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# Making women's roles and experiences visible in countering and preventing violent extremism: the forgotten women of Cabo Delgado

**CHERYL HENDRICKS,  
AMANDA LUCEY AND LOIDE DA  
GLORIA SAMBO MACARINGUE**

November 2023

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The gendered impact of violent extremism (VE), and the roles of women in supporting or countering and preventing violent extremism (C/PVE), in Africa, remains largely understudied.<sup>i</sup> More than two decades after the adoption of the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) there remains insufficient attention on the recruitment of women into armed non-state actor formations and on their peacebuilding roles, especially in conflict contexts characterised by violent extremism.

The WPS Agenda recognises the disproportionate impact of violent conflict on women and girls, affirms the roles that women play during conflict and emphasises the need for their inclusion in conflict prevention, peace-making, peacekeeping and peacebuilding. UNSCR 2242 (2015) specifically urges member states to “ensure the participation and leadership of women and women’s organisations in developing strategies to counter terrorism and violent extremism”. It also highlights the need to integrate a gender perspective into preventing and coun-

tering terrorism and to collate gender-sensitive research and data on the drivers of radicalisation for women and the impact of counter-terrorism strategies on their human rights.<sup>ii</sup> Yet, the emphasis on women in contexts of violent extremism is still predominantly through the lens of victimhood and, therefore, on the need to protect them.<sup>iii</sup> Highlighting women as actors in contexts where violent extremism is prevalent, either as agents thereof or as peacebuilders, remains peripheral to analyses of violent extremism. This inadequacy contributes to a lack of a gendered perspective and/or erroneous gendered programming in C/PVE and also contributes to the continued marginalisation of women in peace processes.

There is a growing body of literature on violent extremism in Cabo Delgado, Mozambique, and the peace support operations (PSOs) deployed to this region to assist with “restoring the authority of the state” and/or to counter violent extremism.<sup>iv</sup> The role of women as survivors and as actors in this conflict, and if, and how, PSOs have mainstreamed gender into their program-

ming remains largely invisible. Very few authors writing on violent extremism in Mozambique, with exceptions such as João Feijo,<sup>v</sup> go beyond journalistic accounts of women being victims of attacks. Indeed, both the peacebuilding contributions and the plight of women in Northern Mozambique have largely been overlooked in the literature and in the counter-terrorism responses, hence the subtitle, ‘forgotten women of Cabo Delgado’.

The brief draws on primary research conducted in Maputo and Cabo Delgado in October 2022 as well as an array of secondary resources. Interviews were held with researchers, civil society and PSO representatives in Maputo and Cabo Delgado.<sup>vi</sup> We also conducted a focus group discussion with representatives of women’s organisations in Cabo Delgado.<sup>vii</sup> They represented a diverse sector of organisations including those dealing with the protection of women and girls, gender-based violence (GBV), trauma counselling, faith-based organisations and women’s groups.

This situational brief provides a short outline of the conflict context in Mozambique, an overview of women and violent extremism, and perceptions of the drivers of, and recruitment for, violent extremism in the north of Mozambique. The brief also highlights the integration of women peacekeepers and gender programming in the Southern African Development Community Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM), the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF) and the European Union Training Mission (EUTM) in Mozambique. It concludes by highlighting some of the ways to strengthen a gender perspective in preventing violent extremism in Northern Mozambique. These insights can be utilised to produce more innovative approaches to preventing violent extremism.

The brief argues that C/PVE and peacebuilding efforts undertaken by international and national actors in Mozambique continue to view women through the one-dimensional prism of victims of conflict and thus negate their agency in conflict management and C/PVE. The continued stereotyping of violent extremists as male, or of only consisting of women who are “mothers, monsters and whores”,<sup>viii</sup> also limits our understanding of women’s role in radicalisation, recruitment, perpetrating violence, and in sustaining and reproducing violent extremist groups. This in turn impacts the development of comprehensive and inclusive C/PVE responses.

## 2. THE CONFLICT CONTEXT IN CABO DELGADO

Mozambique has endured many wars. The war to liberate the country from Portuguese colonialism (1964–1975) was replaced by a civil war (1977–1992) between FRELIMO and RENAMO. The protagonists of these wars originated in the north – both FRELIMO and RENAMO. The conflict resumed in 2013 and a peace deal, brokered by the Swiss Ambassador, Mirko Manzoni, was only signed in 2019. A disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programme was then reinstated. RENAMO submitted a list of 5221 combatants to be demobilised, of whom 7% were women, to the Military Affairs Commission.<sup>ix</sup> All combatants of that war are now deemed to have been demobilised. However, as the conflict between RENAMO and FRELIMO was seemingly finding closure, another war was escalating in the province of Cabo Delgado, one perpetrated by the violent extremist group *Al Sunnah wa Jama’ah* (ASWJ).

