 in order to honor the International Women's Day. Therefore, this year, WANEP celebrates the International Women's Day under the theme: 'Women Unite Against Violent Extremism in West Africa' to appreciate the contributions of women in countering violent extremism from a preventive perspective. It is clear that the threat and menace of violent extremism continue to seriously affect the lives and future of girls and women, with some of them now being used by extremist groups as suicide bombers, cooks, sex slaves, strategists among others.

Violent extremism or terrorism is a complicated phenomenon to understand. It is argued that drivers such as poverty, grievances, lack of access to political processes or justice, gender inequality, need for belonging, dignity and among others that lead to violent extremism. However, nowadays increasingly we are also seeing that more sophisticated people who are not actually on the category of poor people, have been attracted to join the cause of violent extremists (Boko Haram, AQMI, ALQAIDA, ISSI) whether at the domestic or international levels.

## **Conclusion:**

Empowering and equipping women to participate in countering violent extremism is paramount. Women have been overlooked as a resource in CVE policy and planning but are poised to play significant and unique roles in their homes, schools, communities, and governments to help prevent violence and conflict. It is also important to understand the discourse paradigm that leads to radicalization and understand the drivers to radicalization and use integrated approaches and solutions to prevent violent extremism.

## **Recommendations:**

It was recommended that:

- There should be inclusive dialogue and synergy among CSOs in countering violent extremism,
- There should be more supports to female organizations working on gender issues,
- Public places like churches, mosques, markets and among others should be used to talk increasingly about violent extremism
- There should be mutual accountability among stakeholders is paramount in countering violent extremist groups in our region

- There should be more collaboration between CSOs and media in sharing information to combat VE and harms in the region. Medias should not see themselves as events coverers or reporters; they should rather be considered as partners to CSOs in fighting V.E and other related harms in our societies.

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## **Introduction**

Bijou Birch the Program Officer for WIPNET and Peace Education, after given a brief introduction to the International Women's Day, she said, during the celebration of the International Women's Day (IWD), a lot of events takes place in institutions, governments, organizations, women groups, Medias, cooperation and among other to celebrate the socioeconomics and political achievements of women all over world. It is observed that in celebrating this day various organizations set their theme around the celebration of this day, and the theme agreed internationally for this year 2015 celebration is "Make it happen".

WANEP as a leading organization in West Africa is, celebrating the international women day under the theme: "Make it happen: women Unite Against Violent Extremism in West Africa". This comes from WANEP commitment in promoting women agenda in peacebuilding and conflicts resolutions in West Africa through its program called WIPNET. The WIPNET program was setup in 2001 to build the capacity of women, to enhance their roles in peacebuilding process and post conflict reconstruction in West Africa. WIPNET continues to encourage women participations in peace process using regional and international instruments including the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 and the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework as reference (ECPF).

In order to counter the emergence issue of terrorism, she said it has become imperative to recognize women in countering violent extremism and for CSOs to empower women in the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) context and ensure their voices are heard and listened to. We all know that women everywhere influence their family and community in unique ways and experience shows that inclusion of women in peacebuilding and conflicts resolution is the only way sustainable peace can be achieved in our communities. The impact of women in peacebuilding in country such as Liberia is a reminder of the critical roles that women can play in peacebuilding.

### **Welcoming address:**

The Executive Director, after welcoming participants at the round table discussion in commemoration of 2015 International Women's Day, he disclosed that WANEP as an institution places more emphasis on gender parity and it is epitomized in our vibrant program called the Women in Peacebuilding Program (WIPNET). WIPNET has been operational in all the ECOWAS member states since the year 2000 after the official launch of WANEP in 1998 as an institution. He said, introducing WIPNET and mainstreaming gender in WANEP programs was not happenstance, it was deliberate after field experiences and with the strong believe that exclusion at all levels is the cause of violent conflicts, fundamentalism and extremism.

Regarding the commemoration of the International Women's Day the Executive Director Mr Chukwuemeka B Eze, said thousands of events occur to mark the socioeconomic and political achievement of women with governments, organisations and amongst other. He reiterated that the 8 March is also celebrated worldwide to encourage and take effective actions for advancing and recognizing the struggle and efforts, and the contributions of women in nation building. Therefore, this year, WANEP celebrates the International Women's Day to appreciate the contributions of women in countering violent extremism from a preventive perspective. It is clear that the threat and menace of violent extremism continue to seriously affect the lives and future of girls and women, with some of them now been used by extremist groups as suicide bombers, cooks, sex slaves, strategists among other.

