Voices of
Resilience

A Gender Needs Analysis on Preventing Violent Extremism in the Sahel

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Foreword

Sustainable peace and security in the Sahel region remain elusive and concerning for the international community, amidst ongoing instability, as pervasive violence and competition for essential resources disrupt local communities. Multifaceted challenges, compounded by endemic poverty, inequality, violent extremism, and terrorism, continue to afflict the region, and violent extremist groups easily exploit existing grievances and difficult local conditions.

Within this volatile environment, the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) has been committed to building the resilience of communities and institutions in the Sahel region since 2015. One of UNICRI's strategic priorities is to assist Member States to better understand emerging and evolving threats and to support them to prevent and counter violent extremism and radicalisation.

This aligns with UNICRI's focus on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16, which promotes peaceful and inclusive societies, access to justice for all, and effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions. Also integral to its programmes, UNICRI incorporates crosscutting themes of gender, climate change, and youth, which are all critical to preventing violent extremism (PVE).

UNICRI's PVE work in the Sahel region is shaped by relevant and effective initiatives anchored in the everyday realities of individuals. Women, men, girls, and boys face distinct challenges. Accordingly, UNICRI strengthens gender perspectives in its PVE efforts to ensure impactful programming.

In 2023, with the support of the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), UNICRI collected data across Mali, Mauritania, and Niger to inform guiding principles for future PVE interventions. The data collection focused on access to services, gender roles, and security concerns as crucial factors that affect resilience and PVE. Through extensive field visits, UNICRI reached out to a wide cross-section of stakeholders, ranging from community members to national and local authorities, religious leaders, security experts, representatives of international organisations, and civil society actors. Their voices contributed to a better understanding of the unique challenges their communities face. UNICRI then conducted country-specific gender analyses, including gender roles and power dynamics, that illuminate needs and concerns of urban and rural communities. Building upon these gender analyses, we can tailor strategies to address context-specific factors to improve resilience in each country.

Through this study UNICRI facilitates the design and development of initiatives tailored to the specific needs and concerns of women, men, girls, and boys, thereby aligning prevention strategies with the realities on the ground in the Sahel region.

We hope this study will enhance understanding of the linkages between gender relations and PVE and provide a foundation for future PVE interventions shaped by the voices of communities in the Sahel region. By magnifying the voices of those most affected by violent extremism, we are charting a more equitable and inclusive way forward. The path ahead is challenging, but we can make progress towards a future that is free from violent extremism, where every life is cherished and every voice is heard.

UNICRI is grateful for KOICA's generous support.

Antonia Marie De Meo
Director, UNICRI

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

CEDAW Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women

CellRad G5 Sahel Regional Cell for the Prevention of Radicalization and Violent Extremism

CSOs Civil Society Organisations

ECOWAS Economic Community of West African States

FDS Defence and Security Forces (Forces de défense et de sécurité)

FGM Female Genital Mutilation

GBV Gender-based violence

IOs International Organisations

JNIM Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen

MENA Middle East and North Africa

NAP National Action Plan

NGOs Non-Governmental Organisations

P/CVE Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism

PVE Prevention of Violent Extremism

SRHR Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

TVET Technical and Vocational Education and Training

UN United Nations

UNDP United Nations Development Programme

UNESCO United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization

UNGCTS United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy

UNICEF United Nations Children's Fund

UNICRI United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute

UNODC United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

UNOCT United Nations Office of Counter Terrorism

UNSC United Nations Security Council

UNSCR United Nations Security Council Resolution

VAWG Violence Against Women and Girls

VE Violent Extremism

VEGs Violent Extremist Groups

WANEP West Africa Network for Peacebuilding

WASH Water, sanitation and hygiene.

WPS Women Peace and Security

MUJAO Movement for the Unity of Jihad in West Africa

Executive Summary

The Sahel represents one of the most unstable areas in sub-Saharan Africa. Widespread violence and limited access to resources, essential services and means of subsistence contribute to increased fragility and impact the everyday life of women, girls, men, and boys. Endemic poverty, inequality – particularly gender inequality – and human rights abuses are among the multiple factors that have a strong impact on the security of the region, which was described in the report on the United Nations (UN) Support Plan for the Sahel as a "breeding ground for violent extremism, terrorism and criminality."[1]

Since 2015, in line with its strategic priorities, the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) has been implementing projects to prevent violent extremism (PVE) in this region. During the implementation of such projects, it has become evident that PVE strategies in this context must rely on the assumption that the interactions between men, women and violent extremist groups are not uniform throughout the Sahel and the experiences and everyday realities of local communities should inform the design of such initiatives. Through its efforts to strengthen community and institutional resilience, UNICRI has collected evidence of the gendered approach of jihadist groups' propaganda and of the roles of women and girls in supporting as well as preventing violent extremism. This evidence prompted the Institute to further analyse these elements with the aim of mainstreaming gender perspectives across PVE efforts in the region.

Thanks to the generous support of the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), in early 2023, the Institute initiated a data collection effort in Mali, Mauritania, and Niger to define guiding principles for the design of future PVE interventions based on an analysis of gender roles, power relations, and the needs of both urban and rural communities. The rationale behind this effort was to attempt to avoid standardised responses that often replicate the dominant urban perspective. Instead, the goal was to identify ways to adapt gender and preventing initiatives "to the specific needs, aspirations and demands of women from rural and marginalised areas in order to ensure the relevance of these policies in relation to the realities on the ground."[2] By gathering the opinions of local communities on issues such as the availability of services, gender roles, insecurity and violence, and PVE interventions, the study provides a unique opportunity to explore how these

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1   *UN Support Plan for the Sahel*, United Nations (2018), p.8.
2   Luca Raineri, *Dogmatism or Pragmatism? Violent Extremism and Gender in the Central Sahel*, International Alert (2020), p.63.

elements may be interlinked and how concerns over the lack of essential services and fundamental rights may act as drivers of violence. To this end, field visits were conducted to Bamako and the Mopti and Ségou regions in Mali; Nouakchott and the Assaba and Hodh Ech Chargui regions in Mauritania; and Niamey and the Tillabéri region in Niger. Overall, through surveys, key informant interviews and focus groups, the study engaged with 355 respondents across these three target countries. The respondents included community members, national and local authorities, religious leaders, security experts, representatives of international organisations, and civil society actors.

Based on collected data, a country-specific gender analysis of the concerns and unmet needs of the populations was then carried out, with the aim to facilitate the development of strategies that are meticulously designed to address context-specific resilience factors and are rooted in meaningful consultations with women, girls, men, and boys from local communities.

Interestingly, contrarily to initial assumptions, when attempting to understand the experiences of women and men and how they vary between rural and urban areas, it was discovered that in Mali and Niger, the primary factor affecting gender roles and availability of services was the level of violence and insecurity. This factor had a more significant impact than the respondents' urban or rural location. On the other hand, in Mauritania – where levels of violence are lower – the differences between rural and urban contexts and their impact on gender roles and availability of services were much more pronounced.

Differences in the levels of insecurity also become evident in the analysis of the concerns of local communities. While the lack of employment, food insecurity, and violence were the top three concerns mentioned by respondents in all three target countries, the percentage of community members who reported insecurity and violence as a concern was lower in Mauritania compared to Mali and Niger. Regarding women's unmet needs, further disparities emerged. For example, a greater lack of access to education was observed in Niger and Mali compared to Mauritania. In Mali, specifically in the Mopti region, more difficulties in protecting livestock were reported compared to the other two countries. Limited access to healthcare also appears to pose a significant challenge to women in Niger, while less so in Mali.

In addition to the three major concerns mentioned above, a considerable number of women across all three countries reported difficulties in accessing resources, clean drinking water, and limited mobility.

In terms of education, the analysis of primary data shows a relatively equal school attendance rate between girls and boys, being slightly higher for the latter only in Mali. Interestingly, while public and private schools are the most popular choices in all three countries, respondents described pupils increasingly attending

Quranic schools alongside public or private ones – especially in Mauritania and Niger. However, these institutions are often not designed to facilitate entry into the labour market and lack technical and vocational education training to prepare students for employment.

The education system faces additional challenges, including poor teaching quality and safety concerns especially in Niger. In Ségou, Mali, there are issues related to distance from schools, and in rural areas of Mopti, Mali, financial difficulties hinder access to education. Unfortunately, early and forced marriages continue to be a significant concern, leading to the dropouts of young girls from school.

Indeed, according to the research results, girls in the target countries tend to marry at a younger age compared to boys. Early marriages under the age of 15 are especially reported in the regions of Hodh Ech Chargui, Mauritania, and Tillabéri, Niger – while boys typically marry after the age of 18.

In addition to their young age at the time of marriage, women are reported to have less decision-making power within households compared to men. According to respondents in all three countries, women can usually make decisions regarding employment, health, and education. However, especially in Mali and Niger, they may have fewer opportunities to freely attend and participate in public activities, including those organised by civil society actors, with men generally dominating decision-making spaces. Interestingly, in Niger, local authorities and civil society organisations (CSOs) may not be fully aware of this issue, as nearly 60% of these actors believe that women can independently decide to participate in public activities. This misconception is one of the many examples of how resilience-building activities could be at risk of ineffectiveness if not grounded in a thorough understanding of the gender norms specific to each context.

Considering that most respondents in Mali and Mauritania mentioned that women are allowed to work outside their homes, it appears that in these two countries, the above-mentioned restrictions are limited to public activities not related to employment. On the contrary, in Niger, 69% stated that women are not allowed to work outside of their homes, with religious values and norms provided as the main reason for such restrictions. Despite more liberties being reported in Mali and Mauritania regarding women's employment, more women than men in the target areas do not have any source of income or depend on family support. When participating in the labour market, the study shows that – across the three countries – the main sources of income for women are trade and selling products at the local markets, followed by agriculture and pastoralism in Mali (especially in Mopti and Ségou) and Niger (particularly in Tillabéri).

For both women and men, and across all study areas, the state and local authorities are the main providers of essential services. Regarding other types of actors, civil society organisations are reported to be the first providers of sustenance,

healthcare, and financial resources in Ségou, Mali, while traditional leaders did not emerge as significant providers across the target countries – even though they appear to hold a certain degree of influence in Mauritania, especially in relation to service provision in the Assaba region.

According to this study, only very few respondents in Mauritania and one in Niger recognised violent extremist groups as providers of services or protection, and across the three countries, violent extremist groups are overwhelmingly considered threats to peace and sources of violence and insecurity.

In fact, respondents reported violent extremist groups as the main security threat in Mali and Niger. In the former, ethnic-based militias and self-defence groups represent another important source of instability, while in the latter country, another critical threat arises from violent actions caused by conflicts between farmers and herders. In Mauritania, violence by VEGs accounts for only around 10% of total survey responses, with most security threats reported coming from other non-state armed groups. Although in limited numbers, state actors and Defence and Security Forces (FDS) have also been found to engage in discriminatory practices in all three countries, including arbitrary arrests.

Protection from violence is considered to be provided mainly by the state in Mauritania and Niger, while in Mali, this role is largely fulfilled by defence and security forces, especially in the Mopti region. Interestingly, according to the collected data, families are often considered guarantors of protection, even though family members are reported to be among the main sources of violence across the target countries. Indeed, early and forced marriage, domestic violence, and sexual violence perpetrated by family members are the most frequently recorded forms of violence against women and girls, followed by harassment (especially in Mauritania) and abductions (particularly in Niger). Compared to Mali and to some extent to Niger, where sexual violence and abductions by violent extremist groups are more commonly recorded, in Mauritania, violence committed by such groups is less indicated.

As lack of employment was one of the major concerns mentioned by respondents in all three target countries, so are economic vulnerability, poverty, and the pursuit of monetary gain amongst the most frequently mentioned reasons for men and boys to join violent extremist groups. Other drivers include revenge, a desire to defend one's ethnic group, and the pursuit of a sense of purpose in life. Faith is not perceived as a driving force behind joining violent extremist groups in Mali – while it has been mentioned in Mauritania, and 'misunderstanding of religious teachings' was also reported as a possible reason in Niger. According to field data, women may demonstrate support for violent extremist groups due to factors such as subordination, marital ties, or a desire to protect their families and children. In Niger and Mali, threats and fear were also reported to influence women's decision to join or support these groups.

In line with the main concern reported in Mali, Mauritania and Niger – i.e. lack of employment – and in line with the main driver for joining violent extremist groups described above – i.e. economic vulnerability – the study found that the most important factor in building women and men's resilience to violent extremism is the same in all three countries, i.e. state investments in guaranteeing access to income and employment. Indeed, the research identified a correlation between the needs and demands reported by local communities and their key resilience factors against joining violent extremist groups. For instance, in Mali, the other two elements reported are security and safety and inclusive engagement in decision-making processes, while in the more stable context of Mauritania, the second and third resilience factors identified by respondents are access to quality education and availability of health services. Interestingly, in Niger, female respondents also highlighted the importance of health services, while male respondents identified inclusive mechanisms to involve populations in decision-making processes to be among the main key factors of resilience.

This correlation between needs and resilience factors thus shows potential areas on which to focus PVE initiatives relevant to each context, and the study has underscored a considerable demand for such efforts. While most community members in Niger – both men and women – reported having participated in such activities, in Mali and Mauritania, respondents' participation is very low. When asked about the reasons impeding participation, nearly 50% of those surveyed cited a lack of awareness due to poor communication, while 42% stated that these initiatives were not available in their area. This shows that effective communication, the utilisation of appropriate channels and consideration of gender differences in their use are crucial. For instance, in Mali, women and girls tend to rely on the radio as their primary source of information, while men use social media as their primary tool. In Mauritania, most respondents indicated that social media is the most appropriate channel for both women and men. In Niger, to reach both men and women, TV and radio are preferred; indeed, findings show that, overall, women have limited access to means of communication, with the above two being the exception.

Despite respondents' low participation in PVE activities – especially in Mali and Mauritania – civil society organisations and local authorities reported implementing initiatives aimed at education and literacy, income generation, leadership and skills training, and healthcare. Interestingly, in Mauritania, these actors primarily target women and girls, while the majority of community members who reported participating in this type of activity were men. This may suggest that there are still several obstacles to women's engagement in PVE initiatives. Therefore, to enhance women's existing roles as community mobilisers and youth educators and promote their involvement in prevention activities, respondents suggested specific actions and strategies that can be developed in each of the three target countries. These include, in order of importance, ensuring these initiatives facilitate

access to income opportunities, are effectively communicated, align with religious and customary values, are scheduled at a suitable time, provide childcare, are held in women-only spaces, and are held in locations close to beneficiaries' residences or places of work. Indeed, it is essential to create spaces and opportunities for women as well as men to participate in PVE activities, as the research highlighted the important role that both mothers and fathers play in these efforts.

To conclude, by analysing the needs and concerns of local communities through a gender lens, this research shows how critical it is to design prevention initiatives that respond to the realities of each specific context and are tailored to women's and men's lived experiences. While ideology can undoubtedly be a pulling factor, economic instability, poverty, and lack of access to services and resources have emerged as determinant drivers of radicalisation in the study areas. By elevating and capturing the voices of local stakeholders and community members and their perceptions of security issues and gender roles, important resilience factors have also been identified, which should be considered when developing comprehensive PVE strategies. Indeed, such strategies risk being ineffective or counterproductive if they do not accurately reflect existing relations, priorities, constraints, and the way these are experienced differently by women, girls, men, and boys. Based on the findings of this research, Chapter 6 presents specific recommendations that should form the basis of future PVE interventions that take into account the linkages between concerns, unmet needs, gender power relations and violent extremism in the area.

NOTE ON NIGER: On 26 July 2023, the Presidential Guard in Niger staged a coup and detained President Mohamed Bazoum and his family. This was followed by demonstrations, censorship of broadcasts, interruptions to power supplies, and evacuations of foreign nationals. As of the end of August 2023, the situation remains unstable and unclear. As described in the Methodology section, for the purpose of this research, field visits in the country were conducted between April and May 2023 – specifically in Niamey and in the Tillabéri region – and therefore preceded the coup. The collection of data was thus not impacted by these most recent events, and the analysis included in this study reflects the situation as observed during the Spring of 2023.

1. Introduction

1.1 Gender and the Prevention of Violent Extremism in the Context of the United Nations

The impact of conflict, violence and insecurity on women and girls has long been explored within the United Nations context. The UN Security Council (UNSC) officially addressed these interlinks for the first time in 2000, when it adopted its landmark resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS). This resolution, together with those that followed,[3] is a crucial framework to address the unique ways women and girls are affected by conflict and to promote their participation in maintaining peace and security, in conflict prevention, and in post-conflict efforts.

Within this framework, the importance of gender[4] mainstreaming, specifically in the context of Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE),[5] has been widely acknowledged. Since 2015, WPS resolutions have increasingly addressed the

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3 Currently, 10 UNSCRs form what is referred to as "the Women, Peace and Security Agenda": 1325 (2000); 1820 (2008); 1888 (2009); 1889 (2009); 1960 (2010); 2106 (2013); 2122 (2013); 2242 (2015); 2467 (2019); 2493 (2019).

4 "'Gender' refers to the socially constructed and conditioned roles, attributes, opportunities and norms that a given society at a given time considers appropriate based on biological sex. Gender affects the relations and power dynamics between people, which are reflected in access to and control over resources, responsibilities assigned and decision-making opportunities. Gender relates not only to women and structural gender inequality, but also to men and concepts of masculinity." *Gender, Preventing Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism in Gender and Security Toolkit*, DCAF, OSCE/ODIHR, UN Women (2019).

5 In the UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, the Secretary-General calls for a comprehensive approach encompassing not only essential security-based counter-terrorism measures but also systematic preventive steps to address the underlying conditions that drive individuals to radicalize and join violent extremist groups.

specific challenges women face in the context of violent extremism. Resolution 2242 (2015) calls for the meaningful participation of women and girls and the inclusion of a gender perspective in all prevention of violent extremism efforts, as well as for their protection from gender-based violence in this context. Furthermore, it urges Member States to "conduct and gather gender-sensitive research and data collection on the drivers of radicalisation for women."[6]

Resolution 2331 (2016) reinforces these commitments and calls for the inclusion of a gender perspective in all programming and the provision of targeted support to women and girls affected by violent extremist ideology.

Resolution 2467 (2019) reaffirms the linkages between women, peace and security with countering terrorism and violent extremism. It also requests the Secretary-General and relevant UN entities to strengthen the monitoring, analysis, and reporting arrangements on conflict-related sexual violence, including information related to sexual violence as a tactic of terrorism.

Finally, Resolution 2493 (2019) stresses the need to address the specific vulnerabilities and experiences of women and girls. It emphasises the importance of education in preventive efforts, the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls to build resilience against extremist ideologies.

The importance of developing gender-responsive PVE initiatives has also been recognised within the UN Plan of Action for the Prevention of Violent Extremism, presented in 2016 by the Secretary-General. This plan establishes gender equality and women's empowerment as one of its seven priority areas. More specifically, the Plan of Action encourages the development of projects that address women's specific needs in this context, which is the focus of this study.[7]

More recently, in June 2023, the General Assembly adopted a resolution on the Eighth Review of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (UNGCTS), where it recalled the above-mentioned Security Council resolutions on Women, Peace and Security, as well as the vital contribution of women in the implementation of the Strategy. Furthermore, the Eighth Review also reaffirmed that the international community should prevent and combat terrorism with a gender-responsive approach, noting how gender should be considered as a cross-cutting element of the UNGCTS.[8]

6   Resolution 2242 (2015), adopted by the Security Council at its 7533rd meeting, on 13 October 2015, United Nations Security Council, S/RES/2242 (2015). Available at: **https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2242.pdf** accessed August 7, 2023.

7   The Recommendations of the Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism are available at: **https://www.un.org/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism/files/plan_action.pdf** accessed August 7, 2023.

8   *The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy: Eighth Review*, UN General Assembly, A/RES/77/298 (2023). Available at **https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N23/189/01/PDF/N2318901.pdf?OpenElement** accessed August 7, 2023.

Based on such a normative framework, in recent years, many international and regional organisations have designed and implemented initiatives focused on gender and preventing violent extremism in various world regions, including West Africa and the Sahel. For instance, amongst many other initiatives, in 2020, the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) launched a project[9] to accelerate the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in the Sahel, strengthen women involvement in conflict prevention and peace initiatives, and ensure a gender inclusive response to ongoing political and security crisis. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) also developed an important initiative to strengthen women's leadership in preventing and combating violent extremism in Mauritania, through which they aim to better integrate women in related criminal justice responses.[10] Another relevant example is provided by the G5 Sahel Regional Cell for the Prevention of Radicalization and Violent Extremism (CellRad), which has collaborated with various UN agencies, amongst which the United Nations Office of Counter Terrorism (UNOCT), and has implemented activities aimed at strengthening the involvement of women in efforts to prevent and combat violent extremism and youth radicalisation.

1.2 Background of the Research

Working to strengthen community and institutional resilience to protect vulnerable populations, develop effective strategies for preventing and countering violent extremism, and analyse the gender dynamics of recruitment and radicalisation has been, and continues to be, of particular interest to UNICRI, which – as one of the six specialised research and training institutes of the United Nations – is mandated to advance the understanding of crime and crime-related problems as well as to foster just and efficient systems.

In this context, the Institute has developed significant experience working in the Sahel region, where it has been implementing projects to prevent and counter violent extremism through grassroots community action since 2015. The Sahel, indeed, represents one of the most unstable areas in sub-Saharan Africa, where widespread violence and limited access to resources, essential services and means

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9   *WANEP, ECOWAS and UNDP launch governance initiative to accelerate the women, peace and security agenda in the Sahel*, United Nations Development Programme, accessed August 2, 2023, **https://www.undp.org/africa/press-releases/ wanep-ecowas-and-undp-launch-governance-initiative-accelerate-women-peace-and-security-agenda-sahel**.

10   *The Mourchidates, the Mauritanian Women Religious Guides Responsible for Deconstructing Radical Discourse and Preventing Violent Extremism*, United Nations, accessed August 2, 2023, **https://www.unodc.org/westandcentralafrica/en/ westandcentralafrica/stories/2022/the-mourchidates--the-mauritanian-women-religious-guides.html**

of subsistence contribute to increased fragility, affecting the daily life of women, girls, men, and boys in all their diversity.[11]

In the framework of one of these projects, in November 2020, the Institute published *Many Hands on an Elephant. What Enhances Community Resilience to Radicalisation into Violent Extremism?* This report documents the insights gained from working with more than 80 grassroots civil society organisations across nine countries in the Sahel and Maghreb to enhance resilience to violent extremism. It highlights the emerging evidence of the roles played by women and girls in preventing violent extremism. For instance, a crucial lesson learned was that while "half of the population is female, half of the participants are not", as it was found that women represented a segment of the population that has often been neglected or not included on equal terms in relevant projects. Also, "discrimination against marginalised groups, including women, unemployed young men, formerly enslaved persons, nomadic herders, refugee communities, and people with disabilities" was a primary grievance cited by local communities affected by violent extremism.[12]

Further relevant findings have been outlined in the report *Dogmatism or Pragmatism? Violent Extremism and Gender in the Central Sahel*,[13] published in 2020 by International Alert in the context of the same UNICRI project. According to this report, "the 'jihadist governance' often takes a strongly gendered approach, combining elements of continuity and disruption of the social norms of rural communities."[14] On one side, violent extremist groups make significant efforts to ensure women conform to jihadist behavioural ideology, disciplining communities and instituting power relations. For instance, not wearing the veil, as imposed by violent extremist groups (VEGs), may result in violent assaults or whipping in Mali, while in Niger, men may be punished for their wives' violations of the rules. The dress code requirements introduced by the extremist groups also apply to men, including growing a beard and wearing cropped trousers.[15] On the other hand, the same 'jihadist governance' may challenge some non-Islamic traditions (such as hierarchical rankings, social prohibitions and increases in the bride price), appearing progressive concerning gender and resonating with the aspirations of many young people, both men and women.[16]

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11   "The term 'in all their diversity' means recognising, accepting, celebrating and finding strength in individual differences such as gender, age, nationality, race, ethnicity, ability, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, religious beliefs, political beliefs, or other ideologies", Gender Transformative Education, UNICEF (2021).

12   *Many Hands on an Elephant: What Enhances Community Resilience to Radicalisation into Violent Extremism?,* UNICRI (2020).

13   Luca Raineri, *Dogmatism or Pragmatism? Violent Extremism and Gender in the Central Sahel*, International Alert (2020). Available at **https://www.international-alert.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Sahel-Violent-Extremism-Gender-EN-2020.pdf**

14   Ibid. p. 61.

15   Ibid. p. 39.

16   Ibid. p. 61.

These observations highlight the importance of conducting gender-sensitive research as well as mainstreaming gender perspectives in efforts to prevent violent extremism in the region. To elaborate on what these findings may mean in concrete terms, amongst other recommendations, International Alert suggested that strategies that aim to combat violent extremism should give "greater consideration of the specific needs of women and girls" as well as include an "in-depth analysis of the role of gender-related social relations and norms in violent extremism; and anticipation of the impact (positive and negative) of these strategies on women and girls." Furthermore, according to the report, international partners should "avoid standardised responses that often reproduce the dominant point of view of urban settings" and adapt gender and PVE initiatives "to the specific needs, aspirations and demands of women from rural and marginalised areas in order to ensure the relevance of these policies about the realities on the ground where the violent extremist groups have most control."[17]

These findings and recommendations prompted UNICRI to investigate these links further, and – thanks to the generous support of the Korea International Cooperation Agency – at the beginning of 2023, the Institute launched a data collection effort in the Republic of Mali, the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, and the Republic of Niger to define guiding principles for designing future PVE interventions based on an analysis of gender roles and power relations and of the needs of urban and rural communities. The initiative also includes a capacity-building component for national authorities and civil society representatives that will be implemented in 2024 based on the results and findings of this research. Although neither definitive nor conclusive, the study is a crucial step in unravelling the impact of violent extremism on women and girls as well as their specific needs and demands, providing insights and recommendations for the development of gender-responsive P/CVE initiatives in the region.

After describing the research objectives and methodology, this report begins with an overview of the context in Mali, Mauritania and Niger, which informed the selection of the target regions. Delving into the research's main findings, the report presents a gender analysis of the perceptions, needs, and demands of local communities in the study areas, including their vulnerabilities to insecurity and violence. The report concludes by analysing how the research findings can be integrated into P/CVE initiatives to ensure context-relevant and gender-responsive interventions.

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17   Ibid. p. 63.

2. Research Objectives and Methodology

2.1 Research Objectives

The purpose of this study is to provide a situation report on the perceptions and experiences of women and girls, men, and boys in target areas of Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, with the aim to design prevention of violent extremism initiatives based on solid gender analysis and tailored to local needs.

This report gathers the opinions of community members regarding four main areas: availability of services; insecurity and violence; gender roles;[18] and interventions that could prevent violent extremism[19] in the target areas. The study provides a unique opportunity to explore the

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18 "Social and behavioral norms that, within a specific culture, are widely considered to be socially appropriate for individuals of a specific sex. These often determine the traditional responsibilities and tasks assigned to men, women, boys and girls. Gender-specific roles are often conditioned by household structure, access to resources, specific impacts of the global economy, occurrence of conflict or disaster, and other locally relevant factors such as ecological conditions." *Gender Equality Glossary of Terms and Concepts*, UNICEF (2017).

19 In the context of this study, UNICRI considered interventions that are PVE-specific, as well as PVE-relevant and PVE-conducive. These may include, but are not limited to, awareness raising and capacity building activities, as well as initiatives that facilitate social cohesion, access to essential services (such as healthcare and education), income-generation, infrastructure's development, and conflict management.

links between gender, violent extremism,[20] and the degree of dissatisfaction with essential services and fundamental rights as a driver of violence. Furthermore, the research contributes to the need to identify, monitor, and analyse the effects of violent conflict, violence and violent extremisms on women and girls, as well as on men and boys, to assess how prevention initiatives can take gender relations and gender roles into account.

The research has been conducted to capture the voices of those most affected by violent extremism and to elevate the experiences and demands of urban and rural community members. This approach was based on the understanding that gender-responsive and comprehensive interventions are required to prevent and counter violent extremism effectively. Such interventions must be based on the assumption that the interactions between men, women and violent extremist groups are not uniform across the Sahel and should be analysed in the light of the specific contexts, demands, needs and expectations of local communities.[21] While ideology can undoubtedly be used as a pulling factor, economic instability, poverty, and lack of access to services and resources have emerged as determinant drivers of radicalisation in the Sahel. Recognising the differences among the three target countries, the research adopts an intersectional approach to investigate community members' perceptions regarding the availability and access to essential services, as well as perceptions prevailing on security issues and gender roles and norms.

2.2 Methodology

The study adopted a mixed approach comprising desk research and quantitative and qualitative research methods. The initial phase of the study was devoted to desk research, relying on scientific publications, articles, expert reports, and international organisations and governments' documents. This phase provided information about the situation in each target country as related to violence and insecurity, as well as legal and social inequalities faced by women. These analyses aimed at identifying limitations, gaps, and needs essential for devising tailored PVE interventions while taking into account the different strategies, tools, and

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20 A note on definitions: violent extremism has been given several differing definitions, none of which are universally accepted. According to the UNSG Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, defining these terms falls under the prerogative of Member States, given that such definitions must also be consistent with country obligations under international law, and in particular human rights law. As such, the UN has adopted a "practical approach," to preventing and countering violent extremism, largely not addressing the issue of definition. However, for the purposes of this research, the term "violent extremism" generally follows the definition offered by UNESCO: "the beliefs and actions of people who support or use violence to achieve ideological, religious or political goals," including "terrorism and other forms of politically motivated and sectarian violence."

21 Context-specificity is underscored in many international documents. See, for instance, *Good Practices on Women and Countering Violent Extremism*, Global Counter Terrorism Forum (2015), in particular Good Practice #11.

messages employed by violent extremist groups. The desk research was followed by field visits – conducted between April and May 2023 – to Bamako and the Mopti and Ségou regions in Mali; Nouakchott and the Assaba and Hodh Ech Chargui regions in Mauritania; and Niamey and the Tillabéri region in Niger.

In the target countries, primary data was collected by local researchers, who also supported the design of the research tools. Their engagement with local communities and expertise of the region enabled them to provide significant insights into the attitudes and beliefs of interviewees, as well as to identify relevant target areas and groups and suggest context-specific questions. The field visits aimed to gather information through surveys, key informant interviews and focus group discussions. These research tools have all been elaborated to address the following questions:

? What are the needs and demands of women and men in rural and urban contexts, and by which actors are they met?

? How are gender roles, gender-related power relations and norms perceived in the target countries?

? How can PVE interventions adopt a gender perspective and integrate the needs of women and men from urban and rural contexts?

The data analysis methodology was designed to provide equitable consideration of the varying perceptions of women and men and gain insights into their lived experiences, particularly in relation to violent extremism. During the final phase of the study – the analysis of primary data – the goal was not to confirm or challenge the accuracy of previously accredited studies, rather it was to transparently provide an unfiltered report of local perceptions and communities' experiences. This research, in conjunction with national trends and the literature review, can offer a key to understanding the complexities of the field.

2.2.1 Target Areas and Target Groups

The target countries – Mali, Mauritania, and Niger – were identified by UNICRI based on the findings of previous studies considered during the desk research and on the Institute's extensive experience in implementing PVE projects in these locations. The target regions within each country were selected based on their exposure to insecurity linked to violent extremism, the availability of relevant respondents (e.g., national authorities' representatives in capital cities) and UNICRI's goal to collect data from both urban and rural as well as marginalised areas.

All Target Areas
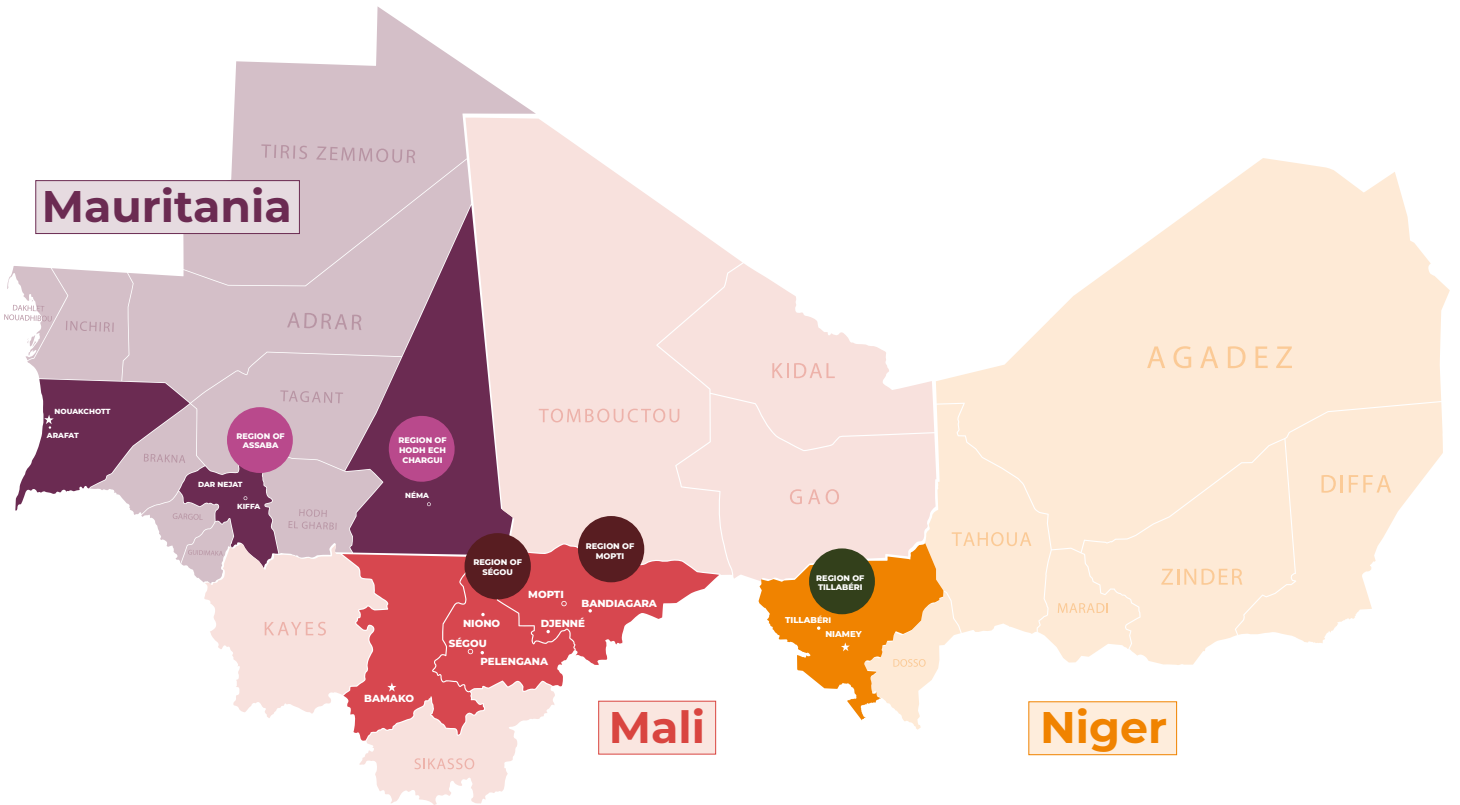
Total Number of Respondents per Country

Total in Mali:

13 KII + FGD with 11 participants
+ FGD with 13 participants
+ FGD with 9 participants
+ 50 surveys to community
+ 9 survey to CSOs
+ 9 to local authorities = **114**

Total in Mauritania:

8 KII + FGD with 8 participants
+ FGD with 9 participants
+ FGD with 10 participants
+ 52 surveys to community
+ 10 survey to CSOs
+ 10 surveys to local authorities = **107**

Total in Niger:

8 KII + FGD with 7 participants
+ FGD with 15 participants
+ FGD with 30 participants
+ 52 surveys to community
+ 12 survey to CSOs
+ 10 to local authorities = **134**

Respondents

***KII**= Key Informant Interviews   **FGD**= Focus Group Discussions*

To ensure the quality of the study, target groups were selected through an inclusive approach that incorporated different categories of respondents who could provide relevant information and a comprehensive overview of the situation in the field. These groups included community members, national and local authorities, religious leaders, security experts, representatives of international organisations, and civil society actors. To ensure that the research tools questions were relevant to all respondents' contexts, the questions were customised according to the profile of the surveyed target group. The study involved a total of 355 respondents across the three target countries. The relatively broad empirical base allowed the researchers to reach the saturation point of collected data. Saturation is defined as the process enabling surveys to be ceased when there is minimal or no variation in the information procured.

