



**STAR GHANA
FOUNDATION**

EXAMINING THE ROLE OF GHANAIAAN WOMEN IN CONFLICTS AND THEIR VULNERABILITY TO VIOLENT EXTREMIST ORGANIZATIONS

Summary

The increasing activities of violent extremist organizations (VEOs) in the Sahel region have posed an existential threat to neighbouring Ghana. The upsurge in illegal mining activities in the northern regions of the country, coupled with porous borders and weak early warning systems has combined to heighten the fears of community members regarding possible infiltration of VEOs into Ghana. This study is part of the Strengthening System for Resilience against Extremism (SURE) project, led by STAR-Ghana Foundation, in partnership with the Foundation for Security and Development in Africa (FOSDA) and the West African Center for Counter Extremism (WACCE), and with funding from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), of the United Kingdom.

This research used mixed methods to collect data from 594 women and men in twelve communities across eleven districts in five northern regions of Ghana. The study identified the roles women play in conflict prevention, response and community resilience. These include gathering and sharing early warning information with security agencies, mediating conflicts, and sustaining household and community economies during periods of instability. At the same time, the study identified limited livelihood opportunities and financial and online inducements by violent extremist organisations (VEOs) as key factors that heighten women's vulnerability to recruitment and exploitation.

The findings point to the need for interventions that both strengthen women's contributions to peace and security as well as address the conditions that increase their vulnerability to violent extremism.

Key recommendations include expanding sustainable economic and livelihood opportunities for women; strengthening women's capacities in mediation, early warning and conflict prevention; incorporating digital literacy and learning circles into VSLA and other livelihood initiatives, and introducing measures, including quotas, to increase women's meaningful participation on conflict prevention and resolution platforms. The study further recommends continuous engagement with traditional and community leaders to promote supportive social norms and practices that strengthen women's participation and leadership in community-level peace and security processes.

1. Introduction

Ghana remains a stable and relatively peaceful democracy in spite of some protracted chieftaincy and land related conflicts which create insecurity occasionally. However, in recent times the heightened violent extremists (VE) activities within neighbouring countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria pose threats to the security and peace of Ghana. Although there have not been any officially reported cases of VE activities in Ghana, the massacre of eight Ghanaian petty traders in the town of Titao in Burkina Faso in February 2026 shows that Ghanaians are not immune to VE attacks. Besides the rising youth unemployment in Ghana, the upsurge in illegal mining activities and porous borders are potential risk factors that could fuel VE activities in Ghana. STAR-Ghana Foundation for years has promoted and undertaken interventions to reduce and mitigate drivers of conflict and violence, particularly in northern Ghana.

The Strengthening Systems for Resilience against Extremism (SURE) project is one of such interventions, implemented from August 2025 to March 2026, in partnership with the Foundation for Security and Development in Africa (FOSDA) and the West African Center for Counter Extremism (WACCE), with funding from the Foreign Commonwealth and Development office, of the United Kingdom. The goal of the SURE project was to reduce vulnerabilities that predispose communities in Northern Ghana to VEOs, and adopted an integrated approach, combining security partnerships, community-based resilience building and gender-responsive peacebuilding towards achieving that goal.



2. Problem Statement

UNDP (2023) report on Gender Equality and Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) stated that women serve as frontline actors with the advantage of spotting early signs of radical behaviours and prevention of VEOs recruitments in families and communities. Coomaraswamy, (2022) equally highlighted the significant roles women play in preventing and resolving conflicts as mediators and leaders of local peace committees. However, in the context of Northern Ghana patriarchal systems and limited education often combine to relegate the role of women in conflict prevention to the background. Whilst the need to examine the gendered dimension of VEOs and conflict prevention has been acknowledged by researchers, existing literature is largely gender blind and examined from a national perspective and not contextualized to women and the Northern Ghana experiences (UNDP, 2023; Aning, Edu-Afful & Aubyn, 2019; Aning & Abdallah, 2013). As a result, evidence available for justifying the role of women in conflict and VE prevention is limited. This study addresses these gaps by interrogating the key question: What are women's specific roles in conflict, and what are their experiences of vulnerability to VEOs?

