



WOMEN'S COMMUNITY INITIATIVES IN THE FIGHT AGAINST VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN NORTHERN BENIN

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, sub-Saharan Africa has experienced growing insecurity as a result of terrorism¹, which has become a major concern in Benin in recent years². Long regarded as a country of peace, the recent terrorist attacks in northern Benin³ have not only taken the Beninese people by surprise, but have also changed the narrative of peace and stability that Benin had built up since the 1990s. It has become «one of the coastal countries most exposed to terrorist attacks, to the point where it would be legitimate to ask whether, at the current rate, it might not be in the process of becoming a new epicentre, or at least an area of particular concern at the West African level»⁴.

Violent extremism is a type of violent mobilisation that aims to elevate the status of one group over another on the basis of criteria such as sex, religion, culture or ethnic origin. Extremist organisations destroy existing political and cultural institutions and replace them with alternative governance structures that operate according to the principles of a totalitarian and intolerant ideology⁵. In Benin, internal diagnostics show that violent extremism manifests itself mainly in attacks, kidnappings and sexual violence against women⁶.

As part of the fight against violent extremism, the Beninese government is developing a strategy along two lines. The first is the all-military strategy, which involves intelligence work, securing the territory and responding to attacks by terrorist groups. The second line aims to provide a non-military response, based on four points: initiatives for the co-production of security (from a socio-legal point of view, co-production would refer to the new modes of action of the State which take the form of recourse to forms of partnership with the population with the aim of responding to the security

¹ Executive summary of the report 'Sur les chemins de l'extrémisme en Afrique : les voies de recrutement et de désengagement', UNDP, 2023. - ² Thierry S. Bidouzo and Expédit B. Ologou (eds.), Le terrorisme au Bénin. Perceptions, actions et perspectives, Cotonou, FES and Christon Editions, 2023, 275 p. - ³ Emmanuel Odilon Koukoubou, Trajectoire et dynamiques du terrorisme en expansion au Bénin, in Thierry Bidouzo and Expédit Ologou (eds.), Le terrorisme au Bénin. Perceptions, actions et perspectives Cotonou, FES and Christon Editions, 2023, pp.41-62. - ⁴ [Timbuktu Institute, «Le Bénin et la menace terroriste : vers un nouvel épiceutre côtier ?», 1 July 2022](#) - ⁵ Mathias Bak, Kristoffer Nilas Tarp, and Dr. Christina Schori Liang, Defining the Concept of 'Violent Extremism', Geneva Paper 24/19, 2019, 6 p. - ⁶ [Le PNUD accompagne l'élaboration de la stratégie nationale de prévention de l'extrémisme violent au Bénin | Programme De Développement Des Nations Unies \(undp.org\)](#).

needs of the population⁷), management of border areas, reform of the judicial system and administrative reforms⁸. While many resources have been devoted to efforts to fight against terrorism, little attention has been paid to the role of women in this fight⁹.

Against this backdrop, this policy brief seeks to answer the question: what is the role of women in the fight against violent extremism in northern Benin? Specifically, the aim is (1) to explore the efforts or strategies implemented by women in the fight against violent extremism and (2) to analyse the challenges relating to this participation. Finally, recommendations are put forward for a more sustainable response to violent extremism in northern Benin.

To contribute to this discussion, interviews and field observations were carried out in the communes of Malanville, Kandi and Karimama in the Alibori Department, and in the communes of Kérou, Matéri and Tanguiéta in the Atacora Department, with key actors involved in the response to this phenomenon¹⁰. These communes were identified because of their vulnerability and their geographical proximity to the borders of Niger and Burkina Faso respectively¹¹. The policy brief was produced within two weeks. Thirty interviews were conducted with different categories of actors (local elected representatives, administrative agents, women in charge of NGOs, community facilitators/organisers, heads of women’s groups). These interviews enabled us to understand the role of women and their actions in the fight against violent extremism in these communes, as well as the challenges they face. Given the time constraints, the only criteria adopted were the profile of the respondents and their willingness to answer.

The aim of this policy brief is to provide information on the actions taken by women in northern Benin to prevent violent extremism and their efforts to combat violent extremism. It also looks at the challenges they face and makes recommendations to the relevant actors.

Suspected VEO (violent extremist organisations) activity in Benin (May 2020 to February 2021)



Kars de Bruijne, Laws of Attraction - Northern Benin and risk of violent extremist spillover - Conflict Research Unit Report, Clingendael Institute & ACLED, June 2021.