2.2.2 Collection of Primary Data

To answer the aforementioned research questions, this study utilised various primary data collection methods, employing complementary approaches to enable a certain degree of generalisation, facilitate triangulation, and allow for comparison between the research locations.

> A total of 214 face-to-face surveys were administered, with the majority (154) targeting women, girls (75) and men and boys (79) from local communities. The remaining surveys (60) were administered to national authorities (29) and civil society actors (31). This research tool included closed-ended questions such as multiple choice, matrix and 'Yes' or 'No' questions.

> Additionally, 29 key informant interviews were conducted with relevant authorities, religious leaders, security experts and representatives of international organisations. These interviews were conducted with semi-structured guides and tailored questions for each target group. Verbatim transcripts were also collected, consisting of relatively short word-for-word excerpts of responses given by the interviewees. These integral, meaningful phrases expressed by the interviewees in local languages or French provided very useful remarks and comments that enriched the analysis in this report.

> Nine focus group discussions were carried out, with three held in each target country. The number of participants in each focus group ranged from 7 to 30, totalling 112 participants. Four focus groups involved civil society actors, while the remaining focus groups included members of local communities. Among these, three focus groups were organised exclusively for women and girls as participants. These discussions were essential for gaining an in-depth understanding of relevant issues and providing a safe space for participants to openly share their unfiltered perceptions and experiences.

During the data collection process, UNICRI ensured the anonymity of all participants, and informed them about the principles of confidentiality and informed consent. The Institute also made efforts to achieve an equitable distribution among respondents, considering factors such as gender, age, ethnicity, and residence in rural or urban areas. To promote equal participation, the times and locations of the interviews and focus groups were scheduled taking into account the exigencies and commitments of all community members, with a special focus on accommodating women and girls.

2.2.3 Challenges and Limitations

This study explored community members' perceptions of needs, existing gender roles, and vulnerabilities linked to violent extremism in Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. Therefore, considering the study's focus on communities' perceptions, the data presented in the report should be interpreted with caution. The study collects individuals' opinions and self-declared information through key informant interviews, focus groups or face-to-face surveys, which cannot be considered definitive evidence of the researched topics. Furthermore, the interviewees' sample selection was not entirely random, as it was influenced by their availability and logistical constraints (mainly due to security reasons).

In terms of information and themes shared by the respondents, despite the use of research protocols designed to ensure anonymity and confidentiality, the high sensitivity nature of the topics under investigation (gender equality and violent extremism) may have impacted the transparency of conversations between interviewers and interviewees or the responses provided by the latter. Indeed, some respondents were hesitant to answer questions related to violent extremist activities presumably due to pervasive lack of trust regarding this topic.

Additionally, it is essential to note that data collection was carried out by three male researchers, respectively from Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. Despite considerable efforts to include female researchers on the local team to encourage the participation of women and girls in the research process, this was not possible, due to their unavailability or reluctance to undertake data collection in this context. While the male researchers possessed valuable knowledge of the local context and language skills, which greatly benefited the data collection process (on-site translation of the survey into the local language was sometimes required), the lack of gender diversity within the data collection team hindered the delivery of some of the planned women-only focus group discussions, as in some cases women were advised not to meet alone with a 'foreign man' (i.e., the researcher) and they were accompanied by male community members. In response to this situation, the researchers avoided excluding men from the focus groups to prevent tension.

Instead, all attendees were encouraged to give women respondents ample space and time to express their views and questions were posed directly to women. Across the three countries, 49% of all face-to-face surveys were administered to women, while 51% were administered to men. Notably, Mali and Mauritania demonstrated a higher representation of women respondents than their men counterpart. Conversely, in Niger, women accounted for only 36% of the survey participants.

Regarding the geographical area, the report focused on the regions where data collection has been conducted, i.e. Bamako and the Mopti and Ségou regions in Mali; Nouakchott and the Assaba and Hodh Ech Chargui regions in Mauritania; and Niamey and the Tillabéri region in Niger. While one of the selection criteria for these locations was their exposure to insecurity linked to violent extremism, the safety and security of local researchers have been prioritised. This means that certain areas or provinces directly under the influence and control of violent extremist groups have not been visited. Therefore, while the perceptions of individuals interviewed in these regions could reflect those of other communities in the target countries or the Sahel, this study should not be considered representative of national or regional perceptions. Lastly, considering the evolving nature of both subjects of this research, violent extremism and gender, while the results of this study aim to reflect the situation as described by respondents in April and May 2023, when field research was conducted, they do not necessarily predict future changes in communities' perceptions.

3. Context of Study

The Sahel region is experiencing rapid population growth, with half of its population being female and one of the youngest in the world.[22] Yet, recurring conflicts, violence, and insecurity – as well as the effects of climate change – exacerbate poverty, perpetuate inequality, and compromise the socioeconomic security of the population. Women, men and young people are exposed to several rsks, including the threats of violent extremism and the spread of criminal networks.[23] The region has been insecure since 2012, when the crisis erupted in Mali, leading to a snowball effect and escalating violence across borders areas between Mauritania, Mali, and Niger. Over the years, violent extremist groups, most notably local configurations and affiliates of Al-Qaeda and Islamic State, have extended their influence throughout the Sahel, perpetrating acts of violence against national and regional security forces, national and international militaries, and UN peacekeeping forces, as well as civilians.[24] A plethora of non-state armed actors,[25] including

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22 *World Population Prospects*, UNDESA (2019).

23 *Sahel Women's Empowerment and Demographic Dividend (SWEDD)*, United Nations Population Fund.

24 Luca Raineri, *Dogmatism or Pragmatism? Violent Extremism and Gender in the Central Sahel*, International Alert [(2020)].

25 There is no internationally agreed definition of non-state armed groups. The Additional Protocol 2 to the Geneva Conventions on the protection of victims of non-international armed conflicts defines non-state armed groups as "dissident armed forces or other organised armed groups which, under responsible command, exercise such control over a part of a territory as to enable them to carry out sustained and concerted military operations (...)".

violent extremist groups,[26] self-defence and ethnic-based militias, are actively operating in the region. According to UNICRI's analysis, between 2015 and 2020, nine countries in the Sahel region registered 1848 violent attacks by non-state armed groups, resulting in 4490 fatalities. Mali and Niger were the most affected in terms of civilian casualties. The Global Terrorism Index 2023 reports that the Sahel region is currently the world's epicentre of terrorism, accounting for 43% of global related deaths in 2022, compared to just 1% in 2007,[27] and terrorism increased by over 2,000% in the last 15 years.

This research covers a diverse range of target locations, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of the nuances and facilitate comparative analysis across different contexts. The target regions include Bamako, Mopti, and Ségou in Mali; Assaba, Hodh Ech Chargui, and Nouakchott in Mauritania; and Niamey and Tillabéri in Niger. These areas exhibit significant variations in terms of violence levels, the influence of non-state armed actors, and the effectiveness of state governance. For example, while Mauritania has not recorded any terrorist attacks since 20 December 2011,[28] Mali has entered its twelfth year of crisis in 2023. Meanwhile, Niger is witnessing an escalation in attacks on civilians leading to displacement and worsening humanitarian conditions in the Tillabéri region.[29]

Given that the levels of gender inequality in the Sahel are among the highest in the world,[30] it is essential to analyse how the interlinked crises that reduce security, access to fundamental services, personal freedom, and economic stability can exacerbate gender disparities and increase risks for women and girls. By examining this, the research proposes a deeper understanding of the challenges and complexities involved and provides recommendations for developing effective strategies to address this critical issue.

The following sections provide an overview of the context of each country, with a focus on security and violent extremisms, while the next chapter presents specific data on gender equality.

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26   Among others, Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS); Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP); Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM); Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM).

27   *Global Terrorism Index*, Institute for Economics and Peace (2023).

28   To note that on 5 March 2023, four members of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb escaped from Central Prison in Nouakchott, where they were imprisoned. They killed two members of the National Guards and injured two others. A few days later, on 11 March, the government announced that three of the escaped terrorists had been killed and one was detained by security forces. From *Preliminary Analysis, Mauritania: Terrorists Prison Attack and Jailbreak*, ACSRT, (2023); *Mauritania Says Three Fugitives Killed After Prison Break*, Reuters (2023). Available at **https://caert.org.dz/incident-reports/Mauritania%20 Terrorists%20Prison%20Attack%20and%20Jailbreak.pdf**; and **https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/mauritania-says-three-fugitives-killed-after-prison-break-2023-03-12/**, accessed August 2, 2023.

29   Ornella Moderan, Fatoumata Maïga and Boogu/Gayya Project, *Niger: Women's Views on Insecurity in the Tillabéri Region*, Institute for Security Studies (ISS), West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP Niger) (2022).

30   *Gender Inequality Index*, Human Development Reports, UNDP; *Global Gender Gap Report 2023*, World Economic Forum (2023); *Africa Gender Index Report 2019*, African Development Bank and United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (2020).

3.1 Mali

Mali has been enduring an unprecedented multidimensional crisis for over a decade, which started in the North and North-East regions (Kidal, Timbuktu, Menaka, Gao) in 2012, leading to a cycle of insecurity that eventually spread to the central regions of Mopti and Ségou, which are part of this study.

Initially, the conflict began with the armed rebellion of Tuareg autonomist movements and escalated with their collaboration with violent extremist groups. Despite signing a peace agreement in 2015, the country has been facing a permanent security crisis that led to community conflicts between populations who have previously lived in harmony. Recurrent violence, such as attacks on villages, blockades, and human rights violations, has plagued the centre of the country. Due to the incursions by various violent extremist groups, the State's security forces have withdrawn from most areas, making non-state armed groups the dominant force on the ground. These include Katiba Macina[31] – part of Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen (JNIM) – as well as community-based and self-defence armed groups. These latter local militias relied on established systems such as hunters' societies traditionally responsible for protecting villages and communities. Local militias like the Dozo, which have become major armed actors in Mali's central regions, illustrate this phenomenon.[32]

As VEGs expanded and consolidated their power, they caused widespread panic and confusion. They targeted defence and security forces, government officials, those they alleged were collaborators, as well as international organisations, and they disrupted and interfered with the traditional communities' mechanisms for managing community disputes. Communities have seen their safety compromised with no protection from the government or traditional conflict resolution methods. In addition, the continuous conflict between farmers and herders has deteriorated the security situation, leaving the population with multiple concerns. Community self-defence forces, created to counter violent extremist groups, have also become a significant threat to the population. The violence has forced communities to flee their villages and seek shelter in camps for internally displaced people (IDP). As a result, children are often unable to attend school and are at risk of recruitment. As in other countries, the education sector is a prime target for violent extremist groups because it is easy to reach, and the risk of resistance is minimal. "Education lies at the centre of an ideological war; accused of studying colonialism or collaborating with the security forces, teachers are habitual targets of violence. For violent extremist groups, the teaching of French must be replaced

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31   Katiba Macina is an Islamist organisation founded and led by preacher Amadou Koufa.
32   Ornella Moderan, Proliferation *of Armed Non-State Actors in the Sahel: Evidence of State Failure?* Italian institute for International Political Studies (ISPI) (2021).

by Arabic and the Quran. Girls and boys must be separated, and teachers veiled: They say that the school of whites is haram."[33]

To address the rise of violent extremism and fight terrorism, in 2017, the Mali government adopted a national policy for the prevention and fight against violent extremism and terrorism and a related action plan (2018-2020). The policy is structured around principles, objectives, and strategies to establish a framework for inclusive consultation, inter-ministerial and sectoral coordination between the government and its partners. The policy is based on five pillars: prevention, protection, continuation, response, and social cohesion. Implementation is overseen by a Steering Committee led by the Prime Minister and a Coordination and Monitoring-Evaluation Committee under the Permanent Secretariat of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Worship, and Customs. An independent evaluation of the policy was conducted, which revealed that the interventions and actions implemented in the Action Plan 2018-2020 needed to improve their overall performance in terms of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, and impact.[34] According to the evaluation report, the Action Plan must effectively coordinate interventions and strategic collaborations among the many stakeholders   involved.

Additionally, as a cross-cutting activity, the document suggested providing better advice to help women and young people identify and develop their project ideas. Based on the findings, the following action plan has been strengthened as a tool for encouraging cross-sectoral collaboration, coordination, and harmonisation of existing activities on preventing violent extremism; these improvements are necessary to enhance the impact of these interventions and make them more relevant to community needs. The 2021–2025 Action Plan of the National Policy for the Prevention and Fight against Violent Extremism and Terrorism (PNPLEVT) was formally adopted by the Government in October 2021.

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33   Luis Martinez, *Sahel: Civilian Populations Put to the Test by a Jihadist Insurgency*, Le Journal de l'Afrique (2023). Available at: **https://lejournaldelafrique.com/en/sahel-of-civilian-populations-has-the-proof-of-a-jihadist-insurrection/** accessed August 2, 2023. The quote "They say that the school of whites is haram" is included in the article, and it is a resident's testimony from the newspaper *The Sahelian*.

34   Bakary Sambe, Mahamadou Konate, *Évaluation de la Politique Nationale de Prevention et de Lutte Contre l'Extrémisme Violent et le Terrorisme et son Plan d'Action (PNLEVT),* 2018-2020.

3.2 Mauritania

Mauritania faces a unique situation compared to its neighbouring countries in the Sahel region. The country shares over 2,236 km of border with Mali, and the area of Hodh Ech Chargui is particularly close to the border, hosting over 92,000 Malian refugees.[35] The coexistence between the host population and refugees in Hodh Ech Chargui is sometimes a source of tension over resources. The inhabitants of this region, who are primarily engaged in agro-pastoral activities and constantly move back and forth between Mali and Mauritania, depending on the seasons and rains, have witnessed a change in the socio-political and security environment over the past decade due to the establishment of violent extremist groups in the regions of Mali bordering Mauritania where the Malian state is absent. Despite the waves of violence close to its borders, the country has managed to contain the spillover effects on its soil. In fact, although VEGs were active in the country between 2005 and 2011, there have been no recorded terrorist attacks since 2011.[36]

The absence of terrorist attacks since 2011 has been attributed to a dual strategy adopted by the Government, involving "hard" counter-terrorism measures on the one hand, and dialogue and engagement with detained jihadists in theological discussions to challenge the legitimisation of violence on the other.[37] This intra-prison dialogue with detainees was carried out with the support of Ulamas[38] and it is reported to have effectively countered extremist beliefs and encouraged a rethinking of ideology, resulting in the disengagement of the vast majority of radicalised youth. Alongside this approach, other PVE efforts in Mauritania included the promotion of a moderate interpretation of Islam known as Wassatiya, which advocates for tolerance. Despite these efforts, there are still areas considered to be hotbeds of violent radicalisation, in particular the Nouakchott-Wad Naga-Boutilimitt-Aleg axis, which has the highest concentration of violent extremists, as well as smaller groups in Kiffa, Néma, and Djiguenny. Young people are being mobilised and recruited by jihadist detainees who are still actively recruiting followers in Nouakchott and Aleg prisons. The presence of certain extremist ideologies at Camp de M'Berra presents recruitment opportunities for armed groups that still have an ideological presence through preachers. In light of this situation, the fight against terrorism and violent extremism in the country is

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35   Factsheet, Mauritania, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2023).

36   As noted above, on 5 March 2023, four members of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb escaped from Central Prison in Nouakchott where they were detained, killing two members of the National Guards and injuring two others. A few days later, on 11 March, the government announced that three escaped terrorists have been killed and one was detained by security forces. From *Preliminary Analysis, Mauritania: Terrorists Prison Attack and Jailbreak*, ACSRT, (2023); and *Mauritania Says Three Fugitives Killed After Prison Break*, Reuters (2023). Available at **https://caert.org.dz/incident-reports/Mauritania%20 Terrorists%20Prison%20Attack%20and%20Jailbreak.pdf**; and **https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/mauritania-says-three-fugitives-killed-after-prison-break-2023-03-12/**, accessed August 2, 2023.

37   **Anouar Boukhars**, *Keeping Terrorism at Bay in Mauritania,* Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2020).

38   *Muslim scholars or religious leaders.*

based on four key pillars that reflect a holistic vision. These pillars include aligning national legislation with international standards, creating a national strategy to address terrorism (established in 2010), and implementing a de-radicalisation process through dialogue and moderation.[39]

Despite the lack of recent attacks, the main threat comes from groups associated with JNIM.[40] Also, many violent extremists in the Sahel region who hold high-ranking positions in violent extremist groups come from Mauritania, and this export of extremism poses a severe threat to the country[41] and the region. According to local researchers, the radicalisation of certain segments of the population, particularly young men and young women, can be attributed to factors such as age, inadequate education, training, information systems and economic difficulties. Indeed, Mauritania's economic transformation is faltering, with 65% of the population dependent on agriculture – including livestock farming, which accounts for 51% of agricultural employment[42] – and, due to the harsh environmental conditions of the region, the livelihoods of many people are at risk. These factors make it easier for extremist ideologies to spread and take root.

Photo by El Mokhtar Aoufa: commemorative stone erected at the site of the attack which claimed the lives of five French tourists, nearby Aleg, Mauritania, on December 24, 2007.

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39   *Colloque Régional sur la Prévention de la Radicalisation et la Lutte Contre l'Extrémisme Violent au Sahel Nouakchott du 17 au 19 mai 2017. L'Approche Mauritanienne Contre l'Extrémisme Violent les Piliers (4) et les dimensions (8)*, African Union, Available at **https://www.au-misahel.org/colloque-regional-sur-la-prevention-de-la-radicalisation-et-la-lutte-contre-lextremisme-violent-au-sahel-nouakchott-du-17-au-19-mai-2017-lapproche-mauritanienne-contre-l/**.

40   *Mauritania Violent Extremism and Media Landscape Assessment*, USAID (2019).

41   Chris Simpson, *Debunking Mauritania's Islamist Militancy Mythology*, The New Humanitarian (2016) available at **https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2016/08/23/debunking-mauritania-s-islamist-militancy-mythology**.

42   Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2022 Country Report — Mauritania*. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung (2022).

Other two political issues mine the stability of Mauritania. Firstly, the country has long witnessed a strong politicisation of identities. Mauritanian society comprises different social and ethnic groups organised according to a dynamic hierarchy within which the rights, duties and level of participation of men and women in social life vary. There are two main identity groups, the Arabic-speaking groups (which include the Bidhân – or White Moors – and the Haratin, or Black Moors) and the "Black African" communities, that is, non-Arabic-speaking groups (Haalpulaaren, Sooninko ad Wolof). Tensions have often erupted between these groups, especially over discrimination in education policies, land tenure and the unequal ethnic representation in the politico-bureaucratic apparatus.[43] Secondly, after gaining its independence in 1960, Mauritania had its first coup d'état in 1978, and since then, almost all heads of state have been current or former members of the military. The presidential elections in 2019 were the first instance of a peaceful political transition in the country which didn't involve a coup d'état.[44]

3.3 Niger

Since gaining independence in 1960, Niger has been subjected to extended periods of authoritarian and military regimes. However, in 2011, the country restored constitutional rule by establishing the Seventh Republic. Notably, the presidential and legislative elections held between 2020 and 2021 marked the first peaceful transfer of power from one civilian government to another.

Tensions have emerged in the past decades due to the insurgence of ideologies in contrast with the traditional Islamic practices of Niger (Tijaniya, the Qadriya and the Khalwatiya) and with the principle of the separation of state and religion or "principle of the secularism of the state," which is enshrined in the constitution. Since the 1990s, Salafist movements from neighbouring Nigeria have emerged in Niger, and the most notable is the Izala movement,[45] which opposes both the state and traditional Islamic currents.[46] Private mosques and madrasas,[47] or Quranic schools, have been established throughout the country, as have Islamic Salafist associations. Preaching on the street and in the media has increased, as has the adoption of an Islamist lifestyle, even by women and young girls. According to researcher Abdoulaye Sounnay, "The emergence of madrasas and learning centres for the Quran and Arabic has strongly contributed to initiatives that aim

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43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Jama'atu Izalatil Bid'ah Wa Ikamatis Sunnah (The Society for the Removal of Innovation and the Establishment of the Sunna).

46 Abdoulaye Sounaye, *Les Héritiers du Cheikh Izala et ses Appropriations d'Usman Dan Fodio au Niger*, L'Islam Au-delà des Catégories 206-207 (2012), pp. 427-447. Available at **https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesafricaines.17066**

47 In the context of this study, the terms *madrasas* or Quranic schools, refer to Islamic education institutions.

to give Islam a normative role, not only in personal life but also in collective and publiclife."[48]

Furthermore, since 2012, Niger, like Mauritania, has been impacted by the crisis in Mali and faces tensions related to violent extremism and transnational crime. Due to its strategic geographic location, Niger serves as a crucial transit area for migration to Europe. Over the past decade, the region has been plagued by two main sources of insecurity: Boko Haram in northern Nigeria, which affects the entire Lake Chad basin, and violent extremist groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in northern Mali. These groups have carried out armed attacks in the area along the junction of the borders between Burkina, Mali, and Niger. Several large-scale attacks have been attributed to the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). In particular, these include the attacks in Inatès (10 December 2019) and Chinegodar (9 January 2020), which inflicted heavy casualties on Nigerien forces. The Al-Qaeda-affiliated Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM), which originated in neighbouring Mali, is also making incursions into the regions of Tillabéri and Tahoua in Niger, which border the areas of Gao and Ménaka in Mali.

As a result, the security apparatus has been restructured, strengthening the resilience of security forces in the face of these actors. In October 2020, Niger launched a National Plan for the Prevention of Radicalization and Violent extremisms, strengthening the capacities of the National Center for Strategic and Security Studies and supporting activities to counter violent extremism through small grants.[49]

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48   Abdoulaye Sounaye, *L'Islam au Niger: Èviter l'Amalgame*, Humanitaire [En ligne], 28 (2011). Available at: **https://journals. openedition.org/humanitaire/1023?lang=en**

49   As described in the Methodology section, for the purpose of this research, field visits in the country were conducted between April and May 2023 and therefore preceded the coup of 26 July. The collection of data was thus not impacted by these most recent events, and the analysis included in this study reflects the situation as observed during the Spring of 2023

4. Desk Research on Gender Equality in Target Countries

This chapter aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the status of women's rights and gender equality in the target countries of Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. The analysis will delve into the institutional framework and policy landscape for gender equality, then into existing gender norms and roles and their impact on access to essential services, education, and healthcare. Lastly, the patterns of violence and the impact of insecurity and violent extremism on women – and their involvement – will be examined. Where information is available, the analysis will focus on the distinct target regions. However, the three countries share similarities in that an oppressive patriarchal system has long governed many societies in the central Sahel.[50]

In terms of their compliance with international instruments, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of

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50   Luca Raineri, *Dogmatism or Pragmatism? Violent Extremism and Gender in the Central Sahel*, International Alert, (2020).

all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) – the international legal instrument that recognises equality between men and women and the right not to be discriminated against on the ground of gender. However, Niger and Mauritania made reservations to the convention about eliminating discrimination related to marriage and family matters. Mali and Mauritania have also ratified the Maputo Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, while Niger has signed the Protocol but has not ratified it. There are still many challenges regarding incorporating these international provisions into national laws and ensuring their effective enforcement. As the reservations to the CEDAW demonstrate, the main obstacles involve reluctance to adopt codes related to family and personal status that align with human rights standards (such as on inheritance, marriage, family, and property rights). In some spheres, there have been some formal advancements, such as promoting women in political leadership roles through temporary special measures such as quotas. However, in all three countries, women's participation in formal decision-making bodies remain low. Concerning the integration of a gender perspective in peace and security, all three countries have adopted National Action Plans to implement United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security.

The following analysis identifies national standards with respect to women's rights and non-discrimination in the three target countries, as well as the existing discriminatory practices within both civil and customary law, including those related to marriage, inheritance, and property, among others. Such practices have a significant impact on women's involvement in all aspects of social, economic, and political life, including women's participation in initiatives and activities on preventing and countering violent extremism.

4.1 Mali

4.1.1 Institutional Framework for Gender Equality

Article 2 of the Constitution of Mali (1992) establishes equality between women and men and prohibits discrimination based on gender. As mentioned, Mali has ratified the CEDAW, its Optional Protocol and the Maputo Protocol, but the process of aligning national legislation with international law has been jeopardised by religious discourse claiming that the reform of the Family Code does not comply with Islamic precepts and Malian culture.[51] The most recent Family Code was passed into law in 2011, and even though it was originally designed to change provisions regarding the age of marriage, custody of children, obedience and inheritance,[52] the revisions made more conservative changes.[53] Men are considered "head of the household" (art. 319), women are required to obey their husbands (art. 316), and the Civil Code grants men sole family and parental authority. The legal age of marriage is set at 16 for females and 18 for males, but marriage can be authorised for 15-year-olds with a judge's permission and the consent of the parents.[54] Inheritance rights are governed by civil law, customary law, and Sharia. The Family Code grants equal inheritance rights to property, while the Sharia law entitles daughters to only half the share received by sons. Customary law, which applies to certain ethnic groups, grants the wife inheritance but obliges her to marry a brother of her deceased husband.[55]

At the national level, Mali has a National Gender Policy,[56] adopted in 2011, which is the result of an extensive regional and sectoral consultation process that was conducted in all regions of Mali during the first half of 2009. In the following years, the country continued to make progress and in 2015, the Malian National Assembly adopted a gender quota bill which requires that at least 30% of elected or appointed officials be women.[57] Within the PVE context, in 2018, the Malian government developed a National Action Plan to prevent and combat violent

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51 Ibid.
52 In 2018, Mali was ruled to be in violation of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, of its Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa ('Maputo Protocol'), of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, and of CEDAW for its tolerance of discrimination in relation to inheritance, minimum age of marriage for girl children, the right to consent to marriage, and the state obligation to eliminate harmful social and cultural practices for women, girl children, and children born out of wedlock.
53 *Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) – Mali*, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).
54 Ibid.
55 Kelsey Jones-Casey, Anna Knox, and Zoey Chenitz, *Women, Inheritance, and Islam in Mali*, Focus on Land in Africa (2011). Available at **https://dqo52087pnd5x.cloudfront.net/posters/docs/gatesopenres-186245.pdf**, accessed August 2, 2023.
56 *Politique National Genre du Mali,* Ministère de la Promotion de la Femme, de l'Enfant et de la Famille (2011). Available at **https://www.prb.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Mali-Politique-Nationale-Genre_2011.pdf, accessed August 2, 2023.**
57 *Loi N° 2015-052/ du 18 décembre 2015 instituant des mesures pour promouvoir le genre dans l'accès aux fonctions nominatives et électives.*

extremism and terrorism (P/CVE NAP) where references to women's roles were included,[58] and more recently, in 2019, the country launched its third national action plan for the implementation of UNSCR 1325 (WPS NAP).[59]

4.1.2 Gender Norms and Roles

The ongoing crisis that has persisted since 2012 has had a significant impact on the gender division of labour within households, and in some regions of the country, norms have become stricter for women and girls. In the areas under the control of violent extremist groups, these impose strict limitations on women leaving their households, carrying out activities, or attending public gatherings without the permission of their male relatives or husbands. Additionally, they mandate the compulsory wearing of the veil and enforce severe punishment for those who fail to comply. According to the literature review, this is the case in the northern region and in all those areas occupied by extremist groups, where women's freedom is restricted, impacting the possibility of accessing essential services. Women cannot go out without covering their hair, and a non-married couple cannot be seen in the streets.[60] The fear and risk of attacks and harassment have severely limited women's mobility outside their homes, preventing them from accessing critical services such as healthcare, local markets, and public spaces. In Mopti, due to the increase in insecurity, men are increasingly taking over the task of collecting firewood and fetching water, responsibilities traditionally reserved for women.[61]

As indicated in the Family Code, men are typically household decision-makers. According to the 2018 National Demographic and Health Survey (EDSM – VI), which inquired about women's decision-making roles within households, only 28% of women decide whether to visit family or relatives, 20% participate in decisions on major household purchases, and 20% make decisions about their healthcare.[62] The majority (63%) do not participate in any of these decisions, and only 10% do participate in all of them.[63] In some regions, such as Mopti, women need authorisation from their husbands or father to participate in community and development activities organised by humanitarian organisations. However,

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58   *Document de Politique Nationale de Prévention et de Lutte Contre l'Extrémisme Violent et le Terrorisme et son Plan d'Action 2018–2020*, Ministère des Affaires Religieuses et du Culte (2017). Available at **https://www.maliapd.org/plateforme-gt/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Politique-nationale-de-lutte-contre-lextremisme-violent-et-le-terrorisme-2017.pdf**, accessed August 2, 2023.

59   *Plan d'Action National pour la Mise en Ouvre de la Résolution 1325 et des Résolutions Connexes du Conseil de Sécurité des Nations Unies sur l'Agenda Femmes, Paix et Sécurité au Mali 2019-2023*, République du Mali. Available at **https://www.peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/Mali%203rd%20NAP%20(2019-2023)%20-%20French.pdf**, accessed August 2, 2023.

60   Luca Raineri, *Dogmatism or Pragmatism? Violent Extremism and Gender in the Central Sahel*, International Alert (2020).

61   *Analyse Rapide de Genre – Mali*, Samuel Hall for UNICEF (2021).

62   *Enquête Démographique et de Santé au Mali (EDSM-VI)*, Institut National de la Statistique (INSTAT) and Cellule de Planification et de Statistique Secteur Santé-Développement Social et Promotion de la Famille (CPS/SS-DS-PF) (2018).

63   Ibid.

women's participation in public activities and decision-making processes may vary depending on their ethnic group. For example, the Dogons do not have female village councillors, while some Fulani communities in Mopti do.[64]

In 2022, the labour force participation rate among females was 54.2% and 80.5% among males.[65] Women are often responsible for selling products at local markets and managing small businesses, but in some areas, the risk of attacks can disrupt the market and negatively impact their earnings. In addition, women and girls are typically responsible for collecting water, having to walk long distances to reach water sources, which can be a challenging task in insecure environments. When the situation is too risky, men may take over this responsibility.[66] A better and more stable access to economic opportunities and remunerated roles would allow women to make more independent decisions within the household. Indeed, the EDSM – VI survey shows that out of the 61% of married women aged 15-49 who had worked in the 12 months prior to the survey, 83% reported being the main decision-makers on the use of their own earnings, while only 6% said they would make joint decisions with their partners.[67]

4.1.3 Access to Services and Resources

📖 Education

Overall, the education level is low for both men and women. A significant number of boys and girls do not attend school due to inadequate infrastructure, long distances to be covered, and unsafe environments. The situation was exacerbated by the closure of educational institutions during the Covid-19 pandemic and attacks on public schools by armed groups in the central and northern regions.[68] Gender disparities are more pronounced in rural areas, where there are lower rates of primary education and school attendance for girls, due to several sociocultural factors:

1. Boys' education is favoured as girls leave the household after marriage, which happens at an early age.

64   *Analyse Rapide de Genre – Mali*, Samuel Hall for UNICEF (2021).
65   *Gender Data Portal – Mali*, The World Bank. Available at **https://genderdata.worldbank.org/countries/mali/** accessed August 2, 2023.
66   *Analyse Rapide de Genre – Mali*, Samuel Hall for UNICEF (2021).
67   *Enquête Démographique et de Santé au Mali (EDSM-VI)*, Institut National de la Statistique (INSTAT) and Cellule de Planification et de Statistique Secteur Santé-Développement Social et Promotion de la Famille (CPS/SS-DS-PF) (2018).
68   *Analyse Rapide de Genre – Mali*, Samuel Hall for UNICEF (2021).

2. Boys' education is perceived as a beneficial investment for the family, while women and girls are expected to oversee household chores.

3. The availability and quality of services are often weak.[69]

4. In general, child and forced marriage is a cause of girls dropping out of school, and young women often have no voice in the decisions affecting their future. Additionally, in times of crisis, families may be forced to consider child marriage as a strategy to cope with economic hardship. In the areas under their control, violent extremist groups strongly oppose the national education systems based on French secular models and advocate for the closure of state-run schools.[70] Attacks on schools often have differential impacts on women and girls, including sexual violence, forced marriage, forced and early pregnancy due to rape, and stigma that reduces the likelihood of girls returning to school after an attack.[71] In 2021, in Mali, the United Nations verified 153 attacks on schools (120) and hospitals (33), which occurred mainly in the regions of Mopti (60), Ségou (45) and Timbuktu (32).[72]

🩺 Healthcare

Many women in Mali face obstacles when trying to access healthcare services, with 47% of women aged 15-49 experiencing barriers,[73] which include high healthcare and medication costs, location, and cultural norms limiting women's mobility and decision-making power regarding their health. This situation is exacerbated by a high number of incidents of violence (which more than doubled in 2022 compared to 2021), undermining healthcare personnel's ability to maintain open facilities and meet patient needs. In 2022, 26 kidnappings of health workers were recorded, of which over 75% took place in Mopti and were perpetrated by JNIM.[74] Despite these challenges, a survey by Plan International found that 85.5% of adolescent girls in Mali reported an available health service in their community, and 80.5% could access it. The literature review shows that access to services could also be impacted by the lack of identity documents as, births of females in Mali are sometimes not registered (14.4% compared to 12.2% of males). Considering that in several areas of the country, and particularly in central Mali, including Mopti, many security checkpoints require residents to provide identification to move

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69   Luca Raineri, *Dogmatism or Pragmatism? Violent Extremism and Gender in the Central Sahel*, International Alert (2020); *Analyse Rapide de Genre – Mali*, Samuel Hall for UNICEF (2021).

70   Luca Raineri, *Dogmatism or Pragmatism? Violent Extremism and Gender in the Central Sahel*, International Alert (2020).

71   *Soutenir une Èducation Sûre dans le Sahel Central*, Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) (2020).

72   *Children and Armed Conflict - Report of the Secretary General*, UN General Assembly, UN Security Council, A/76/871-S/2022/493 (2022).

73   *Enquête Démographique et de Santé au Mali (EDSM-VI)*, Institut National de la Statistique (INSTAT) and Cellule de Planification et de Statistique Secteur Santé-Développement Social et Promotion de la Famille (CPS/SS-DS-PF) (2018).