Although there is a plethora of articles on the activities of ASWJ, locally known as the *al-Shabaab*, there is still surprisingly little known about their nature, structure, membership, leadership, strategy and interests. Their brutal insurgency has led to the death of more than four thousand and the displacement of nearly a million people. It has created fear and instability and increased food insecurity in this region of Mozambique. Beheadings, murder, pillaging, burning houses, rape and kidnapping of locals have been the means through which they instil terror in the population, while attacking government institutions, infrastructure and symbols drives home a message of dissatisfaction with governance and security provisioning. ASWJ attacks on Mocimboa da Praia in 2020 and Palma in 2021, key areas for gas exploration, sent shockwaves globally and led to the peace-enforcement interventions by SAMIM and the RDF and capacity-building interventions by the EUTM in an attempt to support Mozambique to counter the then-rising tide of violent extremism.

For a long period, the government of Mozambique constructed and communicated a narrative that the violent extremists were unknown, primarily foreigners, and that they were all men. It is now, however, accepted that the ASWJ are of local origin and emanated from Mocimboa da Praia, Palma, Quissanga, Macomia, and further afield, though there are some foreign fighters from, for example,



Tanzania and Somalia, who are/have been part of the insurgency. Those named as part of the leadership of this group are Abu Yasir Hassan (a leader from Tanzania, also noted as having died),<sup>x</sup> Bonomado Omar (a senior leader who is said to have been killed in the 22 August 2023 ambush), Mustafa (said to have been Omar's right-hand person), Farido Selemene Arune, Maulana Ali Cassimo (a prominent and educated commander) and, for the purposes of this paper, most notably a woman, Rosa Cassamo (from Cabo Delgado and who is said to have been a leader for logistics in Macomia as well as responsible for mobilising other women in her village).<sup>xi</sup> ASWJ appears to be somewhere between 1000 and 3000 fighters, and operates in small groups (though they have been known to attack in a larger group of nearly 200 fighters before).

The ASWJ emerged because of the structural violence (poverty, marginalisation, exclusion, corruption, oppression, and so forth) prevalent in the north of Mozambique, and an opportunity structure that enabled them to organise (weak governance and security and access to weapons and funding). These conditions impact both men and women alike, but men, who remain cast in the gendered construction of providers for their families, often feel the economic exclusion more acutely. It is unclear what the ASWJ's demands are; however, they have targeted state organs, key installations, businesses, and villages and were wanting stricter adherence to Islamic law in the north. Muslims constitute 18% of the Mozambican population but are the majority (54%) in the north.<sup>xii</sup>

A group of this nature cannot successfully operate by fear alone. Part of their message of marginalisation and oppression and alternative ways of being and belonging has to resonate with the population. They also often have ties to the communities and, therefore, can often successfully infiltrate and be shielded in towns and villages (often by relatives), and they must provide some form of material support or benefit to some in the community. In these contexts, predominantly military interventions remain band-aid solutions, for you "cannot kill an idea with a bullet"<sup>xiii</sup> – you need to provide alternative ideas and concrete solutions to the governance and security challenges that have fuelled the crisis in the first place.

SAMIM, the RDF and the EUTM, arrived in the latter half of 2021 to support the Mozambican security sector to

stabilise and secure Cabo Delgado. These PSOs have registered success in securing some of the districts and in returning some of the displaced persons.<sup>xiv</sup> Approximately 420,200 internally displaced persons were resettled by March 2023.<sup>xv</sup> However, they are dealing with a moving target as the insurgents were spreading to neighbouring provinces, such as Nampula and Niassa,<sup>xvi</sup> and moving back and forth, as in August 2023 there were a large number of insurgents spotted in Macomia (including men and women), a district in Cabo Delgado. With a stronger presence of security due to the PSOs, and with key leaders having been killed, the ASWJ also appear, for now, to be on the retreat.

### 3. WOMEN AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

The literature on the role of women in violent extremist groups has concentrated on those that have been captured, murdered or sexually violated. Their plight as predominantly being 'wives', sex slaves, and/or fulfilling domestic assignments, such as cooking and looking after the children, are usually focused on when writing about women associated with violent extremist groups, continuing the perpetuation of a one-sided narrative of victimhood. At best women's agency in violent extremism is confined to the role of informant. The utility of women for the extremists is quite evident as women can be used as bargaining chips; VE groups receive a lot of publicity when they capture women; women can be used to entice men with promises of access to wives, and as with any other militarised operation, women continue to fulfil the necessary physical, social and ideological reproduction roles so that the whole organisation can exist and grow. They are however also senior leaders, wives of senior leaders, strategists, in charge of logistics, combatants, recruiters, translators, and so forth. They therefore enter these groups differently and occupy different positions within them. They trade on stereotypes that render them invisible and/or in need of protection to move about and act as an enabler for activities of the groups to take place.