This paper makes three key contributions to knowledge. First, it provides a detailed analysis of the specific roles played by women in conflicts and the barriers limiting their participation in conflict resolution platforms in Northern Ghana. Second, the paper empirically assesses from women's own perspectives, the push and pull factors that make them particularly vulnerable to VEOs activities. Third, by focusing the analysis within the specific context of Northern Ghana, the paper offers new, locally relevant insights that can inform the development of more tailored policies aimed at addressing the threat of VE in Northern Ghana.

Following this introduction, the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical frameworks of the study, while Section 3 discusses the methodology. The discussion of results and key findings is presented in Section 4, Section 5 concludes the paper and Section 6 highlights the key recommendations of the study.



3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical frameworks adopted for this paper provides a comprehensive understanding of the roles played by women in conflicts and their vulnerability to VEO activities. To realize this objective, the researchers synthesize two distinct but interconnected theoretical perspectives: the Push-Pull Theory of Radicalization and the Feminist Security Theory. This blended approach allows the researchers to analyse the subject matter of women in conflicts and their vulnerability to VEO activities from the community to the individual-level.

We begin by situating conflicts and violent extremism within the Push-Pull Theory (Moghaddam, 2005; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008; Borum, 2011; Wiktorowicz, 2005). This theory identifies push factors such as poverty, unemployment and political exclusion and pull factors such as financial incentives, safety and protection as the drivers of VE actions. The framing of the study along this theory allows us to identify and analyse the key vulnerabilities that could drive people in specific communities to consider joining VEOs or facilitate their operations. This is important for addressing specific vulnerabilities in selected communities.

From a community perspective, we delve into the individual-level by examining the specific roles of women in conflicts and their vulnerabilities to VEOs drawing on the Feminist Security Theory (FST) (Cohn, 2011; Sjoberg, 2013). The main thrust of FST is that security issues, including violent extremism are gendered. The theory argues that the experiences and roles played by women and men in conflicts are different and should be analyzed differently. We therefore use this theory to examine women's specific contribution to conflict prevention and resolution, the barriers impeding their roles and factors that shape their vulnerability to VEOs.

By integrating these two theories, the analysis moves beyond conventional explanations that position poverty as the primary driver of conflict and violent extremism, to provide a broader analytical lens for examining how multiple and interconnected factors such as proliferation of social media, cross-border migration and governance dynamics interact to shape the drivers of violent extremism in the study area.

4. Methodology

Study Area

The study was conducted in twelve (12) communities across eleven (11) districts and five (5) regions in Northern Ghana as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Study Area

Region	District	Community
Upper West	Lawra	Dikpe
	Lambussie	Hamile
	Sissala West	Jawia
Upper East	Kassena Nankana	Paga
	Bongo	Namoo
		Bongo-Soe
North East	Bumkurugu	Kinkango
	Chereponi	Wanjuga
Northern	Saboba	Kalba
	Tatale	Nachamba No. 1
Savannah	Bole	Mandari
	Sawla-Tuna-Kalba	Jelikon

Source: SURE, Project Research, 2026

These are communities and districts sharing borders with Burkina Faso, Togo and Côte d'Ivoire. These countries that have been hit by activities of VEOs. The selected districts also have porous borders which makes it possible for unrestricted movement of people in and out of them. These communities and districts are also largely rural and depend on farming as their main source of livelihoods. The erratic rainfall pattern, and other climate change events such as floods, droughts and windstorms combine to affect food security in these communities and districts. The opportunities associated with the agrarian economy in these districts are poorly developed which may be contributing to youth unemployment. The increasing population has resulted in competition over farmlands which translates into many land conflicts in these communities and districts. Some of these districts including Sissala West, Bongo and Bole are known for illegal gold mining attracting people from other parts of Ghana and the ECOWAS region. Food insecurity, youth unemployment and the attraction of minerals contribute to raising the risk profile of these communities. These dynamics informed the selection of these communities for the SURE project.