74   *Ignoring Red Lines: Violence Against Healthcare in Conflict*, Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition (SHCC) (2022).

between towns, the freedom of movement of women and children without legally recognised identity documents is restricted, and so is their access to services.[75]

4.1.4 Gender, Security, and Violent Extremism

The impact of the conflict on women is significant and undeniable. In the areas of the country with the presence of non-state armed groups, as in Mopti and Ségou, women are affected by mobility restrictions due to security risks, specifically the risks of kidnapping and attacks, especially on transport routes. Girls under 18 represent the largest proportion of displaced populations in Mali and are particularly exposed to the risks of gender-based violence and sexual violence. One rapid needs assessment conducted in 2019 by Plan International in the Mopti region revealed that 63% of those interviewed reported cases of physical violence (as witnesses or victims), 71% reported sexual violence and 70% reported threats based on their gender. On the other hand, boys are more affected by the six grave violations against children during times of armed conflict[76] established by the UN Security Council. In terms of numbers, between January and December 2022, a total of 452 children (416 boys, 36 girls) were recruited and used by armed groups. The rape of 36 girls by several perpetrators and sexual violence perpetrated against seven girls were verified by the United Nations. Lastly, 109 children (90 boys, 19 girls) were abducted, primarily for recruitment and use and/or sexual violence purposes and as punishment for not respecting the rules imposed by armed groups.[77]

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75 *Analyse Rapide de Genre – Mali*, Samuel Hall for UNICEF (2021).

76 The six grave violations are: killing and maiming, recruitment and use of children, sexual violence, abduction, attacks on schools and hospitals, and denial of humanitarian access.

77 *Children and Armed Conflict - Report of the Secretary General*, UN General Assembly, UN Security Council, A/76/871-S/2022/493 (2022).

4.2 Mauritania

4.2.1 Institutional Framework for Gender Equality

As mentioned above, Mauritania has ratified CEDAW, the international bill of Women's Rights, but with reservations regarding the elimination of discrimination related to marriage and family matters. In fact, in the country's National Personal Status Code, discriminatory norms exist regarding marriage, divorce, responsibility for children after divorce, and inheritance. Marriage is recognised as a union between a man and a woman, requiring the free consent of both parties (Art. 1), however, the law considers "the silence of a young girl" as consent (Art. 9). In Mauritania, as in Mali, the husband is regarded as the head and legal authority of the household, allowed to make decisions on behalf of the family without the wife's consent. The legal age for marriage is 18 for both men and women, and early and forced marriage is prohibited. However, child marriage is prevalent in the country, particularly among rural girls from poorer socio-economic backgrounds with lower literacy and education levels.[78] Women and men have the right to inheritance, but their individual entitlements differ significantly: under Sharia law, a woman may inherit only half of what is allocated to a man (Personal Status Code, Art. 253-259) and, accordingly, a daughter may inherit only half of the property allocated to her male sibling (CEDAW, 2014).

Regarding women's participation in decision-making processes, in 2006, a quota was implemented to ensure a minimum of 20% representation of women in elected positions. This has resulted in a significant increase in the number of women holding political leadership roles at both the municipal and parliamentary levels. In the 2018 municipal, legislative, and regional elections, women received over 35% of the votes, and currently, more than 25% of the Government is made up of women. Furthermore, women account for 18% of the National Assembly.[79] Despite cultural and social norms that prevent women from speaking in public, limiting their involvement in public decision-making, women leaders are also present at the community level.

Within the security context, Mauritania is committed to implementing the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Agenda and has adopted a National Action Plan for the implementation of the United Nations Security Council Resolution

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78   Chata Malé and Quentin Wodon, *Basic Profile of Child Marriage in Mauritania*, The Health, Nutrition and Population Knowledge Briefs of the World Bank (2016).

79   *Gender Quota Database – Mauritania*, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA). Available at **https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas/country-view/214/35 accessed August 2, 2023.**

1325. The country has developed national policies to address this issue, including the National Strategy for the Fight against Terrorism and Cross-Border Crime (SNLTCT), the National Gender Institutionalization Strategy, and the Women's Empowerment and Demographic Dividend Project.[80]

4.2.2 Gender Norms and Roles

Gender norms in Mauritania are strict and prevalent across all ethnic groups. As mentioned above, men are the heads of the households, which restricts women's decision-making abilities both inside and outside the home. Although women are devalued in all communities, the lingering matriarchy within the Moorish community gives women more visibility and facilitates active participation in decision-making.[81] In most households, women are responsible for unpaid domestic chores, and their jobs outside the household are limited to tasks such as selling dairy products, fishing, managing small ruminants and poultry, or fieldwork.[82] Poverty among women is more severe in rural areas, where child marriage is more common, and girls' education is limited. A survey by the National Statistics Office shows that only 8% of women with secondary education or higher were married before age 15, while 20-21% of those with no education, or with a madrasa level, was married before that age.[83]

Among the three countries analysed in this research, Mauritania has the lowest rate of female participation in employment. In 2022, only 26.4% of women were part of the labour force compared to 56.6% of men.[84] This disparity can be attributed to Article 57 of the Personal Status Code, which governs matters related to marriage and family relations. According to this code, women are denied access to certain professions and can only choose work within the bounds of Sharia law.[85] This restriction also contributes to the underrepresentation of women in decision-making positions in politics, despite the quotas described above.

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80   Mounina Abdellah, *Situation of Mauritanian Women in Terms of Traditional Security*, NESA Center Women, Peace, and Security. Available at **https://nesa-center.org/dev/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Mauritania-Mounina_Abdellah_NESA_WPS_E-Book.pdf** accessed August 2, 2023.

81   Mariem Baba Ahmed, *Radicalization and Citizenship – Mauritania National Report*, UNDP, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (2016).

82   *Analyse Rapide de Genre – Mali*, Samuel Hall for UNICEF (2021).

83   Mariem Baba Ahmed, *Radicalization and Citizenship – Mauritania National Report*, UNDP, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (2016).

84   **Gender Data Portal – Mauritania**, The World Bank. Accessed August 3, 2023.

85   *Concluding Observations on the Fourth Periodic Report of Mauritania*, CEDAW/C/MRT/CO/4, Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (2023). Available at **https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2088878/N2306608.pdf** accessed August 3, 2023.

4.2.3 Access to Services and Resources

Access to quality education, health services, public office, and employment in Mauritania is hindered by gender, ethnic-racial identities, and social status.

📖 Education

A 2020 World Bank report identified four major deficiencies in the education system of Mauritania: extremely low levels of teacher competence and a shortage of qualified teachers; poor management of the sector and high levels of teacher absenteeism; poor condition of school facilities and inadequate learning materials; lack of continuity in the education cycle. According to UNICEF, there is an 84% shortage of teachers in Hodh Ech Chargui.[86] Despite improvements in girls' attendance at the primary and secondary levels, a significant barrier to girls' education – and the enjoyment of their rights – is the high prevalence of early and forced marriage. Child marriage is most prevalent in rural areas and in two target areas of the research, namely Assaba (44%)[87] and Hodh Ech Chargui (40%).[88] Similarly, the health and psychological impact of female genital mutilation (FGM) can affect girls' education, leading to early dropouts or absenteeism. Despite the General Code on Children's Protection unconditionally criminalises it, FGM remains extensively practised in the country. According to World Bank data, up to 90% of Mauritanian women and girls aged 15-49 years have undergone some form of female genital mutilation during their lifetime. Women and girls from rural communities and those who have not completed secondary schooling are more likely to have experienced FGM compared to those from urban areas or those who have completed their education.[89] Lastly, girls' access to education and basic social services is also impacted by a lack of separate latrines and sanitary facilities in schools and health centres.

🩺 Healthcare

In Mauritania, women have the right to access basic services such as healthcare, water, and sanitation without requiring permission from their husbands or male relatives. However, there are challenges in accessing these services due to financial

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86   Izidbih Mohamed El Béchir, *Monographie Régionale de* la *Wilaya de l'Assaba*, Office National de la Statistique (ONS), Bureau Central du Recensement (BCR), République Islamique de Mauritanie (2016). Available at **https://ansade.mr/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Monographie-regionale-de-la-wilaya-de-lAssaba-Fr.pdf**.

87   *Enquête par Grappes à Indicateurs Multiples MICS5 Mauritanie 2015*, Office National de la Statistique (ONS) (2017). Available at **https://mics-surveys-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/MICS5/West%20and%20Central%20Africa/Mauritania/2015/Final/Mauritania%202015%20MICS_French.pdf**.

88   Ibid.

89   Cetorelli et. al, *Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting in Mali and Mauritania: Understanding Trends and Evaluating Policies*, Studies in Family Planning, 51(1):51-69.

constraints and limited accessibility in remote areas. The scarcity of drinking water is a significant challenge, and as women and girls are typically responsible for collecting it, this scarcity has a significant impact on their daily lives. UNICEF has reported regional differences in water collection responsibilities, with men aged 15 or over primarily responsible in Hodh Ech Chargui, while it falls mainly on women aged 15 or over in Assaba. In this region, as per the 2015 health directory, the overall health coverage rate is only 58%.

4.2.4 Gender, Security, and Violent Extremism

The current state of violent extremism in Mauritania has made it challenging to assess the direct violent impact on women, as the country has not experienced any attacks by these groups since 2011. In terms of prevention, national, regional, and international partners have recognised that women's participation in the national security approach has been limited. Social, traditional and cultural barriers hinder women's involvement in the security sector.[90]

The literature review informs that in the border areas of the country – where living conditions are insecure – women play many roles in the daily lives of radical groups or simple smugglers but do not see their help as a crime or as part of any process leading to violence.[91] Violent extremists often use women for:

   i. Facilitation, involving the integration of individuals who are active in Mali but living on the Mauritanian side of the border.

   ii. Providing information about the situation in the village or town.

   iii. Mediation (usually practised by women and mothers who are respected by all), such as requesting someone's freedom or the granting of documents.

   iv. Commerce and trade.

   v. Recruitment, although less common.[92]

In addition to violent extremism, other forms of harmful practices concern women, men and children, including domestic violence, female genital mutilation, sexual violence and early and forced marriages. Women and children from poor communities are susceptible to forced labour, begging and servitude, and

90   Mounina Abdellah, *Situation of Mauritanian Women in Terms of Traditional Security*, NESA Center Women, Peace, and Security. Available at **https://nesa-center.org/dev/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Mauritania-Mounina_Abdellah_NESA_WPS_E-Book.pdf**.

91   Mariem Baba Ahmed, *Radicalization and Citizenship – Mauritania National Report*, UNDP, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (2016).

92   Ibid.

Mauritanian women are victims of trafficking in the Gulf countries, where they are subjected to sexual slavery and forced domestic service.[93]

4.3 Niger

4.3.1 Institutional Framework for Gender Equality

Since gaining independence in 1960, Niger has implemented policies and strategies to advance women and gender equality in all areas. Niger's Constitution, established in November 2010, enshrines the principle of gender equality and prohibits discrimination against women, girls, and individuals with disabilities. The Constitution also provides measures to address violence against women and children, promote their development in all areas of life, and ensure the fair representation of women in public institutions.

Niger has ratified various conventions, protocols, and charters at the regional and international levels to promote gender equality and combat gender-based violence (GBV). However, the ratification of CEDAW came with some reservations that hinder gender equality in the country, especially concerning inheritance and female genital mutilation. There have been efforts to draw up a Family Code, but these have been abandoned due to strong opposition from certain Islamic organisations which oppose the ban on underage marriage and on the repudiation of wives. Although the Civil Code (Art. 165-169) mandates that both partners must consent to a marriage, customary laws remain the most frequently applied legal source and significantly influence family life. The legal age of marriage is 21 for both genders, but with parental consent, girls can marry at 15 and boys at 18.[94]

At the institutional level, the Ministry for the Advancement of Women and the Protection of Children ensures the implementation of the National Gender Policy. In an effort to achieve a balanced representation of women in decision-making bodies, a law was passed in 2020 establishing a 25% quota for women in elective functions.[95] As of February 2021, 25.9% of seats in Parliament were held by women, and in the National Assembly, women held 26% of seats in 2020.

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93   *Mauritania*, Africa Organized Crime Index. Available at **https://africa.ocindex.net/country/mauritania**.

94   *Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) – Niger*, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

95   *Le Quota des Femmes et la Question de la Représentation – Niger*, Trans-Saharan Elections Project, University of Florida Liberal Arts and Science. Available at **https://tsep.africa.ufl.edu/femmes-representation/niger/?lang=fr**.

Photo by Garba Abdoul Azizou: Young girls in the department of Torodi, Niger.

Niger has adopted its second National Action Plan (NAP) on the Women, Peace and Security agenda (2020-2024) based on the lessons learned from the previous one (2016-2019). It reported on the implementation of the NAP and on women peace and security commitments in its national reporting for the 25-year review and appraisal of the Beijing Platform for Action.[96] Lastly, Niger supported the establishment of the G5 Sahel Women's Platform[97] and the development of a three-year action plan for 2019-2021.[98]

4.3.2 Gender Norms and Roles

In Niger, as in the other countries in this study, decision-making within the households is at the hands of the male family member. According to the Demographic and Health Survey, although outdated (2012), 39% of women participate in decisions about visiting their family or relatives, 20% participate in decisions regarding major household purchases, and 21% make decisions about their health care. In comparison to the other two countries, females have a higher labour force participation rate of 61.7% in 2021, while males have a rate of 84.3%.

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96 The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of 1995 is an agenda for the empowerment of women and girls, developed at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China — known as the largest-ever gathering of gender equality advocates. The Beijing Platform for Action was adopted by 189 governments committed to taking strategic, bold action in 12 critical areas of concern: poverty, education and training, health, violence, armed conflict, economy, power and decision-making, institutional mechanisms, human rights, media, environment, and the girl child.

97 The G5 Sahel Women's Platform was launched in Niamey in 2018. It was created to facilitate the integration, and effective consideration of gender and the specific priorities of women and girls, in order to contribute to stability and development in the Sahel region. The platform is under the supervision of Ministers of the promotion of women and gender of the G5 Sahel Member States.

98 *Rapport du Niger sur la Mise en Ouvre de la Déclaration et du Programme d'Action de Beijing +25*, Ministère de la Promotion de la Femme et de la Protection de l'Enfant République du Niger (2019).

However, women are more likely to be in vulnerable employment.[99,100] Rural areas present greater discrimination and challenges for women and girls, who are often engaged in arduous and time-consuming tasks such as subsistence farming, water and wood collection, cooking, and care work.

Many organisations and groups, such as CSOs and NGOs, work to protect human and women's rights in the country, and they have made significant progress in eliminating discrimination and gender-based violence. However, these efforts often face resistance from cultural, social, and religious values. Despite ongoing efforts, discrimination and violence against women remain prevalent in Niger, making it difficult to achieve true emancipation for women.

4.3.3 Access to Services and Resources

Despite investment efforts in infrastructure, major shortcomings persist in the quality of basic social services and coverage rates, which are also impacted by the poor road coverage in the country.

📖 Education

Access to primary education is limited, and there are significant disparities between boys (82.1%) and girls (70.2%).[101] Only 15% of girls and 17.3% of boys attend secondary school.[102] Unlike Mali, where schools are targeted by violent extremist groups, school closures in Niger are primarily due to the general security situation, which has forced teachers to flee their place of residence or work.[103] Additionally, structural barriers such as the lack of latrines and water points in primary and secondary schools pose significant obstacles to attendance.

Specific forms of gender discrimination also exist. Girls are often prevented from attending and remaining in school due to social norms and harmful practices such as early and forced marriage. In 2021, there were 4.8 million child brides in the country, two million of whom were married before the age of 15.[104] Niger has

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99 *Gender Data Portal – Niger*, The World Bank. Available at **https://genderdata.worldbank.org/countries/niger**

100 Vulnerable employment is defined as the sum of the employment status groups of own-account workers and contributing family workers. They are less likely to have formal work arrangements and are therefore more likely to lack decent working conditions, adequate social security and 'voice' through effective representation by trade unions and similar organisations. Vulnerable employment is often characterized by inadequate earnings, low productivity and difficult conditions of work that undermine workers' fundamental rights. International Labour Organization (ILO).

101 *Profil Genre du Niger*, Ministère de la Promotion de la Femme et de la Protection de l'Enfant, UN Women, Institut de Formation et de Recherche Démographiques (IFORD) (2017).

102 *Gender Data Portal – Niger*, The World Bank. Available at **https://genderdata.worldbank.org/countries/niger.**

103 Luca Raineri, *Dogmatism or Pragmatism? Violent Extremism and Gender in the Central Sahel*, International Alert, [2020].

104 *Country Profile 2021 – The Niger*, UNICEF, UNFPA.

the highest rate of child marriage in the world, with 76% of girls being married before reaching adulthood.

🩺 Healthcare

The quality of healthcare services in Niger is generally poor due to insufficient funding and staffing. This has resulted in higher prices for general care and only 48.31% national health coverage. The distribution of health workers is uneven between urban and rural areas, and health centres often lack clean water. Women are particularly affected by these challenges, notably due to the country's high fertility rates – with an average of 7.5 children per woman – and early and forced marriage. In regions of distress, like Tillabéri, basic social services are lacking, and healthcare is hard to access due to displacement. Staff at schools and health centres are often threatened, reducing the availability of essential services, particularly outside the main towns.[105]

4.3.4 Gender, Security, and Violent Extremism

In a context of deteriorating security, endemic poverty, and violent action by extremist groups, the most vulnerable, most exposed and least protected are women and girls. Often, they are used by VEGs as human bombs and sex slaves or are victims of direct and indirect violence. Many women and young girls have, for example, been abducted by these groups, and many others have become widows with several children to raise without any real assistance and care.[106] Since 2017, the region of Tillabéri has experienced a rise in insecurity due to the presence of several armed groups active in this part of western Niger and in bordering regions in Mali and Burkina Faso. In northern Tillabéri, these groups abduct government officials, village chiefs, and civilians in order to raise funds through ransom and increase their recruitment. In Niger, Boko Haram militants and, to a lesser extent, ISIS-WA affiliates have also targeted noncombatants, including women and children, using violence, intimidation, theft, and kidnapping to terrorise communities and sustain their ranks.[107] Attacks on civilians have increased since 2021, and there have been reports of gender-based and sexual violence, including rape.[108]

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105 Ornella Moderan, Fatoumata Maïga and Boogu/Gayya Project, *Niger: Women's Views on Insecurity in the Tillabéri Region*, Institute for Security Studies (ISS), West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP Niger) (2022).

106 *2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Niger,* U.S. Department of State, Available at **https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/415610_NIGER-2022-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf** accessed August 3, 2023.

107 Ibid.

108 Ornella Moderan, Fatoumata Maïga and Boogu/Gayya Project, *Niger: Women's Views on Insecurity in the Tillabéri Region*, Institute for Security Studies (ISS), West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP Niger) (2022).

5. Gender Analysis of the Perceptions, Needs and Demands of Local Communities in the Study Area

This section presents the findings of the research, outlining the perceptions of insecurity, violence, basic needs, availability of services, and PVE initiatives as experienced and observed by community members – women and men, girls, and boys – in target areas of Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. The analysis – which also includes the insights of civil society actors, local authorities, religious leaders, and security experts – takes a gender-focused approach, aiming to identify the unique roles and perspectives of women and girls in the target areas compared to men and boys.

5.1 Mali

Summary of Findings

Overall, the everyday life of the population is challenging. In the target areas, women and men equally suffer the **lack of employment, financial resources and means of subsistence**, leading to severe food insecurity. This is exacerbated by the pervasive condition of **personal insecurity** due to violence, as the targeted regions, and in particular, Mopti and Ségou, suffer the presence of violent extremist groups. According to the survey and the interviews conducted in the area, such groups are considerably more present in the region of Ségou than self-defence groups and ethnic-based militias, which are present in only a few municipalities. In the villages of Mopti, VEGs, self-defence groups, and ethnic-based militias compete with each other.

While the living conditions are difficult for all, women and girls are victims of specific forms of discrimination and violence. **Access to education for girls is limited** due to several factors, including **social norms, distance from schools, insecurity and financial constraints.** In line with available statistics on early marriages, this is also found to be a barrier to girls' education. In addition to the widespread issues of domestic violence and **early and forced marriages**, the scourge of sexual violence and abductions perpetrated by violent extremist groups is pervasive.

When developing prevention initiatives and activities to promote the well-being and resilience of the population, it is essential to consider contextual factors and gender-specific differences. For example, variations exist in the employment and income-generating activities pursued by men and women, and these differences also differ across regions. In Mopti, women are primarily engaged in agriculture, trade and pastoralism, while in Bamako, they are involved in trade and markets, and the private sector, such as food preparation. In Ségou, trade is their primary source of income. It is also important to identify the **key actors who provide protection** and cohesion in the area and who are recognised and respected by the population.

According to the respondents, state actors[109] and **local authorities are perceived to have the most influence and control** in the targeted areas, while national defence and security forces are perceived as providers of protection from violent armed groups, such as jihadist groups and self-defence militias. Again, there are **regional and gender differences**. When analysing the responses by gender, it was found that women tended to identify national defence and security forces

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109 In the context of this study, the term 'state actor' refers to non-armed national or local authorities. Throughout the report, as well as in surveys and interviews questions, a distinction was made between state actors and armed state actors (or FDS) to ensure the analysis reflects respondents' perceptions of both types of stakeholders.

as the primary actors with power more often than men. In rural areas of Mopti, they are seen as playing a more significant role, whereas state actors and local authorities are considered the primary power brokers in Sègou. Traditional actors of local governance, CSOs, and non-state armed groups do not appear to wield significant influence or control in these regions.

It is perceived by women and men respondents that the **insecurity, crisis**, and the influence of extremist groups have had a **detrimental impact on women's mobility, employment, and participation in public life.** This has occurred through restrictions of movements and the imposition of a dress code (including the enforcement of mandatory veiling). However, some positive factors can be leveraged to combat discriminatory practices. For instance, some respondents perceive that men's migration has elevated the role of women as main providers and has led to a decrease in early and forced marriages. Additionally, the initiatives aimed at women's empowerment and advancements in technology are seen as factors that are alleviating strict gender roles. Therefore, efforts could focus on increasing women's leadership and participation in public activities, including awareness-raising and the prevention of violent extremism, to challenge and transform existing (and pre-existing) social norms that limit women's freedom as well as more recent restrictions that have emerged due to violence and the presence of violent extremist groups.

Finally, the key **factors of resilience** identified by respondents f**or both women and men** include:

> **State investments in guaranteeing access to income:** it increases well-being, economic stability and reduces the risk of poverty. This, in turn, could have positive effects on resilience against violent extremism by decreasing the likelihood of individuals joining armed groups due to a lack of economic opportunities.

> **Security and safety:** an increased feeling of safety within the population could reduce the need to join violent groups as a means of protection.

> **Inclusive engagement in decision-making processes:** the establishment of inclusive mechanisms of engagement and the creation of consultative spaces could enhance individuals' sense of participation in public affairs and decision-making.

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Summary of Data Collection and Target Groups

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

Religious leader, Muslim, urban, Niono (Ségou)
Religious leader, Muslim, rural, Djenné (Mopti)
Religious leader, Catholic Christian, urban, Ségou
Religious leader, Muslim, urban, Bamako
Local Authority, rural, Pelengana (Ségou)
Local Authority, rural, Djenné (Mopti)
Local Authority, rural, Bandiagara (Mopti)
Local Authority, rural, Bandiagara (Mopti)
Local Authority, rural, Mopti
Local Authority, rural, Mopti
UN representative, rural, Mopti
Security expert, Bamako
Human rights advocate, Bamako

REGION OF KOULIKORO
REGION OF SÉGOU
REGION OF MOPTI
MOPTI
SÉGOU
BAMAKO
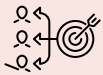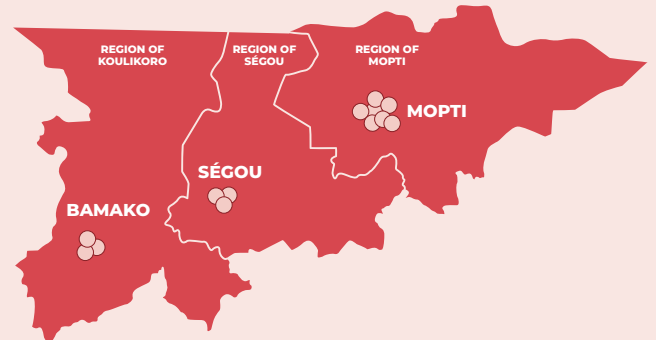
FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Civil society actors,
rural, Mopti (Mopti)

11 participants

Women community members,
rural, Pelengana (Ségou)

13 participants

Women and men community
members, urban, Niono (Ségou)

9 participants

SURVEY OF COMMUNITY MEMBERS

50 women and men from
the target areas (Ségou,
Mopti, Bamako) of which:

28 Female

22 Male

Divided as follows:

Bamako ➜ 18: 14 urban, 4 rural – 9 women, 9 men –
9 Fulani, 4 Soninké, 3 Dogons, 1 Songhoy, 1 Bambara

Mopti ➜ 18: all rural – 12 women, 6 men – 5 Dogons,
11 Fulani, 1 Soninké, 1 Bambara

Ségou ➜ 14: 9 rural, 5 urban – 7 women, 7 men –
5 Bambara, 5 Fulani, 1 Malinke, 1 Samogo, 1 Mossi, 1 Dogons

SURVEY OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES

9 CSOs

5 in Bamako
1 in Ségou region
3 Mopti region

9 Local authorities

5 in Bamako
3 in Ségou region
1 Mopti region
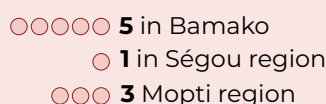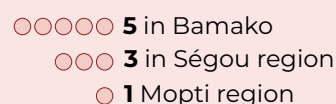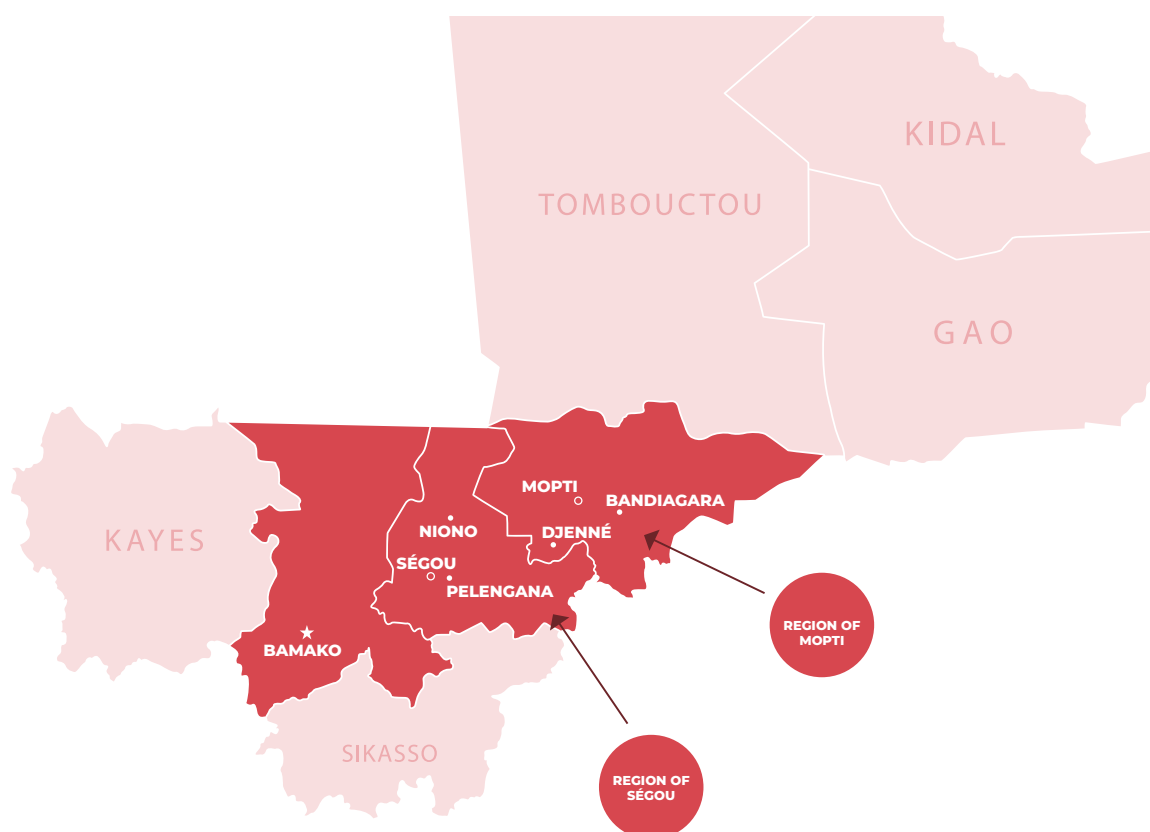
5.1.1 The Target Areas

In Mali, data collection was conducted in the municipalities of Niono, Ségou, and Pelengana (in the Ségou region), Bandiagara, Djenné, Mopti (in the Mopti region), and Bamako.

The regions of Mopti and Ségou in Central Mali are currently facing a surge in insecurity due to inter-community conflicts, the proliferation of self-defence militias, and the presence of violent extremist groups and bandits. Towns and villages in Mali have varying levels of historical Islamisation, with the regions of Mopti and Ségou having a stronger Islamic tradition compared to others, such as Bamako, where more syncretic practices can be found. The central region of Mali has fallen into the hands of violent non-state actors, and 2018 saw the highest level of violence since the French intervention in 2013.[110]

Among these groups is Katiba Macina, which is active in Mopti and certain areas of Ségou. The further destabilisation in Central Mali is of particular concern for

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110   Philip Kleinfeld, *Sieges, Sanctions, and Soaring Hunger: Mali's Humanitarian Crisis Deepens as Foreign Forces Withdraw*, The New Humanitarian (2022). Available at: **https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2022/03/21/Mali-crisis-Barkhane-Sieges-sanctions-hunger-Wagner** accessed August 3, 2023.

several reasons. Firstly, it has led to an increase in inter-communal violence and violent reprisals, in a region where different ethnic groups coexist. These groups include the Fulani, Tuareg, and Moor (mostly pastoralists), Bambara, Dogon, Songhai, Malinke (generally sedentary farmers), and Bozo (mainly fishermen). Secondly, these dynamics are already spilling over into neighbouring countries such as Burkina Faso and Niger, which face similar ethnic cleavages in their border areas and have also been hit by jihadist attacks. Lastly, the population of Mopti and Ségou, which is five times larger than the population in the north of the country, is particularly vulnerable to growing insecurity, and the situation could have serious humanitarian consequences.

Compared to the north, Central Mali constitutes a strategic region for the national economy. The river delta is a major commercial hub and a valuable food basin, with its three predominant production systems – pastoral (cattle raising), agricultural (cereals in dry areas and rice in wet ones) and fisheries – constituting a major part of the export economy of the country. Increased conflict in the region has therefore the potential to disrupt these livelihoods.

5.1.2 Concerns, Unmet Needs, and Social Demands

The primary concern most frequently reported by respondents, both women and men, in the target regions of Mali is the **lack of employment, financial resources** and **means of subsistence**. The second most prominent concern is the pervasive condition of **personal insecurity due to violence**, followed by **food insecurity**. These vulnerabilities are interlinked. For instance, in some areas, insecurity and violence make it difficult to carry out income-generating activities, such as selling products at the local market, thus reducing earning opportunities, especially for women. According to the findings, women are significantly more impacted than men by the **absence of transport and infrastructure, confirming the existence of gender disparities in terms of mobility.** The **scarcity of drinking water**, **sanitation and hygiene**, **limited access to resources** such as land and energy, **education**, and difficulties in livestock management are among other factors cited by women as causing concerns in their daily lives.

There are noticeable differences between regions regarding the specific challenges faced by women. In Mopti, women are particularly affected by difficulties in protecting their livestock, food insecurity, and limited access to education, healthcare, and clean water. Meanwhile, in Bamako, women face more significant obstacles to accessing resources, transportation, and infrastructure. In Ségou, women have better access to healthcare, sanitation, and hygiene, but at the same time, there are concerns about the availability of drinking water points

▶ **Figure 1. What are the major concerns of daily life in your community? (Mali, all regions)**

Women   Men
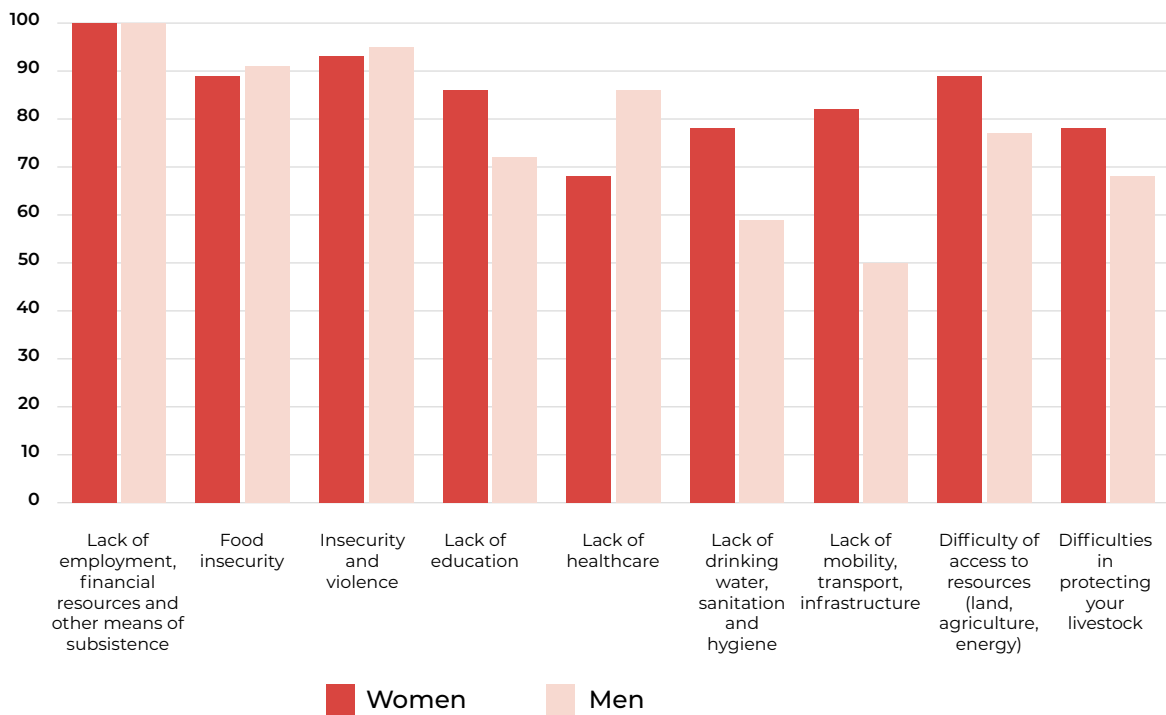
for girls responsible for fetching water,[111] and violence is a significant concern in this region. The populations surveyed in Mopti and Bamako have significant health concerns. Key informant interviews held with local authorities and religious leaders revealed that in some villages, such as Djenné and Bandiagara (Mopti), the community faces limited access to health services due to insecurity.

While men and boys would benefit from greater access to and control over livestock (in Mopti), access to drinking water and sanitation (in Bamako) and access to resources (in Ségou and Bamako),[112] women require protection from violence, particularly from harmful practices. Unfortunately, early and forced marriages, as well as sexual and domestic violence, are prevalent throughout the country. In general, *"Malian women need a climate of security, protection, work and financial support."*[113]

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111   Focus Group Discussion with women and men of the community, Niono, Ségou.
112   Men and boys are usually assigned to cattle and trade, while women and girls to food processing.
113   Key Informant Interview, security expert, Bamako.

