

EMPOWERED WOMEN, PEACEFUL COMMUNITIES

RESULTS AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE
REGIONAL PROGRAMME ON PREVENTING VIOLENT
EXTREMISM IN SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

UN WOMEN REGIONAL OFFICE FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC | 2017 - 2022



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Violent extremism affects women and girls differently from men, and often experience serious violations of their rights, including sexual violence. Further, counterterrorism policies can unintentionally curtail women's rights and impact their quality of life. Increasingly, women are becoming recruits to these groups — forcibly or willingly — and are playing a role in recruiting other women and men.

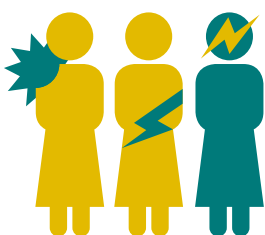
But women are not just victims or perpetrators of this phenomenon. Many have been and continue to be on

the front lines of prevention efforts. Their multifaceted roles include shaping community and family values, influencing potential recruits' decision-making and identifying early signs of radicalization to intervene before they lead to terrorism. In some instances, women imams preach religious tolerance, women activists use different forms of media to promote counternarratives and women police officers engage with local communities to collect information.

WOMEN PLAY KEY ROLES IN VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND ITS PREVENTION

1

Survivors of violence, often subject to restrictions on their rights



2

Perpetrators, sympathizers, mobilizers



3

Preventers, peace activists, community leaders



Given the gendered underpinnings of the Women, Peace and Security¹ agenda and the gendered approaches that violent extremist groups use in their recruitment, promoting gender equality and women's empowerment can be an effective countermeasure to the spread of radicalization. However, women remain marginalized in decision-making processes,

particularly at senior levels where stakeholders design and implement such strategies. To effectively engage with the gendered dynamics of violent extremism and reverse its growing trend, it is critical that prevention and response efforts prioritize women's rights, empowerment, participation and leadership in decision-making from the community to the national level.



Photo: UN Women/Adrianus Mulya

1 UN Security Council, Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) [on women and peace and security], 31 October 2000, S/RES/1325 (2000), available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/docs/2000/10/un-security-council-resolution-1325>

UN Women's Approach

In April 2017, with generous support from the Government of Japan, the UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific began implementing one of UN Women's largest programmes on preventing violent extremism: Empowered Women, Peaceful

Communities. From 2017 through 2022, UN Women has contributed, in a context of ongoing threats of violent extremism, to the development of more cohesive and peaceful societies in the region, particularly in Bangladesh, Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand.

THEORY OF CHANGE

The programme's theory of change was developed consistent with various international frameworks, including the UN Security Council Resolution on Women, Peace and Security and its subsequent resolutions and the 2030 Agenda's Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 16 (promoting peaceful and inclusive societies) and Goal 5 (promoting gender

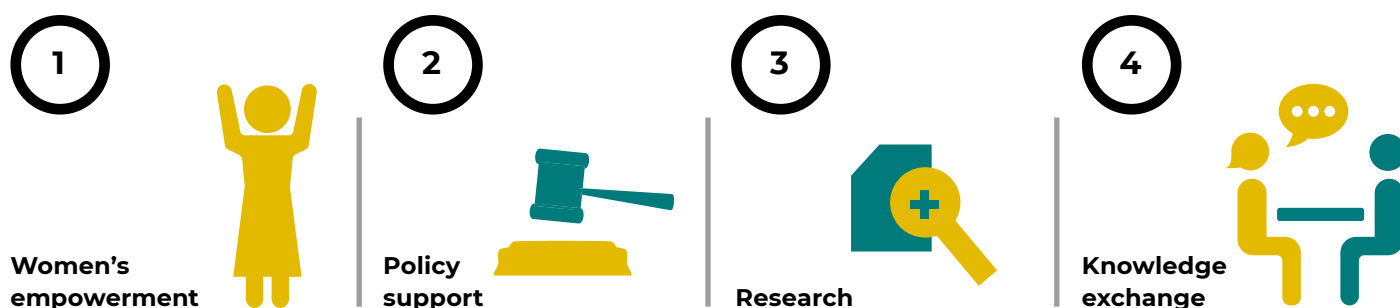
equality and women's empowerment). By translating global frameworks and strategies into local contexts, the programme has demonstrated that women's empowerment is key to promoting peace and preventing violent extremism and to achieving tangible results for women and girls at the community level.