The majority of women who are associated with violent extremism are often forced into this association. However, this provides an incomplete picture of women's association with these groups. The work of Abatan, Okech and Feijo illustrate this when they revisit gender and violent

extremism in Africa in their analysis.<sup>xvii</sup> Some join voluntarily, some seek to join their husbands and others may have been captured at first but then begin to be combatants themselves. A more nuanced analysis of their differing roles and differing positionality within these groups is therefore important. Their voluntary joining of these groups challenges both male stereotypes of who is a terrorist/rebel and the WPS Agenda as a whole. The WPS Agenda continues to place more emphasis on an essentialised notion of women's peacefulness in order to justify why they should be included into peace processes. Highlighting their agency as fighters disrupts this discourse. Yet, it is precisely because they also participate in this manner that they need to be factored into peace processes, for as has often been the case, their needs are not taken into account when men engage in negotiations for the distribution of positions and for DDR and Security Sector Reform (SSR) programming.

Jeannine Abatan's research (2021) in Mali and Nigeria underscores that women join violent extremist groups for a variety of reasons. For example, she highlights that they associate as a means of protecting themselves from the insecurity generated by the extremists; as a means of protecting their income-generating activities; to avenge the death of family members; to find a husband or to follow a husband; for religious reasons and/or to wage jihad. In Niger, they are deployed as suicide bombers and trained in firearms and archery to support military operations. Women also perform supply chain functions, reproduce the groups through bearing and looking after children and ensuring supplies. They help recruit members and also act as scouts and informants before military operations.<sup>xviii</sup> Okech notes that "access to economic power and its attendant privileges has been illustrated as a core driver for women choosing to be associated with Boko Haram".<sup>xix</sup> Her research highlights that structural inequalities and/or socio-economic dispossession are key reasons why women joined Boko Haram. They therefore associate, if they are not abducted, for the same reasons that men do, for economic freedom (access to food and finance).<sup>xx</sup> These women, Okech contends, become the "conveyers of political beliefs and ideologies to secure more members".<sup>xxi</sup> Importantly, she also emphasises the hierarchy of power between the women associates, noting that the proximity to masculine power, such as leaders and fighters, offers some of them privileges that they did not enjoy in their own communities.<sup>xxii</sup>

Analysing the role of women in *al-Shabaab* in Somalia, the Harleys bring attention to the privileged position of some of the women associated with violent extremism. They assert that women who were married to *al-Shabaab* fighters "lead a privileged existence both in terms of the quality of life that is accorded to them by *Al-Shabaab's* Executive Council, especially in comparison to the civilian population living under *Al-Shabaab's* control, and also the freedoms they are allowed".<sup>xxiii</sup>

#### 4. THE SITUATION OF WOMEN IN CABO DELGADO

Violent conflict is gendered and has a contradictory impact on women. The conflict in Cabo Delgado is no different. Toxic masculinity is heightened in this context. The performance of extremism is often enacted on the bodies of women, for example, through subordination, subjugation, forced marriage, rape, dictating bodily attire and behaviour. Those who are deployed to protect the population, i.e. government security services and/or soldiers and peacekeepers are often also guilty of sexual exploitation and abuse.

Women and girls in Cabo Delgado were vulnerable before the war began. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) noted high rates of teenage pregnancy, child marriage and HIV prevalence.<sup>xxiv</sup> The war certainly increased the vulnerability of women. The majority of those displaced are women and children. Young women and girls are trafficked and sold, others are kidnapped and held in captivity as wives of fighters and/or as cooks, while many others are sexually assaulted and murdered. In December 2021, Human Rights Watch noted that since 2018, approximately 600 girls had been abducted by ASWJ.<sup>xxv</sup> The number is likely to have increased since the report was released, as abductions of women and children have also been reported in subsequent attacks. Access to reproductive health care, education, food and justice also become more challenging for women in these situations. The north of Mozambique, however, also had many women who fought in the liberation movement (the struggle for independence was largely fought in Cabo Delgado between 1964 and 1974 and FRELIMO had a women's wing), and some have been part of the armed resistance carried out by RENAMO (as previously noted, 7% of those who presented them-



selves for DDR were women); that is, women have a long history of being part of armed movements in this region of the country. It is known that in places afflicted by violent extremism, some women voluntarily associate with extremist groups, either for economic gain, protection, belief in the mission/ideology, or because they are following husbands and other family relations. Women perform different roles in violent extremist organisations, namely, leadership, domestic and performing acts of violence.<sup>xxvi</sup> It is known, for example, that the Islamic State (IS) has an all-women's brigade, Al-Khansaa, that performs stop and searches, recruitment and intelligence gathering<sup>xxvii</sup>. It is also known that many of the Boko Haram suicide bombers were women. Research on violent extremism has previously indicated that around 10–15% of members of violent extremist groups are women. There is, therefore, no reason to believe that women were all victims or only entering the ASWJ via abductions. It is more likely that some of them were voluntary associates and performing many of the same functions as they would be in other armed non-state formations – we already identified the important role of coordinating logistics and recruiting women performed by Rosa Cassamo. We must assume that there are more women performing these roles. Not much, however, has been written about women and girls associated with ASWJ – they remain largely invisible.