▶ **Figure 2. What do men and women lack most in your community? (Mali, all regions)**
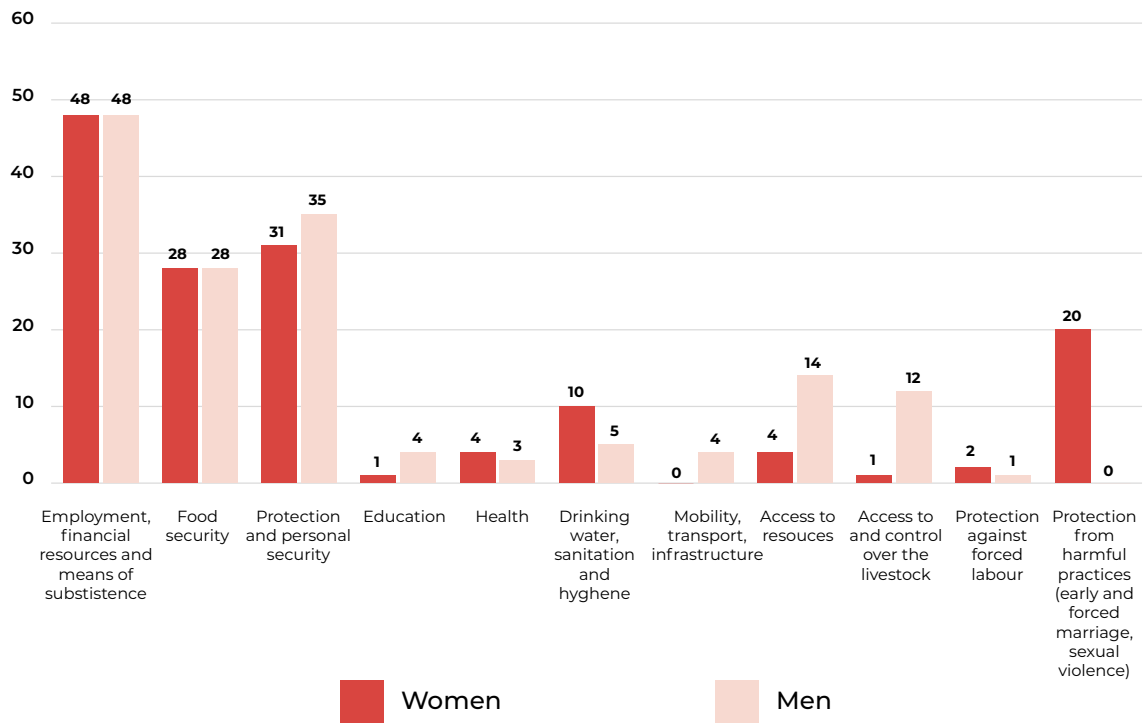
Providers of Services and Security: State and Non-State Actors

Results show that the **state and local authorities** are responsible for and expected to provide all essential services to the public. **Defence and security forces** are perceived to provide protection, especially in rural areas of Mopti, while in Ségou and Bamako, this is felt by only around half of the respondents. **Civil society organisations** provide services mostly in Ségou, where they are perceived as the first providers of sustenance, healthcare, and financial resources. Indeed, a religious leader in Ségou emphasised the critical role of CSOs in providing skills training and workshops for women (such as dyeing, agri-food processing and saponification): *"thanks to these activities, often women enjoy better conditions than men."*[114] On the contrary, CSOs and NGOs are not reported as active providers of services in Bamako and Mopti. However, an interviewee from this region acknowledged international organisations as providers of humanitarian support. According to the responses, **non-state armed groups** do not provide any of these services in target locations. Traditional actors, including traditional chiefs, tribal chiefs, and religious leaders, are usually only involved in granting access to and control over livestock.

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114   Key Informant Interview, religious leader, Ségou.

▶ **Figure 3. Which are the roles played by state and non-state actors in your community? (Mali, all regions)**

State and local authorities   Violent extremist groups
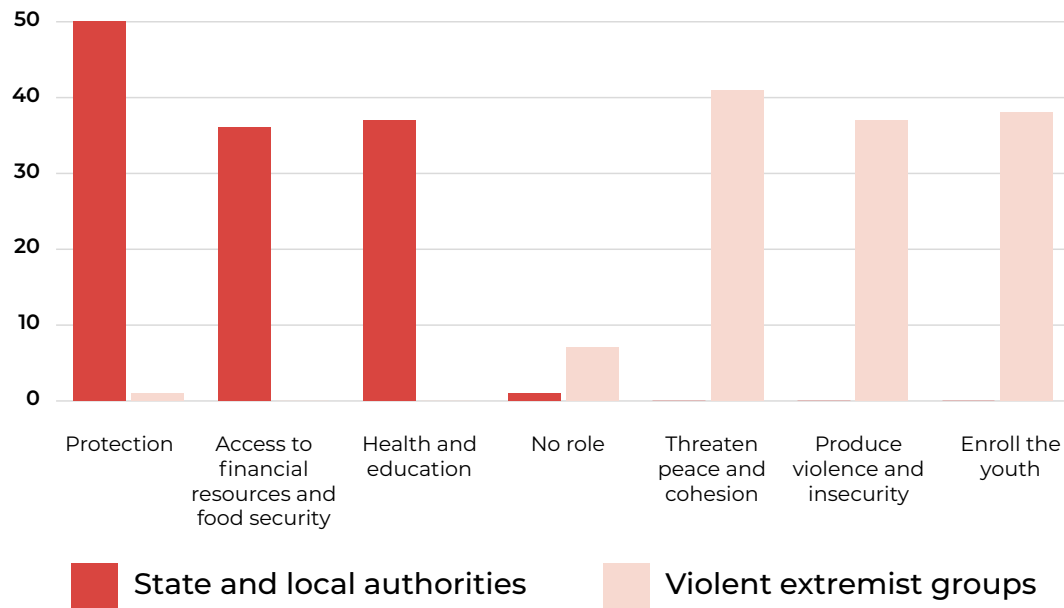
From a gender perspective, female respondents in the three regions identify state actors and local authorities as providers of education, access to resources, employment opportunities, transportation and infrastructure, access to water, sanitation and hygiene, access to and control over livestock, and access to healthcare. Men's perspectives are also similar across regions, but they additionally identify state actors and local authorities, as well as defence and security forces, as providers of security.

Across the target areas, violent extremist groups are perceived by 82% of survey respondents as a threat to peace and cohesion, while 74% of them believe that they cause violence and insecurity, leading to concerns about the recruitment of young people. VEGs were not recognised as providers of resources or services by the communities surveyed.

5.1.3 Education

Survey results indicate that, in the target areas, the school attendance rate is slightly higher for boys compared to girls. Public schools are the most popular choice for both boys and girls, with only few reports of attendance at madrasas schools in Bamako and Djenné (Mopti), where children meet with Quranic teachers after attending classes at public schools. The choice of school is based on the quality of education and affordability. Interestingly, in Bamako, the chosen education

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path is based on the potential employment opportunities it might offer in the future. Key informant interviews with local authorities, CSOs representatives and religious leaders provided details of the **challenges preventing children from attending school, including the distance from school in Ségou,**[115] **and financial difficulties in rural areas of Mopti, which often lead to girls dropping out**. Schools are generally safe in all regions, except for those localities in Ségou and Mopti, where armed groups affect school access by committing violence against civilians and damaging school buildings.

Quranic Schools in Mali

Quranic schools in Mali are educational institutions that combine religion and conventional subjects, with classes typically held in the homes of Quranic masters. While education is not tailored differently for girls and boys, some masters decide to separate pupils by gender during the apprenticeship period. Recently, more Quranic learning centres have emerged, such as boarding schools which provide separate accommodation and supervision for girls and boys. It is worth noting, however, that these centres differ from traditional Quranic schools in that they charge fees and also teach – in French – reading, writing, and math in addition to the study of the Quran.

Despite being overseen by the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Local Communities, Quranic schools are not officially recognised as educational institutions in Mali. The lack of supervision and monitoring, poor childcare, and absence of socio-professional opportunities pose significant challenges for all stakeholders, including learners and public authorities. To address these issues, the High Islamic Council of Mali, with the support of partners and the state, organised a national forum on Quranic schools from 27 to 29 October 2008. Additionally, the Government organised the National Forum on Education from 30 October to 2 November 2008, and established an inter-ministerial technical commission through Decision No. 04054/MEALN-SG of 28 October 2010. The purpose of this commission was to examine the role of Quranic schools in the national education system, to develop guidelines, and to propose ways of integrating or aligning these schools with the Malian education system.

Female Quranic Teachers

Both men and women are encouraged to seek knowledge, as hadiths[116] state that "the best knowledge that a person can acquire is the Quran." Therefore, women are not only allowed but valued for their role as Quranic teachers. Although they are a minority in Mali, female Quranic teachers perform the same duties as their male counterparts, educating children of all ages while also serving as maternal figures in their students' lives. Women are often preferred as teachers for other women and girls, as it is widely accepted in the country that they are better suited for the role.

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115 A key informant interviewee from Ségou informed that to address this, some NGOs provide bicycles to facilitate school attendance.

116 Hadith is a corpus of the sayings, actions and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad and major source of religious law and moral guidance.

5.1.4 Role and Participation of Women

Employment

In the three regions, men and boys have various sources of income and work in different sectors depending on the context. According to the research findings, in Bamako, men's primary income sources are trade and market, independent work, and public administration or public services. In Mopti, men's primary source of income is agriculture, followed by pastoralism and, to a lesser extent, trade. In Ségou, the top three sources of income for men are pastoralism, agriculture, and the market, and fishing is commonly practised in the latter two regions. Men are less frequently involved in the private sector, particularly in roles like food preparation.

Women in Bamako are involved in trade and market, as well as in the private sector, such as food preparation and independent work. In Mopti, women work in agriculture, trade, and pastoralism – which explains their concern for access to and control over livestock. In Ségou, trade is their primary source of income, followed by pastoralism and agriculture. According to the population interviewed, women do not usually work in the public sector, and overall, more women than men in the target regions do not have any source of income and/or depend on family support.

According to the survey, **women are allowed to work outside their home in all regions.**[117] However, restrictions on **women's participation in public spaces** exist, especially when women's mobility is not related to employment. In Ségou, interviewees reported that women primarily engage in housework but also leave their homes to participate in income-generating activities. However, *"due to insecurity, for women is rarer to go outside, even though they do some business and gardening."*[118] A religious leader from the same region, along with two local authorities' representatives from Mopti and a human rights advocate, explained that women can work outside the households with the consent of their parents or the spouse. Another interviewee indicated that *"women can leave the house for activities but must return early."*[119] These testimonies confirm that women are indeed active in income-generating activities outside their homes, yet other forms of public participation seem limited. In fact, men usually dominate decision-making spaces.

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117   One respondent out of 50 selected "no", Ségou.
118   Focus Group Discussion with women and men of the community, Niono, Ségou.
119   Key Informant Interview, local authority, Pelengana, Ségou.

When asked about the **obstacles to women's movement** outside their homes, thus not only in relation to income-generating activities, but in a broader sense, over 70% of women and men cited social and cultural norms as the main barrier. Religious norms and values were only reported as minor factors. In Bamako, the risk of aggression is not a concern, whereas it is in Ségou. Regrettably, insecurity, deterioration, and the influence of 'violent extremist groups have adversely affected women's mobility, employment, and participation in public life. Nonetheless, the migration of men, women's empowerment initiatives, a decrease in early and forced marriages,[120] and technology have all contributed to positive changes in gender roles.

Marriage

Civil marriage is the prevailing matrimonial arrangement. In contrast, religious weddings are less common and are predominantly observed in the Ségou region, where they supersede civil ones. Traditional marriages were only mentioned by a few respondents in rural areas.

The responsibility for deciding on marriage typically lies with the parents of the prospective couple, especially in Mopti, and only in certain urban areas of the target regions the couple may have some say in this decision. Data indicates that girls tend to marry at a younger age, between 15 and 18, while boys usually marry after 18. In urban areas like Bamako, a higher number of girls marry after turning 18, whereas in Mopti, girls and boys typically marry before reaching the age of 18. Early marriages often lead to early pregnancies, making it necessary to ensure proper access to maternal health services. Indeed, interviewees confirm that Community Health Centres that provide mother and child health services, such as paediatrics, prenatal consultation, and family planning, are required in the region.

▶ **Figure 4. Who makes the decision whom to marry? (Mali, all regions)**

24% The couple

76% The parents of the couple

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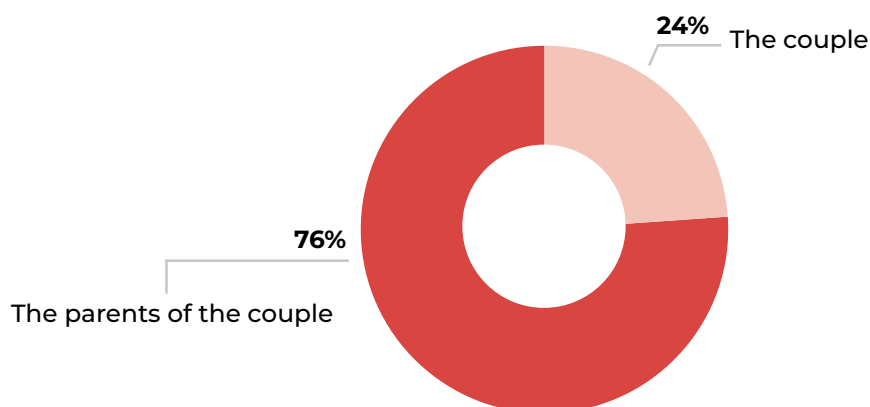
120   Key Informant Interview, religious leader, Ségou.

▶ **Figure 5. Which decisions can women make within households?
(only responses: yes, they can) (Mali, all regions)**
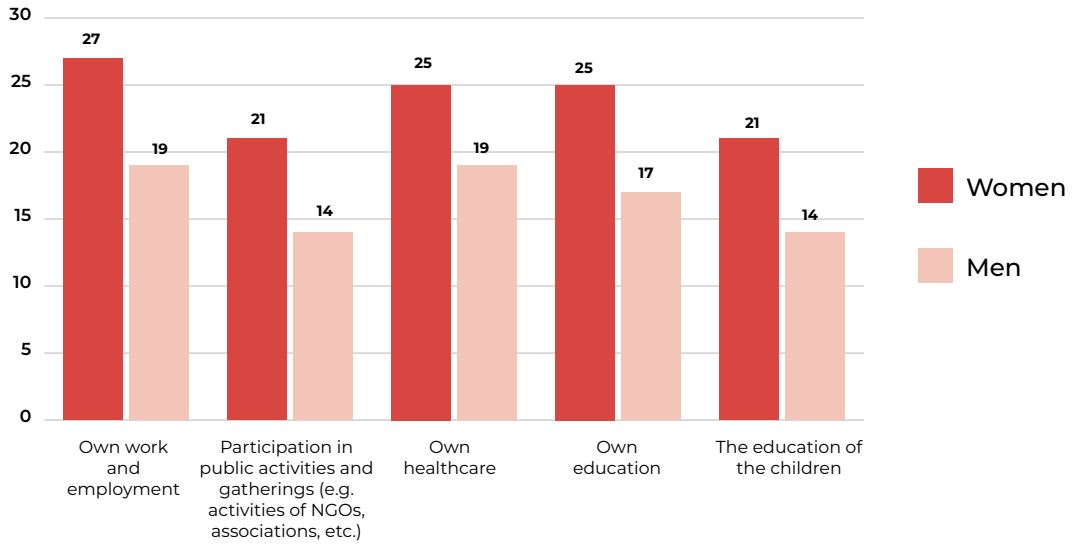
▶ **Figure 6. Which decisions can women make within households?
(only responses: no, they can't) (Mali, all regions)**
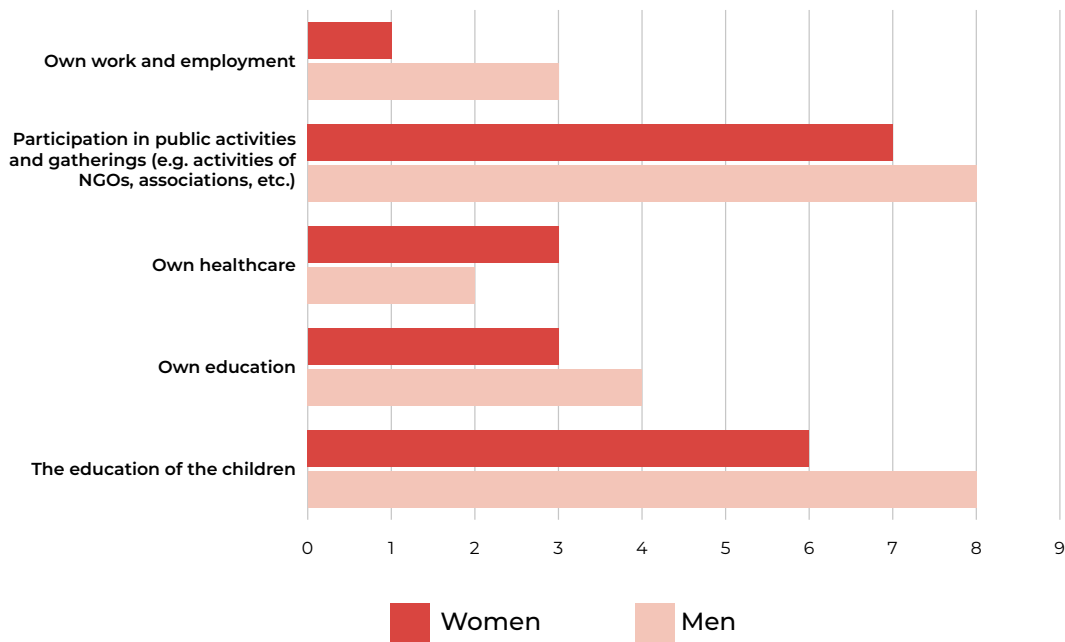
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The practice of the **bride price**, where the groom's family gives money or property to the bride's family, is present in all target areas and is considered burdensome for young couples by 38% of respondents from Mali, particularly in Ségou. Interestingly, it was not mentioned as a burden in Mopti.

Overall, **women have less freedom than men to decide over issues related to marriage and participation in certain activities.** When asked about women's freedom to decide over specific spheres within the household, respondents reported that women can make decisions regarding **e**mployment, health, and education, but they may have fewer liberties when it comes to participating in public activities, such as those organised by CSOs and NGOs, and on issues related to the education of their children, especially in Ségou and Bamako. The analysis of responses disaggregated by sex shows that men tend to be more restrictive in terms of women's decision-making within the household. They adhere to the traditional notion that men generally make the important decisions, while women claim to have greater decision-making power than what men report.

5.1.5 Violence and Insecurity

In the regions under study, the primary security **threat arises from** the violence committed by **violent extremist groups**, followed by actions of **ethnic-based militias. Conflicts between farmers and herders** in Ségou have also been reported, alongside incidents of banditry in Bamako. Findings show that in Ségou and Bamako, VEGs are more prevalent, while reports of ethnic-based militias are less frequent. The data also confirms the presence of Katiba Macina in Bandiagara (Mopti).[121] According to all respondents, both men and women have fallen victims to the violence perpetrated by these groups, which threaten peace and security, recruit young people, and use violence to exert influence in the region, particularly in Ségou and Mopti. In these two regions, key informant interviews have reported disruptive violence: VEGs carry out attacks in villages, burning them and destroying property, placing mines and explosive devices, and confiscating the cattle and food reserves. Concurrently, self-defence groups also represent a security issue in Pelengana (Ségou), *"Self-defence groups, known as hunters, settled in this locality. To gain respect and enforce their rules they demanded cash payments as penalties for various violations, such as adultery, which is consider a grave sin. In case where the demanded amount was not paid, these groups publicly*

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121   Key informant interviews in the region indicate that violent extremist groups, such as Katiba Macina, are present in the villages of Djenné and Bandiagara (Mopti), while Dozo militias are reported in Niono (Ségou).

▶ **Figure 7. Threats to security in your village/city reported by men (Mali, all regions)**

Acts of violence due to conflicts between farmers and herders — **7%**

3% — Acts of violence from armed state actors

29% — Acts of violence from ethnically based groups (self-defence groups, hunting groups and militias etc.)

Acts of violence from extremist groups — **61%**
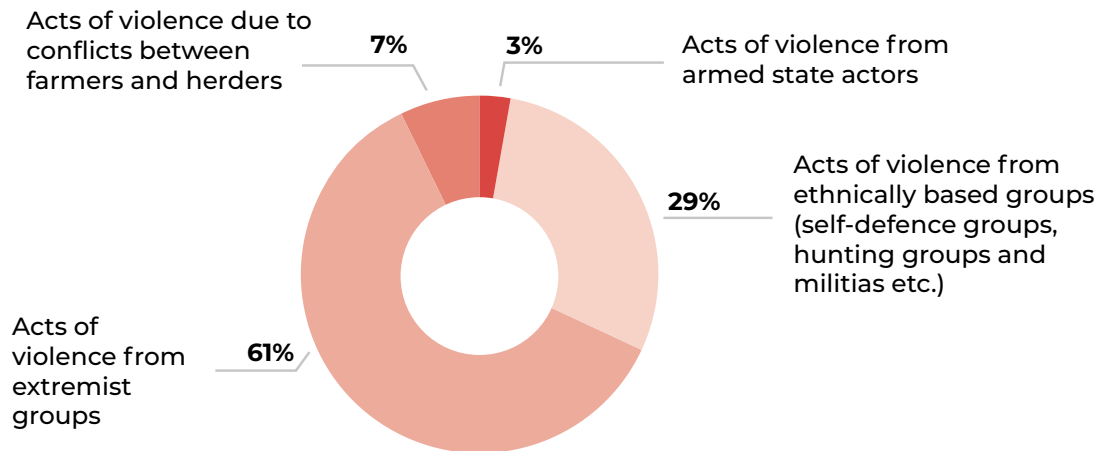
▶ **Figure 8. Threats to security in your village/city reported by women (Mali, all regions)**

Acts of violence due to conflicts between farmers and herders — **5%**

2% — Acts of violence from armed state actors

41% — Acts of violence from ethnically based groups (self-defence groups, hunting groups and militias etc.)

Acts of violence from extremist groups — **52%**

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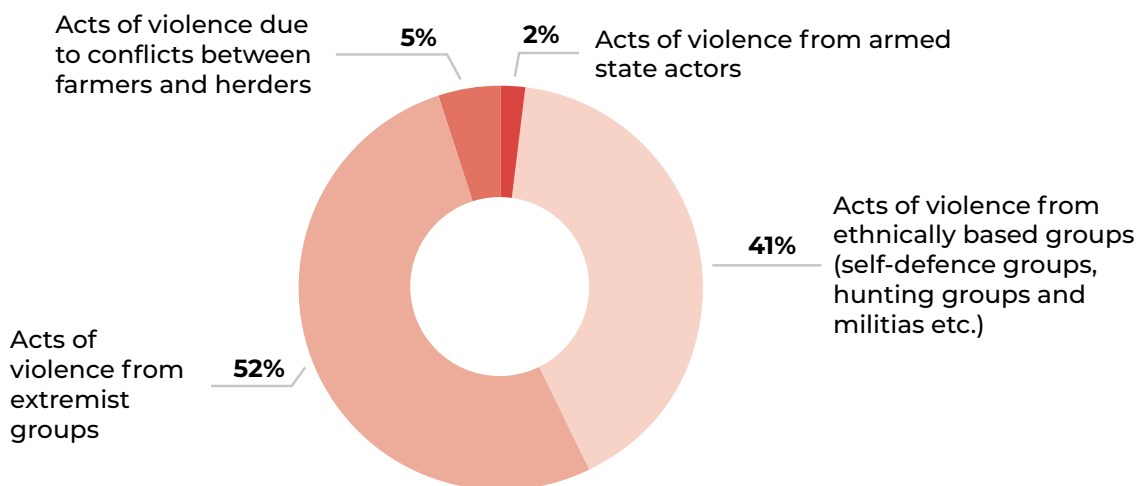
administered beatings as punishment."[122] The security post at the entrance of this village has been targeted by terrorist attacks on two occasions.[123]

"Self-defence groups had established their bases in the villages of Diouna and Katièna, and started to recruit young people in the town of Pelengana. People would approach them to resolve their disputes. Here, they conducted patrols from 11 p.m. and imposed fines of 3,000 FCFA on anyone they arrested, or you

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122 Focus Group Discussion with women and girls from the community, Pelengana, Ségou.

123 Reportedly, armed groups no longer occupy Pelengana, as a self-defence Dozo militia did not find popular support and left the area (Focus Group Discussion with women and girls from the community, Pelengana, Ségou).

would have to spend the night with them. One day, members of these groups arrested a man in broad daylight and took him away on motorcycles because he refused to pay the money he had borrowed. This case triggered significant outrage among the local population, leading them to approach the authorities with a request for the disbandment of self-defence groups. In May 2022, the governor of the Ségou region organised a discussion forum to disband the armed groups, which, in turn led to the establishment of an alert commission."[124]

As previously mentioned, the state is not perceived as a source of violence and insecurity but rather as an entity responsible for protecting communities from violence perpetrated by violent extremist groups and ensuring their safety. In Bamako, state actors are perceived as offering more protection compared to armed defence and security forces, whereas in Ségou and Mopti, the results have indicated the opposite. Indeed, the survey had revealed that in the latter region, defence and security forces are involved in maintaining security in specific villages. It is noteworthy that women often perceive their families as protectors, despite the fact that families can also be a major source of violence.

▶ **Figure 9. Who protects you from violence? (Mali, all regions)**

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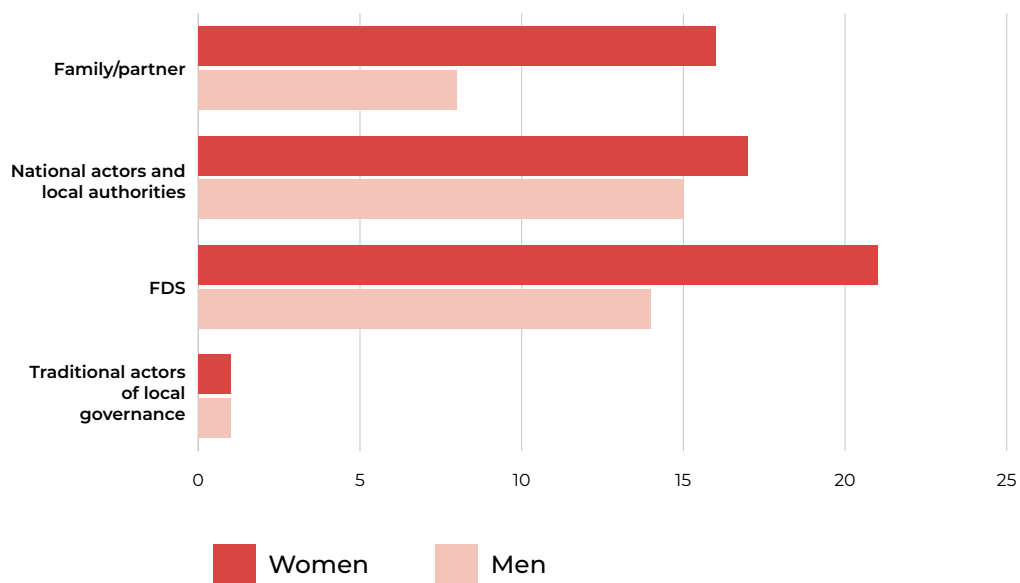
124 Civil society actor, Pelengana, Ségou.

Violence Against Women and Girls

Violence against women and girls is a serious issue, with **sexual violence, domestic violence, and early and forced marriage** standing out as the most prevalent forms. Men often report domestic violence as the primary form, while women tend to report sexual violence more frequently. This disparity may arise from stigmas, taboos and misconceptions surrounding sexual violence. Respondents also reported incidents of girls being kidnapped and early marriages occurring in Djenné (Mopti), and instances of female genital mutilation and violation of freedom of movement in Ségou.[125] Although early and forced marriage is less frequently reported in the capital, it remains in practice.

In relation to violence against women and girls (VAWG) committed by violent extremist groups, key informant interviews mentioned restriction of movements, imposition of a dress code, including mandatory veiling, and sexual violence. The latter two are specifically linked to a VEGp affiliated with Katiba Macina based in Bandiagara (Mopti). In Mopti, violent extremist groups frequently use women as shields during their attacks, and there have been instances of women being abducted in Djenné (Mopti).

Additional sources also confirmed that ethnic-based militias[126] and self-defence groups, such as Dozo militias,[127] are responsible for sexual violence, primarily in Mopti.

However, while in this context it is important to focus on violence perpetrated by armed groups, it is equally crucial not to overlook the fact that the **main perpetrators of violence**, including early and forced marriage and sexual violence, are **family members and partners.** It is also crucial to emphasize that **domestic violence prevails in all research areas,** with husbands being the main culprits. *"A family head started to sell the family's fields (cultivable land). His wife objected because it could harm the family property. Since the adult children sided with their mother against the land sale, he started beating his wife every time he passed her in the family courtyard until she had wounds all over her body. When the wife wanted to lodge a complaint, a reconciliation commission intervened to convince the victim to drop the case, resulting in the couple resuming cohabitation."*[128]

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125   Key Informant Interview, religious leader, Ségou.
126   Key Informant Interviews, Bandiagara and Niono.
127   Key informant interviews reported the following: the main perpetrators of violence in Mopti and Ségou are violent extremist groups (Djenné, Bandiagara, Niono), Dozo militias (Bandiagara and Niono), and other self-defence groups (Niono).
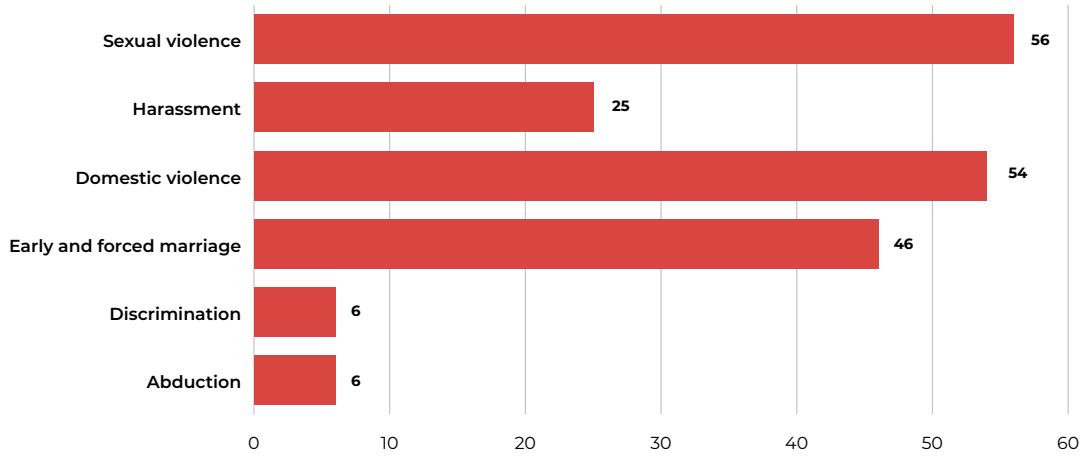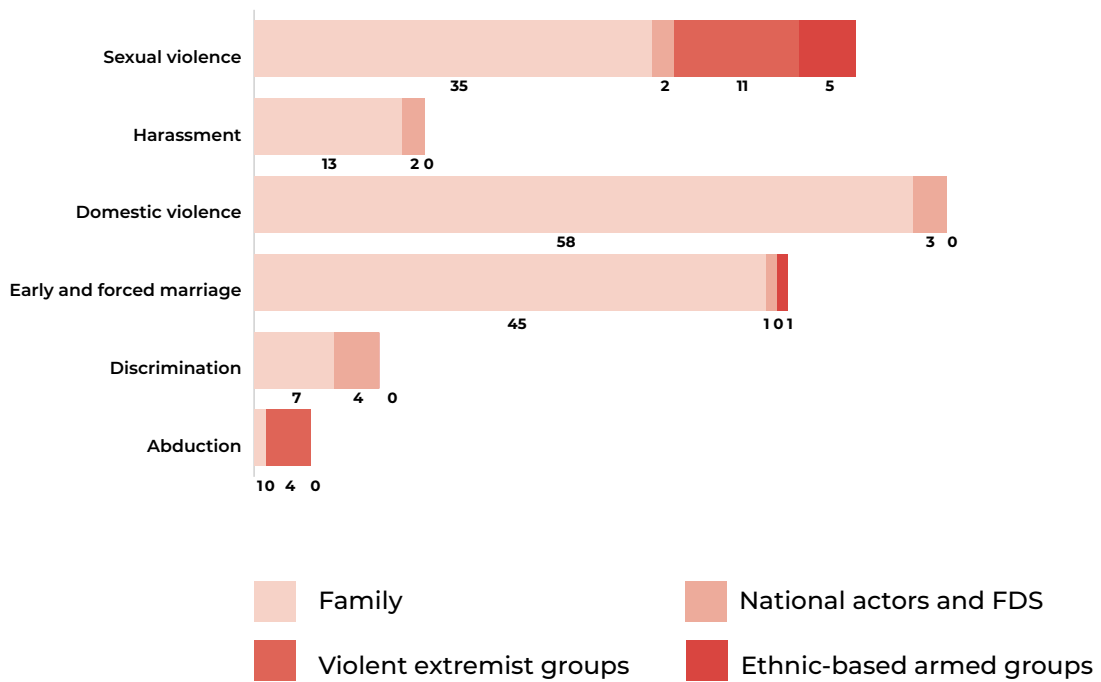128   Key Informant Interview, local authority, Pelengana, Ségou.

MALI

▶ **Figure 10. What are the major acts of violence committed against women and girls? (Mali all regions, and all actors: communities, local authorities and CSOs)**

▶ **Figure 11. Who commits the acts of violence? (Mali all regions, and all actors: communities, local authorities and CSOs)**

5.1.6 Violent Extremism

Joining Violent Extremist Groups and Recruitment Tactics

"These are unemployed young people who, because of the crisis, are no longer able to sustain themselves through rural work. It is impoverishment, unemployment. Some children are even recruited as fighters under the threat that their whole family will be killed. The proportion of voluntary recruitment does not seem to be significant."[129]

According to the findings, in Mali, the primary reason for men and boys to support radicalisation and violent extremism is **economic vulnerability**. *"Revenge and unorthodox behaviour of state agents"*[130] can also be a contributing factor, while faith is not perceived as a driving force behind joining extremist groups. On the contrary, religious leaders and local authorities representatives in Niono (Ségou) and Bandiagara (Mopti) believe that the role of religion is to *"sensitise the faithful to disassociate from armed groups."*[131] It is also important to acknowledge that, according to an interview with a security expert, the **desire to defend one's ethnic group** can also play a role in joining VEGs. In areas like Mopti and Niono (Ségou), men may feel compelled to join VEGs to protect their communities, families, and land, as in the case of *"traditional hunters and certain Peuls."*[132] The reference to Peuls, also known as Fulani, is made because, following the insurgency in northern Mali in 2012, a number of Fulani nomadic pastoralists joined violent extremist groups to seek shelter and protection. Some Fulani herders joined the Movement for the Unity of Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) with the intention of receiving military training and protection from fighters and gangs who stole their herds.[133]

To gain influence over communities, violent extremist groups utilise religion (by **preaching in mosques**) as well as **restrictions on movement, school closures, and violence.** This includes gender-specific forms of violence, such as early and forced marriages.[134] They may also offer money to those who join, and, in some instances, violent extremist groups have even used **matrimonial arrangements** to gain community legitimacy.[135] This information confirms the findings of previous studies that outline how extremist groups use matrimonial policies as a tactic in their strategy to establish themselves in the region. In some cases, leaders

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129 Key Informant Interview, human rights advocate.
130 Key Informant Interview, security expert, Bamako.
131 Key Informant Interview, religious leader, Niono, Ségou.
132 Focus Group Discussion with women and men of the community, Niono, Ségou.
133 Anouar Boukhars, Carl Pilgram, *In Disorder, They Thrive: How Rural Distress Fuels Militancy and Banditry in the Central Sahel*, Middle East Institute (2023).
134 Key Informant Interviews, Ségou and Mopti.
135 Key Informant Interview, security expert, Bamako.

of violent extremist groups in the central Sahel have purposely married women from tribes in areas where they sought to gain power.[136]

According to field data, women in rural Pelengana and Ségou are not involved in radicalisation and violent extremist activities. However, in other regions of Ségou (specifically, Niono) and Mopti, **women may demonstrate support for** violent extremist groups due to **subordination, marital ties, and a desire to protect their families and children.** According to a security expert, women may join violent extremist groups for reasons such as *"seeking revenge or establishing a sense of identity."*[137] Women involved in violent extremism may work as spies, gather and share information, prepare food, and even participate in combat in some cases (such as in Niono).