FOUR KEY AREAS OF WORK

The programme has engaged in four mutually reinforcing areas of prevention: 1) women's empowerment, 2) policy support, 3) research and awareness raising, and 4) knowledge exchange. The women's empowerment area entails promoting women's leadership and economic empowerment as strategies for strengthening community-level social cohesion. The policy support area aims to influence policy by various means, including through

strengthening women's groups and networks that support social cohesion and work to prevent violent extremism. The research and awareness-raising area enhances the evidence base and social understanding linked to the roles that women play in preventing violent extremism. The knowledge management area promotes South-South cooperation, knowledge exchange and experience sharing.



Box: Projects under the Empowered Women, Peaceful Communities Programme

- Phase I (April 2017 – March 2018): Prevention of Radicalization and Violent Extremism through Empowered Women's Influence in Building Resilient Communities in Asia, with a focus on Bangladesh and Indonesia;
- Phase II (April 2018 – March 2019): Empowered Women, Peaceful Communities: Preventing Violent Extremism in Asia, with a focus on Bangladesh, Indonesia and the Philippines;
- Phase III (April 2019 – March 2020): Empowered Women, Peaceful Communities: Preventing Violent Extremism in Asia, with a focus on Bangladesh;
- Phase IV (April 2020 – March 2021): Securing the Peace Off- and Online: Engaging Women in Preventing Terrorism and Hate Speech in South and Southeast Asia, with a focus on Bangladesh and the Philippines; and
- Phase V (April 2021 – March 2022): Peacebuilding in a Pandemic: Empowering Women to Promote Social Cohesion and Prevent Terrorism and Violent Extremism in the Context of COVID-19 in South and Southeast Asia, with a focus on Bangladesh and Thailand.

Key Programme Results (2017–2022)

1. WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

- a. In Bangladesh, Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand, over **6,000 women** now have more resources and stronger capacities to lead efforts that build resilience and social cohesion in their communities.

BANGLADESH – WOMEN PEACE CAFÉ²

The Women Peace Café, co-created by UN Women, the Centre for Peace and Justice and Brac University in Bangladesh, is a university-based platform for social

entrepreneurship and has been established in four universities. At the Café, young female students have received leadership and social entrepreneurship training and provided with safe spaces to discuss gender issues in their communities and support each other's efforts to develop innovative solutions such as the Women Peace Ambassador (WPA) initiatives to respond to violent extremism risks and to strengthen social ties among community members. The Women Peace Café was recognized as a replicable model for youth engagement in promoting peace and social cohesion.



One of Women Peace Café established at Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University in Mymensingh. - Photo: UN Women/Fahad Kaizer

2 <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2020/04/female-university-students-in-bangladesh-build-resilient-communities>

"I have been involved with the Women Peace Ambassador HARMONY initiative as an anchor and content writer for around four months. From this journey, I have learned so many things to raise my voice as a woman as well as about women's health and hygiene maintenance. I have also learned how to prevent and take steps against cyberbullying, hate speech, etc. [...] I learned how to face all these types of problems as a woman and how to build peace in society through my work. Besides all this, I have achieved some skills such as leadership, decision-making, gender equality, communication, network build-up, peace, etc. At last, all these works and dedication help me to become the best version of me as a youth leader and peace builder."

Lamiatun Nisa Protibha, Women Peace Ambassador HARMONY initiative

Women Peace Café, Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University



Photo: Centre for Peace and Justice, BRAC University



A community volunteer for the Women Peace Café's Women Peace Ambassador initiative demonstrates how to use a digital thermometer as part of the distribution of COVID-19 toolkits to support mothers in the community. - Photo: Srabonti Chakma.

INDONESIA – PEACE VILLAGE³

The Peace Village initiative was conceived by UN Women and the Wahid Foundation, an Indonesian NGO. The Peace Villages aim to promote peaceful and resilient communities and to respond to an increase in violent extremist attacks by preventing radicalization and recruitment into extremist organizations by mobilizing the entire community,

especially women, to promote social cohesion. To become a Peace Village, community members commit to protecting and fostering tolerance and peace within their communities, starting with making peace within their families and agreeing on guidelines to promote harmony and social cohesion.

“Empowering women to build a peaceful community fits the slogan of our city: empowered village, successful city. For me personally, peace starts from home and community.”

Yuli is a 45-year-old stay-at-home parent who, through the Empowered Women, Peaceful Communities programme, started a business group with other women from her community.⁴



Peace Village declaration at Nglinggi Village in Klaten, Central Java. November 2017. - Photo: UN Women/Roni Bintang.