There is a sense of empowerment that can emerge with the women who join these organisations: they begin to disrupt conventional patriarchal relations in which men are constructed as leaders, fighters, providers and protectors. War does not impact all women in the same way, and it is therefore important to have a gendered lens when making women's experiences visible and when developing C/PVE programming.

In conflict contexts, many more women take on the roles of humanitarian workers, activists and peacebuilders. During our research in Cabo Delgado we met, and heard of, women who opened their houses to refugees in Pemba, women who were trying to provide trauma counselling and psychosocial support, women's organisations dealing with violence against women, and women who were trying to make a difference to the lives of other women in Cabo Delgado. Each was doing the little they could. For example, an older woman in the focus

group had taken in many women and children who were refugees, when she herself seemed to have so little.

*My house is really full now. One of the women died. It saddens me to look at the children. They miss what used to be. The children miss school. I don't know for how long they are going to stay either.*

Mozambique adopted a National Action Plan (NAP) on WPS covering the period 2018–2022. The plan is relatively silent on violent extremism. There is, however, a platform on WPS that was established by PROMURA, which consists of 23 local CSOs in Cabo Delgado. This forms part of a broader UN Women project and promoting women and girls' effective participation in peace, security and recovery in Mozambique. Through these projects, women, including security sector officials, have received some training on implementing UNSCR 1325 and women in the WPS platform are being trained as election observers. However, despite these interventions, women need to strengthen their collective response mechanism for dealing with the challenges presented by violent extremism in this country.

## 5. PERCEPTIONS OF THE DRIVERS OF, AND RECRUITMENT FOR, VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN CABO DELGADO: WOMEN'S VOICES

There is broad consensus on the multifaceted nature (political, security, geographic, socio-economic and cultural) of the drivers of conflict in Cabo Delgado. These drivers speak to long-standing marginalisation of the north and its concomitantly constructed sense of being and belonging (which is informed by religion, trade routes to the east, and language and cultural affinities). The north is characterised by a governance of extraction and predation; corruption; informalisation; inequality; organised crime; human rights abuse and wilful neglect; a state not having a monopoly on the means of violence; all of which are constitutive of the structural and physical violence[s] that have informed the experiences of those who live in the region. Feijo notes that religion needs to be factored in as a people's response to the real misery they have been experiencing, and that this extremist version of Islam, too, was a political message, which could only be countered with an alternative ideology.<sup>xxiii</sup>

In the interviews conducted with women in Mozambique (Maputo and Pemba), we were also able to discern what they perceived as the drivers of violent extremism in the north. The perspectives of the women we interviewed largely dovetail with those advanced by researchers and activists to date. In an interview with a woman journalist and activist in Maputo, perceptions of a disproportionate allocation of resources to FRELIMO, a vacuum of leadership in the north, and Mozambique having become a 'controlled democracy' were articulated.<sup>xxxix</sup> Mozambique was portrayed as a weak state with porous borders creating an enabling environment for lawlessness and the proliferation of violent extremism. The interviewee highlighted the expropriation of land without compensation in the areas where the gas fields were located and the concomitant displacement of large numbers of people.<sup>xxx</sup> In addition, emphasis was placed on the local ethnic conflicts in Cabo Delgado and on the expulsion of illegal ruby miners from Montepuez. This political economy perspective is one that tallies with many of the explanations that have been proffered in the academic literature on this conflict.

Women in the focus group discussion highlighted poverty, social exclusion, marginalisation of youth, lack of economic development, unemployment, poor education, low levels of literacy, lack of capacity of the state to control borders, ethnic, cultural and religious divisions, and so forth as causes for the rise in violent extremism. They were however also adamant that these were proximate factors that aggravate the situation noting that these conditions were also pervasive in many of the other provinces.<sup>xxxi</sup> The trigger factors of this conflict, for the women in the focus group, were the discovery of oil and gas in Palma, as well as the abundance of rubies in Montepuez. However, they further asserted that the discovery of these natural resources attracted people from different parts of the world, especially from Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Kenya and Tanzania, some of whom were able to use large amounts of money to recruit young boys from their neighbourhoods into violent extremism.<sup>xxxii</sup> They pointed to the government's decision to regulate ruby mining in Montepuez, which left many young men without a source of income, as a major source of grievance. The dominant narrative of the women in this focus group was one of violent extremism being largely fuelled by 'foreigners' who enabled an opportunity structure (funding from the outside and further deprivation from

the sources of extraction and production). Those locals who joined them, they seem to suggest, were enticed by the money they were being offered, and they were entrapped once they took the cash.