He said the role of gender in violent extremism and countering violent extremism has been in WANEP opinion, the missing link in the chain of the multi-stakeholders mantra that the entire international community continues to sing and as a result, the CVE practice has not significantly taken into cognizance. The three key interdependent variable that influence our actions and results he said, are namely: gender dynamics in violent extremism, women's roles in CVE initiatives and how both violent extremism and CVE differently impact on women and girls against men and boys.

It has mostly been argued in Africa and other developing countries that poverty is the pull and push factor that lure people to violent extremism but recent examples have shown that there are other factors other than the so called poverty. He said with the level of young, educated, rich background and elitist western girls and women herding and itching to join ISIS, meanwhile, Boko haram and other insurgents groups continue to endure women, who bear the brunt of all these cannot be on the fence or simply pray and hope that God will "forbid". It has become obvious that no nation or region is immune to or spared from this ugly scourge and perhaps this may just be a wake-up for collective and inclusive action.

In his concluding remarks, he made reference to Ghana and said that Ghana continues to provide beacon of hope and inspiration in West Africa as a stable, democratic and highly tolerant country. This feat cannot be and should never be taken for granted. Therefore, WANEP as a peacebuilding network is verily concerned about the current spate of ethnocentric politics gradually creeping into the polity as well as the seeming religious intolerance in school. While we do not discountenance the court as a dispute resolution mechanism, he stressed that for such value-based issues, are better resolved through dialogue and sincere discussion. Violent extremism he said cannot be overcome through hardcore security along; in fact in some instances, it could be counterproductive. Preventive strategies such as peace education, interfaith programs, and inclusive policies all rooted in a democratic and good governance space would have more impact and be better sustained.

## Presentation

The regional Coordinator, Network Development, Alimou Diallo, started his presentation with the conceptual issues that underpinned the concept of violent extremism. He said, recent attacks related to violent extremism in countries like Afghanistan, Denmark, Egypt, France, Kenya, Libya, Nigeria, Mali, Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen as well as in Syria underscores the importance and need for stakeholders to engage in dialogue and constructive processes to minimize the impact of violent extremism and West Africa is increasingly witnessing the growth of extremist groups in our subregion. From the CSOs perspective we prefer to use violent extremism against the concept of terrorism so that people understand the issue. He said now women have been used as suicide bombers, initially they were victims but now they have become actress. Regarding the definition of violent extremism he disclosed that there is no definition yet agreed upon at the international level. There are different perceptions and understanding of the word due to its complexity and people stand points. He said that one man terrorist could be someone freedom fighter and violent extremism or terrorism is not a new concept. Violent extremism or terrorism was used as a tactic to fight for liberation during colonial era.

However, he said there are guarding definitions depending on evidences we have seen related to violent extremism. Violent extremists are defined as “individuals who support or commit ideologically-motivated violence to further political goals.” In the same attempt to defining violent extremism, Mr Diallo came out with a definition given by Manus Midlarsky that defines political extremism or extremism in general as the will to power by a social movement in the service of a political program typically at variance with that supported by existing state authorities, and for which individual liberties are to be curtailed in the name of collective goals, including the mass murder of those who would actually or potentially disagree with that program. Restrictions on individual freedom in the interests of the collectivity and the willingness to kill massively are central to this definition. The elements of this definition characterize extremist groups the discussion is talking about here, whether for political or religious ideology.

In creating more awareness on violent extremism, Mr Diallo said that there are drivers that lead to violent extremism and among these drivers, he made mention of:

- structural conditions: such as poverty, grievances, lack of access to political processes or justice, gender inequality and among other,



- individual psychological and emotional characteristics: such as need for belonging, dignity, meaning, or revenge, or the continuation of cycles of violence brought on by chronic conflict;
- the influence of socialization and group dynamics by family, peers, and schools (including religious schools); and
- the pull of active recruitment to include extremist messaging that inspires violence (use of new media wearing the posts to attract young men and women to join their ranks in perpetuating violent acts)

But increasingly we are also seen that more sophisticated people who are not actually on the category of poor people, been attracted to join the course of violent extremists. Violent extremist groups in waging war, they use various methods and strategies, among these methods the Mr Diallo revealed that violent extremists or terrorists frequently use firearms, Explosive and Incendiary Devices, Chemical Agents ,Biological Agents ,Nuclear Weapon and among other.