⁷ Héritage Bitá Heyeghe. «L'avènement de la coproduction de la sécurité : le bilan et les acteurs». *Les Annales de droit*, 13 December 2018 - ⁸ Estelle K. Djanato, Les stratégies non gouvernementales de lutte contre le terrorisme au Bénin, in Thierry Bidouzo and Expédit Ologou (eds.), *Le terrorisme au Bénin. Perceptions, actions et perspectives*, Cotonou, FES and Christon Editions, 2023, pp.178–186. - ⁹ DCAF, ODIHR, UN WOMEN, *La place du genre dans la prévention de l'extrémisme violent et la lutte contre le terrorisme*. - ¹⁰ See appendices. - ¹¹ See appendices.

1 WOMEN'S ACTIONS TO PREVENT VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN NORTHERN BENIN

An analysis of the initiatives shows that women's contribution to the fight against violent extremism is manifold and that there is a geographical variation in the nature of this contribution between the eastern and western regions of the north of the country. This first part focuses on prevention initiatives implemented by women. Three major actions have been identified.

1.1 RAISING AWARENESS OF THE NEED TO PRESERVE PEACE

In the face of violent extremism, which feeds on internal vulnerabilities in order to take root in communities, every single action against extremism taken by women in the municipalities of Malanville and Kandi and in north-east Benin is significant. These women, the majority of whom believe that the municipalities mentioned are not affected by violent extremism, have undertaken awareness-raising campaigns on the preservation of peace without waiting for their municipalities to be affected by violent extremism. For example, they organise practical sessions on conflict management and mediation at community level in order to «identify small problems and their causes at an early stage and provide solutions»¹². These awareness-raising events, which take place every week under a tree, are run by women who are members of women's associations and are trained by national NGOs working on peace and security issues. Driven by the need to preserve what is considered a «treasure»¹³, they use sketches and tales to raise awareness among some forty women of the need to preserve peace. During these sessions, the facilitators use fictitious cases in the community to help participants better understand strategies for managing conflict and preserving peace.

Considering that violent extremist groups (VEGs)¹⁴ feed on community instability, these sessions represent a way of making it impossible for VEGs to take an interest in these municipalities. According to the president of the Association des Femmes de Malanville [Malanville women's association]: «To prevent community problems or hotbeds of tension from sparking terrorism in our area, we give priority to peacekeeping sessions with women. There are no terrorists from elsewhere... The day there is a conflict, terrorists will not choose to kill 2 or 3 people in a village, they will attack the whole village. One of the main causes of terrorism is the multiple vulnerabilities within communities.»¹⁵

1.2 AWARENESS-RAISING AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE AIMED AT PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

The lack of economic opportunities makes young people prime targets for VEGs. Young people can easily be receptive to the «soft»¹⁶ strategies of these groups. Women, being well aware of this situation, are carrying out awareness-raising campaigns, firstly highlighting the negative implications of violent

extremism on communities—drawing on the lived experiences of neighbouring municipalities—and secondly encouraging young people to understand the role they can play in ensuring peace in their communities.

Primarily run by women's NGOs, these awareness-raising sessions also cover the specific issue of teenage pregnancy. Traditional awareness-raising sessions on sexual and reproductive health sometimes include the prevention of violent extremism, not as a module in its own right, but with discussion sessions to ensure that «young girls do not fall into the financial trap often laid by the VEGs or their supporters»¹⁷. The head of an NGO working on the rights of girls and women stressed the importance of taking into account the prevention of violent extremism, while citing her own initiative to combat this phenomenon and highlighting the fact that young girls are among the beneficiaries of her work.

1.3 POPULAR BELIEFS AND RELIGION

The mobilisation for Muslim prayer¹⁸ deserves a mention among the preventive initiatives. According to some Muslim believers in Malanville, the 3 a.m. chant is particularly effective because «... it is used above all to chase away bad vibes and bring peace to those around you»¹⁹. Inside the mosques, aided by the calm of nature, women entrust the safety and peace of their community to Allah. Trust in God or Allah or recourse to mysticism are elements that are believed to keep terrorists away from Malanville. Shopkeepers and heads of women's groups interviewed in Malanville emphasised the mystical abilities of women, which they believe could be useful in keeping their communities away from violent extremism. With great confidence in her voice, one of the women interviewed confides: «They can't get here to Malanville. We hear what they're doing in areas further out, but in Malanville, they can't do it. If someone tries to get in, they can't get out alive»²⁰.