Research Approach

The study used a mixed research approach and a convergent parallel design, which involves the collection of quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously, analyzing them separately, and then merging them to compare or combine the findings. The sample size for the study was 594 women, men and community leaders. Simple random sampling technique was used to select the respondents for the study.

The data collection methods deployed were: household survey, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The sample size for the household survey was calculated using Yamane formula.¹ This was based on a population of 1,200 beneficiaries of the livelihoods support component of the SURE project with 5% margin of error. In each community, a list of beneficiaries was obtained from STAR Ghana Foundation, and a simple random sampling technique used to select household members for the survey. This approach ensured that every household had an equal probability of being selected, thus minimizing sampling bias. In total, 300 respondents (66% women and 34% men) were sampled from the 12 communities. The higher proportion of women respondents ensured that women's perspectives were sufficiently captured, particularly regarding their roles in conflict situations and the factors that may increase their vulnerability to involvement in VEO activities. For the qualitative component, participants for the FGDs and KIIs were selected using a purposive sampling technique. Table 2 shows the category of respondents and sample sizes used for the study.

Table 2: Categories of Respondents and Sample Sizes

Sample for survey for youth (men and women)				
# communities	Sample Size	Sample per community	Sample by sex	Data sources
12	300	25	F=13; M=12	Beneficiary list
Sample for separate FGDs for men and women				
12	288	24	12 M/F each	Randomly selected
community members (chiefs, queen mothers, religious leaders etc)				
Purposively selected for each community	6(chief, queen mother, women leader, youth leader, religious leader, Assembly member	6(chief, queen mother, women leader, youth leader, religious leader, Assembly member	3M/F each	Purposively selected
Total	594			

Source: SURE, Project Research, 2026

Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS version 31 and thematic analysis used for the qualitative data collected.

¹The Yamane formula is expressed as: $n = N / (1 + N(e)^2)$
Where: n = Sample size; N = Total population & e = Margin of error

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Demographic Characteristics and Vulnerability

The demographic characteristics of respondents presented in Table 3 provide important context for interpreting women's vulnerability to involvement in VEO activities. Women constituted 66% of the 300 respondents, compared with 34% men, ensuring substantial representation of women's perspectives in the study. This is particularly significant given concerns about the limited participation and visibility of women in research and public discourse in contexts where prevailing gender norms may constrain their participation. The age distribution of respondents is equally relevant to the analysis of violent extremism, as young people may face distinct vulnerabilities to recruitment and mobilisation by VEOs, including exposure to economic, social and ideological inducements (UNESCO, 2017). In this study majority of the respondents, 61% were within the ages of 18 and 34 years.

The educational attainment of respondents was generally low. The findings indicate that 17% had no formal education, while the largest proportion (44%) had attained education only up to the primary or Junior High School level. These findings have two important implications. First, limited educational attainment may increase vulnerability to misinformation and disinformation, particularly where individuals have limited opportunities to develop media and information literacy skills. Second, low educational attainment may constrain access to decent and sustainable employment opportunities, thereby increasing socio-economic vulnerability. Low levels of education and youthful demographic profile of the study communities raise the need for continuous targeted preventive interventions that strengthen education, livelihood opportunities, and resilience to misinformation, particularly among young women who may be vulnerable to recruitment or exploitation by VEOs.

Table 3: Socio-demographic characteristics of Respondents

Variables	Categories	Frequency	Percent
Sex	Female	198	66.00%
	Male	102	34.00%
Age Group	18-24 years	60	20.00%
	25-34 years	123	41.00%
	35-44 years	60	20.00%

	45-54 years	39	13.00%
	55-60+ years	18	6.00%
Education	Islamic/Arabic Education	21	10.00%
	Junior High School	55	26.00%
	Senior Secondary School (SHS)	55	26.00%
	Primary Education	38	18.00%
	Tertiary Education	21	10.00%
	No formal Education	36	17.00%
	Non-formal Education	8	4.00%

Source: SURE, Project Research, 2026

5.2 Roles of Women in Conflict Prevention

The study found the top three contributions of women to conflict prevention and resolution to be in the areas of (1) Early Warning, 23% (2) Mediation, 20% and (3) Livelihood/Resilience of households and communities, 19% in times of conflicts as shown in Figure 1.