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136   For more information: **https://www.international-alert.org/publications/dogmatism-or-pragmatism-violent-extremism-gender-central-sahel/**

137   Key Informant Interview, security expert, Bamako.

Prevention of Violent Extremism

"The proliferation of workshops and increased public and family awareness have prevented young people in Ségou from supporting radicalisation and violent extremism."[138]

Women Religious Leaders And Associations

According to religious leaders from Mopti and Ségou, faith, and religious associations, including religious women's associations, can play an important role in supporting the resilience of both women and men to violent extremism by implementing peace-related activities and providing counter-narratives. Women preachers are also recognised as influential actors in this context.

According to survey respondents, the **three most important factors for building resilience** to violent extremism are the same for women, girls, men, and boys:

> **State investments in guaranteeing access to income and employment**: Increased well-being, reduced risk of poverty and economic stability could have positive effects on the resilience to violent extremism, reducing the likelihood of individuals joining armed groups due to the lack of economic opportunities.

> **Security and safety**: an increased feeling of safety in the population could reduce the need to join violent groups as a protection mechanism.

> **Inclusive engagement in decision-making processes**: the establishment of inclusive mechanisms of engagement and the creation of consultative spaces could enhance a sense of participation in public affairs and decision-making.

During the key informant interviews, several examples of critical **prevention initiatives** were discussed, the objectives of which were aligned with the findings of the survey. These included **providing training and capacity building for women and girls** to engage in **income-generating activities**, as well as **public investment** to improve living standards and employment opportunities.

The study also identified some examples of relevant initiatives implemented in the target areas. For example, to prevent youth and women from joining violent extremist groups, local administrations in Pelengana (Ségou), Djenné, and Bandiagara (Mopti) organised capacity-building and awareness-raising activities about the topic. In Bandiagara, the local administration has taken specific steps to support women's groups, including donating cereals and providing economic assistance through financial partners. A UN representative from Mopti has mentioned that initiatives tailored to women and girls in the region include

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138 Key Informant Interview, religious leader, Ségou.

▶ **Figure 12. Key resilience factors of men, boys, women and girls in the face of violent extremist groups (Mali, all regions and and all actors:communities, local authorities and CSOs)**
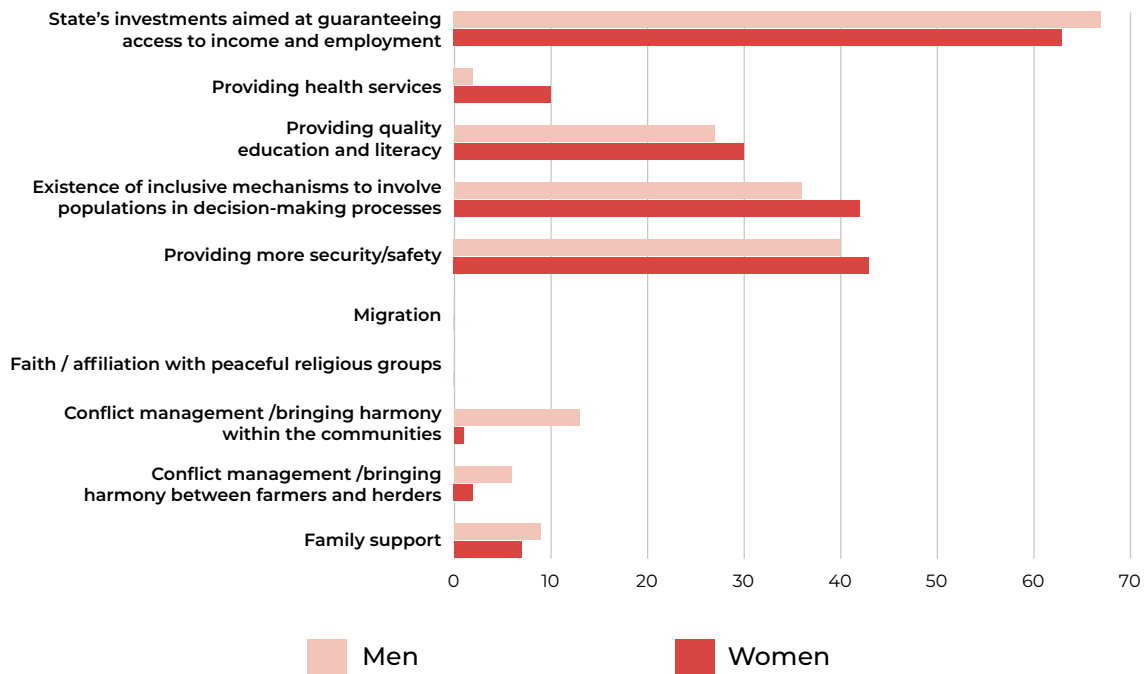
▶ **Figure 13. Have you participated in programmes that provide services such as the following? (Mali, all regions)**
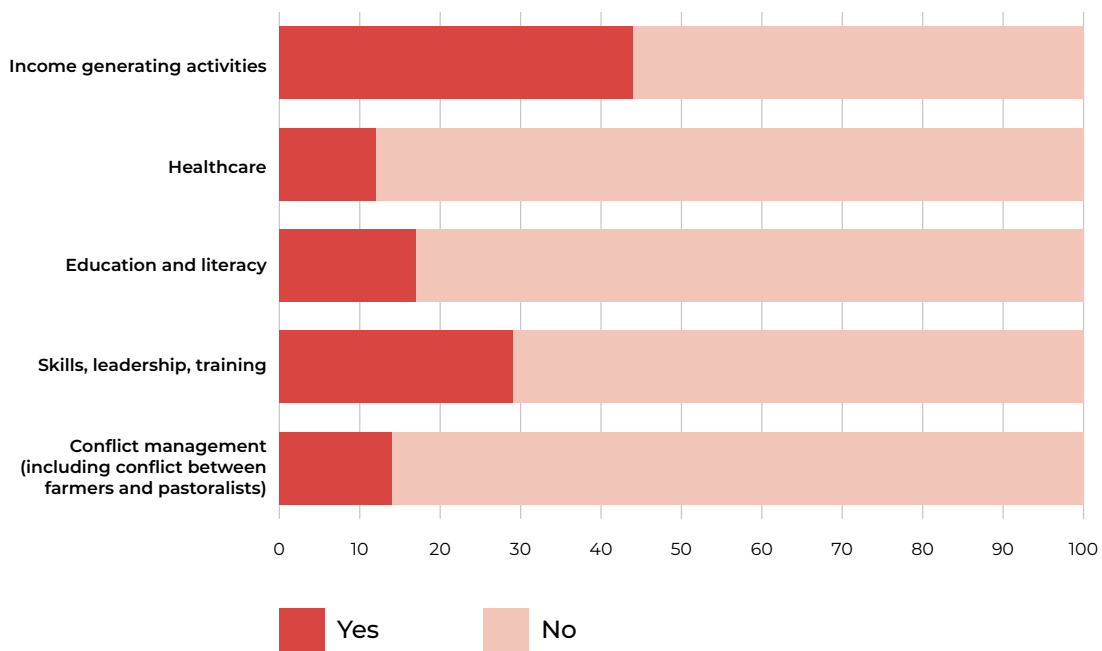
income-generating activities, education, protection, training, addressing violence against women and girls, and providing financial support as well as water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH). Organisations such as CSOs and NGOs, which, from the limited responses, appear to be more active in Ségou, are the primary providers of such activities for both men and women. However, they sometimes offer skill-building and training opportunities specifically tailored to young men. The state also provides some services, such as education and literacy, but to a lesser extent. Respondents reported being open and willing to participate in these initiatives, particularly when they are offered by the state, international organisations, or CSOs/NGOs and, to a lesser extent, when offered by religious associations.

Unfortunately, **only a few community members reported having participated in PVE initiatives**. However, some respondents had taken part in initiatives providing income-generating activities, followed by training, skills development, education, literacy, conflict management (including between farmers and herders), and access to healthcare. Despite this, the majority of respondents had not participated in any of these activities.

When asked about the reason for not participating in such initiatives, two women reported that these initiatives were not considered appropriate to local customs, while most respondents did not participate **because of the unavailability of such initiatives or** because they were **unaware** of them due to **poor communication.** Eliminating these barriers is essential to foster the participation of all community members, including women and girls, who play an important role in preventing violent extremism. According to the research, women's efforts in the target areas are critical to *"monitor, report and denounce suspicious behaviour."*[139] They also play a significant role in raising awareness and educating youth to deter them from joining armed groups, and this work is often facilitated by women's associations.

To promote the involvement of women in prevention activities, respondents suggested that initiatives should be:

> Designed to facilitate earning opportunities.

> Scheduled at an appropriate time.

> Compliant with religious and customary beliefs.

> Effectively communicated through the use of social media and radio (radio broadcasts and programmes, as well as social media such as WhatsApp and Telegram).

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139 Key Informant Interview, local authority, Pelengana, Ségou.

Most CSOs and local authorities surveyed rely on radio and direct communication with community members to share information about their activities. However, it is important to note that the effectiveness of **communication channels** varies, and the choice of the most suitable one should be based on the specific context or target group. In Mali, findings show that **radio** is still the most effective means to provide information, raise awareness, or issue warnings (92%), while **social media and television** are popular modern communication methods, but less frequent. On the other hand, **newspapers** are not reported to be widely used to access information, and internet usage is minimal, mostly limited to Bamako.

Analysing **age groups** reveals that individuals aged 18-25 report using social media more frequently than those over 26, particularly in urban areas, indicating alignment with worldwide patterns. If the data is disaggregated by gender, it is evident that women and girls tend to rely on the radio as their primary source of information, followed by social media and television, while men use social media as their primary tool, followed by television and then radio. Even though the data collected is limited, it confirms existing reports that show that in Mali, most social media users are men, with 75.5% compared to only 24.5% being women.[140]

▶ **Figure 14. In order to participate in the implementation of these programmes, It is important that they are: (Mali, all regions)**

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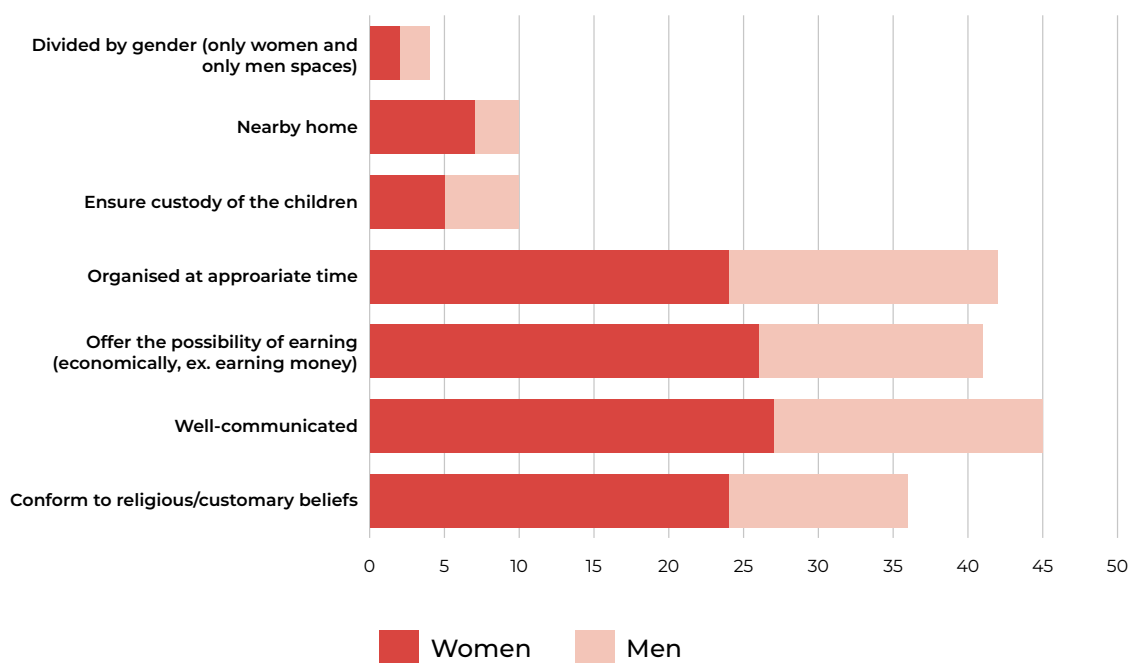
140 Simon Kemp, Digital 2023: Mali, Datareportal (2023). Available at **https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-mali** accessed August 3, 2023.

Good Practices in Inclusive PVE Initiatives

Through key informant interviews, the study collected examples and good practices adopted at the local level to promote women's participation in preventing violent extremism.

1. In the region of Ségou, a religious leader informed that to restore social cohesion, the Association of Women of the Catholic Church held a session to **raise the awareness among religious women** about their crucial role in building social cohesion and advocating for peace.

2. A religious leader from the region of Ségou organised **round tables** between women and women's groups from different neighbourhoods. These debates were broadcasted on the radio.

3. Local authorities in rural Mopti organised a consultation day for all municipal actors to discuss **social cohesion**. The event also gathered donations for populations affected by the crisis.

4. A security expert reported as a good example the creation of a pool of experts on peace and security funded by UNDP and the Danish Refugee Council. This activity provided training on **mediation skills and techniques** to thirty **women** from Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Similarly, the Peacekeeping School organised training sessions for women mediators.

MALI

5.2 Mauritania

Summary of Findings

In the target regions of Mauritania, some level of violence and insecurity continues to be present but is reportedly less widespread than in Mali and Niger. Approximately 85% of security concerns reported by respondents stem from non-state armed groups, including militias, vigilante groups, bandits, and youth offenders. In contrast, violent extremist groups account for only 10% of the reported threats. Nevertheless, some respondents still see them as a threat to peace and unity, seeking to gain influence and control through preaching, the recruitment of young people, and threats of violence. Regarding location, VEGs seem to be more prevalent in Nouakchott and Hodh Ech Chargui. According to the analysis, some members also operate outside of Mauritania, particularly in Mali. This makes the border area between the two countries particularly precarious, and the presence of farmer-herder and ethnic group conflicts complicates this situation of insecurity.

Unemployment and food insecurity are the primary concerns among surveyed communities across the target regions of this study. However, when developing prevention initiatives, it is crucial to take into account the specificities of each context. For example, in the Assaba region, people generally feel safe, but they are primarily worried about the lack of employment, protecting livestock, and access to water, sanitation, and hygiene. In Hodh Ech Chargui, people feel less vulnerable in the sectors of education, health, and WASH, but are concerned about food insecurity, employment, violence, and access to resources. Meanwhile, in Nouakchott, most respondents' concerns revolve around employment, food insecurity, education, and health.

In terms of gender-specific differences, while in Mauritania both boys and girls are vulnerable to **forced labour** (and this vulnerability is even more pronounced than in Mali and Niger), women face specific challenges due to limited access to resources, including land, energy, property, credit, as well as literacy, training, and decision-making opportunities, causing economic struggle and marginalisation. Due to existing cultural and gender norms and the predominance of male personnel in this environment, **women face obstacles in accessing healthcare,** particularly reproductive healthcare. Furthermore, female-headed households, women farmers, and women herders are reported to be among the most vulnerable groups. Additionally, over 30% of surveyed individuals perceive that **girls lack protection from harmful practices** like early and forced marriage, with higher rates reported in Nouakchott.

Even though in the target regions of Mauritania (unlike certain areas of Mali), violent extremist groups' ideologies are not perceived to influence gender roles, strict gender norms do exist – especially in Assaba and Hodh Ech Chargui – and the majority of respondents (60%) view them as the main obstacle to women's engagement in activities outside their households. Nonetheless, according to the research, social roles are evolving in urban areas thanks to the influence of modern technology, social networks, urbanisation, and television. This may have facilitated the development of the Mourchidates network, a group of women responsible for raising awareness about alternative narratives to violence through religious preaching. Interestingly, despite such a **positive example of involving women in preventing violent extremism,** PVE initiatives in general are reportedly not common, with 83% of respondents indicating a lack of such services in their area.

Considering the above challenges, the survey's respondents identified the following elements as key factors in promoting the well-being and resilience of women, girls, men, and boys:

> **State investment in guaranteeing access to income;**

> **Quality education;**

> **Availability of health services.**

Lastly, in addition to a good understanding of the context, implementing effective PVE initiatives crucially involves identifying the key players providing essential services and protection to the population. In the target areas, those surveyed feel that protection from violence is granted by their family members or state actors and local authorities. In contrast, armed state actors, such as the defence and security forces, were not often mentioned. One noteworthy observation is that, in comparison to Mali and Niger, **traditional leaders (such as tribal chiefs and religious leaders)** in this region retain some influence and are recognised as providers of specific services, particularly in the Assaba region.

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Summary of Data Collection and Target Groups

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

International organisation representative, Kiffa (Assaba)
Security expert, Nouakchott
Religious leader, Kiffa (Assaba)
Religious leader, Arafat (Nouakchott)
Religious leader, Néma (Hodh Ech Chargui)
Religious leader, Néma (Hodh Ech Chargui)
Local authority, Néma (Hodh Ech Chargui)
Local authority, Arafat (Nouakchott)

NOUAKCHOTT
ARAFAT
REGION OF TRARZA
REGION OF ASSABA
KIFFA
REGION OF HODH ECH CHARGUI
NÉMA
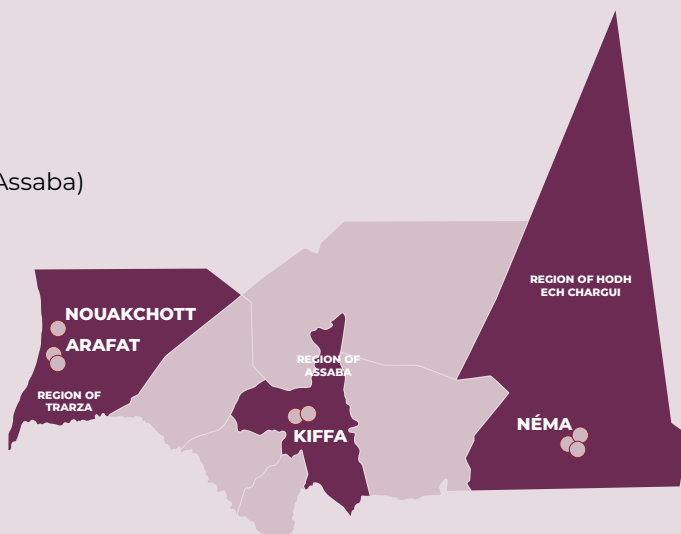
FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Women and girls, Kiffa (Assaba)

8 participants

Women and girls, Néma (Hodh Ech Chargui)

9 participants

Civil society actors, Arafat (Nouakchott)

10 participants

SURVEY OF COMMUNITY MEMBERS

52 women and men from the target areas of which:

28 Female

24 Male

Divided as follows:

Nouakchott ➜ 17: urban – 10 women, 7 men – 14 Moors, 3 Fulani

Hodh Ech Chargui ➜ 20: 10 urban, 10 rural – 10 women, 10 men – all Moors

Assaba ➜ 15: 8 rural, 7 urban – 8 women, 7 men – all Moors

SURVEY OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES

10 CSOs

3 Nouakchott
4 Hodh Ech Chargui region
3 Assaba region

10 Local authorities

3 Nouakchott
4 Hodh Ech Chargui
3 Assaba region
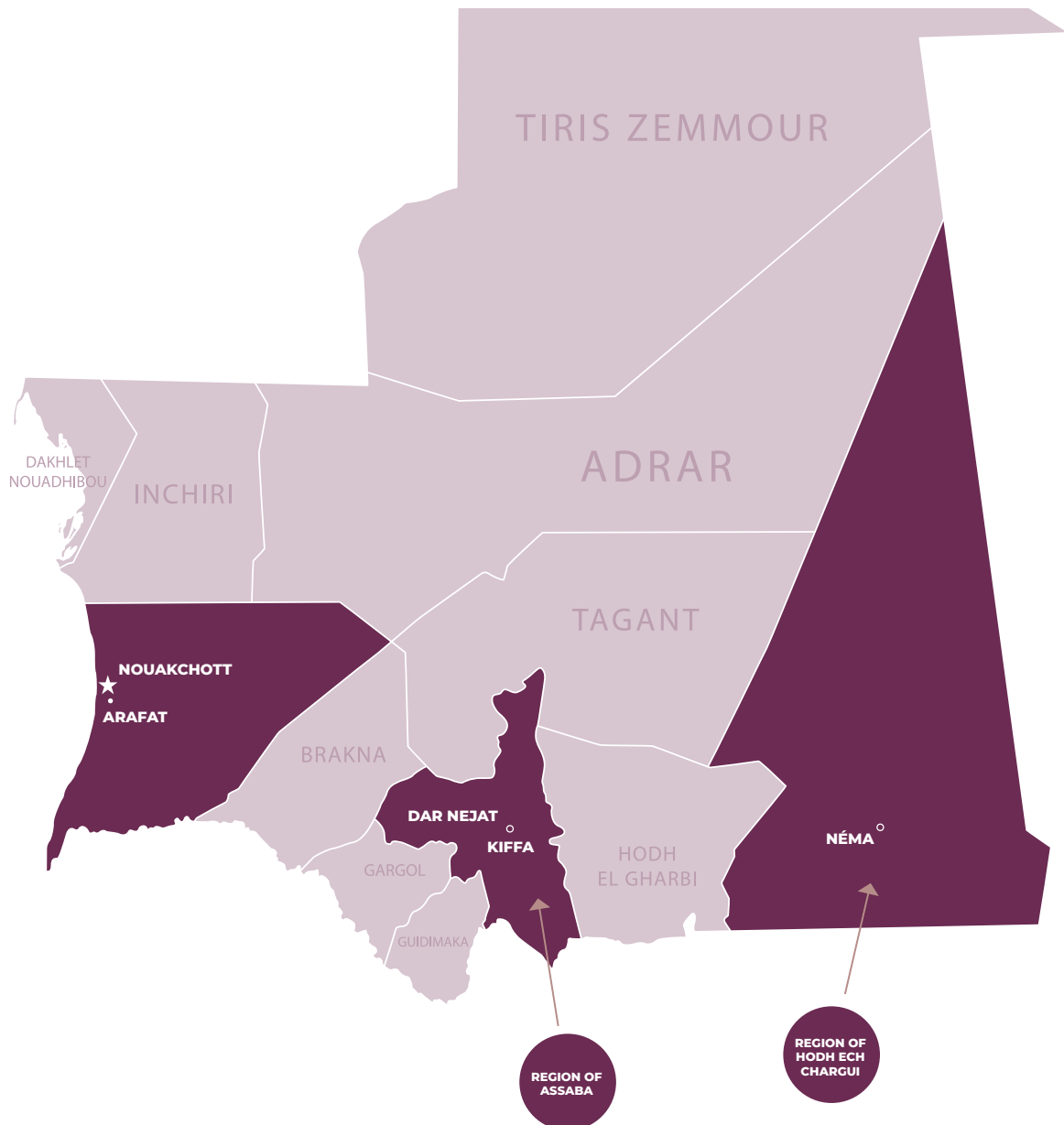
5.2.1 The Target Areas

In Mauritania, data collection took place in Nouakchott and in its suburb Arafat, in Kiffa and Dar Nejat in the Assaba region, and in Néma in the Hodh Ech Chargui region.

The **region of Assaba** is facing high poverty rates and is structurally vulnerable due to low social investments, the repurcussions of the COVID-19 pandemic and the effects of climate change, resulting in job insecurity and vulnerability in an economy that relies heavily on the informal sector. Enrollment rates for basic education have decreased, and the use of healthcare services is below the national average. Harmful practices and discriminatory social norms in the region often allow for violence and exploitation.

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The **region of Hodh Ech Chargui** shares similar vulnerabilities to Assaba. Largely rural, the region is affected by multidimensional poverty caused by the region's economy based on agro-pastoral and subsistence activities. The lack of basic services, including education, healthcare, housing, drinking water, sanitation, and electricity, also contributes to its precarious situation. Women and girls in this region suffer from harmful social practices that negatively affect their well-being. Furthermore, Hodh Ech Chargui is also home to nearly 100,000 Malian refugees, accounting for 20% of its population.

While Assaba and Hodh Ech Chargui share some similarities, they differ from Nouakchott in several ways. In the capital, poverty is less prevalent – with some exceptions, such as in some parts of the city's southern outskirts – and job opportunities, as well as a support system for vulnerable groups are available. Despite this, Nouakchott faces multiple challenges, including poor quality of services, heavy traffic, extreme urbanisation, the risk of siltation, and the threat posed by the Atlantic Ocean: some areas of the city are situated below sea level, and the dune belt has been extensively damaged by overexploitation as a construction material. Additionally, there is a complete absence of fresh water, which must be imported from the Senegal River, located approximately 200 kilometres away.

5.2.2 Concerns, Unmet Needs, and Social Demands

Across the three target areas, women and men who responded to the survey reported struggling with **unemployment** and **food insecurity**. Women often face difficulties **accessing resources**, such as land and energy, while men are more concerned with protecting livestock. During the data collection, women pointed out that their lack of access to resources, including property, credit, literacy, training, and decision-making opportunities, strongly contributed to their economic struggles and marginalisation. Health services also emerged as a major need for women in all three regions, especially as early marriages and pregnancies are very common, making reproductive healthcare a critical need. However, access to healthcare is limited, and since most healthcare personnel are male, women can be reluctant to undergo examinations by male doctors.

When analysing the data by specific target area, it appears that there are some significant **regional differences** in the perception of vulnerabilities. For instance, while almost all respondents from Assaba feel safe and secure, women and men from this area are concerned about the lack of employment, livestock protection, and access to water, sanitation, and hygiene. In Hodh Ech Chargui, people feel less vulnerable in the sectors of education, health and WASH, but they are concerned about food insecurity, employment, violence, and access to resources. Meanwhile, in Nouakchott, the concerns of most respondents revolve around employment, food insecurity, education, and health.

In terms of gender-specific differences, while the survey found that boys and girls are equally vulnerable to forced labour in Mauritania (and more so than in Mali and Niger), many challenges specific to women have emerged during data collection. Firstly, over 30% of respondents perceive that girls lack protection from harmful practices such as early and forced marriage, especially in Nouakchott, and generally require protection from violence. Secondly, according to a key informant interview in Assaba, women, particularly in households affected by migration (including seasonal migration), require stronger economic security and stability. With men frequently migrating with their herds to Mali, women have no choice but to seek seasonal employment in urban centres, leading to a temporary exodus. Finally, the most vulnerable individuals include widowed and divorced women who head households, as well as women farmers and herders. In times of drought, the latter group is especially susceptible to acute and severe malnutrition, which affects women and children in particular.

"Especially among the Peuls in the Kankossa area, young girls go to Kiffa or Nouakchott in search of work, while boys go to Chami, Zouerate in pursuit of gold. Young people from Assaba do not try to migrate to the United States like other young people in the country. If there are no activities, there is an exodus."[141]

▶ **Figure 15. What are the major concerns of daily life in your community? (Mauritania, all areas)**
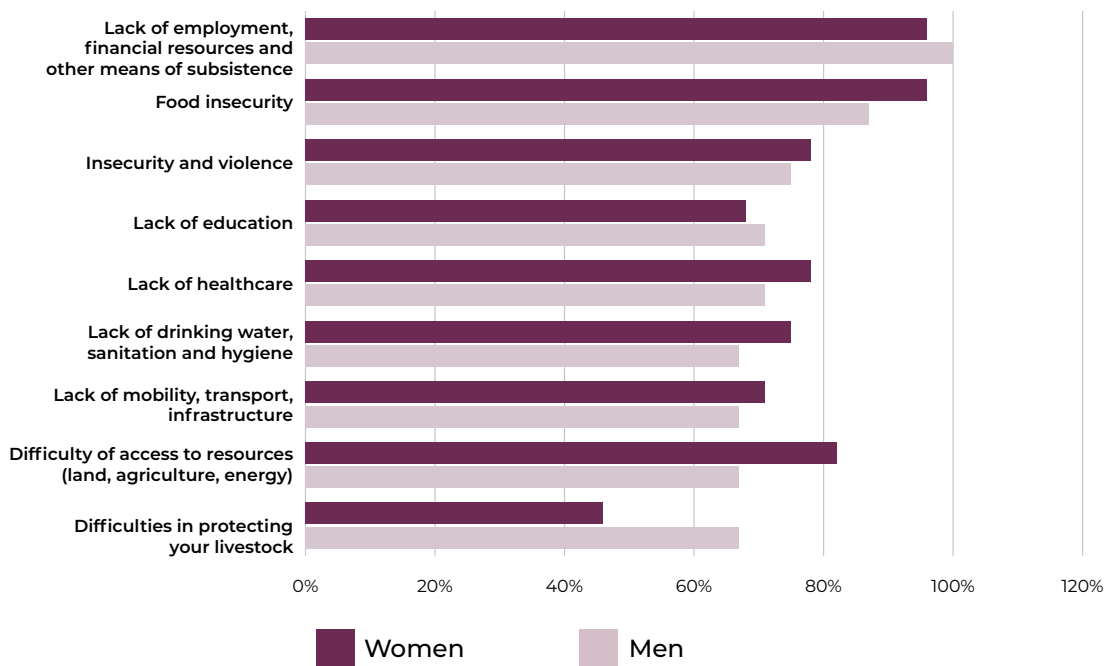
Providers of Services and Security: State and Non-State Actors

In the target areas of Mauritania, the **state and local authorities** are viewed as providers of protection, financial support, food security, and social services such as healthcare and education. However, there is not a unanimous perception of their role as approximately 31% of respondents indicated that state actors do not play any role in offering services. More than half of these responses came from Assaba, with many of them being women. A few male respondents from Nouakchott even reported the negative role of the state in threatening peace and inflicting violence. In very few cases **defence and security forces** (i.e., armed state actors) are perceived to provide protection, and only in Nouakchott.

One interesting observation is that, compared to Mali and Niger, in the target areas of Mauritania, **traditional leaders** (such as tribal chiefs and religious leaders) are reported to hold some influence and to provide certain services, especially around mobility, infrastructure, livestock, WASH, and access to resources. This is particularly relevant in the Assaba region, where traditional leaders are considered more important than state actors in meeting the community's needs.

Although in Mauritania there have been no attacks by **violent extremist groups** in more than ten years, some respondents still perceive these groups as a threat to peace and unity and as recruiters of young people who may engage in violent activities. The presence of VEGs is more often reported in Nouakchott and Hodh Ech Chargui compared to Assaba. Though in very limited numbers, two female respondents in Nouakchott reported perceiving violent extremist groups as providing protection from security threats.

▶ **Figure 16. Who is the key actor who controls and exerts the most influence in your community? (Mauritania, all regions)**
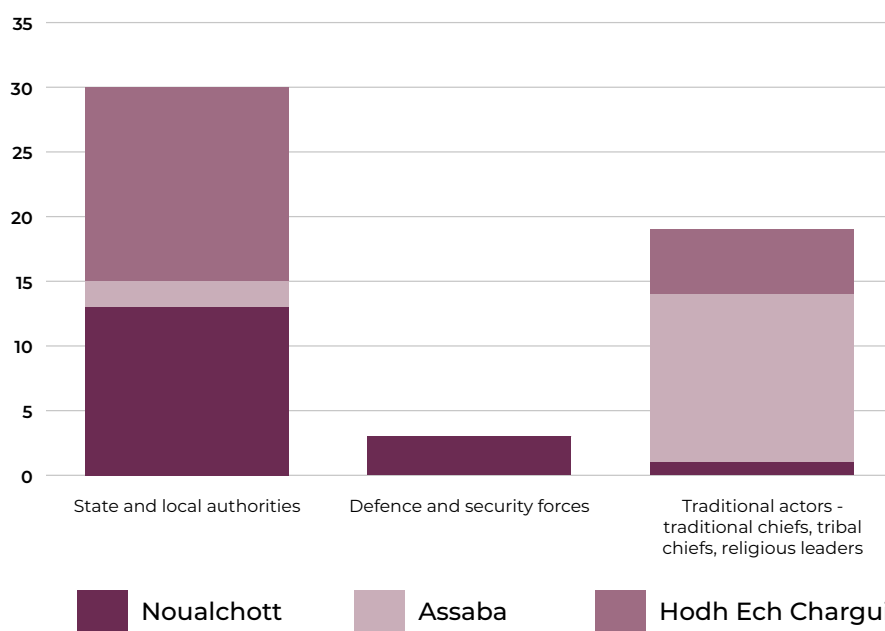
▶ **Figure 17. Focus: Traditional actors providing services in Assaba**
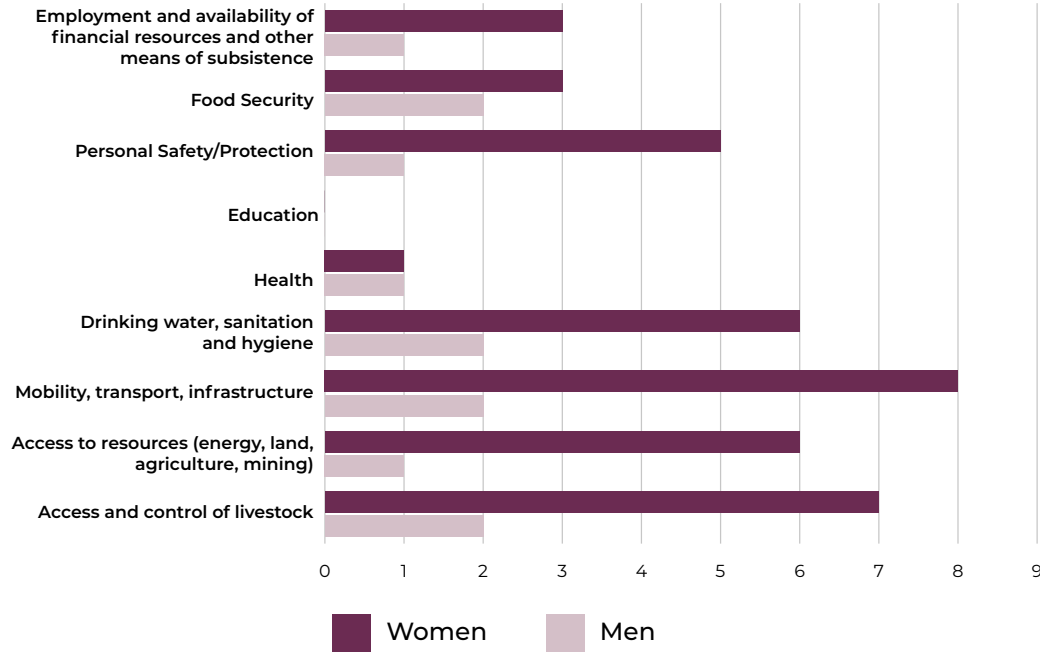
▶ **Figure 18. Roles played by state and non-state actors (Mauritania, all regions)**
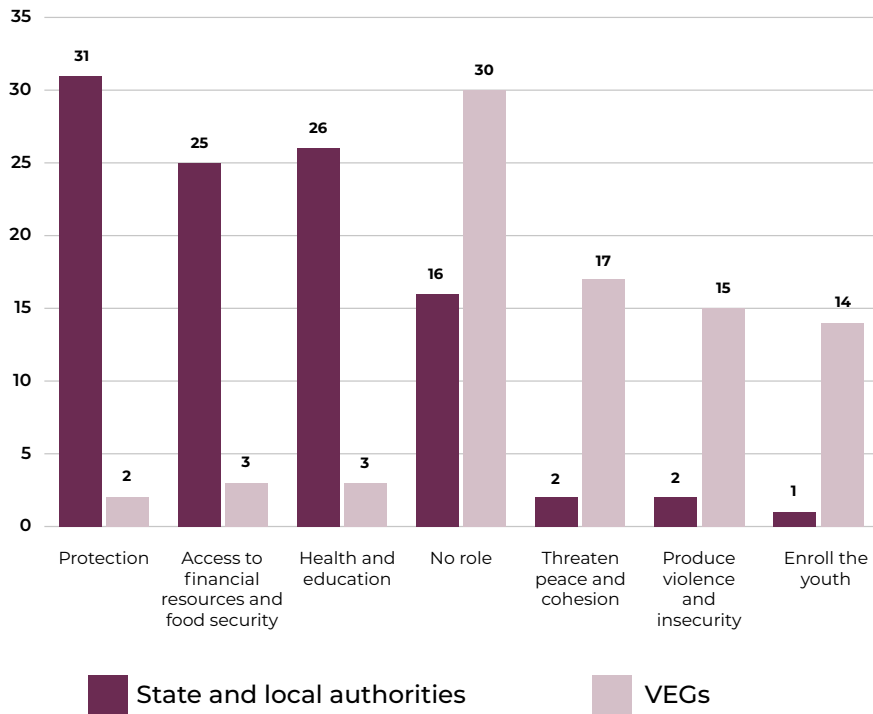
MAURITANIA

5.2.3 Education

❝

"For lack of support, families are forced to send their school-age children to work, which can be the origin of delinquency, drugs, theft..."[142]

In the target areas of Mauritania, most children attend public or private schools. While no respondent reported **Quranic school** attendance, different key informant interviewees mentioned that students attend Quranic schools in parallel with public or private ones, either in the early morning or in the late afternoon,[143] and that girls attend both education systems.[144] In the surveyed regions, schools lack clean water and sanitation facilities (including toilets), canteens, meals and safe transportation.[145] Some institutes do not offer a complete education cycle, and middle and secondary schools are frequently unavailable: *"The child from Tenaha on the border with Mali, after primary school where does he go? Nowhere."*[146]

According to the study, when selecting the school, the quality of teaching is the most important element to be considered. This is followed by security and affordability – the latter factor prioritised by male respondents, while women give precedence to the former. As mentioned, Quranic schools play an important role, but religious beliefs were not identified to be among the main reasons for school selection. Unfortunately, **early and forced marriages and related dropouts** remain a great concern in Mauritania: *"We do our best to keep the girls throughout their schooling, but early marriage prevents them from continuing their education. They fall back into illiteracy if they do not go beyond the sixth year of primary school."*[147]

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142 Focus Group Discussion with women and girls, Néma, Hodh Ech Chargui.