In northern Benin, violent extremism has had multiple consequences within communities, particularly for women²¹. In addition to preventive actions, women dedicate themselves to finding solutions to the repercussions of violent extremism.

¹² Interview with a woman in charge of the Association des Jeunes Engagés de Kandi [Association of Committed Young People from Kandi], 9 October 2023. - ¹³ When we spoke to the President of the Association des Femmes de Malanville [Malanville women's association], she said that peace was to be preserved in the municipality, because according to her, Malanville is surrounded by water, which geographically prevents terrorists from gaining a foothold there. - ¹⁴ [Groupe de soutien à l'islam et aux musulmans \(GSIM, JNIM in Arabic\), a jihadist group affiliated to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. See Le monde, Au nord-ouest du Bénin, le combat de l'armée contre les groupes terroristes, September 2023 - See Kars de Bruijine, Despite military progress, it's not going well in Northern Benin, November 2023, ClingendaelInstitute.](#) - ¹⁵ Interview with the head of the Association des Femmes de Malanville [Malanville women's association], 12 October 2023. - ¹⁶ Soft strategies here refer to the methods used by the VEGs, in particular recruitment, the promise of improved living conditions for young recruits, and indoctrination. - ¹⁷ Interview with an NGO facilitator/organiser on sexual and reproductive health rights, Kandi, 9 October 2023. - ¹⁸ Islam remains in the majority in our study area, northern Benin. - ¹⁹ Interview with a female trader and member of a women's network, Malanville, 12 October 2023. - ²⁰ Interview with a female shopkeeper, Malanville, 12 October 2023. - ²¹ Thierry S.Bidouzo, les implications catégorielles du terrorisme au Bénin, in Thierry Bidouzo and Expédit Ologou (eds.), Le terrorisme au Bénin. Perceptions, actions et perspectives, Cotonou, FES and Christon Editions, 2023, pp.129–147.

2 WOMEN'S ACTIONS TO COMBAT VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN NORTHERN BENIN

In the municipalities of Tanguiéta, Matéri and Kérou in the Atacora Department in north-west Benin, and exceptionally in Karimama in the north-east, it can be seen that women's initiatives are attempting to find solutions to the consequences of violent extremism, whether experienced directly or indirectly by communities. Three types of initiative are worth mentioning here.

2.1 PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT FOR WOMEN

In Benin's northern region, violent extremism is no longer a new or distant phenomenon; people are experiencing it on a daily basis and are suffering the consequences. Actions taken by women include providing psychosocial support for victims. Indeed, as one of the female members of the Association des Femmes Religieuses [Association of religious women] described it: «Who could remain insensitive, when you have close to home, or when you are in charge of an NGO within a community, the suffering of a woman like you who has lost her husband and her children?»²². With sensitivity and anguish in her voice, this NGO leader explains the direction of their actions in the face of the atrocities of violent extremism. These are actions in response to the tears, the emptiness and the trauma caused by violent extremism. For example, ECL'IPSE ONG, through its «bringing women together through storytelling in Atacora» project, has had an impact on 160 women in six districts of the municipality of Matéri and 350 women in five districts of the municipality of Tanguiéta, through psychosocial support sessions. This activity, using tales and the sharing of stories, took place in the Maisons des Jeunes [youth centres] in the administrative centres of each district. During these sessions, songs, dances and riddles are alternated to enrich the exchanges between displaced women and indigenous women.

This psychosocial support in the municipalities of Tanguiéta and Matéri is having a positive impact, as the head of the indigenous and displaced women's group can testify: «Today, women feel able to get themselves out of a bind. They found themselves heads of the household overnight, they felt lost. Today they have good self-esteem. When a woman cries, the other women support her, dancing around her and singing songs to show her that she's not alone»²³.

In Karimama, on the other hand, psychosocial support is provided by a psychologist who supports female victims. As a member of the development association explains: «...They have either suffered emotional shock or trauma. The ones who have seen members of their family have their throat slit, or who have suffered violence, cannot easily heal from their suffering. But they confide in the psychologist. And there are many in these conditions who are silently living with the consequences of violent extremism»²⁴. These comments corroborate the efforts made by women in communities affected by the phenomenon of violent extremism. The sharing of lived experiences, the use of songs, tales and dances, psychosocial support and listening are all part of the «female resilience» that has built up in the wake of the atrocities committed by VEGs.