It is now widely accepted that this conflict has both internal and external dimensions, but that the leaders and foot soldiers are predominantly from Cabo Delgado. Women in this focus group discussion in Cabo Delgado, however, placed emphasis on the 'outsiders' – gas companies, people from the south of Mozambique, or terrorists from elsewhere. This could be an attempt to disassociate from the idea of indigeneity of the group: a disbelief that the sons and daughters of Cabo Delgado could purposefully carry out the heinous acts of murder and terror on their own communities. Yet, the horrific nature of the violence perpetrated is not new to this area – movements such as RENAMO have in the past also adopted scorched-earth approaches against villages to achieve their aims.

However, when delving deeper into women's roles during the focus group discussion, anecdotal evidence seems to suggest that it was locals (not outsiders/foreigners) doing much of the initial hiding and the recruitment and that women seem to play a central role in these aspects. The women in the focus group noted that in Mocimboa da Praia the preparation for the attack began from around 2014. They saw motorcycles coming in, more people driving cars, and an increase in the circulation of money in the town. Moreover, women and men in Mocimboa da Praia were renting space in their houses to the insurgents as a source for extra money.

*The population was used in a way as they hid people and they got paid for it. The day of the attack they did not come from far; they were already inside the village. When it started, we just heard shooting from all over the village.*

One focus group participant noted that a family member had been involved in recruitment at some point and that he had received large sums of money. Another focus group participant noted that she knew of a woman who was sending the 'boys' airtime, and of another who had participated in the group's reign of terror. Clearly, there was awareness that recruitment, hiding of insurgents, and planning was taking place in Cabo Delgado and



that some of the local residents were at the forefront of the initiatives. Speaking to the women in the focus group there was a stark reality that we were speaking to women who were right in the throes of the insurgency – ASWJ was not some distant rebel group, they were their ‘boys’ and they were recruiting and roaming among them. There was a sense of fear among the women and the rawness of their experiences of terror still sat with them.

When asked about what the violent extremists wanted, the focus group participants indicated that they did not know what the demands of ASWJ were or who their leadership was. They, too, seem to have bought into the narrative of the faceless extremists with no clear agenda, which is somewhat contradictory to their elaboration of the extremists at first living in, and recruiting from, their villages.

Women in the focus group discussion also noted that there are many women who are associated with the *mashababos* (insurgents). Although the majority were viewed as joining the group involuntarily, it was affirmed that there were women who voluntarily associated with the group. One of the participants stated that:

*There are women whom we believe were part of the community, since they apparently lived a normal life, but we saw that they are part of al-Shabaab when there is an attack. There was this foreign woman who lived in Mocimboa da Praia for a very long time, she had a shop in the village, but during one of the attacks, she had a gun, and she exploded the Vodacom antenna. No one knew for how long she was part of the group.*

Feijo provided a description of one of the woman leaders in ASWJ, Rosa Cassamo. Before joining the group, he notes that she owned three huge farming plots. She was described as light skinned and beautiful (seemingly sought-after features for violent extremist men) and a mother of five children. Two of her daughters were married to insurgents. Rosa was also considered to be the “queen of black magic”.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Feijó (2021) argues that the line between coercion and the willingness to associate with *al-Shabaab* is a thin one.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The above clearly illustrates that even if women

voluntarily associate, it is the structural violence (patriarchy, familial ties, poverty, invisibility, exclusion, etc.) that they face on a day-to-day basis that often provides the motive for aligning themselves with the insurgency.

These drivers of conflict cannot be resolved by a military intervention alone. Any sustainable peaceful solution can only emerge through addressing the conditions that give rise to deep seated grievances, dialogues with key stakeholders and communities to address transitional justice and social cohesion issues, creating a more sustainable peace infrastructure, adherence to human and socio-economic rights, as well as creating more participatory, legitimate and accountable forms of governance for the north. Central to the reconstruction of the north is the need to address the added forms of oppression, exclusion and burden faced by women in these conflict affected areas.

## 6. LOCAL WOMEN PEACEBUILDERS

Although there are a number of agencies working in Cabo Delgado who are supporting women, particularly the internally displaced persons (IDPs), support for local women peacebuilders appears wanting. UNFPA, for example, has set up safe spaces for women in resettlement areas offering humanitarian responses, psychosocial support and income-generating activities. Fórum Mulher, based in Maputo and working with Women’s Learning Partnership, trained women in the region “to be leaders, defend their rights, and advocate for change”.<sup>xxxv</sup>

UN Women held a conference on WPS in Mozambique in December 2022. Such conferences go a long way in ensuring deeper analysis, in promoting the WPS Agenda and in providing the solidarity that is needed. There should, however, be many more of them, at national and regional levels, if women are to play a more meaningful role in peacebuilding. The conclusions of this conference highlighted the need for psychosocial support; the mapping of organisations working on women’s peace and security in Mozambique; the need to strengthen the capacity of women to engage in conflict prevention and mediation; and the need to hold community-level discussion on women’s participation in peace processes.<sup>xxxvi</sup> All these are much needed interventions.