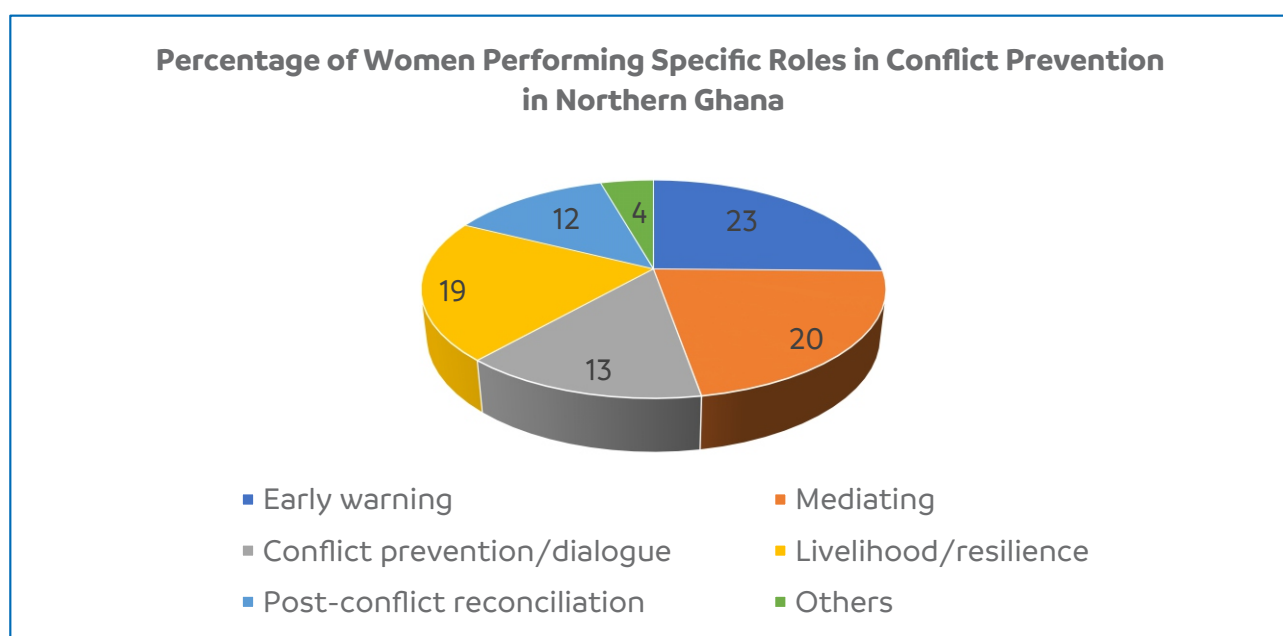


Figure 1: Women's Roles in Conflict Prevention and Resolution

The significance of women in early warning systems lies in the unique social spaces they occupy. Unlike formal security actors, women move freely across domestic, markets, religious, and communal spaces. Some of these spaces are often opaque to male security officials and formal institutions. This spatial mobility gives women unparalleled access to information about changes in community behaviour, new arrivals, unusual financial flows, and shifts in attitude among youth. In contexts of violent extremism, these are precisely the indicators that formal intelligence systems struggle to detect early enough to be actionable.

Furthermore, the trust that community members place in women such as mothers, traders, and caregivers imply that information is shared with them more candidly than with others, such as government officials or formal structures. Women notice when a neighbour's son begins associating with strangers, when patterns of mosque or church attendance change, or when young men begin receiving unexplained income. These are the soft, relational indicators of radicalisation that are invisible to conventional surveillance but highly legible to women embedded in community life.

It is also important to note that women's early warning role is not passive. Evidence from comparable studies in the Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin, and the Horn of Africa shows that women actively transmit early warning signals through informal networks such as market associations, religious women's groups, and neighbourhood welfare groups which function as decentralised early warning nodes. The challenge, however, is that these signals rarely reach formal decision-making levels, representing a critical gap between informal early warning and formal early response.