³ <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/01/peace-villages-women-leading-peace-in-indonesia>

⁴ UN Women. 2018. In Indonesia, Women-led Peace Villages Discuss Ways to Move Their Vision Forward. Available at: <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2018/10/ways-to-move-their-vision-forward>

THE PHILIPPINES

Through the development of craft-based social enterprises, women were empowered to build their knowledge of entrepreneurship and their product- and quality-development skills. The participants also increased their understanding of how these social enterprises feed into the long-term vision of women playing a central role in building social cohesion and preventing violent extremism.

THAILAND

Online marketing training strengthened female entrepreneurs' marketing skills in Thailand's southern border provinces. This capacitation enabled them to access and explore the online-marketing platform's opportunities to sell their products both online and offline. As a result, three groups of women entrepreneurs established social enterprises and committed to continue building their vocational capacity and increasing their groups' membership. The vocational activities associated with these social enterprises have served not only as a learning and marketing platform but also as a social platform that enables women and youth to create safe spaces and organize social- and psychosocial support activities in their communities and built trust between local authorities and local communities and between Buddhist and Muslim communities.



Women learned how to weave water-hyacinth crafts, which provided a portable livelihood without the need for land. It also solved an environmental problem by preventing flooding (and potential conflict) in the community in Datu Piang, Maguindanao. - Photo: UN Women/Joser Dumbrique.

- b. In Bangladesh, the Philippines and Thailand, digital-literacy training enabled **420 young leaders** (408 women and 12 men, including indigenous peoples, transgender individuals, the urban poor and rural communities) to strengthen their capacity to use social media to produce and disseminate counternarratives to terrorism, violent extremism and hate speech.

Over the course of hybrid virtual/in-person trainings, young women and men learned how to identify, protect against and report online hate speech, misinformation and disinformation, especially in the context of COVID-19. They also learned how to create edutainment videos that promote gender equality and social cohesion in the context of COVID-19. The participants developed a total of 58 videos, which were disseminated through social media.

“[I learned that] if there is hate speech such as on racism or even fake news about one particular group, it can spread in the community and destroy the peace and cohesion of that community and between different groups.”

Participant from Bangladesh



Participants of Training on Peace, Social Cohesion and Leadership - Photo: Centre for Peace and Justice, BRAC University

2. POLICY SUPPORT

Governments have increased their access to gender expertise, and women's groups have strengthened their capacities to influence the development and implementation of gender-sensitive policies designed to prevent and counter terrorism, violent extremism and hate speech. The programme supported the following policies: the National Action Plan on Women Peace and Security (Bangladesh), the National Action Plan on Preventing Violent Extremism (Indonesia and the Philippines) and the Plan of Action to Prevent and Counter the Rise of Radicalization and Violent Extremism (Association of Southeast Asian Nations).

For example, Bangladesh has launched its four-year National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security which was developed by listening to the voices, needs and experiences of diverse women from all over the country. Building on Bangladesh's efforts to establish peace and security within and beyond its borders, the National Action Plan expands women's roles in peacekeeping, peacebuilding, disaster management and preventing violent extremism.⁵

In the Philippines, UN Women hosted over 100 women in March 2019 at the Inaugural Bangsamoro Autonomous Region Women's Summit. The purpose of the grass-roots initiative was to call for women's full participation in the new political entity, the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao. The summit produced a 10-point Women's Agenda, which called for laws and policies to fully meet women's needs, full implementation of the existing Gender and Development Budget and the creation of a Ministry for Women in the new Bangsamoro Government.⁶



The Bangladesh National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security launching event in Dhaka, Bangladesh, on 24 November 2019, with representatives from the government, civil society groups, academia, research organizations, development partners and the media. - Photo: UN Women/Activation Ltd.



UN Women and NGO representatives and beneficiaries at the Inaugural Bangsamoro Autonomous Region Women's Summit. 28-29 March 2019 in Davao, southern Philippines. - Photo: UN Women/Josier Dumbrique

⁵ <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2020/01/bangladesh-launches-first-national-action-plan-on-wps>

⁶ <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2019/04/bangsamoro-womens-summit-raises-grass-roots-womens-voices>

3. RESEARCH AND AWARENESS RAISING

a. Research

UN Women has developed new and innovative research on the gender-specific dynamics of violent extremism as well as novel tools for collecting sex-disaggregated and gender-sensitive data.⁷ These research efforts and tools have raised awareness of the gender dynamics associated with underlying social issues, thereby increasing the effectiveness of interventions.