There are many women's community-based organisations, but they appear to be responding more to violence against women, humanitarian needs, promoting economic empowerment of women and girls through saving groups, building capacity among women and girls in terms of women's rights and offering training and counselling on the issues related to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and psychosocial support. This is usually a first response to violence in the continuum of peacebuilding activities. There appears to be little work in relation to training on conflict analysis, conflict prevention, mediation and PSOs. Discussions on how women can more concretely intervene in promoting peace in the north and in establishing a larger peace infrastructure is needed. Indeed, our visit to the area and our engagement with the women left us with a sense that the women of Cabo Delgado have largely been forgotten – this despite the WPS NAP and the global rhetoric around supporting women in conflict contexts. The UN conference on WPS in Mozambique was a welcome initiative but also seemed as if it was too little and too late.

One of the women of the focus group noted that:

*Civil society does not have a voice here. They closed all the doors. Government does nothing. We just help people. We are just a bridge to support people.*

This quote gives a sense of the marginalisation of women working in the civil society space in the north and highlights the need for more support to the women of this region. Very few local women are, therefore, directly engaged in C/PVE in Cabo Delgado. This situation needs to change. Women must have a more active role in informing PVE strategies and in establishing and leading broader peace processes. This is something that the PSOs could address going forward.

## 7. WOMEN IN THE REGULAR ARMED FORMATIONS COUNTERING AND PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM: MOZAMBIKAN ARMED FORCES (FADM), THE RDF, SAMIM AND THE EUTM

Women have been playing an active part, in combat and non-combat roles, in the regular armies to assist with C/PVE in Mozambique. There is, however, still a major gender imbalance in the deployment of personnel to PSOs in contexts of violent extremism. Only 12% of the Mozambique Armed Forces (FADM) are women. The majority of women are in support functions, for example, administration, logistics and military health. The number of women in senior leadership and/or command positions remains small. There are, therefore, not many women from FADM deployed to counter terrorism in Cabo Delgado.

The RDF has a contingent of approximately 2800 in Cabo Delgado of which approximately 500 are women.<sup>xxxvii</sup> There are women in command positions; for example, Lt Yvonne Umwiza leads a speed boat unit and a small contingent of female naval soldiers.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Rwanda seems to have had marked success in integrating women into its defence force and in utilising their capacity across the different operational functions of the mission. Their legitimacy, efficiency and effectiveness seem to have improved, and Rwanda is gaining a reputation as Africa's preferred peacekeeper (if one looks at the number of African countries asking for its direct assistance).

SAMIM has a force of 1929 with 177<sup>xxxix</sup> of these being women in its mission (about 9%). They have a gender advisor deployed in the mission headquarters and were expecting a woman police commissioner to join them. In total, at the time of the interview, there were two women and six men at the Head of Mission office and another four women performing support functions at the office. SAMIM is developing a strategic plan for the mission and has indicated that it will have a gender perspective. Although SAMIM's gender balance must be revisited, it is showing a willingness to integrate a gender perspective into its programming, hence the deployment of a gender advisor. They also presented a five-day training programme to police officers in five districts of Cabo Delgado on human rights and policing,



gender and community policing, protection of civilians, and sexual exploitation and abuse as well as conducted interventions with IDPs to make them aware of GBV.<sup>xi</sup>

The EUTM, which is training the Quick Reaction Forces and supporting FADM's Gender Department, is trying to integrate a gender perspective. Its training includes a focus on gender equality, gender-based violence and the WPS Agenda. The EU and the EUTM may have the theoretical knowledge for integrating gender but given the low levels of women's participation in their own security sector, it is doubtful whether they are leading by example.

Almost all the interviewees believed that their security had improved since the arrival of the RAF and SAMIM to Cabo Delgado, though many of the locals seem to place more faith in the RAF's ability to protect them. The fear is also there that the PSOs will eventually have to leave and that a situation of heightened insecurity may return. This is why it is important that C/PVE is embedded within the local population and why women should play a far stronger role in this regard. FADM, the RDF, SAMIM and the EUTM, as well as the broader international community, should pay more attention to ensure that women can play this role. They should also not only look at increasing the number of women in their own missions, but how to meaningfully integrate a gender perspective into their work and how to build a larger peace infrastructure that can draw on the capacity and insights of women peacebuilders. As highlighted earlier, this begins by identifying the differing roles that women play and responding accordingly rather than with a blanket interpretation of women as victims or believing that those who are associated with extremist groups have been 'brainwashed'.