This finding is broadly consistent with existing literature. Scholars such as Hudson et al. (2012), True and Rivard (2013) and USIP's work on women, peace and security have long established that women's social embeddedness makes them natural early warners. However, what this study adds is the specific articulation of this role in the context of violent extremism and recruitment detection which constitute a relatively newer application. Earlier literature documented women's early warning roles in inter-communal and ethnic conflicts; applying the framework to VE recruitment structures is a newer dimension that warrants further exploration in subsequent studies.

The study also found evidence of women playing mediation roles and preventing conflicts from escalating. The study however, established that women's mediation role in conflicts is often informal which explains their limited visibility in formal peace processes.

Women's mediation role operates across a continuum from micro-level interpersonal disputes to meso-level community conflicts. At the household level, women mediate disputes between family members, often acting as the first buffer against the escalation of domestic grievances into wider community violence. At the community level, women function as interlocutors between disputing parties, often leveraging their relationships across ethnic, religious, and political fault lines to broker informal ceasefires, negotiate the return of abducted persons, and create spaces for dialogue.

The informality of this mediation is both its strength and its limitation. Its strength lies in the fact that informal mediation is faster, more culturally attuned and less bureaucratic than

formal processes. Women mediators often work without agendas, without cameras and without institutional stakes which are qualities that enable frank dialogue. Its limitation, however, is that informal mediation is unrecognised, undocumented and unfunded. The agreements reached are rarely codified or monitored, which makes them fragile in the face of renewed tensions.

The finding that women's mediation is predominantly informal also raises structural questions about access. Women's exclusion from formal peace processes is not accidental; it reflects gendered power structures that have historically positioned peace and security as male domains. Formal peace tables tend to reflect the composition of armed parties and political elites, both of which are overwhelmingly male. Women, who bear disproportionate costs of conflict yet rarely control the levers of violence, are thus structurally excluded from the negotiations that shape post-conflict arrangements.

Notably, even when women gain formal access to peace processes as happened in the Liberia's peace talks and the Colombian peace negotiations, they often face tokenism, marginalisation of their agenda items, and exclusion from implementation structures. This suggests that formal inclusion alone is insufficient. Deepening institutional transformation is required.

The finding on informal mediation confirms a well-established pattern in the literature. Anderlini (2007), Paffenholz (2010), and the UN Women landmark report on women's participation in peace processes all document women's relegation to informal, behind-the-scenes roles. What this study potentially adds is a pointer to deeper future reflections to answer the question: do women see their informal role as empowering, as imposed, or as a strategic choice?

The findings also show that in the study communities, women through their economic activities sustain their households. This role, though ranked third, is arguably the most pervasive and the least studied in relation to conflict prevention.

These triple roles played by women in conflict situations have contributed immensely to the sustenance and resilience of the study communities. These viewpoints are captured in Box 1.



Quotes related to women's role in early warning

- "The men in this community are miners and farmers, they leave home early in the morning and sometimes don't even come back home. We the woman give them the current happening in the community" (FGD, Female Youth Leader, Bole District).
- " If you want all the secrets in this community, contact women"(KII with Male Youth leader, Bongo-Soe, Bongo District).
- "The Village Savings and Loan Associations in the communities are very strong and well organized. Most of our women play the role of a spy in the community, they inform us about warning signs and suspicious people or strangers in the community. Women are always home so they play this role effectively, they also educate their peers through women groups in the community" (FGD, Community member, Bongo-Soe, Bongo district).