#### **Images of some violent extremist attacks:**



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1KZqqSI9-s>





<http://goo.gl/R38OYP>



<http://goo.gl/R38OYP>



Regarding the conceptual origin of violent extremism or terrorism, the presenter said, from the religious perspective, violent extremism links to martyrdom. Suicidal martyrdom represented being killed by invaders which resulted in rewards in heaven. So those who are involved in perpetuating violent extremism believe that when they die or kill people in the process, they are rewarded by heaven. Mr Diallo disclosed that, this practice dates back to thousands of years in many societies or religions, which means it is not new but growing in our societies. Terrorism against the enemy is often viewed as a religious act. When you look at it from the political perspective, he said it is related to asymmetric Warfare. And asymmetric warfare is the use of apparently random/unpredictable violence by a weak military/militia against a stronger military to gain advantage (Allen, 1997). The key of Asymmetric warfare is using unexpected, unconventional tactics in combat (Craig, 1998).

Concerning the typology of violent extremism, Mr Diallo said basically there are two types of violent extremists or terrorisms:

- Domestic Violent extremist: he said this type of violent extremism involves groups whose violent activities are directed at elements of a government or other groups without foreign involvement. This is confined in the boundary of a given country.
- International terrorism involves network groups whose violent activities transcend national borders, Boko Haram, Alshabab, AQIM, ALQAIDA, ISSI are all international violent extremist networks operating in the different parts of the world.

Since that the round table was convened to develop solutions in countering violent extremism in our region, he stressed that it is paramount to look at some primary prevention mechanisms. And among these primary prevention mechanisms:

- Education is vital. Ignorance is the key factor that leads to fear and when people do not have self-confidence and do not have knowledge of their religious tendencies, political ideologies they become vulnerable to manipulations by extremist groups.
- Understanding Understand the differences in cultures, religions, beliefs and human behaviors are also important. And the educational institutions are important in countering VE to the extent that, difference cultures and religions are interacting and attending the same educational institution. This promotes harmony and understanding of different cultures and religions.
- Think of the peace, freedom and equality of all human beings, not just “my group of people”
- Establish surveillance and monitoring system on terrorism attack

- Involve women in the monitoring, analyses and intervention processes will help curb violent extremism.

Because of the significant influence of socialization and relationships in the process of radicalization, both men and women are inherently part of the dynamics that push and pull an individual toward and from violent extremism. In many societies, gender identities and norms are also deeply embedded in ideas about violence and peace. Peacebuilders appreciate the need to examine the role gender plays in both mitigating and fostering trajectories of violence and peace.

Empowering and equipping women to participate in countering violent extremism is paramount. Women have been overlooked as a resource in CVE policy and planning but are poised to play significant and unique roles in their homes, schools, communities, and governments to help prevent violence and conflict. Indeed, some already do, although their participation is not recognized or documented as CVE per se. Peacebuilders, with their inclusive and gender-sensitive ethos, are well-positioned to help empower women in local communities engage safely and productively in preventing violence.

It is also important he said to understand the discourse paradigm that leads to radicalization and understand the drivers to radicalization and use integrated approaches and solutions to prevent violent extremism.

In the last part of the presentation, in referring to the objectives of the gathering there were some guiding questions that the presenter came out with to lead the rest of the discussions. These questions were:

- I. What are the causes of violent extremism and their consequences on women in the region?
- II. Why are women the targets of violence perpetrated by extremists and why are they involved in acts of violence?
- III. What strategies can women use to counter violent extremism in West Africa?
- IV. How can Civil Society support women and girls in facing the challenge of recruitment and radicalization to violence?

#### **Discussion session:**

The discussion was led by Margaret Alexander Rehoboth from the KAIPTC. During this session, many interesting suggestions, comments and questions came out in return to the presentation. Participants reaffirmed that; poverty, corruption, inequity gaps, exclusion and the inappropriate use of social media by violent extremist groups are the causes that attract young women and

men in violent extremism. Participants also expressed the need for more space for women in decisions making mechanisms both at the national and regional levels as mentioned in the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and subsidiary resolutions 1888 and 1889 in countering violent extremism and other related harms.