For example, the study “Building an Evidence Base for Empowering Women for Peaceful Communities: A Case Study of Bangladesh and Indonesia” identified the many ways in which women and men influence values, attitudes and behaviours in their communities, including raising awareness of violent extremism, challenging belief systems that cause harm to women and children, and advocating for women’s and girls’ education. Four significant conclusions can be discerned from the research conducted across programme and non-programme sites in Bangladesh and Indonesia:

1. Compared to non-programme sites, programme sites exhibited greater individual empowerment of women with respect to confidence in participating in preventing and countering violent extremism initiatives, as well as reporting violent extremism and knowing what to do to counter or prevent violent extremism.
2. Increased awareness related to women’s empowerment and greater confidence in engaging in preventing and countering violent extremism initiatives was evident in the programme sites.

3. Both women and men in the programme sites recognized that greater economic empowerment of women decreased family and community tensions and thereby contributed to more peaceful and resilient societies.
4. Community engagement was found to be a key factor in preventing and countering violent extremism.



The publication “Building a Stronger Evidence Base: The Impact of Gender Identities, Norms and Relations on Violent Extremism (a Case Study of Bangladesh, Indonesia and the Philippines)” presented research findings on the relationships between support for misogyny, violence against women and extremist violence in Bangladesh, Indonesia and the Philippines. It made three key findings:

1. Hostile sexism and support for violence against women are strongly associated with support for violent extremism.
2. Religiosity, age, gender and level of education achieved do not have significant relationships with violent extremism.
3. Misogyny and support for violence against women are important and overlooked factors in compelling some people, including women, to support violent extremism.

The UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific UN Women created a video, The Impact of Gender Identities, Norms and Relations on Violent Extremism, to disseminate the study’s key findings to a wider audience.



⁷ For more information, please visit: <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/focus-areas/peace-and-security/preventing-violent-extremism>

UN Women and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have been working to ensure that efforts to prevent violent extremism are inclusive and based on the promotion and protection of women's human rights.



The agencies jointly developed the study, "Conflicting Identities: The Nexus between Masculinities, Femininities and Violent Extremism in Asia," in order to better understand the relationships between violent extremism and gender power relations in South and South-East Asia (particularly as it relates to radicalization and recruitment) and to inform programming and policy responses.

Based on qualitative and quantitative research and expert analysis of case studies, the publication highlighted how inequalities in gendered power structures fuel and shape violent extremism throughout the region. It emphasized how patriarchal structures and harmful performances of masculinity were deeply embedded in violent extremist groups' modus operandi, offering policymakers and practitioners a unique insight into the gender dynamics that underpin violent extremism in South and South-East Asia.



Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, violence against women and girls has intensified globally. Focused on the time period between March and June 2020, "Social Media Monitoring on COVID-19 and Misogyny in Asia and the Pacific" found that online misogyny and hate speech directed at women in South and South-East Asia followed this trend.

As COVID-19 lockdowns and other movement restrictions have pushed more people online, digital platforms and online spaces are being increasingly used to spread sexist, inaccurate and dangerous rhetoric about women, inciting hatred and potentially provoking online and offline violence.



UN Women also developed a training package on gender and preventing violent extremism ("Training Modules on Gender and Preventing Violent Extremism in Asia") to improve the understanding of the critical roles gender plays in understanding, addressing and preventing violent extremism; to support women's organizations and civil society in their ongoing work on preventing violent extremism; and to support other fields related to women, peace and security.

The training package was designed for use in South and South-East Asia, particularly Indonesia and Bangladesh. Target audiences for the training modules include local communities, civil society organizations, government agencies and other stakeholders.

- b. Awareness-raising activities on the roles that women play in preventing terrorism, violent extremism and hate speech reached over **five million people** across South and South-East Asia. Communication vehicles included community-based theatre (before the COVID-19 pandemic), radio campaigns and social media platforms.

For example, in Bangladesh, over 80,000 individuals attended community-based theatre productions that promoted messages of women's empowerment and community harmony and built awareness of the importance of social cohesion to preventing violent extremism. In the Philippines, a radio broadcast informed women about their rights and how they can contribute to peace.



A community-based theatre show (in partnership with BRAC) that depicted women's roles in building social cohesion. The main messages were acceptance of diversity and peaceful coexistence within the community. The actors were community members who developed theatre acts that conveyed key messages.