## 8. GENDER AND THE PREVENTION OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM

The UN Women's Handbook<sup>xii</sup> notes that women "play a critical role in sustaining violent extremist groups", pointing to their social reproductive functions of raising the next generation of jihadi fighters, providing inspiration, emotional and psychological support, and other non-violent activities such as finance and group operations. This situational brief has already shown that

women also engage in violence and act as enablers for the violence to occur.

PVE is a broader approach than countering violent extremism, focusing on the drivers thereof and on "preventing violent extremism through non-coercive means, using awareness-raising, dialogue, education, psychosocial and socio-economic means, and addressing push and pull factors".<sup>xiii</sup> The UN Women's Handbook notes that "community engagement, economic development, socio-political development, education, countering extremist narratives, promoting interfaith dialogue, and public-private partnerships represent some of the P/CVE measures used to counter the appeal and support for extremist groups".<sup>xiiii</sup> This approach, therefore, shifts the interventions from more militarised approaches of countering extremism to the more sustainable, yet more intangible, focus of shifting behaviour and relationships. These are roles that civil society, especially women's peacebuilding organisations, can and should play. Civil society and especially women's organisations in the north can begin to be supported to take up some of these roles.

Although a Northern Resilience and Integrated Development Strategy (ERDIN) was developed for Cabo Delgado, which prioritises peacebuilding, it was not adopted by the government. ERDIN proposed the creation of a national body for peace and reconciliation, tasked to address the drivers of violent extremism and indicated that it must include women. The body should be tasked with "promoting capacities for peace, promoting reconciliation, and social cohesion, ensuring access to justice, respecting human rights, strengthening community security and resilience, and developing cross border communities".<sup>xlv</sup> Other pillars speak to legal and governance reforms to improve state-society relations and economic recovery. The strategy also advocated that 50% of the beneficiaries of each intervention should be women. If implemented, the strategy would go a long way to addressing some of the drivers of extremism in a gender-sensitive manner. The strategy that the government's Council of Ministers has adopted, Programme for Resilience and Integrated Development in the North (PREDIN) in June 2022, has dropped the focus on grievance, poverty and inequality<sup>xlv</sup> and seems to reference women more in relation to addressing SGBV, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) and sexual and reproductive health. Given that women

in the group discussion felt that they were not being included and supported in peacebuilding (assisting IDPs, DDR processes, early warning, conflict prevention, local mediation, etc.), it is clear that much more needs to be done to ensure that women are centred in peace processes, as well as interventions to improve their security and their livelihoods. Women must be at the forefront of shaping their futures and restoring their dignity.

The first step would be for government, PSOs and the international community to begin to consult with women about their peacebuilding engagements to date and their needs and interests as well as their perspectives for engendering a sustainable peace. Women must be involved in the drafting of any new C/PVE strategies or programming meant for their benefit – ‘nothing for us without us’ should be the approach informing the development of these interventions. Women must be seen as both agents of violence and as agents of change and, therefore, be included in ways that address their specific drivers for radicalisation (which would include persistent patriarchal culture and gender inequality) as well as their key roles in reproducing and sustaining violent extremism. An actor mapping that takes account of gender in recruitment to violent extremism and gender in prevention of violent extremism is important. The collation of gender disaggregated data is important in these contexts and clearly missing in the case of Cabo Delgado. Education and equal opportunity must inform C/PVE strategies. Transitional justice and reconciliation, inclusive of programming for MHPSS support, should be at the heart of C/PVE strategies, and women should be instrumental in the design of these processes given the impact that violent extremism has had on their lives, dignity and livelihoods. To date the space has been relatively closed for women to participate in conflict man-

agement in Cabo Delgado; this needs to change. Women need to be provided with the support, the training, the shared experiences and the solidarity initiatives to make informed interventions on the future of their relations within communities and between state and society.

Women in the focus group discussion recommended that:

1. The government must find ways to bring back peace through dialogue. It must find ways of reconciliation that include forgiveness. However, it must also be aware that not all the communities are ready to receive insurgents back, and the necessary processes for healing and reconciling must, therefore, take place.
2. Government must also create suitable conditions for those who are returning to the districts, including building hospitals, schools, and restoring livelihoods as well as ensuring the necessary safety and security.
3. Women must have access to education, small business development funding and training and must be included in economic and political decision-making spaces at all levels.
4. Local women civil society organisations must be included in the peace, security and development strategies and programming, and their work needs to be respected and valued.
5. Dialogues involving the government, civil society organisations, women’s organisations, influencers at the community levels, and traditional and religious leaders need to occur in order to address violent extremism coherently.