143 Key Informant Interviews, local authorities in Nouakchott and Hodh Ech Chargui; Key Informant Interview, international organisation reprsentative, Assaba.

144 Key Informant Interviews, religious leaders, Assaba, Nouakchott and Hodh Ech Chargui.

145 Key Informant Interviews, international organisation representative and local authorities.

146 Key Informant Interview, international organisation representative, Kiffa, Assaba. Primary education is considered to have ended after grade 6AF, at the age of 12 or 13.

147 Key Informant Interviews, local authorities.

Mahadhras in Mauritania

Mahadhras[148] were established in Mauritania during the 13th century and were initially mostly located in the Sahara Desert. The development of such institutions within nomadic environments allowed for their wide distribution over large territories. Throughout the years, mahadhras, which are traditionally known as centres for advanced studies, have enabled the training of Ulamas and the transmission of Islamic teachings, disseminating the knowledge of the Quran, Muslim law, and the Arabic language in West Africa. The three main types of mahadhras are:

> Generalized Jamia or Mahadhras, where courses touch upon different disciplines;

> Specialized Mahadhras, which teach only two disciplines (the Quran and one additional subject);

> Quranic Mahadhras, which provide only religious teaching.

Young people typically learn Arabic and begin studying the Quran within the family setting before attending mahadhras to further their knowledge. Quranic schools enrol a diverse range of students, ranging from 5 to 18 years old, and are representative of a plurality of social backgrounds. As these schools are based on volunteering, while formal education is based on professionalisation and salaried employment, tuition fees are low, and their teachings are focused on religious content and on repetition and memorisation techniques. In recent years, the mahadhras education system has been undertaking rapid changes in an effort to adapt to evolving needs and priorities. In fact, due to sedentarisation and urbanisation, while the demand for formal education has been increasing, especially at the primary level, families still aim for their children to receive a religious education, which is only available in mahadhras. Consequently, most mahadhras have rearranged their schedules and programmes, allowing children to attend these schools either early in the morning or in the afternoon, thus combining formal education with a religious one. Demand for Quranic schools therefore remains strong: the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Original Education reported that in 2021, there were a total of 8,416 mahadhras in Mauritania, including 6,743 Quranic mahadhras. They were attended by 387,133 students, of whom 254,149 were also enrolled in formal education. Mauritania also counts seven institutions offering Arab-Islamic higher education.[149]

Besides offering religious teachings, mahadhras have been reported to serve as temporary shelters for unaccompanied minors who are on their way to Europe from neighbouring countries such as Senegal, Gambia, Mali, and Guinea. These mahadhras are a place of refuge for children who often lack access to care and protection services and may be victims of trafficking, physical abuse, forced labour, or forced to beg.

Lastly, it is important to note that mahadhras do not usually provide professional training in traditional sectors such as agriculture, livestock, fishing, construction, or mechanics. Offering such courses and developing vocational training centres would be extremely beneficial in addressing one of the main concerns reported by respondents across all target areas, i.e. unemployment.

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148 In Mauritania, formal Quranic schools are called mahadhras. The methods and tools of these schools were adapted to the lifestyle of the nomadic populations in the country.

149 The Modern University of Chinguetti; the Higher Institute of Islamic Studies and Research (ISERI); the University of Islamic Sciences of Aioun; the Great Chinguitian Mahadhra; the Ibn Abbas Institute; the Center of Ulama Training; Abdellah Ibn Yassin University.

Women Religious Preachers

One of the priorities of the Mahadhra reform in Mauritania has been to promote women's role within Quranic schools and, in this context, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Original Education has encouraged the presence of women, known as Cheykhatt, as managers and teachers. This significant initiative acknowledges and, by providing tailored capacity-building courses, strengthens the important role women play in the religious education space, traditionally dominated by men. By including women in prevention activities, this reform also reinforces the fight against violent extremism. This is indeed extremely relevant in the educational context, since that, in the past, VEGs from the Maghreb have reportedly travelled to Mauritanian madrasas to recruit young people.

5.2.4 Role and Participation of Women

Employment

Selling products at **local markets and trade** are the two most commonly reported types of employment for **women** in the target areas of Mauritania. Self-employment, such as food preparation and public service roles in healthcare and education, are also cited, but to a much lesser extent. In contrast to Mali and Niger, agriculture is not a significant source of income for women, and they are only minimally involved in pastoralism. More generally, despite 92% of respondents stated that women are allowed to work outside the home, the percentage of respondents reporting that women do not work and lack family support was higher compared to the other target countries, suggesting high level of unemployment.

Men's primary source of income is work in the **market and trade**, followed by **pastoralism and agriculture**, although to a lesser extent compared to Mali and Niger. In terms of regional differences, agriculture is reportedly more prevalent in Hodh Ech Chargui, while in Assaba and Nouakchott, fisheries, work in public administration, and public services are more common.

Key informant interviewees described a gender-based division of labour within households and communities, where women and girls are primarily responsible for household chores and caregiving duties, while men and boys are usually involved in aspects related to community relations and cohesion, occupying public spaces and decision-making roles. "*The village chief and male members of the community tend to manage public activities, dykes, infrastructure, social cohesion and relations with other villages... religious aspects are also*

the responsibility of the men."[150] This division is particularly prevalent in rural communities, while in urban areas roles and responsibilities tend to be less rigid. Here, gender roles are slowly changing under the effects of technology, social networks, urbanisation, and television, allowing women *"[to] play roles they never played before."*[151]

"In the urban environment, things are changing; some women work outside their home and have substantial incomes that allow them to influence family decisions. These changes are more or less noticeable, depending on the cities and the neighbourhoods."[152]

Marriage

▶ **Figure 19. Age of marriage of girls, urban vs rural (Mauritania, all region)**
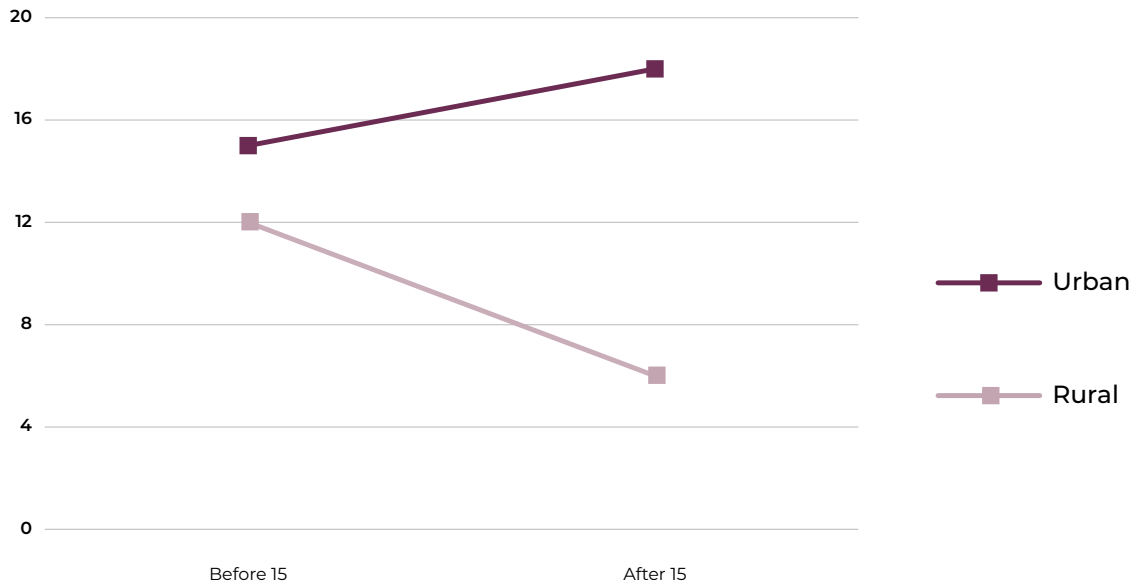
In the target areas, respondents indicate religious marriage as the preferred type of matrimony (94%), while traditional marriages account for only 6% of the total and civil marriages are not reported. Decisions regarding the marriage are predominantly made by the parents of the prospective couple. The survey also reveals that 36% of girls in Hodh Ech Chargui marry before the age of 15, whereas in the capital Nouakchott, **early marriages** are less common, with only 6% of respondents reporting them. Nevertheless, these statistics are alarming, and it should be noted that, according to this study, almost all men get married after the age of 18.

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150 Key Informant Interview, international organisation representative, Kiffa, Assaba.
151 Key Informant Interviews, religious leaders.
152 Key Informant Interviews, religious leaders.

When it comes to **decision-making within the household,** women reportedly have some influence over their children's and their own education, participation in public activities, health and work. According to the survey, 60% of respondents believe that religious norms, which are more strictly followed in Assaba and Hodh Ech Chargui, are the primary limiting factor for women's freedom to engage in activities outside the household. The remaining 40% is evenly divided between cultural values and fear of aggression. In Nouakchott specifically, religious norms are equally significant as the other two factors. Some key informant interviewees confirmed that women are usually able to leave the house, but only under certain conditions, such as wearing *"decent clothes and guaranteed security."*[153]

Unlike certain areas of Mali, as reported by respondents, violent extremist groups and ideologies, despite their presence along the country's borders, have not yet influenced gender roles in Mauritania. Focus group discussions held with women and girls reveal that there is a certain degree of awareness about restrictions that violent extremist groups may pose to women: *"We do not see an influence of violent extremist groups. If they were here, they would have forbidden women to work and go freely into town."*[154] Additionally, a religious leader stated *"Certain enlightened religious people rightly believe that religion has a middle position on the role of women, which is not that of the traditionalists who want to keep them prisoners within four walls."*[155] Interestingly, a security expert revealed that matrimonial alliances are part of the strategies employed by violent extremist groups to establish their presence in the region: *"Violent extremist groups have wives in Mauritania. These alliances sometimes help them to hide and defend themselves."*[156]

5.2.5 Violence and Insecurity

In Mauritania's target regions, the majority of the **reported security threats (85%) stem from violent actions committed by non-state armed groups**, with threats by violent extremist groups accounting for only around 10% of total responses. During key informant interviews, representatives from international organisations confirmed that youth offenders and non-state armed groups, including militias, vigilante groups, and bandits, frequently perpetrate violent actions. They also reported inter-ethnic conflicts and violence committed by armed state actors.

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153 Key informant Interviews, religious leaders.
154 Focus Group Discussion with women and girls in Néma, Hodh Ech Chargui.
155 Key Informant Interviews, religious leaders.
156 Key Informant Interview, security expert, Nouakchott.

▶ **Figure 20. What are the major acts of violence committed against women and girls in the area? (Mauritania, all regions, all actors: community; local authorities; CSOs)**

Legend:
- Nouakchott
- Hodh Ech Chargui
- Assaba
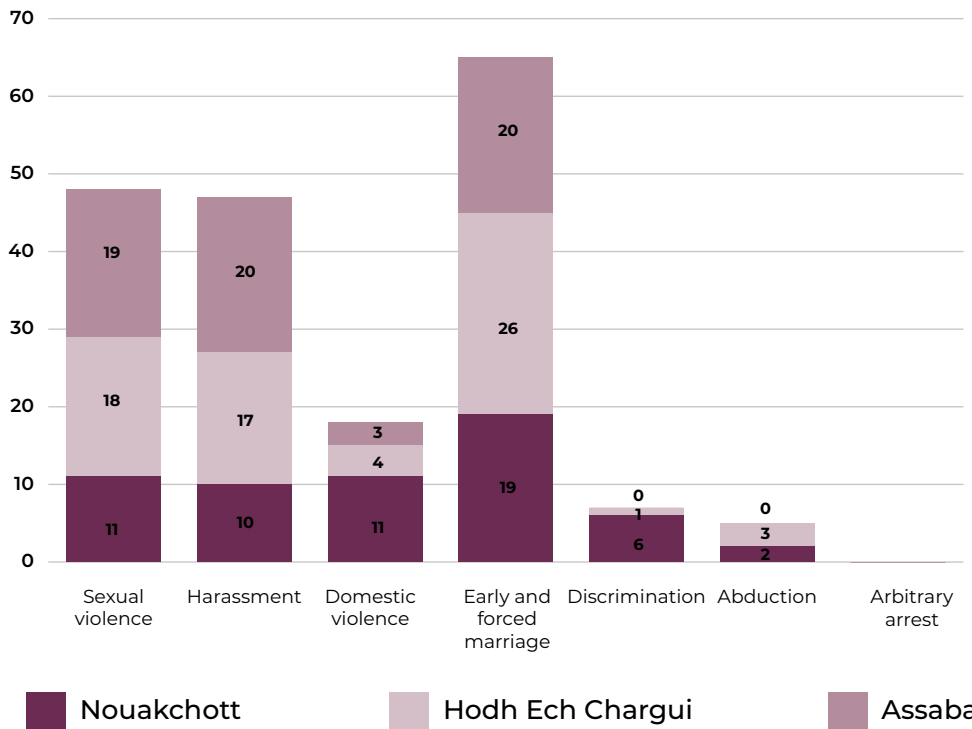
> *"Youth crime and insecurity have increased, and the attacks have multiplied. This is due to poverty, idleness, drug abuse and youth unemployment."*[157]

During an interview, a security expert described **prevailing insecurity along the border with Mali,** where armed state actors, ethnic-based militias, and sometimes violent extremist groups and bandits operate and where conflicts between farmers and pastoralists are also occurring. Indeed, women and girls who participated in a focus group discussion in Kiffa (Assaba) confirmed their feeling of vulnerability due to the proximity to the border with Mali. They expressed *"the fear of seeing the terrorist armed groups crossing the border and settling in our country."*[158]

In Mauritania, those surveyed feel that protection from these forms of violence is granted by their family members, state actors and local authorities, while armed state actors, such as the defence and security forces, are not perceived as protectors.

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157 Focus Group Discussion with civil society actors in Arafat, Nouakchott.
158 Focus Group Discussion with women and girls in Kiffa, Assaba.

▶ **Figure 21. Who commits the acts of violence? (Mauritania, all regions, all actors: community; local authorities; CSOs)**
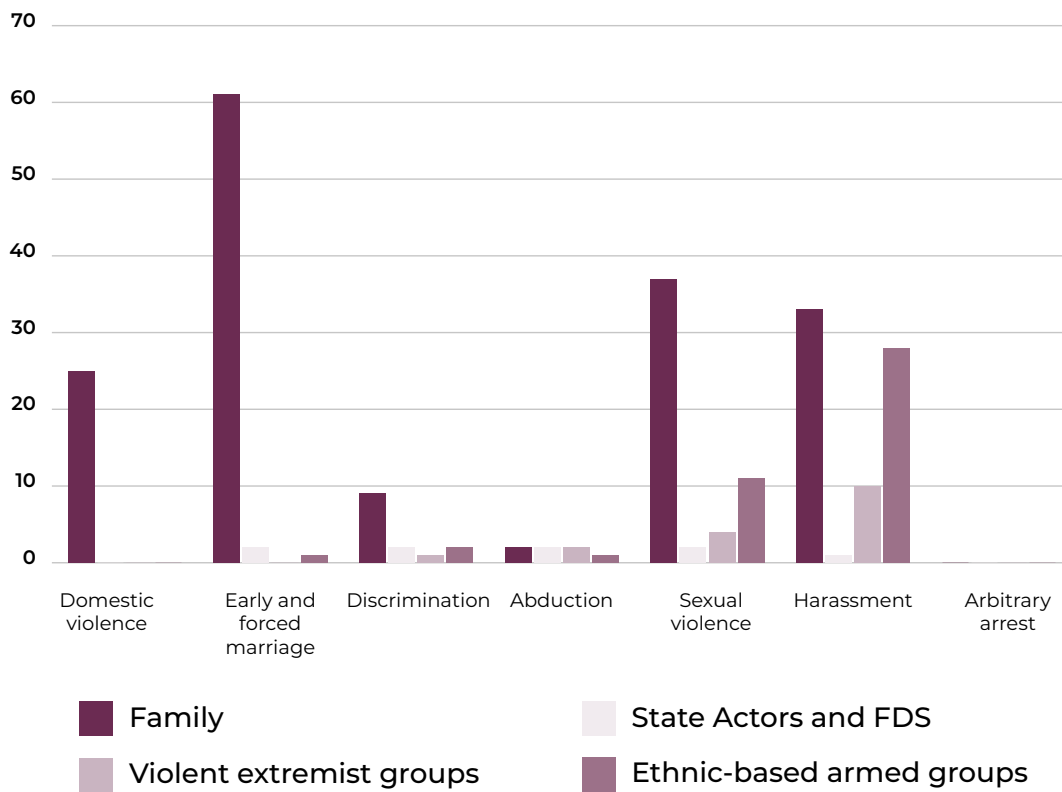
Violence Against Women and Girls

When asked to identify the primary victims of violence and insecurity, 69% of respondents selected both men and women, while 29% selected women and girls. In Hodh Ech Chargui, survey respondents perceived women and girls as being more vulnerable to violence than in other regions. Regarding the most **prevalent form of violence against women and girls**, the survey's results highlight early and forced marriage as a major issue – which, according to interviews with international organisations representatives, is often caused by family instability. During focus group discussions, civil society actors also reported cases of rape, harassment, and assault, while other key informant interviews denounced the practice of female genital mutilation.

Compared to Mali and, to some extent, to Niger, where sexual violence and abductions by violent extremist groups are more frequently recorded, in Mauritania violence committed by VEGs is less common. Only a few responses denounced forms of harassment, and there were a total of six responses reporting sexual violence and abduction. This can be attributed to the fact that the target areas of the study in Mauritania are not currently experiencing open conflict. Violence by other armed groups, such as militias, is not commonly reported in Nouakchott

but is more prevalent in Hodh Ech Chargui and Assaba. Unfortunately, in these two regions, harassment is reported to be equally perpetrated by both family members and militias, as it is the case of sexual violence in Hodh Ech Chargui. In Assaba, sexual violence is most frequently committed by family members.

5.2.6 Violent Extremism

Joining Violent Extremist Groups and Recruitment Tactics

As mentioned in the analysis of the context, VEGs are still present in Mauritania, even if some of their members are active outside of the country, mainly in Mali. In the target areas of this study, survey respondents have reported several reasons why individuals could join violent extremist groups. These are diverse and multifaceted and include the **pursuit of monetary gain** or a **sense of purpose in life**, **religious convictions**, **tribal and family alliances** or the **aspiration for improved living standards**. Notably, the need to defend communities and families against insecurity and violence is not among the factors cited by interviewees.

Factors Leading to Radicalisation According to Religious Leaders

During interviews with imams, these religious leaders have highlighted the strong connection between radicalisation and vulnerability:

> *"The needs of young people are not yet satisfied; that is why they are looking elsewhere."*

> *"Terrorist organisations have the means to attract young people – terrorist groups have the money; young people need it."*

> *"Poverty and unemployment make young people vulnerable to manipulation; terrorists are good manipulators."*

> *"The absence of acceptable living conditions incites terrorism."*

> *"Poverty, unemployment and precariousness are not the exclusive causes of violent extremism, but they greatly encourage it."*

> *"Poverty and misery are fertile ground for terrorism and its proliferation because they make you lose hope; once you lose hope, anything can happen."*

> *"If some young people find someone who will get them out of poverty, unemployment and precariousness, they will follow him blindly, and the terrorists are aware of that."*

> *"The desire to get rich pushes many young people towards extremist movements."*

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Factors Leading to Radicalisation According to a Security Expert

The security expert emphasised that the reasons leading to violent extremism are incredibly complex, multifaceted, and often interconnected, and therefore cannot be simplified or categorised. These include:

> *The allure of the religious message.*

> *Ignorance of Islam and its jurisprudence.*

> *Poverty and vulnerable living conditions.*

> *Precariousness and social exclusion.*

> *Perceived injustices and the feeling of oppression.*

> *Psychological motivation or the search for glory through acts of brilliance.*

> *The search for a new identity.*

> *Media coverage and the internet.*

> *Weak state structures.*

According to the research's findings, violent extremist groups use **threats** as well as religion, including **preaching,** to assert their influence and attract individuals. A security expert interviewed during this study noted that these strategies are prevalent in areas characterised by political corruption and weak public administration. In addition to these tactics, VEGs employ a variety of approaches:

"Terrorist groups use all imaginable means to recruit young people. I have seen a video of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb filming a hunting scene to attract potential recruits."[159]

Religion holds critical significance in the daily lives of community members and, according to key informant interviews, men, not only members of VEGs, sometimes exploit religion as an excuse for violence. Religious leaders strongly condemn this practice.

"Those who have a thorough knowledge of religion will distance themselves from extremist groups; those who know it poorly can use religion as an excuse to join armed groups. The 2010 dialogues between the greatest scholars of the country and the detainees with connections with extremist groups provided a proper interpretation of the sources used to incite violence and recruit young people. This initiative reduced the recruitment capacities of VEGs in Mauritania, but it is a shame that it was not replicated abroad."[160]

Specifically in relation to women, the research revealed that some may demonstrate support for extremist groups due to factors such as **subordination,**

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159   Key Informant Interviews, religious leaders.
160   Key Informant Interviews, religious leaders.

marital ties, or financial incentives. *"Women involved in violent extremism often look serious, display the image of religious, devout women and do not stand out."*[161] A few interviewees reported that, when involved in violent extremist groups, women can collect information, train other women and young people, as well as provide logistical support.[162] *"They are very effective in disseminating the ideas they rightly or wrongly adopt, and in gathering and transmitting information. [These] women dress differently from other women. They are very committed and ready to make any sacrifice and to do a lot of publicity for the ideology they embrace."*[163]

Prevention of Violent Extremism

According to the survey's results, in the target areas, both women and men share common resilience factors against violent extremism, which include:

> **State's investments in guaranteeing access to income;**

> **Quality education for girls and boys;**

> **Availability of health services.**

▶ **Figure 22. Key resilience factors of men, boys, women and girls in the face of violent extremist groups (Mauritania, all regions and and all actors:communities, local authorities and CSOs)**

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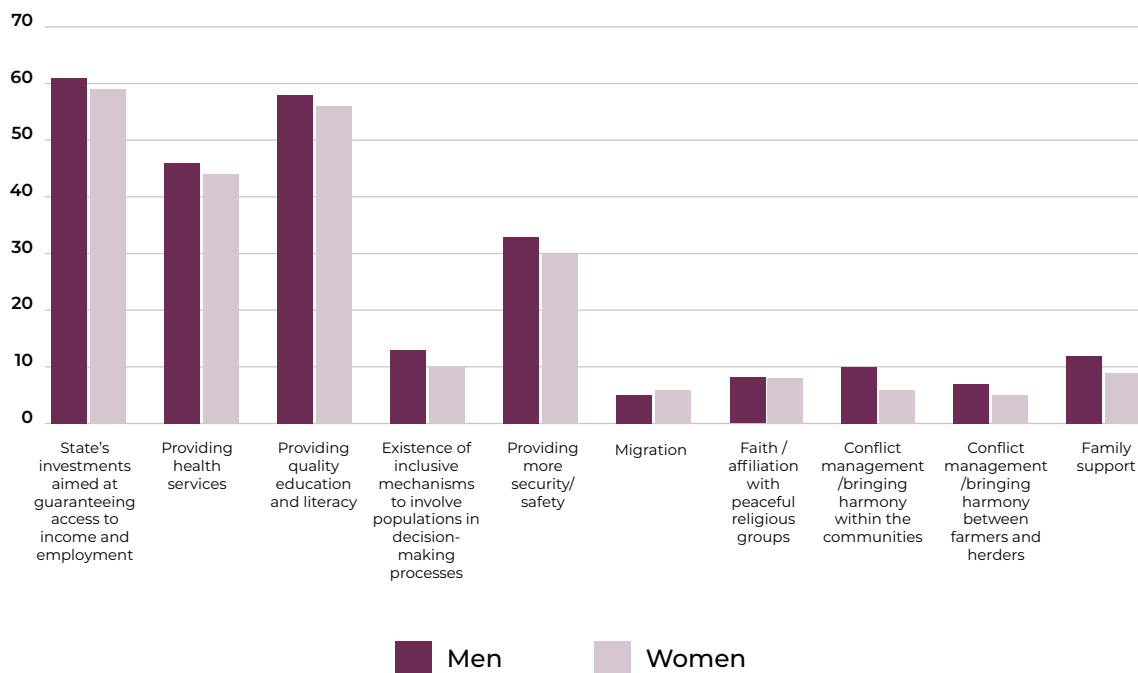
161   Focus Group Discussion with civil society actors in Arafat, Nouakchott.
162   Key Informant Interview, international organisation representative, Kiffa, Assaba.
163   Key Informant Interviews, religious leaders.

However, only a small percentage of community members who participated in the survey (approximately 7%, mostly men from Nouakchott) have taken part in initiatives addressing the aforementioned factors, such as income-generating activities, health education, or literacy skills training. The majority of respondents have never been engaged in such activities, with no participation reported in Assaba and almost no participation in Hodh Ech Chargui.

According to community members, the number of actors providing these services is also limited, primarily consisting of CSOs and the state. When asked about the reason why they did not participate, approximately 6% (in Assaba and Hodh Ech Chargui) responded they are not willing to be involved in such activities. However, the majority of **respondents (83%) stated that these services are not available in their area.** Interestingly, the type of provider for these activities does not seem to impact the decision to participate, as respondents reported having no preference and being open to taking part in PVE initiatives whether they are offered by civil society, the state, international organisations, or religious associations. Despite respondents' low participation rate, the results of the survey administered specifically to civil society and local authorities indicate that these actors do implement several initiatives aimed at education and literacy, income generation, leadership and skills training, and healthcare. Notably, these actors reported targeting primarily women and girls, while the majority of community members who reported participating in these types of activities were men. This suggest that there may be several obstacles to women's engagement in PVE initiatives, including threats and lack of security for both themselves and their children.

▶ **Figure 23. Do your offices/authorities/CSOs organise programmes with the aim of providing services to women and men such as the following? (Mauritania, all regions. Actors: civil society organisations and local authorities).**
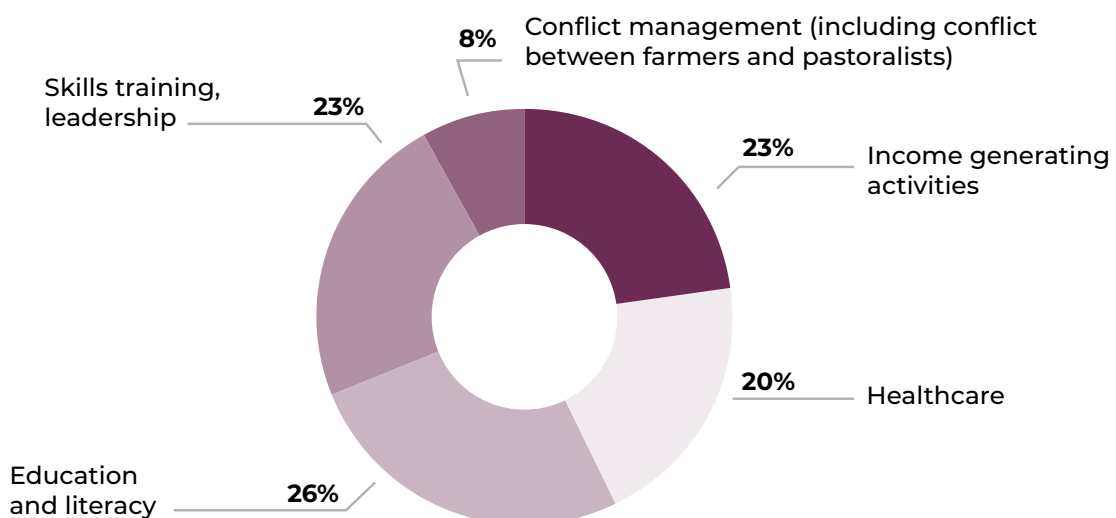
Indeed, according to this study, to **encourage women's involvemen**t in relevant programmes, it is crucial to grant them safety and protection, and ensure that these initiatives align with religious values, provide childcare services, are well-promoted, facilitate income opportunities, are scheduled at suitable times, and are held in locations close to beneficiaries' homes or workplaces. Having these activities conducted in gender-segregated spaces seems more important for men than for women, although it is generally not considered an essential factor (as it was in Mali and Niger). As frequently suggested, interviewees also underlined the importance of context-specific interventions, highlighting the need to *"create a framework for women's involvement that adapts its actions to the needs of women in each locality and environment."*[164] Promoting increased participation of women and girls by considering all of the above elements, is critical to developing effective PVE efforts, as *"when women are motivated and convinced, they can move mountains."*[165]

In the PVE context, women are, in fact, reported to have an important role as community mobilisers and organisers of awareness-raising activities and educational dialogues on the negative aspects of joining violent extremist groups. They also *"distribute posters and go door-to-door to organise talks with women of the same age."*[166] Another interesting suggestion that was mentioned several times by key informant interviewees is the development of women's networks specifically focused on countering and preventing violent extremism, akin to the Mourchidates. Such networks could enhance women's resilience and increase their engagement in this sector.

Regarding the more effective media to promote PVE initiatives and reach community members in the area, most respondents indicated that social media, television, radio, and newspapers are the most appropriate to reach men and boys. Interestingly, six respondents reported that door-to-door outreach is the best effective way to reach men in Hodh Ech Chargui. Unfortunately, data on the most appropriate media to reach women and girls were not collected in Assaba and Hodh Ech Chargui, and the limited data collected in Nouakchott indicate that women also prefer social media. It is unclear why the majority of respondents did not provide a response to indicate the most appropriate media to reach women; this may be due to gender bias or the fact that women may not use media as frequently as men.

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164   Focus Group Discussion with civil society actors in Arafat, Nouakchott.
165   Focus Group Discussion with women and girls in Kiffa, Assaba.
166   Focus Group Discussion with civil society actors in Arafat, Nouakchott.

▶ **Figure 24. In order to participate in the implementation of these programmes, it is important that they are: (Mauritania, all regions)**
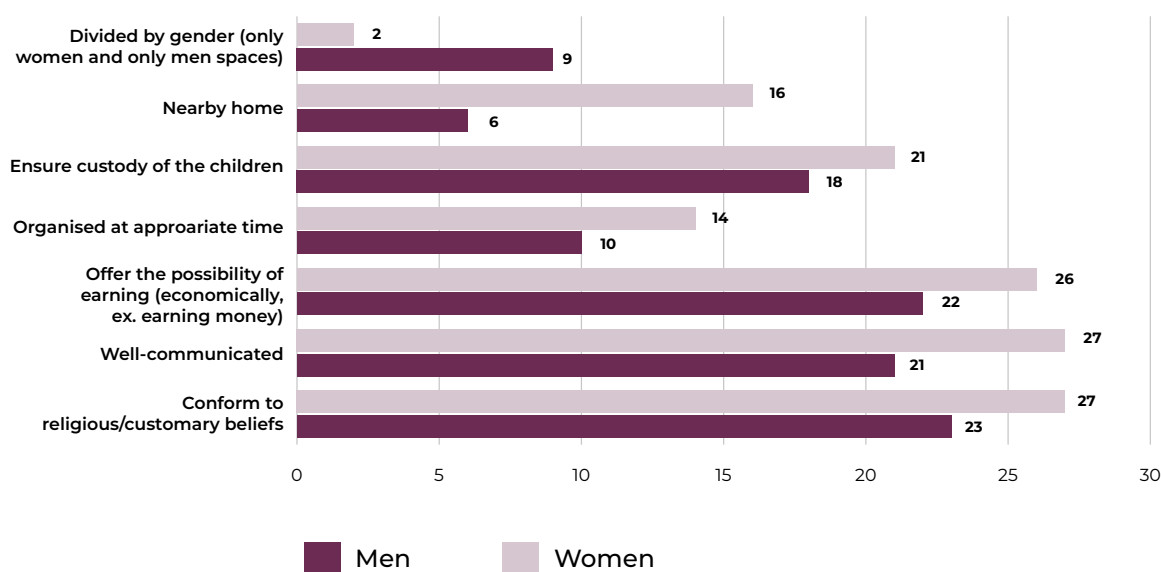
Good Practices in Inclusive PVE Initiatives

Through key informant interviews, the study collected examples and good practices adopted at local level to promote women's participation in preventing violent extremism.