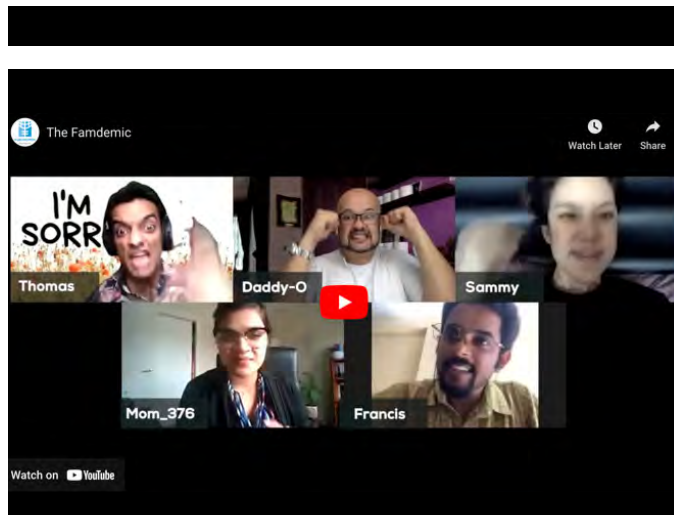
Photo: UN Women/Snidgha Zaman



Anisa Taha Arab is an Islamic religious leader and host of a UN Women radio show that is broadcast across Mindanao, Philippines. Photo: UN Women/Joser Dumbrique

Counternarrative videos that promoted peace and conflict prevention garnered over 4.3 million views on social media platforms. In collaboration with Mythos Labs, UN Women partnered with popular local comedians and social media influencers in the Asia region to produce online counternarrative videos. The project harnessed the power of comedy to offer, particularly to younger audiences, alternative messaging to online violent extremism and gendered stereotyping. The comedy videos included the following:

- *Brainwash* (2018), aimed at a South Asian audience, is a satirical take on a typical beauty-product advertisement that challenges gender stereotypes.
- *HI-SIS* (2018), a hit film featuring Indonesia's Mentari Novel and Cameo Project, counters gendered recruitment narratives with satirical testimonials of fictional female members of extremist groups. *HI-SIS 2* (2021) is a satirical short film that highlights how extremists use gender stereotypes and toxic masculinity to recruit young people. To directly counter extremist messaging in Indonesia, it draws from the UN Women–UNDP report “Conflicting Identities: The Nexus between Masculinities, Femininities and Violent Extremism in Asia.”
- *The Famdemic* (2020), made in partnership with five actors and comedians across Asia, was created in response to and during the COVID-19 global lockdown period to promote solidarity, understanding and cohesion in communities.



4. KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

UN Women organized or provided support to over 40 international and regional meetings and workshops to share research findings and knowledge on good practices and lessons learned with key stakeholders (including members of government institutions, women-led organizations, development partners, academia, UN agencies and project participants from diverse communities).

For example, in Indonesia, UN Women partnered with the Wahid Foundation in October 2017 to organize the International Day of Peace Community Festival in Sumenep, Madura Island, East Java. This event, attended by 8,000 people, showcased the initiative of including local women, especially female religious leaders, in promoting peace and tolerance. President Joko Widodo publicly announced his support for this programme at the event, resulting in a strengthened relationship between the government, the Wahid Foundation and UN Women. President Widodo also indicated further buy-in and recognition from the government regarding women's important roles in preventing violent extremism in the country.⁸



The October 2017 International Day of Peace Community Festival in Sumenep, Madura Island, East Java. Photo: UN Women/Fuli Handoko

In March 2018, Japan hosted the Women and Their Role in Creating Peaceful Societies and in Preventing Violent Extremism regional conference. The conference brought together representatives from Bangladesh, Indonesia and the Philippines, as well as researchers, academics, practitioners and members of the private sector and the media.

Conference participants shared their experiences of and perspectives on engaging with the Empowered Women, Peaceful Communities programme. Women from Bangladesh and Indonesia who had participated in the programme discussed how it economically empowered them and built their capacity to be leaders for peace. Hasbiyah shared her story of transformative change brought about by the programme: "After we joined, we learned how to implement the values of pluralism and tolerance, including equality, and trained to deal with issues that arise in our village and to become more empowered women."