Quotes related to women's role in mediation

- "Women have the best medicine to bring and resolve conflicts". (KII with Youth Leader, Mandari, Bole District.)
- "Women serve us peace makers when it come to conflicts" (Assembly member, Mandari, Bole District)
- "War shifts women overnight into negotiators, providers, and protectors." FGD, Dikpe Lawra.
- "When women help broker peace deals, they last longer." FGD, Dikpe, Lawra

Quotes related to women's role in securing livelihoods in conflict situations

"Even in times of violent conflicts women are able to manage with limited food stuff, and supplies to sustain the households. They still ways earn income through trade to keep the community afloat" FGD, Dikpe, Lawra District

Source: SURE, Project Research, 2026

5.3 Barriers to Participation

Whilst the study unequivocally established the significant contributions of women in conflict prevention and resolution in their communities, it equally identified barriers impinging on their visibility and participation. The three top barriers identified include: (1) low access to participation in formal peace structures (162/300), (2) Lower literacy levels of women (162/300) and deep-rooted patriarchal norms and beliefs (159/300) as shown in Figure 2.

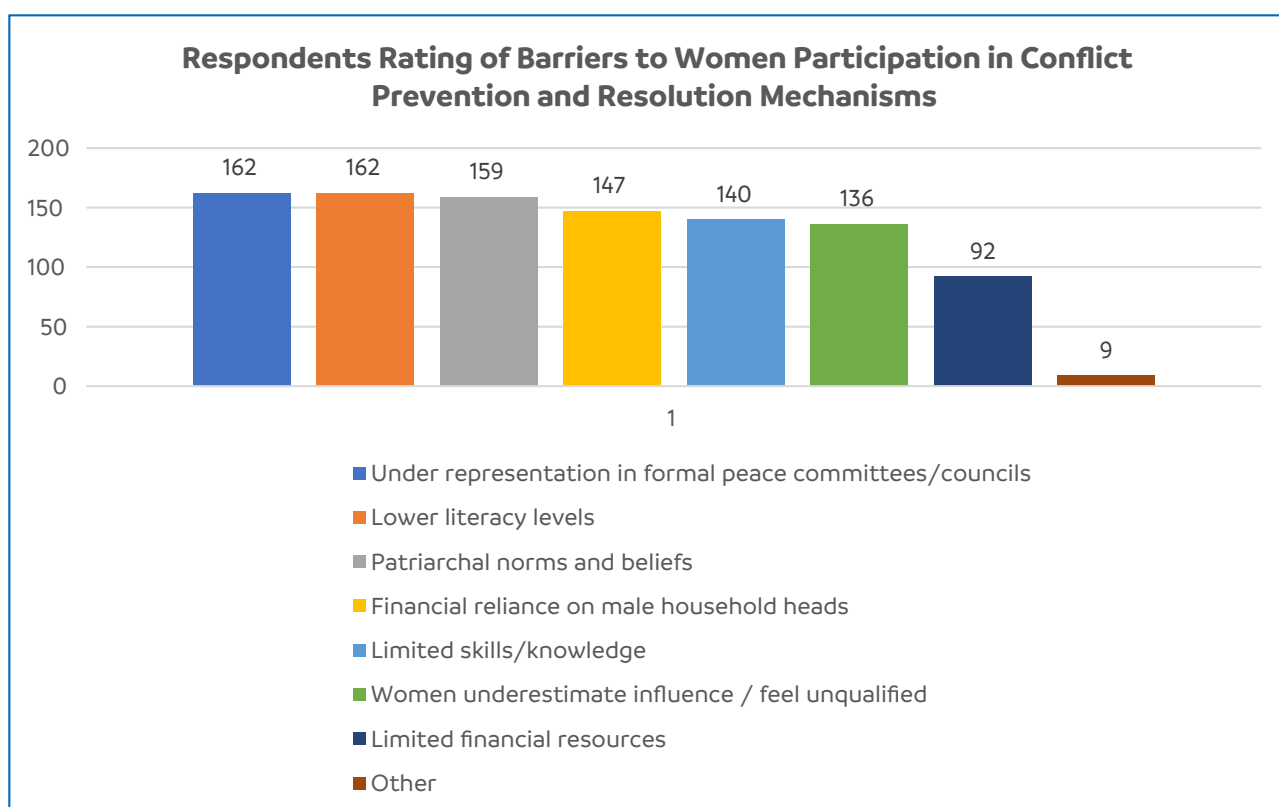


Figure 2: Views on barriers to women's participation in conflict prevention and resolution

These barriers were corroborated by the respondents as indicated Box 2.