1. The G5 Sahel Women's Platform was mentioned by the security expert as an example of good practice. This platform focuses on mediation, negotiation, peace and security – including PVE.

2. Some local authorities reported income-generating activities and savings schemes as effective means to enhance resilience against poverty. Tontines, for instance, are frequent among women,[167] and consist in credit associations that allow members to save small amounts of money.[168] The twiza, which translates to "solidarity system", is another interesting example where groups of people operate to carry out tasks or provide services for the benefit of the local community.[169]

3. The Mourchidates Network, developed by UNODC in collaboration with the Mauritanian Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Original Education, the National Antenna for the Fight Against Radicalization of the G5 Sahel, and the Association of Women Heads of Families, serves as a good model for promoting the

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167 Amadou Diop, *La Finance Informelle en Mauritanie : Fondements et Evolution Récente*, Finance & Bien Commun, (2007/3), N° 28-29: 58-64.

168 Ibid.

169 Stefano Verdecchia, *Cartographie des OSC, ICE* - International Consulting Expertise (2016).

involvement of women in PVE efforts. This network comprises women tasked with raising awareness among communities about alternative narratives to counter violent extremism. They operate in various settings, including mosques, prisons, youth centres, public spaces, and schools. This approach underscores the crucial role of women in educating children about religious knowledge and promoting social harmony. Mourchidates are selected based on their knowledge of Islam, leadership roles, influence within their community, cultural backgrounds, and willingness to engage in voluntary work. Thanks to this initiative:

> Local communities, including those in border areas, have been sensitised to PVE efforts;

> Women have been empowered as religious guides and community leaders responsible for raising awareness of the alternatives to violent extremism;

> Synergies and collaborative efforts between religious leaders and women and girls have been strengthened;

> More women now feel more comfortable expressing their views in public and are more willing to engage in open discussions about gender equality, women's roles in security professions, and the criminal justice system.

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5.3 Niger

Summary of Findings

Niger[170] continues to face multiple challenges due to the presence of violent extremist groups within its borders. While state control and service provision are more robust in Niamey, VEGs are more prevalent in the municipalities of the Tillabéri region. Consequently, security threats primarily arise from non-state armed groups, including ethnic-based militias, and conflicts between farmers and herders. In Tillabéri, where pastoralism is prevalent, these conflicts are sometimes intertwined, as controlling the herd can be challenging due to cattle theft by VEGs.

The findings reveal that in the target areas of Niger, both men and women face difficulties such as **unemployment, financial instability, and food scarcity.** These challenges are compounded by a sense of **personal insecurity** resulting from the **ongoing violence**. Although living conditions are harsh for the majority of the population, women and girls experience specific forms of discrimination and violence. The Tillabéri area, in particular, grapples with issues like early and forced marriages and abductions, while most cases of domestic violence are reported in Niamey.

Access to education, although probably limited to primary education, appears to be available to both boys and girls, despite concerns about the poor quality of teaching in public schools, the high costs of private education, and safety concerns in rural areas.

Considering the above challenges, the survey's respondents identified the following elements as key factors to promote the well-being and resilience of women, girls, men and boys:

> **State investments in guaranteeing access to income;**

> **Access to quality education and healthcare services;**

> **Inclusive engagement in decision-making processes.**

However, when developing prevention initiatives, it is critical to consider these factors in conjunction with contextual aspects and gender-specific differences. For example, while employment is mentioned as one of the main resilience factors by interviewees, 69% of survey respondents agree that women are not permitted to work outside their homes. Although there is not a significant difference between urban and rural areas, this restriction is more noticeable in Tillabéri. It is noteworthy that the majority of respondents (approximately two-thirds),

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170 As described in the Methodology section, for the purpose of this research, field visits in the country were conducted between April and May 2023 and therefore preceded the coup of 26 July. The collection of data was thus not impacted by these most recent events, and the analysis included in this study reflects the situation as observed during the Spring of 2023

who agreed with this sentence were men. Therefore, these results underscore the need to engage with men, including husbands and fathers, especially in the Tillabéri area, to raise awareness about the importance of women's formal employment and their participation in activities outside their homes. This approach can also facilitate the creation of inclusive consultative spaces and ultimately foster women's involvement in decision-making processes within their community. Indeed, during the interviews, the importance of women assuming prominent roles in public spaces has already emerged as a positive factor for change. This shift can be partially attributed to awareness-raising programmes focused on capacity building and women's rights.

Lastly, partnering with local authorities and women's organisations can be a strategic choice to implement activities aimed at building resilience. According to the survey, these entities are considered to have a positive influence in the target areas and/or are perceived as guarantors of security. In fact, both women and men reported participating in projects organised by these actors, encompassing capacity-building, income-generating activities, education, literacy, healthcare, and leadership initiatives.

NIGER

Summary of Data Collection and Target Groups

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

Local authority, urban, Torodi (Tillabéri)
Local authority, urban, Niamey
Security expert, Niamey
UN Women representative, Niamey
Religious leader, rural area, Torodi (Tillabéri)
Religious leader, urban area, Tillabéri
Religious leader, urban area, Niamey
Religious leader, urban area, Niamey

REGION OF TILLABÉRI

TORODI
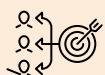
NIAMEY

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Civil society actors,
Niamey

7 participants

Women and girls, men
and boys, Tillabéri

15 participants

Civil society actors,
Tillabéri

30 participants

SURVEY OF COMMUNITY MEMBERS

52 women and men from
the target areas (Niamey
and Tillabéri) of which:

19 Female

33 Male

Divided as follows:

Niamey ➜ 26: 25 urban, 1 rural – 14 men, 12 women –
19 Fulani, 4 Zarma, 3 Haoussa

Tillabéri ➜ 26: 12 urban, 14 rural – 19 men, 7 women –
9 Fulani, 6 Zarma, 5 Soninké, 2 Touareg, 2 Gourmantché,
1 Haoussa, 1 Dogon

SURVEY OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES

12 CSOs

7 in Niamey
5 in Tillabéri

10 Local Authorities

7 in Niamey
3 in Tillabéri

5.3.1 The Target Areas

In Niger, the target areas of this study covered the municipalities of Niamey, Tillabéri and Torodi (the latter two both located in the Tillabéri region). **Niamey, the capital of Niger**, comprises five municipalities, and UNICRI's data collection focused on two of them: Communes IV and Commune V. Communes IV is the largest in terms of population, and houses the international airport and most of the capital's industrial plants. Commune V is separated from the rest of the capital by the Niger River, and is home to Fulani nomads and Sonrais fishermen along its banks. Both areas face a high risk of direct impact from extremist violence and could potentially serve as bases for these groups.

The Tillabéri region, predominantly rural, is home to various ethnic groups, including Fulani, Zarma, Tuareg, Hausa, Gourmantché, Dogon, Soninké, and Songhay. The region has experienced frequent attacks, that have had a severe impact on the local population, particularly women and children. It has become one of the areas with the most critical conditions for women in the country. For this study's purposes, high-risk locations in this region were avoided, and data collection was conducted in relatively stable towns, despite occasional attacks.

NIGER

In both municipalities, Tillabéri and Torodi, essential public services like healthcare and education are available, and there is a significant presence of defence and security forces as well as facilities for displaced persons.

5.3.2 Concerns, Unmet Needs, and Social Demands

At the country level, both women and men reported **unemployment, financial instability, food insecurity**, and **violence** as significant concerns in their lives. Other critical issues include the insufficient provision of education, healthcare, access to WASH, transportation, and infrastructure, as well as limited resources such as energy and land.

In terms of security, when considering gender-disaggregated data, it appears that boys are more affected by forced labour, while girls are more frequently victims of harmful practices like forced marriage and sexual violence. Furthermore, basic needs, such as **health and education,** remain unmet, and high poverty rates and poor sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) disproportionately affect women's well-being. Although health centres and hospitals are accessible, they are often prohibitively expensive and suffer from staff shortages. To address this issue, specialised hospitals for women and children, including maternity units, gynaecology services, and paediatric care centres, are needed.

> *"You must visit the central maternity hospital in Niamey; you will see the suffering of pregnant women who cannot even find a bed, let alone a doctor. It is no exaggeration to say that women die by the dozen every day in the maternity ward. In some areas, it is simply a silent catastrophe."*[171]

In Tillabéri specifically, the main concerns reported were food insecurity and violence, closely followed by lack of employment, difficult access to resources, education, health, WASH, and infrastructure. These issues are particularly challenging for women in the area, with personal security and healthcare services described as the most pressing needs. In this region, men reported struggling to control their herds, with cattle theft by violent extremist groups occurring frequently.

Respondents from Niamey face similar challenges but with slightly better access to resources, transport, infrastructure, and personal security. However, access to healthcare services remains a significant concern for women. Focus group discussions reported high levels of concern towards urban banditry and delinquency in the capital. Young girls described being victims of aggression by

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171   Key Informant Interview, UN Women representative, Niamey, Niger.

▶ **Figure 25. What are the major concerns of daily life in your community? (Niger, all regions)**

Women — Men
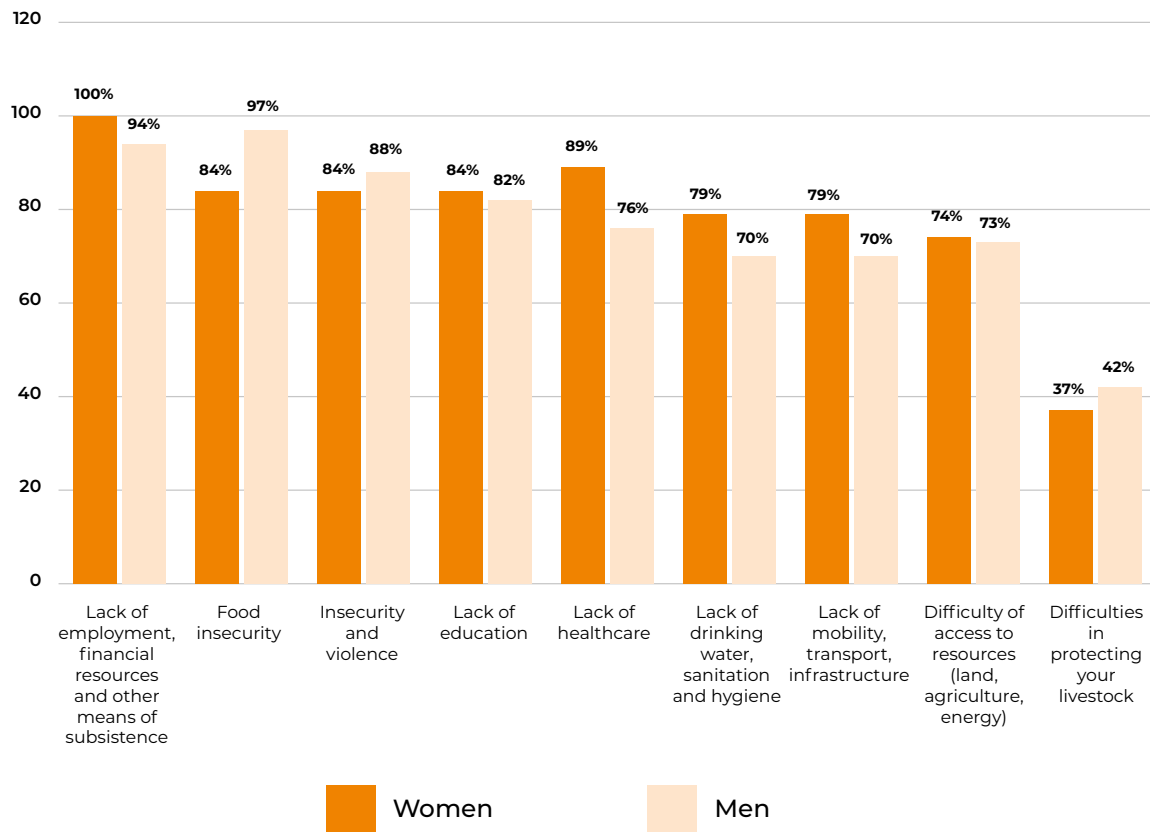
young boys on motorbikes attempting to or succeeding in stealing their belongings, such as money and mobile phones, which has led to fear of circulating alone in certain neighbourhoods. According to interviewees, factors such as poverty and lack of education contribute to pushing young boys towards criminal behaviour and delinquency.

"It will take a real policy towards women and young girls to get out of this infernal circle. The list is long because everything is a concern, and everything is lacking in Niger."[172]

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172 Ibid.

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▶ **Figure 26. What do men and women lack most in your community? (Niger, all regions)**

	Women	Men
Employment, financial resources and means of substistence	46	52
Food security	43	47
Protection and personal security	42	44
Education	40	44
Health	37	43
Drinking water, sanitation and hyghene	37	43
Mobility, transport, infrastructure	27	40
Access to resouces	21	34
Access to and control over the livestock	10	20
Protection against forced labour	7	12
Protection from harmful practices (early and forced marriage, sexual violence)	11	8
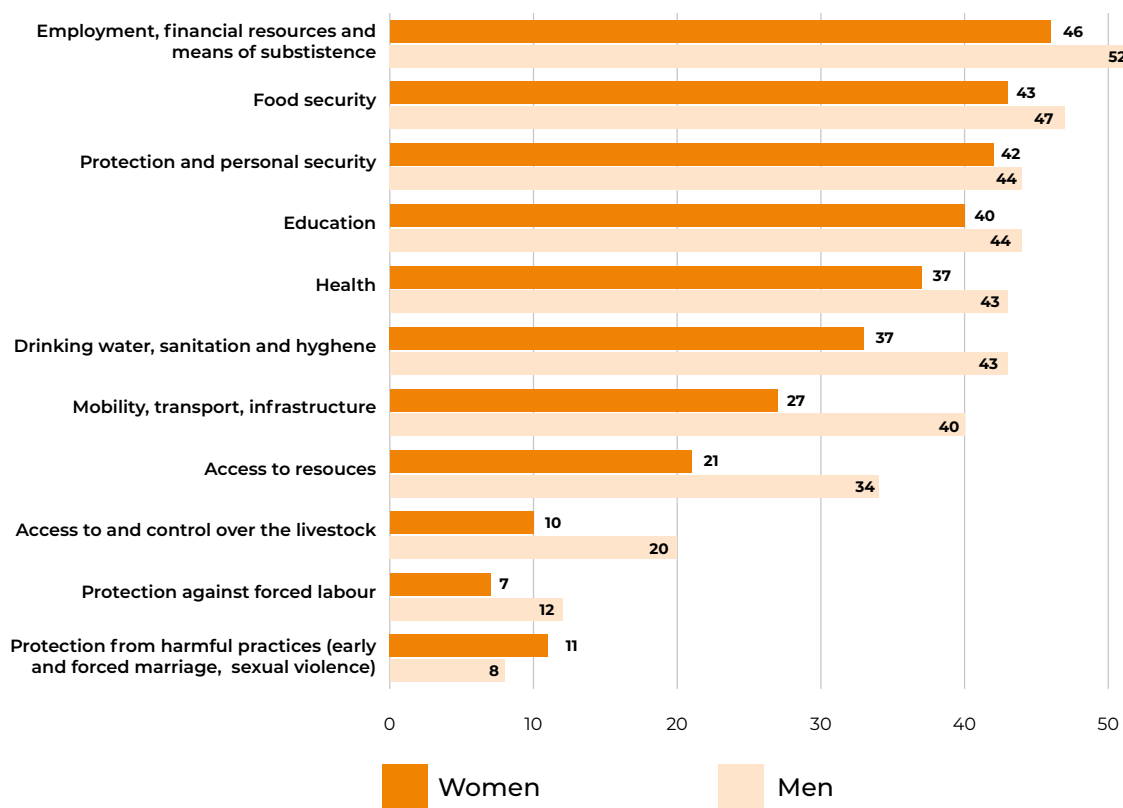
Providers of Services and Security: State and Non-State Actors

According to respondents, **state actors and local authorities are the primary service providers, exerting influence and control** in the target regions. They are responsible for meeting **communities' needs**, from providing financial resources and essential services to ensuring protection, personal security, and food security. Although defence and security forces, traditional chiefs, tribal chiefs, and religious leaders also hold some authority, they are not recognised as the main influential actors.

Violent extremist groups are reported to be solely responsible for generating violence and insecurity, threatening peace and local cohesion. Interestingly, responses from female and male community members suggest that VEGs are not actively targeting young individuals for recruitment. However, civil society organisations and local authorities, argue that these groups are indeed recruiting young people, particularly in the Tillabéri region, where their presence is more prominent. It is noteworthy that only one respondent from Niamey selected violent extremist groups as providers of social services, including education, healthcare, employment, financial resources, food security, and protection.

▶ **Figure 27. Who is the actor who controls and exerts the most influence in your community? (Niger, all regions)**

Traditional actors - traditional chiefs, tribal chiefs, religious leaders

8%

Defence and security forces

4%

State and local authorities

88%
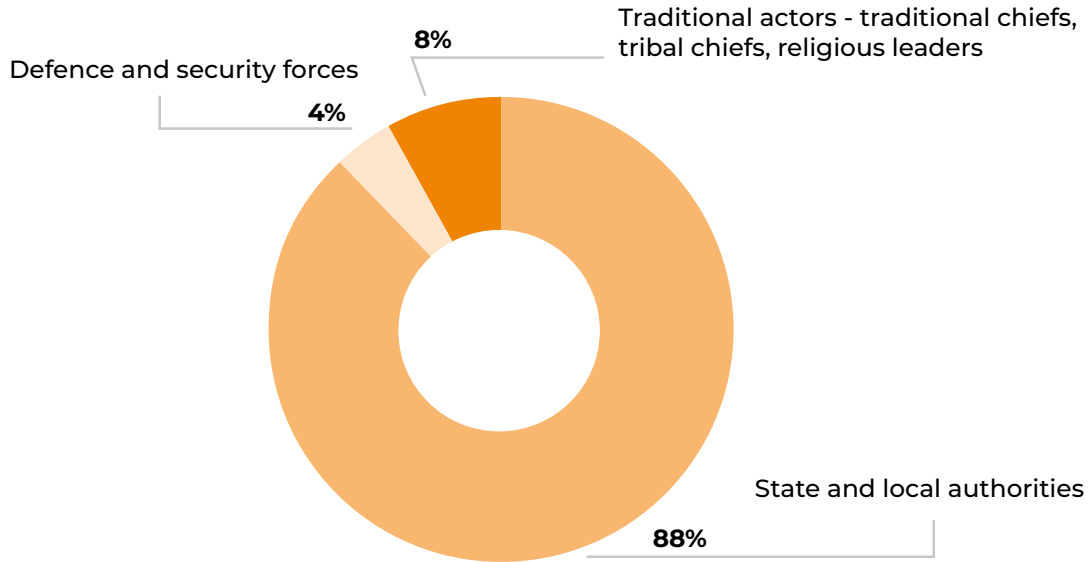
▶ **Figure 28. Roles played by state and non-state actors in the community (Niger, all regions)**

State and local authorities

Violent extremist groups

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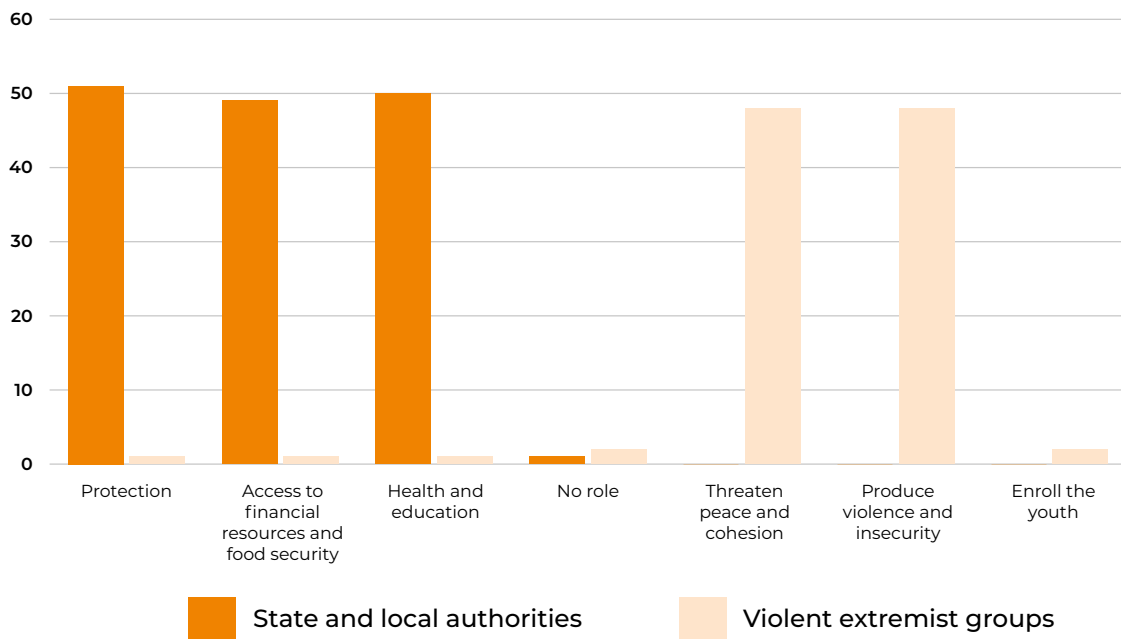
5.3.3 Education

According to all survey respondents, both boys and girls attend school, whether public or private. School selection is based on the quality of education, affordability, school safety, and religious beliefs – the latter being a critical factor, especially in Niamey.

Key informant interviews also confirmed that **schools are accessible to girls,** despite several **challenges** such as the **poor quality of teaching in public schools**, the **high costs of private ones**, and **safety concerns** in **rural areas**. Interestingly, men more often than women reported safety (of both girls and boys) as an important factor in school selection.

Young girls are increasingly attending **Quranic schools**, mostly at the primary levels compared to secondary ones, since these institutions are not designed to facilitate entry into the labour market.[173] The same tendency is also reported in Mauritania, where madrasas lack technical and vocational education training to prepare students for employment.

> *"As the state is the largest provider of employment and it is the state that recognises diplomas, it goes without saying that at the higher level, most students attend public schools. Girls of legal age attend Quranic schools incidentally since they do not offer employment opportunities."*[174]

Women Religious Preachers and Women-led Quranic Schools

In Niger, some religious women, known as Oustazias, teach the Quran to other women in madrasas or their own homes. The practice is more common in Niamey, where there are women-led Quranic schools for women, and less common in rural areas – only one woman is reported to teach the Quran to other women and girls in her community in Torodi (Tillabéri). Although Oustazias lack a public platform to assert their function as religious leaders and their role in society is not yet widely accepted, there are instances where women can be seen preaching on some media channels, particularly in Niamey.

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173 Key Informant Interview, UN Women representative, Niamey, Niger.
174 Ibid.

5.3.4 Role and Participation of Women

Employment

In terms of productive activities, the survey shows that the main sources of income for both **men and women are trade and selling goods at the market**, followed by **agriculture** and **pastoralism,** particularly in Tillabéri. Public administration and self-employment are less common but can be found in Niamey, while fishing is practised in Tillabéri. Jobs in the private sector are almost non-existent for men, but women are reported to be more involved in this sector, for example in food preparation, and more women than men are self-employed, especially in the capital.

Out of all respondents, 69% stated that women are not allowed to work outside of their homes, with approximately one-third of these respondents being women and two-thirds being men. This restriction has been evenly reported across target locations, although it is more noticeable in Tillabéri. Religious values and norms have been cited as the primary reason for such limited freedom of movement. While some concerns about the risk of aggression exist, they were mentioned as a minor factor (9%), more prevalently in Niamey. It is interesting to note that local authorities and civil society actors responded with a unanimous yes when asked if women can work outside of their homes. This highlights how critical it is to have a strong understanding of societal rules and norms, including those affecting women's mobility, in order to design effective resilience initiatives. Ignoring these norms can render initiatives ineffective or even counterproductive.

Regarding the division of labour, an interviewee highlighted that the caste system can also influence it,[175] in addition to cultural norms and societal factors that determine whether women are permitted to leave their homes without their husbands' permission. *"In a customary marriage, the man is the head of the family; he must provide shelter and food for the whole family and take great care of them. The role of the woman remains cooking, taking care of the education of the children, caring for the husband and having children."*[176]

However, according to some key interviewees, there has been a recent increase in the number of women entering the workforce, participating in politics,[177] and joining the security sector.[178] Similarly, focus group discussions with community members confirmed that women have been assuming more prominent roles in public spaces. These changes were encouraged by awareness-

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175 Key Informant Interview, local authority, Tillabéri.
176 Key Informant Interview, UN Women representative, Niamey.
177 Key Informant Interview, local authority, Tillabéri.
178 Key Informant Interview, security expert, Niamey.

raising programmes on women's rights organised by both international and local organisations, as well as by the state. The dissemination and use of **technology and social networks** are also perceived as contributing to women's empowerment.

Marriage

In the target areas, religious marriage is the most common type of matrimony. Traditional marriages are predominantly reported in Tillabéri, while civil ones are not commonly reported. The decision on when and who to marry is typically made by the parents of the couple, except in Niamey, where a small percentage of cases involve the couple making their own choice. Girls tend to get married at a younger age than men, with reports of marriages under the age of 15 in Tillabéri, confirming the existence of early and forced marriages. The practice of bride price is not common among respondents, and those who reported its use were primarily in Tillabéri. Within the household, women indicated having **decision-making power** over their children's and their own education, and they appear to have some control over work and health matters. However, they did not report enjoying the same freedom to participate in public activities. In this regard, it appears that local authorities and civil society organisations may not be fully aware of the challenges that women face when making decisions about participating in public activities – or may be reluctant to share this information. In fact, according to the survey, nearly 60% of these actors believe that women can make independent decisions in this regard.

5.3.5 Violence and Insecurity

According to women and men from local communities in Niamey and Tillabéri, the two main security threats are violent actions resulting from **conflicts between farmers and herders** and those committed by **violent extremist groups**, followed by violence perpetrated by ethnic-based militias. Reports of violence involving armed state actors were relatively minor and were mentioned by men only. Survey responses from civil society and local authorities yielded similar results, with the exception that acts of violence from VEGs exceed those caused by conflicts between farmers and herders. Key informant interviews also underscored that the most significant security threats are posed by violent extremist groups followed by armed militias.

▶ **Figure 29. Which are the main threats to security in your village/city?
(Niger, all regions; actor: women and men from local communities)**

4% Acts of violence from armed state actors

Acts of violence due to conflicts between farmers and herders 43%

14% Acts of violence from ethnically based groups (self-defence groups, hunting groups and militias etc.)

39% Acts of violence from violent extremist groups
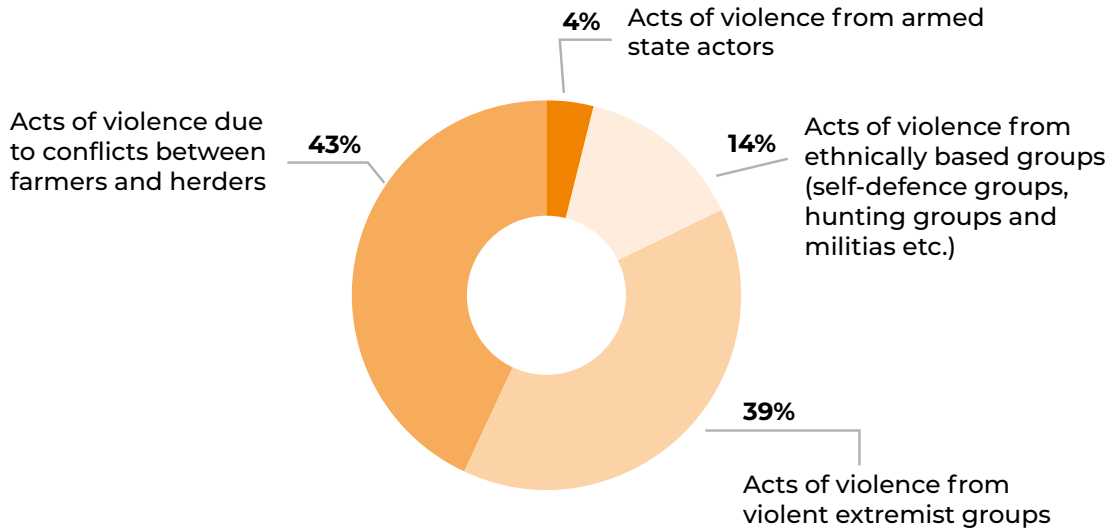
▶ **Figure 30. Which are the main threats to security in your village/city?
(Niger, all regions; actor: local authorities and CSOs)**

3% Acts of violence from armed state actors

Acts of violence due to conflicts between farmers and herders 30%

24% Acts of violence from ethnically based groups (self-defence groups, hunting groups and militias etc.)

43% Acts of violence from violent extremist groups
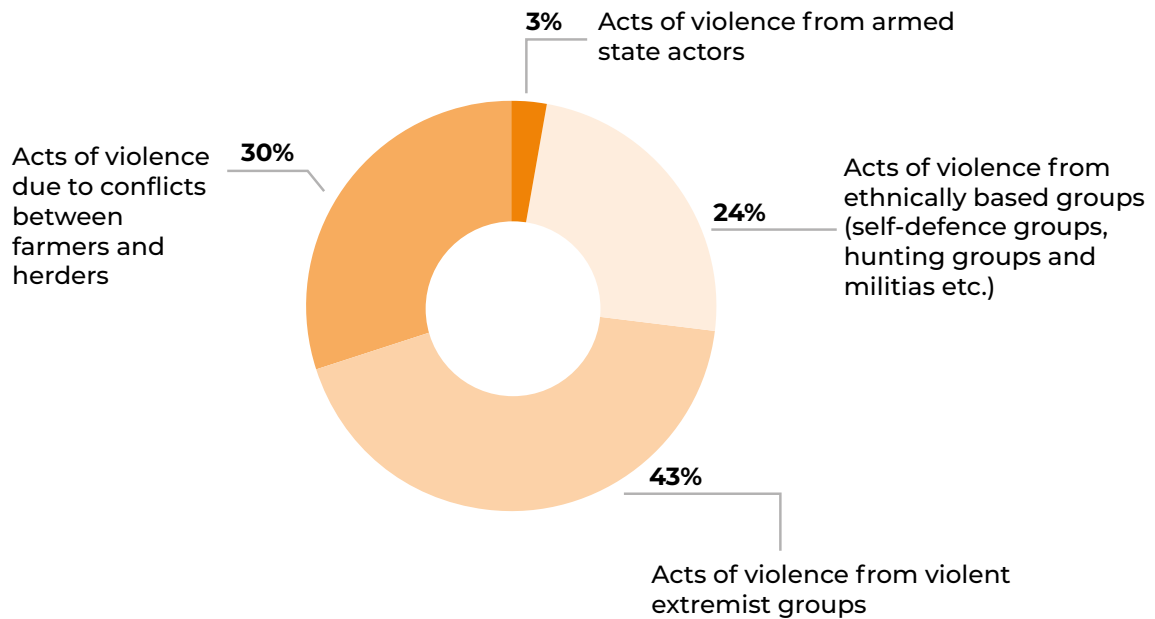
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Violence Against Women and Girls

▶ **Figure 31. What are the major acts of violence committed against women and girls in the area? (Niger: all regions; all actors: women and men from local communities, local authorities, CSOs)**

Violence perpetrated by the aforementioned actors is perceived to affect everyone, whether directly or indirectly. However, there are specific forms of violence committed against women and girls, with the three main forms reported by respondents being **early and forced marriage**, **domestic violence**, and **abduction**. Tillabéri appears to be particularly affected by early and forced marriage and abductions, while in Niamey, there are more reported cases of domestic   violence.
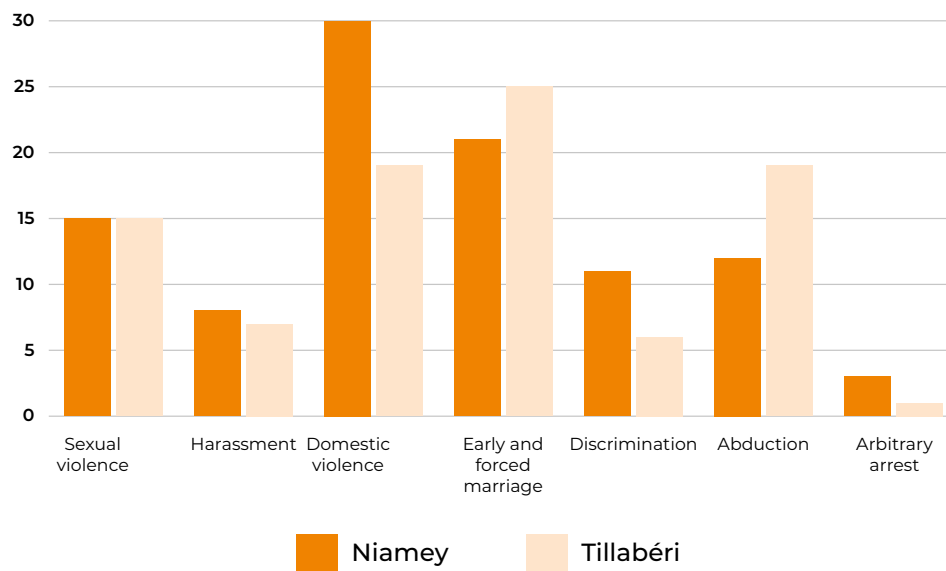
Respondents informed that violence is frequently perpetrated by family members and partners, particularly in instances of early and forced marriage and cases of domestic violence. Non-state armed groups, including ethnic-based militias and jihadist extremist groups, are identified as the main actors committing abductions and sexual violence. State actors and FDS have also been implicated in some discriminatory practices, such as arbitrary arrests and other forms of violence.

There is a significant contrast with the results from Mali regarding the **perception of the role of defence and security forces**. In fact, as seen in previous sections, defence and security forces are not considered protectors by the surveyed populations in Niger, especially in Tillabéri, where community members rely on local authorities, state actors, and their families or partners for protection. There is a slight variation in Niamey, where defence and security forces, as well as civil society organisations, are mentioned as providers of protection, while the family's role is minor. Traditional actors such as tribal chiefs and religious leaders were only mentioned once in both Tillabéri and Niamey.