UN Women organized the Transforming Gender Social Norms through Comedy – Fighting Terrorism One Laugh at a Time public event, which featured prominent artists and social media influencers. Held at Sophia University, people from all walks of life learned about the importance of women's engagement in preventing violent extremism and how the clever use of strategic communications can help spread messages of peace.⁹



The regional conference Women and their Role in Creating Peaceful Societies and in Preventing Violent Extremism. Photo: UN Women/STORY CO., LTD

The public event Transforming Gender Social Norms through Comedy – Fighting Terrorism One Laugh at a Time. The performers and audience are holding up five fingers, representing SDG 5 on gender equality. Photo: UN Women/STORY CO., LTD

⁸ <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2017/10/president-of-indonesia-and-community-leaders-spotlight-role-of-women--in-sustainable-peace>

⁹ <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2018/03/power-of-comedy>

Lessons Learned

The programme engaged in pioneering work by disseminating an in-depth and nuanced understanding of women's diverse roles as both promoters and preventers of violent extremism. Through the programme, UN Women helped to advance social cohesion by supporting women's empowerment at the community level. The key lessons learned and good practices emerging from the Empowered Women, Peaceful Communities programme include the following:

- **Collective space for women's engagement in peacebuilding:** Bringing women together in collective safe spaces at the grass-roots level has been one of the project's most effective strategies. Supporting women's

ability to self-mobilize and discuss issues of peace, social cohesion and preventing violent extremism and ensuring their participation in leadership and peacebuilding trainings was a critical strategy for increasing their awareness, engagement and confidence to engage in preventing violent extremism at the community level.

- **Empowering women through the combination of imparting individual skills and knowledge and building institutional capacities** through women's groups and civil society created momentum that can be independently maintained, thus ensuring sustainability after the programme ends.



Pori Banu Member, Polli Shomaj Akkelpur, Joypurhat - Photo: UN Women/Snigdha Zaman

- **National consultations and coalition building:** The processes of national consultations and the creation of a women's coalition were major components that led to successes in the policy support area. These strategies resulted in inclusive policy development and increased national and subnational ownership over the development of national action plans.
- **Digital literacy and social media skills were highly valued:** With a near-total shift to online work due to COVID-19 lockdowns, the programme's social media and digital literacy elements became ever more crucial, linking with the wider needs of women across the region. The programme delivered on this aspect with trainings and materials that were tailored to reflect the challenges faced by women in digital spaces and useful strategies to overcome barriers to their online engagement and promote social cohesion.
- In addition to identifying the potential for online harm, **digital literacy approaches helped women identify and implement initiative-taking strategies** for remote engagement and communication, with implications far beyond preventing violent extremism.
- **Engagement with new stakeholders (including youth and religious leaders) by incorporating a more comprehensive approach to community-level preventing violent extremism trainings:** The community-level trainings increased stakeholders' awareness of the risks and consequences of violent extremism and generated greater commitment among community members to prevent violent extremism. The programme consciously expanded opportunities for engaging with men, especially youth and religious leaders, through its training programmes and its community-level dialogue processes.
- **Partnership formation:** A particular strength of this project has been the development of a variety of partnerships, including partnerships with strategic implementation partners and innovative regional-level partnerships.
- **Use of creative communication materials:** Using innovative communication tools has been one of the project's most effective practices. This endeavour has included creative national-level activities, such as the use of community-based theatre and regional-level activities, such as the creation of counter-extremism narratives in online spaces through video productions with Mythos Labs.
- **Development of a body of research and evidence that supports the implementation of a gender-sensitive approach to preventing violent extremism:** UNSCR 2242 (2015) urges Member States and the UN system "to ensure the participation and leadership of women and women's organizations in developing strategies to counter terrorism and violent extremism."¹⁰ Yet despite decades of work on the women, peace and security agenda, the roles of women in preventing and countering violent extremism remains largely unexplored and undocumented.
- **Awareness of the subject matter's sensitivity and the need to ensure the safety of all participants and implementers:** Working on women's empowerment can be difficult in itself; however, working on preventing violent extremism from the perspective of women's empowerment can be even more challenging – and it can trigger opposition. The programme took the security of staff, partners and women in the community seriously and employed strategies to mitigate risks to participants' safety. A successful risk-mitigation strategy has been rebranding the programme at the community level, using the new title "Empowered Women, Peaceful Communities" and language linked to peace instead of violent extremism. The programme is nationally owned by UN Women country offices and partners that helped to ensure a culturally sensitive approach to women's empowerment.

¹⁰ <https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/focus-areas/countering-violent-extremism/>

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