2.2 TRAINING IN INCOME-GENERATING ACTIVITIES

To deal with the economic consequences of violent extremism, particularly for those who have lost their means of subsistence, such as working in the fields and trading across borders, women's NGOs have undertaken training in income-generating activities (IGAs) for female victims²⁵. These courses cover topics such as soya cheese making or rice processing. The aim is to give these women a new economic activity and, above all, to prevent them from becoming potential targets for VEGs. This is the analysis that emerges from discussions with a woman in Karimama, for whom «...it is idleness that leads people to join terrorist groups. These women who have lost everything (husband and job), if we do nothing, we'll be leaving other problems in our community, and these people, they exploit every weakness in the community. ...»²⁶. The training also aims to enable women to play their role as educators and peacemakers within the family and the community. This is what a member of the NGO Femmes Leaders [women leaders] explained to us: «When a woman is autonomous, she can educate her children, take better care of them so that tomorrow, these same children do not take up arms to create disorder»²⁷.

2.3 INTELLIGENCE

When listing women's actions in the fight against violent extremism, women's involvement in intelligence is often mentioned. In rural communities, women's social position makes them a source of useful information in the fight against violent extremism. This role of what is referred to as a «naïve intelligence agent»²⁸, who holds the information and makes it available to those who know how to analyse it, was emphasised during the interviews. Whether they are at the market, in places of worship, on village committees, etc., women gather valuable information informally. This is not a collective initiative, but rather an individual one, given the sensitivity of the subject, which consists of providing information about a citizen who is thought to be suspicious and acting to destabilise the peace. The words of a local authority in Gouandé regarding this initiative are revealing: «We don't know about everything. If someone is buying large quantities of cooked food, or there is a large quantity of fuel going out of the locality, women are the first to know, so they must be able to report it»²⁹.

It is important to stress that the various actions carried out by women as part of prevention efforts and as part of the fight against violent extremism are supported by the administrative authorities at a decentralised level. The words of the mayor of Matéri clearly reflect the authorities' efforts in this direction: «At local council level, we continue to support women's initiatives. We are making women's voices heard at institutional meetings and are calling for special attention to be paid to women in border communities who are suffering the horrors of violent extremism»³⁰.

Although the contribution of women in the fight against violent extremism in northern Benin is significant, the fact remains that this journey is strewn with pitfalls.

²² Interview with a female member of the Association des Femmes Religieuses et Traditionnelles [Association of religious and traditional women] and Treasurer of the Association de Développement de Karimama [Karimama development association], 12 October 2023. - ²³ Interview with a head of the group of indigenous and displaced women rice farmers, Tanguiéta, 13 October 2023. See also Rapport de la réunion de restitution des résultats après mise en œuvre du projet «Bringing women together through storytelling», USAID, Programme régional d'appui aux pays côtiers, 2023. - ²⁴ Interview with a member of the Association de Développement de Karimama [Karimama development association], 12 October 2023. - ²⁵ Some of them receive technical and financial support from international organisations. - ²⁶ Interview with a female member of the Association des Femmes Religieuses et Traditionnelles [Association of religious and traditional women] and Treasurer of the Association de Développement de Karimama [Karimama development association], 12 October 2023. - ²⁷ Interview with a woman from the NGO Femmes Leaders [women leaders] and ambassador of peace in Tanguiéta, 14 October 2023. - ²⁸ Expédit Ologou, Les renseignements citoyens dans la lutte contre le terrorisme au Bénin, in Thierry Bidouzo and Expédit Ologou (eds.), Le terrorisme au Bénin. Perceptions, actions et perspectives, Cotonou, FES and Christon Editions, 2023, pp.151-175. - ²⁹ Interview with a local authority in Gouandé, Matéri, 14 October 2023. - ³⁰ Interview with the Mayor of Matéri on 14 October 2023.

3 THE CHALLENGES FACING WOMEN'S COMMUNITY INITIATIVES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The many actions taken by women at community level are not without their challenges. We will look at these before proposing some recommendations.