### **Recommendations:**

As part of the general recommendations, it was recommended that:

- There should be inclusive dialogue and synergy among CSOs in countering violent extremism,
- There should more supports to female organizations working on gender issues,
- Public places like churches, mosques, markets and among should be used to talk about violent extremism
- Mutual accountability among stakeholders is paramount in countering violent extremist groups
- There should be more collaboration between CSOs and media in sharing information to combat VE and harms in the region. Medias should not see themselves as events coverers or reporters; they should rather be considered as partners to CSOs in fighting V.E and other related harms in our societies.
- Women in the media should strive to propagate their rights while performing their works
- Parents should educate their girls from accepting gifts from unknown individuals
- Religion should be separated from state affairs; tolerance among religions in paramount and should be promoted.

### **Press release:**

The West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) joins the rest of the world to celebrate the 2015 International Women's Day. The day is set aside to reflect on women's strides in various spheres and to celebrate acts of courage and determination by ordinary women who have played extraordinary roles in their countries and communities. The theme for this year 2015 is "Make It Happen" which calls for further action in advancing and recognizing women, from ending the violence that affects them and hinders the achievement of their full potentials.

WANEP recognizes that the West African Region is confronted with the issue of violent extremism, a contemporary threat to human security. This has severely affected the livelihoods of several communities in parts of West Africa, with the greatest impact being on women and children who have had to flee from these communities, thereby increasing their vulnerability. An additional dimension is how violent extremist groups usually prey on the vulnerable in communities and women are particularly targeted for their logistical support, for their community mobilization capacities, sometimes for their funding abilities and recently, they are targeted for tactical fighting.

The grotesque acts of these extremists groups (Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, MUJAO) in countries like Nigeria, Mali, and Niger among others, has seen heinous crimes committed against women - abduction, sexual slavery, forced marriage, and more recently, suicide bombing. Within the past year, the active engagement of women in violent extremism has come into the limelight as a result of the increased recruitment and use of women and young girls as suicide bombers. This phenomenon further exposes the vulnerabilities of women and girls and renders hostage to fortune the economic and socio-cultural dynamics particularly within African societies. As these extremist groups have capitalized on the very reasons underpinning the advocacy and lobbying for an increased women's involvement, visibility, representation, participation and leadership in issues of peace and security, it undermines the effective implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) and related resolutions.

WANEP acknowledges that Violent Extremism is not linked to any specific race, culture, nationality, ethnicity, or religion, and the type of extremism we are facing today across the Region calls for the revival of a regional women's peace movement and a meaningful response that must come from within communities.

WANEP affirms that women are positioned to be effective partners in Countering Violent Extremism efforts as bulwarks against intolerance and extremism, as agents of positive change in their families, communities, and public spaces in order to prevent radicalization from leading to violent extremism and acts of terrorism.

As we celebrate women around the world and focus on the need for protection of women, WANEP calls for attention to be focused on understanding women's engagement in violent extremism and for a more nuanced discourse on violent terrorism that reflects gender perspectives, particularly, as it relates to understanding the risk factors for women's engagement in violent extremism.

WANEP therefore advocates that:

- Women be recognized as equal partners and a resource in Countering Violent Extremism efforts
- Women mobilize and say a resounding NO to Violent Extremism in West Africa
- There should be more research on the gender perspectives of violent extremism for an enhanced understanding, particularly on women's roles as enablers and preventers of violent extremism
- There must be an engagement of relevant local communities and non-governmental actors in developing strategies to counter the violent extremist narrative
- Effective prevention of the spread of violent extremism in different communities requires localized, specialized, multi-dimensional and integrated efforts, thus reinforcing the need to further empower youth, families, and women, as well as religious, cultural and educational leaders, and all other concerned civil society actors, and to adopt tailored approaches, including those sensitive to local cultures and religious beliefs, to addressing this phenomenon.

Now, more than ever, ECOWAS needs to re-think how Countering Violent Extremism strategies are developed on a local, national, and regional level to integrate a gender perspective, and to increase the participation of women in the development and implementation of these strategies.

**Closing remarks:**

The Regional Program Coordinator, Ms Queeneth Tawo in her closing remarks, thanked participants for honoring their presence during the round table discussion. Upon which, she encouraged all participants to make sure to carry out, and share this information in their various organizations in order to create more awareness on violent extremism and its consequences on our girls and women. She also argued participants for more collaboration and synergy among their civil society networks and the media in countering and combating violent extremism in West Africa.