



Strengthening women's leadership in the prevention and fight against violent extremism, through participation in criminal justice, promotion of social cohesion and cultural identity

October 2023



Duration

Length: **18 Months**
Start Date: **07/10/2021**
End Date: **20/07/2022**
24/03/2022

Budget

 TOTAL: **\$ 999,329**
UNODC: **\$ 599,318**
UNESCO: **\$ 400,011**

Implementing Agencies



UNODC
United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Partners

Ministry of Social Affairs and Women and Children (MASEF)
Ministry of Culture and Youth
Ministry of Islamic Affairs
Ministry of Justice
Ministry of Interior
Association of Women Heads of Household – AFCF
National branch for the fight against radicalization and violent extremism of the G5 Sahel (Cellrad)
Local elected officials
Local Communities

CONTEXT

Mauritania is considered an oasis of stability in a complex region facing security challenges. However, there are factors likely to threaten this peace and stability: i) the rapid rise of violent extremism in the Sahel; and ii) the risks of escalation of community tensions linked to social inequalities threatening cohesion between communities. These challenges cannot be resolved without the participation and commitment of women, who play an essential role in Mauritanian society.

OBJECTIVES

This project aimed at increasing the inclusion of Mauritanian women and girls into the prevention and fight against violent extremism (VE). The implementation strategy is anchored in two pillars: 1) integrating gender considerations into criminal justice to acknowledge the multiple roles women could play as law enforcement, justice actors, offenders, victims, witnesses, or drivers of peace and thus overcome gender stereotypes linked to VE; 2) promoting the traditional positive roles of Mauritanian women in the promotion of social cohesion and cultural diversity. The engagement of women is at the heart of this project for effective prevention of violent extremism (PVE) in Mauritania.

KEY IMPACT AND RESULTS

The project has reinforced the integration of gender considerations in the prevention of extremism, including in the criminal justice system to counter terrorism in Mauritania.

- ▶ 5 networks of Mourchidates female religious guides, have been established in the border areas of Mauritania (Nouakchott, Hodh El Chargui/Hodh El Charbi, Guidimakha, Tiris Zemmour, and Trarza)
- ▶ 7,707 individuals, including 4,667 women and girls, 2969 men and boys, 40 female inmates, and 31 families of terrorist offenders were sensitized on alternatives narratives to violent extremism rethorics in various settings including high schools, prisons, mosques, Quranic schools, neighborhoods, markets, etc.

By providing an alternative discourse to violent radicalism, these women deconstructed the radical rhetoric of extremist groups using religious arguments. The project evaluation found that the Mourchidates have acquired skills to counter radical discourse and violent extremism, which they were

previously unable to do; they reached new vulnerable groups that had been neglected in previous violent extremism prevention strategies, including mothers who were informed on how to recognize the first signs of radicalization in their children, women prisoners, the families (mothers, wives, sisters and children) of male prisoners convicted of terrorism-related offenses; the Mourchidates gained visibility and legitimacy by being officially recognized as a network by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Original Mauritanian Education. The Mourchidates have also been invited to share their work in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Chad so that such approach could be replicated there.

■ CATALYTIC EFFECTS

The Mourchidates have had a significant non-financial catalytic effect by serving as a successful model in preventing violent extremism. Their efforts have nurtured a lasting partnership between the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and civil society organizations, resulting in formal recognition of the Mourchidate network by the Ministry. Additionally, the introduction of the Mourchidates as influential female religious leaders has enriched the landscape of peacebuilding in Mauritania. On the financial front, meetings between Mauritanian ambassadors and the Mourchidates have sparked Germany's interest in potentially funding an additional phase of the Mourchidates program, signaling a promising financial catalytic effect. The catalyzing impact in this context lies in the enhanced integration and participation of women in the advancement of culture, thereby bolstering social cohesion and proactively preventing violent extremism.

In addition, the project has played a central role in championing the traditional roles of Mauritanian women within the cultural sphere, with a primary aim of fostering social cohesion and ultimately preventing violent extremism:

- ▶ Recording of 25 stories, tales, and anecdotes from Mauritanian grandmothers, in the Pulaar, Soninke, Wolof, and Mooré languages, addressing social cohesion, living together, and tolerance.
- ▶ Training of 75 secondary school women inspectors and women teachers in Quranic schools (Mahadras) in prevention of violent extremism through education.
- ▶ Training of 135 women organizations in Nouakchott, Zouérate, Selibaby, Aioun, and Rosso on the importance of heritage in social cohesion, which resulted in the identification of 20 cultural elements preserved by Mauritanian women through the project

The project was commended in its final evaluation for its effective and sustainable outcomes. It notably enhanced women's involvement in countering violent extremism, advancing gender equality and empowerment. It also promoted social cohesion and cultural preservation by involving women in related activities, ultimately strengthening local communities against extremism and improving safety.

■ TESTIMONY OF A MOURCHIDATE

I am **Mouna Bint Alban**, a 24-year-old Mourchidate from Nouakchott. I come from the Tnwagyu tribe, a tribe known for its knowledge of Islamic sciences. Extremists often use Takfir speeches to justify their acts and hatred towards others - that is to say, they say that certain people are disbelievers and thus justify violence against them. As a Mourchidate, my role is to correct misinterpretations of the Quran and show these young people in my Quranic school that Islam calls for tolerance.