Box 2: Community members voices on the barriers limiting women's participation in conflict prevention and resolution

- "There was an instance when a meeting was going on and I gave my contribution and one person said you haven't gone to school leave the educated people to talk". (FGD women participants, Kinkango, Bunkpurugu).
- "Traditionally women are not supposed to lead in conflict discussions because they are considered as weak and spiritually not well fortified due to their menstrual circle". (KII Youth leader, Wanjuga, Chereponi).
- "In our culture women are supposed to stay at the back and only contribute if men give them the opportunity". (Male community leader, Kinkango, Bunkpurugu).
- " We are easily chased away when men are discussing matters to resolve conflicts. If a woman is seen around that vicinity she is labelled as a witch, arrogant or controller of her husband". (KGD with a middle-aged woman, Paga, Kasena-Nankana District).

Given the important roles played by women in conflict prevention and resolution, the existing barriers to their participation need to be addressed. Female scholars in conflict and peace building propose the introduction of quotas for women in existing and future community peace structures (Anderlini, 2007; Porter, 2007; United Nations. 2000). There is equally the need to train more women on mediation and dialoguing skills to improve their confidence (Turner, 2020; UN Women. 2021; University for Peace.2004; Parry, 2022). Also longer term engagement with traditional and religious leaders on the importance of gender equality in conflict prevention interventions will help in resolving many of the community conflicts.

5.4 Drivers of Women Vulnerability to VEOs

The Push-Pull theory of radicalization provided the framework for assessing women's vulnerability to VEOs activities. In terms of pull factors, the study identified four main incentives that respondents perceived as potentially attracting women to VEOs: money or financial rewards (24%), promises of marriage or enhanced social status (16%), social media and online enticements (11%), and a sense of purpose and belonging (11%), as presented in Figure 3. These findings suggest that women's potential attraction to VEOs cannot be explained solely by economic considerations but factors of economic, social, relational and psychological incentives.

Financial rewards emerged as the most prominent pull factor, cited by 24% of respondents. This finding is particularly important when considered alongside the limited livelihood and employment opportunities identified elsewhere in the study. Where women have restricted access to sustainable sources of income, financial incentives offered by VEOs may become more attractive, particularly when presented as opportunities for economic security or support. Thus, economic vulnerability may create conditions that VEOs can exploit through promises of money, employment or other material benefits.

The promise of marriage or enhanced social status (16%) points to the importance of gender relations and prevailing social expectations in understanding women's vulnerability. In contexts where marriage may provide women with social recognition, economic security or an enhanced position within the community, promises of marriage or status can potentially be used as recruitment incentives. This finding shows how VEOs may exploit not only economic hardship but also existing gender norms and women's aspirations for social and economic security. Social media and online enticements (11%) highlight the growing significance of digital spaces in recruitment and radicalisation processes. Social media can provide VEOs with opportunities to reach women beyond traditional physical and community networks, cultivate relationships, circulate persuasive narratives and offer financial or social incentives. This finding is especially significant given the relatively low levels of education among respondents.

Finally, the identification of a sense of purpose and belonging (11%) shows that vulnerability to VEO recruitment is not exclusively material. Feelings of exclusion, limited opportunities for meaningful participation, or a desire for identity, recognition and connection may make the narratives and networks offered by VEOs appealing to some women.

The study identified poverty and limited livelihood opportunities (33%) as the leading push factor increasing women’s vulnerability to VEO recruitment, followed by unemployment (24%), trafficking (10%), marginalisation and exclusion (10%) and food insecurity or crisis (10%). These factors are closely connected to the identified pull factors, as underlying vulnerabilities can increase the attractiveness of incentives offered by VEOs. For instance, poverty, unemployment and food insecurity may heighten the appeal of financial rewards and promises of marriage or improved social status, while marginalisation and exclusion may make offers of belonging, recognition and a sense of purpose more attractive. Social media may further provide a channel through which these vulnerabilities are identified and exploited, while trafficking highlights the possibility of coercive rather than voluntary involvement. Overall, the findings show that push and pull factors are mutually reinforcing, with structural vulnerabilities creating conditions that VEOs may exploit through economic, social, relational and online incentives.