▶ **Figure 32. Who commits the acts of violence? (Niger: all regions; all actors: women and men from local communities, local authorities, CSOs)**

Legend:
- Family
- State actors and FDS
- Violent extremist groups
- Ethnic-based armed groups
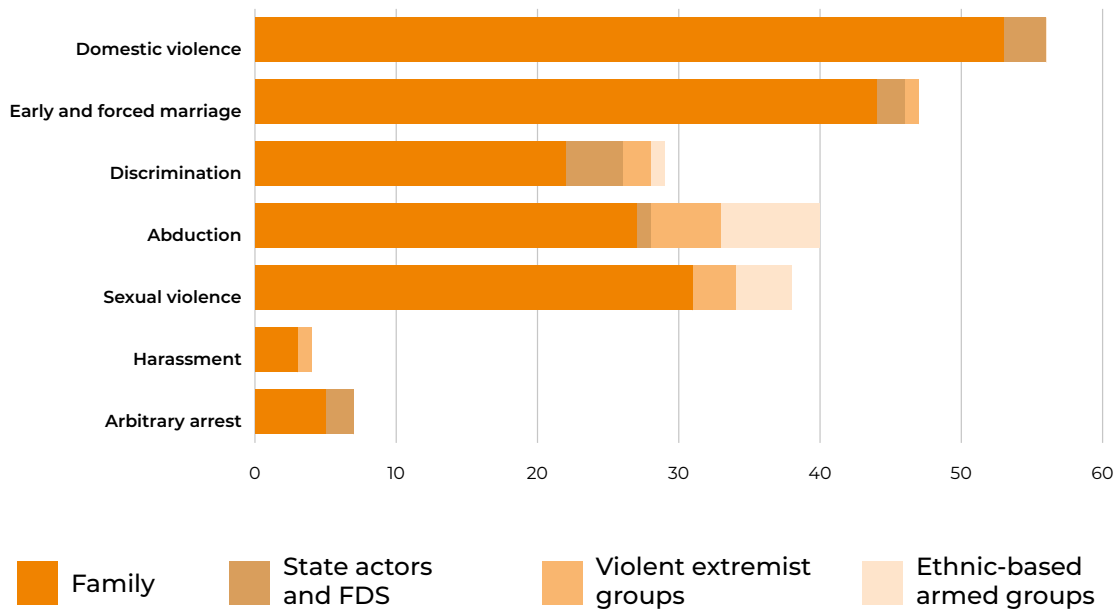
5.3.6 Violent Extremism

Joining Violent Extremist Groups and Recruitment Tactics

Poverty, unemployment, frustration, desire for revenge against state's injustices,179 and misunderstanding of religious teachings are cited as reasons for men to join violent extremist groups, who exert influence through governance, violence[180] and intimidation, leading people to submission. These groups preach and deliver sermons across villages, quoting Quranic verses, and threaten the population to ensure their subordination and support. These factors, **threats and fear**, reportedly have an impact on women's decision to join or support these groups. As mentioned in some key informant interviews, in the target areas of Niger, women can be indirectly complicit when they do not denounce VEGs or can be actively involved as informants, supply workers,[181] or by assisting in recruitment. In this context, women may also suffer sexual violence and become sex slaves or widows, which may lead them to serve violent extremist groups against their will.[182]

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179 Key Informant Interview, security expert, Niamey.
180 Ibid.
181 Ibid.
182 Focus Group Discussion with community members.

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Niamey seems to be less impacted by violent extremism when compared to the Tillabéri region, and during the discussions held in the capital, there was no indication of any support or sympathy for these groups. Community members stated that women living in Niamey are less likely to be exposed to violent extremism, but at the same time, they may face strong pressure from men who impose absolute submission on their wives and daughters based on strict cultural and religious norms – potentially leading women to adopt extremist views based on their religious beliefs or through marital ties. This is in line with some reports that describe Salafist ideologies as having a greater impact on women in Niamey compared to Tillabéri since, in the capital, many young girls attend Quranic schools in search of a better social life. However, resilience to violent extremism is reported to be weaker in Tillabéri, possibly due to a lower state presence, suggesting that a stronger state presence (as in the capital) may play a positive role in preventing violent extremist activities.

Prevention of Violent Extremism

> *"The resilience of women is, first of all, psychological, they do not give up, and they display this strong desire to always move forward. Women are combative, they face situations with any means available."*[183]

Two out of the three key resilience factors reported by respondents and interviewees in the target areas are common to both women and men: state's **investments in guaranteeing access to income** and **quality education**. According to focus group participants, the latter is crucial for women for two main reasons: it facilitates escaping discrimination and achieving independence;[184] and, if accessible to young mothers, it has a direct impact on the education of their children.

> *"Women contribute to the prevention of violent extremism by participating in state or CSO's projects as well as by providing an education for their children."*[185]

According to the findings of the research, the third key factor that could strengthen the resilience of women against violent extremism is the **availability of health services** – which is critical, especially in terms of maternal, reproductive, and children's health – while the third key resilience factor for men and boys is **ensuring the existence of inclusive mechanisms to involve populations in decision-making processes.** This is indeed paramount, as the establishment of inclusive mechanisms of engagement and the creation of consultative spaces would increase a sense of participation in public affairs and decision-making.

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183 Key Informant Interview, UN Women representative, Niamey.
184 Focus Group Discussion with community members.
185 Key Informant Interview, UN Women representative, Niamey.

▶ **Figure 33. Key factors of resilience of women and girls and men and boys in the face of violent extremist groups (Niger: all regions; all actors: women and men from local communities, local authorities, CSOs)**
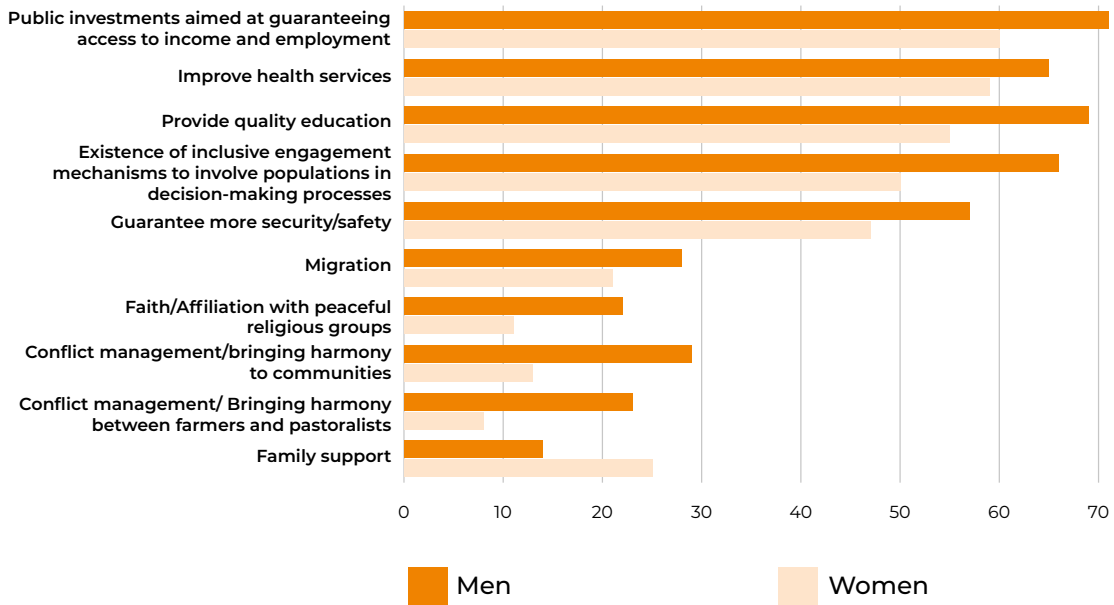
▶ **Figure 34. In order to participate in the implementation of these programmes, it is important that they are: (Niger, all regions)**
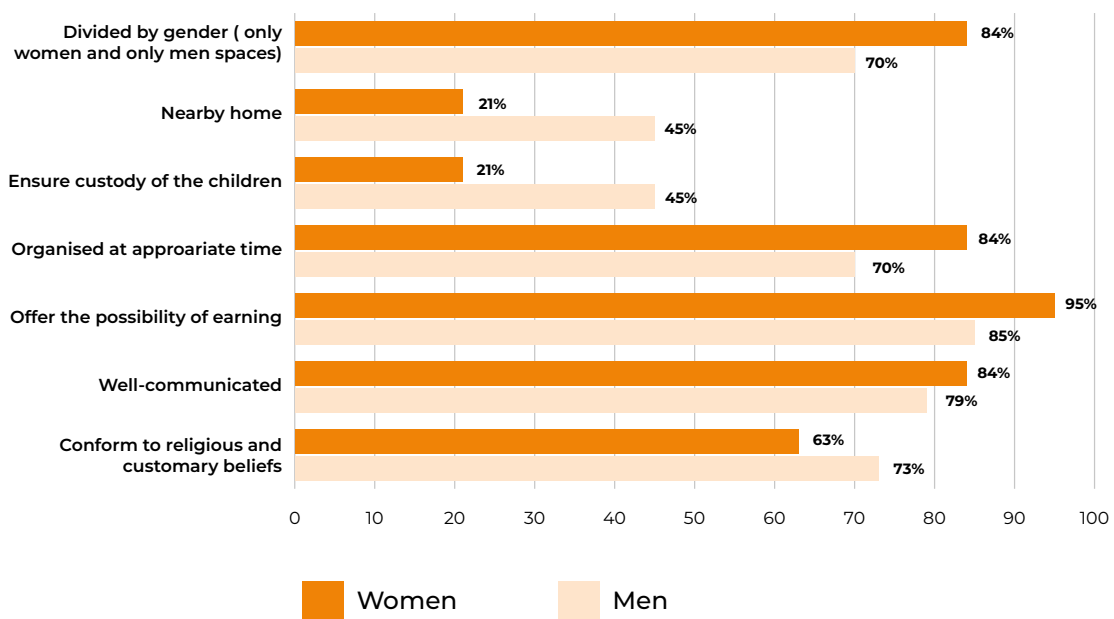
The data collection revealed that, in the target areas, several initiatives are or have been delivered to address the aforementioned resilience factors. The vast majority of community members, both men and women, reported having participated in these activities, with women more involved in programmes related to education and literacy followed by income-generating activities, healthcare, and leadership or skills development. Men, on the other hand, more frequently mentioned income-generating activities. Additionally, some respondents reported participating in conflict management initiatives, which mainly occurred in Tillabéri.

Interestingly, despite reported limitations on women's freedom to engage in public activities, the survey results indicate that women do participate in various initiatives, especially when offered by state actors. Specifically, only the state has reportedly provided participants with conflict management initiatives, such as those between farmers and herders. After state actors, non-governmental organisations are the second provider of income-generating activities, as well as skills, leadership, and training. It is worth noting that international organisations and religious associations were not indicated to be relevant actors in this context.

The survey responses received specifically from local authorities and CSOs, seem to be in line with those administered to community members and confirm that there is a gender difference in the activities being offered by these actors. Men and boys are provided with more opportunities for income generation, education, literacy training, and conflict management activities, while women and girls are targeted for healthcare support, education, literacy, skills training, and leadership.

▶ **Figure 35. Do your offices organise programmes with the aim of providing services to women and men such as the following? "Niger, all regions; actors: local authorities and CSOs"**
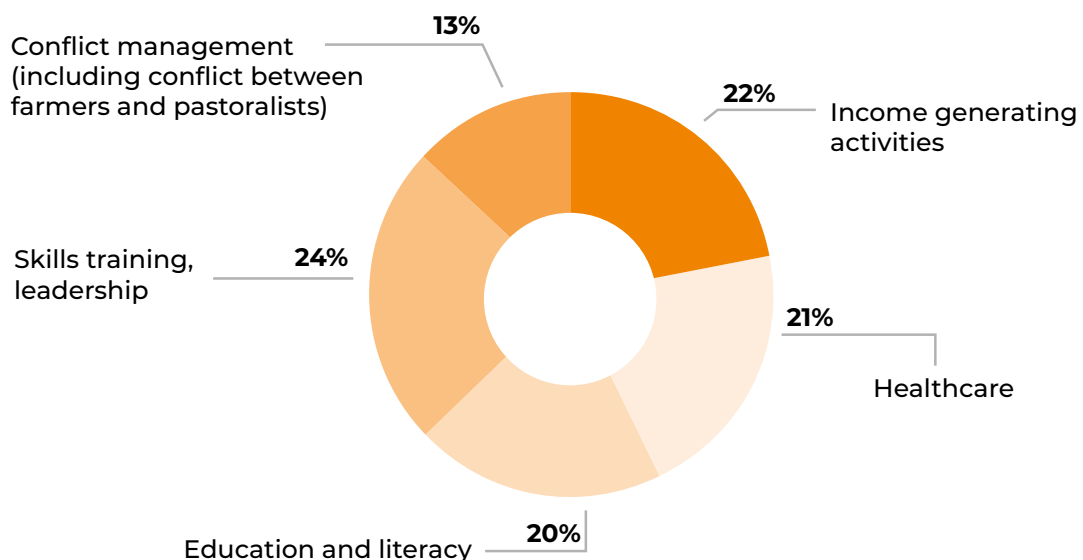
In terms of the role that family members can play in keeping individuals away from violent extremist groups, while fathers, brothers, and husbands were slightly more frequently selected, almost the totality of respondents acknowledged that both genders can play an equally significant preventive role.

In fact, during focus group discussions, several community members acknowledged the important role of women in preventing violent extremism, as member of the community, as educators, as mothers or as participants in projects organised by women's associations, the state, or CSOs. However, as the risk of violence, sexual abuse, and reprisals from violent extremist groups may deter women from participating, PVE activities must be able to grant them safety and protection.[186] According to this study, to promote the involvement of women, such initiatives should also:

> Be scheduled at an appropriate day and time;

> Be held in only-women spaces or places frequented by women (such as women's associations);

> Raise awareness among male family members of the important role that women can play in the prevention of violent extremism;

> Facilitate access to earning opportunities;

> Establish communication with **women leaders**;

> Be effectively communicated through the use of social media and radio (radio broadcasts and programmes, as well as social media such as WhatsApp and Telegram).

"Choose the places frequented by women and raise awareness among husbands of the importance of the role that women can play in the prevention of violent extremism."[187]

To promote the implementation of PVE initiatives and ensure reaching a wide segment of the population, selecting the most appropriate communication method is indeed essential. According to the data collection, **radio and television** are the most effective channels for education, awareness raising, and providing helpful information to the population at large. In the target areas of Niger, findings show that social media are less popular than in Mali, and their use is more common in Niamey compared to Tillabéri, where radio is the main communication channel. In the capital city, radio and television both have an important role, followed by newspapers, which are read especially by men.

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186 Key Informant Interviews.
187 Key Informant Interview, security expert, Niamey.

▶ **Figure 36. Which channel of communication is more suitable to reach local women and men? (Niger, all regions)**
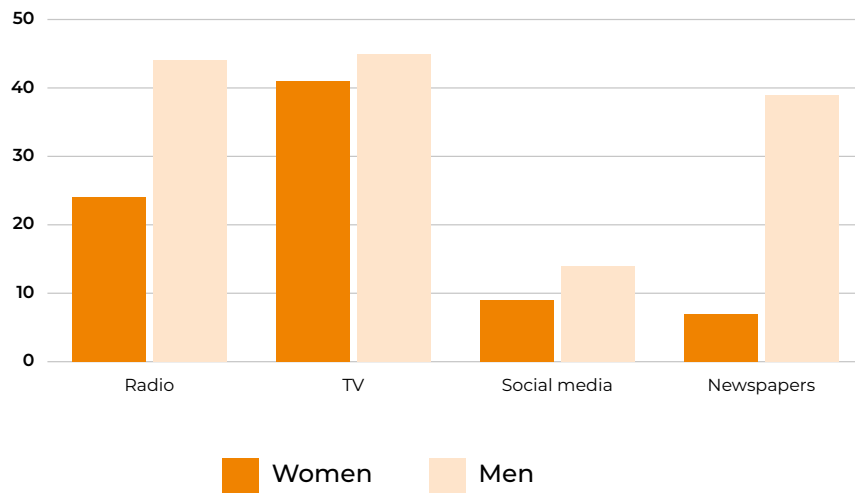
Interestingly, there are significant **gender differences** in the use of media tools. To reach men, TV, radio, and newspapers are preferred. While TV and radio are also the most suitable choice for women and girls, social media and newspapers would probably be less effective. Overall, findings show that **women have limited access to communication channels**, with television being the exception.

In fact, while local authorities and civil society organisations interviewed find radio the most effective way to reach women, these actors mostly **communicate directly** with the communities or adapt the means to the content and context. For instance, in Tillabéri, direct communication is preferred, while radio and the internet are utilised in Niamey. Written materials such as brochures are rarely used, and only by local authorities in Niamey.

Good Practices in Inclusive PVE Initiatives

Through key informant interviews, the study collected examples and good practices adopted at local level to promote women's participation in preventing violent extremism.

❯ In urban areas of Tillabéri, local authorities have designed and are implementing a municipal development plan that considers and promotes women's resilience in the face of violent extremism.

❯ According to a UN Women representative, the second National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security provides a relevant example of how to include women in PVE activities.

6. Analysis of Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Correlation Between the Needs and Demands of Local Communities and the Integration of a Gender Perspective in PVE Interventions

Collecting and analysing the views and perceptions of community members in the target countries on issues related to insecurity and violence, essential services, gender roles, and violent extremism has been an enlightening journey, sometimes confirming, while other times disproving, initial assumptions. The research focused on conducting a gender analysis to identify roles, **power structures** and relations among women, men, girls and boys, and aimed not to be influenced by pre-existing ideas or narratives that may not be relevant in the target regions of the study. To achieve this goal, the data analysis was **gender and country-specific**, avoiding a homogenous approach and identifying differences within each target area, allowing practitioners, experts, local and national authorities, civil society and international organisations to develop initiatives adapted to each context. The multidimensional

crisis affecting the Sahel needs strategies that are meticulously designed, tailored to the local context, and rooted in thorough analysis as well as in meaningful consultation with women and girls, men, and boys from local communities.

It is important to highlight that, throughout the analysis, when attempting to identify the different perceptions of women and men in the target countries, particular attention has been given to variations and differences between rural and urban areas. In this context, the findings confirmed noticeable contrasts, such as less strict gender norms in urban areas compared to rural ones, where harmful practices against women, such as early and forced marriages, are more prevalent. Rural and urban differences in employment patterns and the availability of services and infrastructure were also evident. However, in Mali and Niger, the level of violence and insecurity was found to be the main factor affecting gender roles and availability of services, more so than the urban or rural location of respondents. Interestingly, in Mauritania, where violence levels are lower, the differences between rural and urban contexts and their impact on gender roles and availability of services were much more pronounced.

💡 Recommendation

Ensure that rural populations are not excluded from the provision of essential services, particularly women and girls. This can be achieved by implementing projects and programmes that target women and girls, focusing on areas such as education, including TVET, health and employment (e.g., income-generating activities). Additionally, providing support to civil society organisations operating in rural areas can also help address the needs of these communities.

💡 Recommendation

Tailor prevention initiatives taking into consideration the level of violence and insecurity of the specific target areas, considering that widespread violence may have a substantial impact on cultural norms, availability of essential services and gender power relations. As this research has shown, when attempting to capture the experiences of women and men and their variations between rural and urban areas, in Mali and Niger, the level of violence and insecurity was identified as the primary factor affecting gender roles and the availability of services, more so than the location of respondents.

Drivers of Violent Extremism

In this framework, although the primary objective of the research was not to investigate women's and men's roles in relation to violent extremism, the topic was often raised during key informant interviews and discussions with community members, experts, and civil society organisations. While it is important to recognise that it is crucial to avoid assuming that women's role with VEGs are passive or subordinate (either caretakers or victims), in the target regions, findings do indicate that women may join these groups due to submission and marital ties. Other factors include fear of violence, threats, abductions (in Mali and Niger), and religious beliefs in Mauritania. In Mali, it was reported that some women may join violent extremist groups to seek *"revenge or to gain a sense of identity."*[188] These responses must be contextualised to the specificities of the target countries where structural gender inequality often deprives women and girls of autonomy. It is also important to note that data collection in Mauritania and Niger did not take place in areas currently under the control of violent extremist groups, thus knowledge of women's joining VEGs – and the reasons behind this choice – is often unknown. Additionally, from the data collected it appears that when supporting VEGs, both within and outside their families, women can play active roles such as information gathering, food preparation, and even combat.[189]

Concerning men and boys, across the target countries, vulnerability is the main factor that was indicated as leading to joining violent extremist groups. In Mali, and to a lesser extent in Niger, economic vulnerability, the desire to protect communities, and the desire for revenge or to defend one's ethnic groups are among the reasons men and boys join VEGs. In Mauritania, poverty and a desire for improved living standards are accompanied by various other factors, such as pursuing a sense of purpose in life, religious beliefs, and tribal and family alliances.

Women's and Men's Roles in PVE

Despite these challenges, both women's and men's roles in PVE were also highlighted. For instance, while findings indicate that women can be the first to detect extremist ideologies and behaviours in their families, research shows that both parents can impact their children's decisions regarding joining VEGs. Especially considering that men are formally recognised as the heads of household in the three countries, it is important to highlight that both mothers and fathers play significant roles in PVE.

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188 Key Informant Interview, security expert, Mali.
189 Key Informant Interview, civil society actor, Ségou, Mali.

Beyond the family setting, women's contributions to PVE efforts were also recognised in their roles as community mobilisers, youth educators and organisers of awareness-raising activities to disseminate counter-narratives. As an interviewee said when talking about women's role in prevention, *"when women are motivated and convinced, they can move mountains."*[190]

Key informant interviews also revealed the vital role of women-led associations. In Niger, these organisations were cited for involving other women in PVE activities,[191] and in Mauritania[192] and Mali[193] women's religious associations and preachers are reportedly involved in peace and preventing violent extremism efforts. This is a promising area to explore further to promote women's role in PVE initiatives.

Recommendation

Focus on all family members as part of preventative programming. Although the role of women and mothers is crucial, the importance of involving fathers and male relatives in preventing radicalisation should not be overlooked. Male elders, community leaders, and other male role models should also be included in awareness-raising efforts to prevent violent extremism.

Recommendation

Engage in dialogue and consultation with actors working on gender equality. These actors need to be regularly consulted and included in discussions and dialogues to raise awareness among policymakers and local authorities on the significance of adopting a gender perspective and the effectiveness of gender-responsive measures. These organisations include women's groups and women-led CSOs, as well as women leaders at the local level. At the national level, gender mechanisms and gender experts should be involved.

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190 Focus Group Discussion with women and girls in Kiffa, Assaba, Mauritania.
191 Key Informant Interview, local authority, Tillabéri, Niger.
192 Key Informant Interviews, religious leaders, Mauritania
193 Key Informant Interview, religious leader, Ségou, Mali and Key Informant Interview, religious leader, Mopti, Mali.

💡Recommendation

Fund women-led organisations, especially in remote and challenging areas, to implement PVE initiatives. While this study did not specifically map out women's organisations, they have been recognised as crucial players in the prevention of violent extremism. They are valuable partners in promoting gender equality, particularly as they are often best equipped to engage with women and girls in areas with strict cultural norms. As these organisations often struggle with limited financial resources and face challenges in accessing international funding, given their expertise and experience, it is recommended to include them in prevention programmes while offering them managerial support.

💡Recommendation

Involve women religious leaders and religious women's associations to develop alternative discourses to violence and share existing good practices while exploring the potential for similar experiences across different countries.

💡Recommendation

Invest in women's peacebuilding initiatives, which may provide protection to local communities by offering service provision and prevention mechanisms while challenging the narrative and messages of violent extremist organisations.

Needs and Demands from Local Communities

Interestingly, regarding the primary objective of the study – i.e., to analyse the perceptions and experiences of women and girls, men and boys to design gender-responsive PVE initiatives tailored to local needs – the research identified a direct correlation between key resilience factors against joining violent extremist groups and the needs and demands reported by local communities. In fact, the main concerns indicated by community members (employment, food security, protection and insecurity, and availability of services) match with the key factors of resilience to violent extremism identified through the survey, indicating potential areas of focus for PVE activities.

Key factors in the face of violent extremist groups (all countries)

- Improve health services
- Existence of inclusive mechanisms to involve populations in decision-making processes
- Guarantee more security/safety
- Providing quality education and literacy
- State's investments aimed at guaranteeing access to income and employment

What do men and women lack most? (all countries)

- Lack of health
- Lack of education
- Lack of security and protection
- Food insecurity
- Lack of income

Women   Men

As seen in previous chapters, the concern most often mentioned by the population in the target areas is unemployment and lack of financial means and indeed, according to the data collected in all three countries, the approach considered most effective for both women and men to increase resilience to violent extremism is governments' investment in providing access to income and employment. This would have a positive impact on people's well-being, reduce the risk of poverty, and promote economic stability, thereby reducing the likelihood of individuals turning to armed groups for financial gain. Other suggestions mention providing *"an income for women involved in social mobilisation and sensitisation"*[194] *and "create[ing] a framework for women's involvement that adapts its actions to the needs of women in each locality and environment."*[195]

💡 Recommendation

Introduce Income Generating Activities (IGAs) based on existing occupations and tailored to the main sources of income for women and men in each target area. Offer technical and vocational training programmes to enhance employment and technical skills and support entrepreneurship. This should also include providing opportunities to increase resilience to socio-economic and environmental challenges, such as training on natural resource management and climate adaptation.

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194   Key Informant Interview, local authorities, Mauritania.
195   ocus Group Discussion with civil society actors in Arafat, Nouakchott.

🔆 Recommendation

Partner with local and religious leaders to raise awareness among men and boys on the importance of women's economic empowerment and its benefits to community resilience, to promote women's participation in the labour market and formal employment.

🔆 Recommendation

Ensure prevention activities targeting women and girls are based on identified resilience factors, including fostering public participation, and enhancing employment opportunities. The data collected revealed that, in the target areas, most initiatives addressed to women focus on education, literacy, and health, while men and boys are often targeted with income-generating activities. According to respondents, this approach does not necessarily reflect the role that women's active participation in the labour market may play towards community resilience.

After unemployment, the second correlation between local needs and resilience factors pertains to education,[196] which is a substantial concern for women and men in the communities, and it is recognised as one of the most critical factors for resilience in all three countries. Improving education in the region presents a notable opportunity to enhance the living standards of these communities. Providing quality education for young girls is essential for their rights, their well-being as well as those of the communities.[197] To address this issue, a multi-layered approach is necessary, which includes ensuring that schools offer quality education and that institutes are safe, accessible, affordable, and equipped with adequate WASH facilities. Other efforts should focus on keeping girls in school and raising awareness about the negative effects of early and forced marriages, which are prevalent in the target areas and are reported as the main form of violence against women and girls. Low school attendance and early and forced marriages create a challenging environment that diminishes the chances of stability and well-being for girls. Furthermore, the three countries have high fertility rates, as well as poor maternal and children health. This emphasises the importance of access to healthcare as a crucial factor for resilience and as an essential element to improve the well-being of all individuals.

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196 'Education, skills development and employment also constitute one of the seven focus areas identified in the UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism.

197 *Empowering Girls and Communities Through Quality Education*, UNESCO (2023). Available at https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/empowering-girls-and-communities-through-quality-education

💡 Recommendation

Improve the quality and accessibility of education by raising awareness about the negative effects of early and forced marriages on girls' school dropout rates and by ensuring safe, clean and well-equipped educational institutes.

💡 Recommendation

Include vocational education and training in educational settings to address the gap between conventional and traditional subjects provided by the education system – including Quranic schools – and promote access to employment.

💡 Recommendation

Enhance access to healthcare services by increasing the number of female personnel for female, maternal and child healthcare and ensuring that health centres are equipped to address cases of sexual violence.

The third significant correlation is between the concern of personal insecurity and violence and the recognition of the communities' need to feel safe and protected. By improving personal safety, the likelihood of communities joining violent groups for self-defence can be significantly reduced. The findings show great potential for local actors, such as local authorities, to increase perceptions of security through community engagement, especially as state actors are usually perceived as those who protect respondents from violence. Perpetrators, however, vary depending on the region. In Mauritania, violence is mainly reported as related to criminal activities and banditry, often carried out by non-state armed actors other than VEGs. In contrast, in Mali and Niger, the main threats are posed by violent extremist groups and ethnic-based militias, as well as conflicts between farmers and herders in the latter country. According to the interviewees, violence, intimidation, and religious preaching are the tactics used by VEGs to impose themselves in the target areas of this study. To counter their propaganda, religious leaders reported giving sermons presenting an alternative perspective to the extremist narrative. Female religious leaders are also playing a vital role in preventing violent extremism, particularly in Mauritania. Women preachers, including the Mourchidates and the Cheikhates in Mauritania, and the Oustazias in Niger, have demonstrated their ability to challenge extremist ideologies and promote a peaceful and tolerant religious discourse. Despite facing challenges in asserting their roles as religious leaders, particularly in the case of the Oustazias,

who lack a public platform, these women have made significant progress in a male-dominated environment.

An important finding in the analysed regions, as reported by the interviewees, is that **VEGs do not fill the gaps left by the state to establish themselves. Consequently, they are not perceived as providers of essential services in terms of health, education, food security, or protection to the population.**

💡 Recommendation

Identify and partner with existing actors that are recognised by local communities as guarantors of protection and security in each specific context. In the study areas, these are most often represented by local authorities, that may be well-equipped to implement and communicate prevention strategies at the local level.

💡 Recommendation

Develop initiatives aimed at preventing, managing, or resolving conflicts related to the access and use of natural resources. The collected data shows that, especially in Niger, violence arising from conflicts between farmers and herders is one of the main security threats. However, respondents across the three target countries reported low participation in conflict management activities, indicating a need for investment in peaceful dispute resolution mechanisms.

Addressing the forms of violence that target women and girls is also critical. The three most serious forms of violence are early and forced marriage, sexual violence, and domestic violence. Violence limits women in their everyday lives and increases their vulnerability. This, in turn, restricts their participation in community and social activities, engagements, initiatives, and at times employment, especially if they do not feel safe and protected or if this exposes them to further risk. This can lead to a cycle of vulnerability and insecurity that further destabilises households and community resilience. In the study areas, the main perpetrators of these types of violence are reported to be family members and partners. Other identified actors committing sexual violence are non-state armed groups, including violent extemist groups, self-defence groups, and ethnic-based militias.

⟡ Recommendation

Address discrimination and violence and challenge harmful practices through community-based awareness raising campaigns led by local actors. These initiatives should challenge new restrictions imposed by VEGs, as well as pre-existing context-specific norms that are detrimental to women and girls. Strengthening the capacity of public authorities and civil society actors to design and implement projects that challenge such norms and practices would benefit the entire community, strengthening its resilience to the narratives of VEGs, which restrict and harm women's rights and equality.

⟡ Recommendation

Leverage positive factors that support women's empowerment to combat discriminatory practices. For instance, in the study areas, some respondents perceive that the **migration** of men, which has led to women becoming the main household providers, the implementation of **women's empowerment initiatives**, and the advancement of **technology** can all contribute to the enhancement of positive gender roles.

Finally, an interesting finding is that inclusive mechanisms that allow for engagement in decision-making processes are reported to be among the key factors for building resilience to VEGs, especially in Mali and Niger. This means prioritising a people-centred and bottom-up approach in community engagement efforts with diverse representation from women and men, girls and boys, across various age, economic, social, ethnic, geographical, linguistic, and religious backgrounds. This includes creating spaces for the organisations and actors representing them, such as women, youth-led and refugees organisations, traditional leaders, faith-based organisations and leaders.[198] By establishing such mechanisms and creating consultative spaces, people will have a greater sense of participation in public affairs, ultimately leading to more effective decision-making and stronger communities. However, despite engagement in decision-making has been identified as a key resilience factor for both women and men, in all three countries, respondents reported women and girls having limited liberties to attend and participate in public activities, with men generally dominating decision-making spaces.

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198 *United Nations Community Engagement Guidelines on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace*, United Nations Peacebuilding (2020). Available at **https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/documents/un_community-engagement_guidelines.august_2020.pdf**

💡Recommendation

Establish inclusive mechanisms to enable wide participation in decision-making processes. This can be achieved by creating inclusive consultative spaces at the local level, such as community advisory councils and informal community representative bodies.

💡Recommendation

Promote women's right to meaningful participation in decision-making processes and PVE initiatives, including security and counterterrorism spaces. Equal participation and leadership empower women as political agents in their families, communities, and state institutions, enabling them to lead prevention efforts.

Tailoring Gender-Responsive PVE Initiatives to the Local Context

Research findings show that to be effective, resilience-building activities should be based on a strong understanding of the gender norms of each specific context. It is of the utmost importance to invest resources towards PVE activities that cater to the needs of women and men, girls, and boys within local communities, and that are based on thorough gender, contextual, and where relevant conflict, analyses. The study highlights a considerable demand for such efforts. For instance, in Mali and Mauritania, respondents' participation in PVE initiatives is very low. When asked about the reasons that impede participation in these activities, nearly 50% of those surveyed cited a lack of awareness due to poor communication as the main reason for not participating, while 42% stated that these initiatives were not available in their area. Effective communication is crucial, as is the utilisation of appropriate channels and taking into consideration gender differences, location (such as urban or rural), levels of violence and insecurity, and local language. The study found that, across target countries, men are most reachable through social media, followed by television while women are reached primarily through television and radio.

When implementing such initiatives, it is also essential to consider geographical differences, particularly between urban and rural areas, along with contextual factors. For example, in Niger gender-segregated spaces are significant, while in Mali, this may not be the case, and in Mauritania initiatives should align with religious and cultural values. It is also crucial to define the most appropriate scheduling times and location for both women and men. In Mali, for instance,

findings show that women are markedly more impacted than men by the lack of transport and infrastructure, so it is essential to select easily accessible locations.

Above all, however, the success of PVE initiatives depends on a good understanding of how gender roles and norms affect women's mobility and freedom. In the target regions, women generally have the freedom to work outside their homes, except in Niger, but their power to decide over their own participation in public activities – i.e. outside the household – is more limited than in other areas, such as deciding over their own and their children's healthcare and education.

To ensure equal opportunities for women's involvement in relevant initiatives, effective strategies must be implemented. These strategies may include reaching out to women through media such as radio and television to convey messages, engaging women's and civil society organisations, and working with men to raise awareness about the importance of women's (as well as their) participation in PVE initiatives.

CSOs, the state, and international organisations (with some exceptions in Niger) and traditional actors (especially in Mauritania, primarily in Assaba) have the potential to successfully implement these strategies, as respondents were reportedly open and willing to participate in activities implemented by these actors. Conversely, religious associations hold influence mostly in Mauritania, even though their role was also mentioned in the Malian context, together with that of women's associations.

💡 Recommendation

Design PVE interventions and strategies based on a context and gender analysis. When developing PVE strategies, it is important to have a deep understanding of the local context, including gender roles, traditional responsibilities assigned to women and men, household structures and power relations, as well as access to resources. This understanding will help to shed light on women's roles in VE and PVE based on contextual analysis rather than pre-existing assumptions.

💡 Recommendation

Conduct regular quantitative and qualitative research and analysis disaggregated by sex, age and context (urban, rural) to monitor the needs and experiences of all community members. This research provides a baseline that can be further expanded by relevant actors depending on the needs. Gender and context analyses, including gender-sensitive conflict

analyses[199] must be used to adapt programmes and projects to each target group and location.

💡 Recommendation

Improve communication of and on PVE initiatives. The findings show that strong communication is essential for community engagement and awareness raising on existing PVE initiatives. Communication should make use of suitable channels while taking into account gender differences. This entails selecting the most appropriate communication tools based on gender preferences, as identified through the research findings. Additionally, considerations should extend to factors like location (e.g., urban or rural settings) and the use of local language. Effective communication should also be based on consultation with the community: when women and men are engaged in discussions about the focus and design of potential programmes and activities, they are more likely to participate. Furthermore, the research findings indicate a growing utilization of social media, particularly in Mali. It is noteworthy that social media can also serve as a tool for women's empowerment. However, it is important to consider that these online spaces are often exploited by violent extremists. In alignment with the UNSG Plan of Action to prevent violent extremism, it is key to use these channels to amplify efforts and messages on PVE to reach all members of communities.

💡 Recommendation

Ensure protection to women and men who participate in PVE activities. The actors consulted (organisations, local authorities, and religious leaders) informed that women who engage in activities to prevent or counter violent extremism might face violence and threats from VEGs. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure the safety of participants, and this should be taken into consideration in terms of location, schedule, and commute needed to reach and participate in these activities.

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199 Gender-sensitive conflict analysis is the systematic study of the gendered causes, structures, stakeholders and dynamics of conflict and peace. It is conflict analysis with a gender lens (UNDPPA).

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