3.1 CHALLENGES FACING WOMEN

There are a number of challenges facing women's organisations in the fight against violent extremism in northern Benin. Here are some of the key points:

- Inadequate representation of women in formal peacekeeping and security mechanisms and processes, including at community level;
- Poor mobilisation of resources for large-scale, long-term peace-building actions for the benefit of communities at a basic level;
- Women's lack of financial autonomy, synonymous with poverty and insecurity, a breeding ground for explosive frustration;
- Switching to other income-generating activities that are fulfilling and risk-free («Since agriculture, our main source of income, is under threat because we no longer have access to all our arable land, we have to switch to other IGAs.»³¹)

3.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A MORE SUSTAINABLE FIGHT AGAINST VIOLENT EXTREMISM

In light of the above challenges, we have put forward a number of recommendations as possible solutions.

• For the attention of the government

- Reduce the distance between the decision-makers at the top of the State and the governed, who are left behind by development programmes. This feeling of abandonment, often noted among the population, is expressed by a young woman who is a member of the Matéri artisans' group: «We don't have the impression that the state cares about those of us who live in areas affected by violent extremism»³².
- Set up and allocate a special fund to support IGAs for women affected by violent extremism³³.

- With the support of NGOs, organise regular awareness-raising sessions on the 'Plan d'action national de mise en œuvre de la résolution 1325' [National Action Plan for the implementation of resolution 1325], in order to encourage communities to better represent women in actions to combat violent extremism.

• For the attention of municipal authorities

- Set up a system for the systematic involvement of women in community conflict prevention and peace promotion mechanisms. This requires the effective inclusion of women in all decision-making processes at a decentralised level that relate to the fight against violent extremism.
- Integrate and support gender-sensitive and resilient budgeting in municipalities affected by violent extremism in order to promote social justice and genuine equality.

• For the attention of women's groups and networks of women's associations

- Capitalise on the good practices resulting from community activities with a view to replicating them in neighbouring municipalities for sustainable initiatives and a more global fight against violent extremism. This will also enable us to build on what we have learned and use it to mobilise resources for long-term actions.
- Set up community action units to decentralise actions at village level in areas such as Matéri and Gouandé.

• For the attention of technical and financial partners

- Harmonise interventions and ensure the equitable distribution of resources allocated to initiatives in favour of vulnerable people, particularly girls and women.

• For the attention of traditional and religious leaders

- Help to deconstruct stereotypes about the social role of women and support women's initiatives.

CONCLUSION

Bold action that incorporates the contribution of all protagonists, including women, is required to put up an unwavering fight against the threat of terrorism in Benin, which has become a reality through attacks by armed terrorist groups, the first of which was highly publicised in 2019 in the Pendjari Park in north-west Benin. In the context of the position of women in traditional African societies, women are delivering both preventive initiatives and tentative responses that are commensurate with their resources. In order for the actions taken by women in communities affected by violent extremism, and even those deployed in outlying areas, to be more effective, there is an urgent need for state and local actors to agree on a common gender-sensitive agenda and prioritise resilient responses tailored to vulnerable communities.

³¹ Interview with a citizen in Gouandé, a district of Matéri, 14 October 2023. - ³² Interview with a member of the Matéri artisans' group on 14 October 2023. - ³³ Those who no longer have access to their fields, those whose husbands, parents and guardians have been the target of attacks or collateral victims.

APPENDIX 1

OVERVIEW OF PROFILES SURVEYED

Categories	Numbers	Departments/Cities
Local elected officials	5	Atacora/ Tanguiéta, Matéri, Kérou Alibori/Malanville, Karimama, Kandi
Administrative agents	5	Alibori/Malanville, Karimama Atacora/ Tanguiéta, Matéri, Kérou
Female NGO leaders (Association des Femmes de Malanville [Malanville women's association], EDUCO NGO, Association des Jeunes Engagés de Kandi [Association of Committed Young People from Kandi], Association des Femmes Religieuses et Traditionnelles [Association of religious and traditional women])	4	Atacora/ Tanguiéta, Matéri, Kérou. Alibori/Malanville, Karimama, Kandi
Community facilitators/organisers	7	Alibori/Malanville, Karimama Atacora/ Tanguiéta, Matéri, Kérou
Heads of women's groups (Cooperatives of women rice parboilers, group of women charcoal producers, groups of women from the Malanville market, group of indigenous and displaced women, rice parboilers, group of women and artisans from Matéri, Association of women who process millet into local beverages, Soukatiyinna association, Association of seamstresses from Matéri)	9	Atacora/ Tanguiéta, Matéri, Kérou. Alibori/Malanville, Karimama, Kandi

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