These recommendations can be factored into the programming undertaken by the PSOs and the intergovernmental organisations.



## WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

There is clearly a need to address the drivers of the conflict for sustained peacebuilding to prevail. There also needs to be attention to the additional factors playing a role on driving women into joining these extremist groups and targeted deradicalisation programmes that address these needs. The women and men who are part of PSOs should be sensitised to gender dynamics in the region and to the different agentic roles that women have and can play (including that they are actors in the conflict performing various logistics, domestic, reproductive and active combat functions). They can play a role in training women in the region on conflict analysis, conflict prevention, mediation, C/PVE, DDR SSR, trauma and psychosocial support in order to enhance their skills, strategies and interventions. The sharing of experiences of women peacebuilders in other areas where violent extremism is rife in Africa will be beneficial, as well as the support of women peacebuilders across Mozambique and across the region. UN Women in Mozambique has developed a comprehensive set of recommendations of the actions that should be undertaken to promote women's peace and security in Mozambique. In addition, this brief highlights the need for:

- A better understanding of the gender dynamics in this conflict. This is necessary to enable a more comprehensive and gender responsive approach to conflict management. This situational brief begins to address the issue, but there needs to be continued research and engagement.
- Focus on including and training young women on peacebuilding.
- More extensive training for PSOs and the Mozambique government on how to integrate a gender perspective into C/PVE.
- Training and support of women's organisations and civil society on peace and security and on their role in C/PVE.
- Sharing of experiences of women across Africa, and more broadly, who have been engaged in C/PVE.
- Promoting transitional justice, reconciliation and social cohesion programmes.
- Utilising the African Union's Frameworks for Security Sector Reform, Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development and Transitional Justice as guidelines for creating gender-sensitive peacebuilding.
- Putting in place a sustainable peace infrastructure that strengthens and includes women's organisations in northern Mozambique.
- Mozambique should update its NAP, and it should speak more directly to the context of VE in the north.
- More national, regional and continental solidarity missions with the women of Cabo Delgado.

## ENDNOTES

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- ii UNSC Resolution 2242 (2015). [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_res\\_2242.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2242.pdf) and Irene Ndung'u and Uyu Salifu. 2017. *The role of Women in Violent Extremism in Kenya*. ISS East Africa Report.
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- xi J. Feijo. *From the "Faceless Enemy" to the Hypothesis of Dialogue: Identities, Pretensions and Channels of Communication with the Macahababs*. OMR. No 130. (2021).
- xii D. Gartenstein-Ross, E. Chase Donahue and C. Clarke. *The Evolution and Escalation of the Islamic Threat in Mozambique*. Foreign Policy Research Institute. (2021).
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- xiv Interview with Rwandese Defence Forces spokesperson Brigadier General Ronald Rivunga on 28 October 2022.
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- xxix Interview with women journalist in Maputo on 24 October 2022.
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## About the author

Professor Cheryl Hendricks is the Executive Director of the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR). Prior to this she was Executive Head of the Africa Institute of South Africa in the Human Sciences Research Council. In 2013 she was appointed as a Professor in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Johannesburg and served as the head of the department from 2014 to 2017. Cheryl also previously worked as a Senior Research Fellow in the Conflict Management and Peacebuilding Division at the Institute for Security Studies. She holds a PhD in Government and International Relations from the University of South Carolina and a Masters in Southern African Studies from the University of York, England. She has a wealth of knowledge and expertise in the areas of conflict management; peacebuilding; women, peace and security; African Regional Security architectures and has engaged and published widely on these topics.

Amanda Lucey is Senior Project Leader for Preventing Violent Extremism at the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, where she runs a project on 'Shifting Narratives and Approaches to Preventing Violent Extremism'. She has over 15 years of experience in working on peacebuilding and has worked for a variety of organisations including various United Nations (UN) entities, the World Bank, GIZ, the EU and the Institute for Security Studies. She holds a Masters in Justice and Transformation from the University of Cape Town.

Lóide Sambo Macaringue is a researcher from Mozambique. She holds a Masters in Energy Policy and Security from O.P. Jindal Global University – India (2014-2016) and an Honour's Degree in International Relations and Diplomacy from the High Institute of International Relations – Mozambique (2010-2014). She currently works at the Center for Strategic and International Studies of the Joaquim Chissano University as a researcher and since 2018 she has been working on Violent Extremism in Mozambique, Cabo Delgado.

## Imprint

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung  
Maputo Office  
Av. Tomás Nduda 1313  
Caixa Postal 3694  
Maputo, Mozambique

Tel.: +258 21 49 12 31  
Email: [info@fes-mozambique.org](mailto:info@fes-mozambique.org)  
[www.fes-mozambique.org](http://www.fes-mozambique.org)

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Design: Green Eyez Design SARL  
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