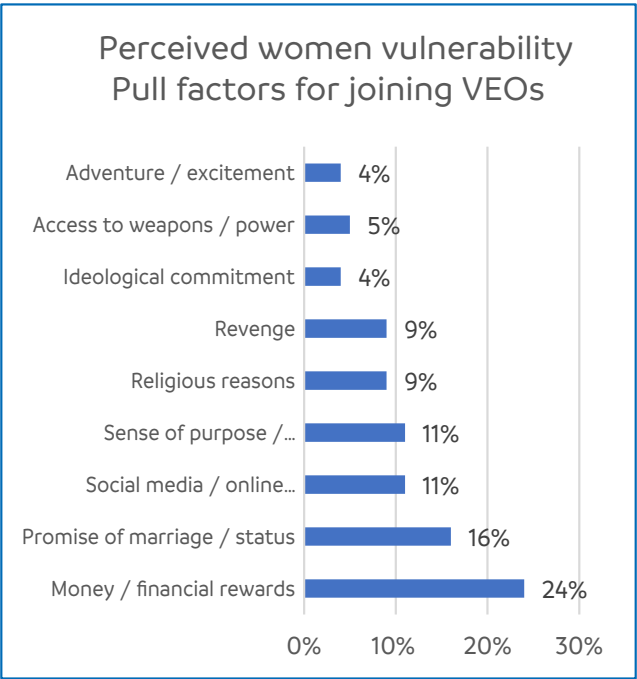


Figure 3: Perceived women’s vulnerability Pull factors for joining VEOs

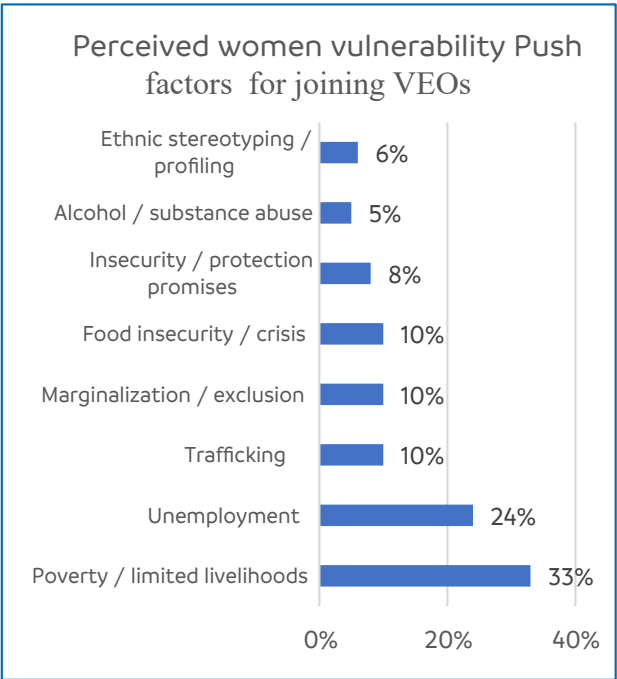


Figure 4: Perceived women’s vulnerability Push factors for joining VEOs

The women’s vulnerability to VEOs were corroborated by the respondents as shown in Box 3.

Box 3: Community members voices on women’s vulnerability to VEOs patriarchal norms and beliefs (159/300) as shown in Figure 2.

Community voices on women Pull vulnerability factors for joining VEOs

- "In fact, I am right to say poverty is a disease. With money, you can buy the whole world including women to engage in VEOs". (Youth leader, Mandari, Bole District).
- "I will gladly join the VEOs if given the opportunity since I have to feed, clothed and help my family. My wife even left me because am not gainfully employed". (A young adult stated. FGD, Paga, Kasena-Nankana District).
- "Even though some of us are qualified to be recruited into the security services, we don't get the chance because you need to know a big politician to get the chance to be recruited. So, I have been at home for four years now after graduation without work". (A man in his mid-twenties in a FGD, Paga, Kasena - Nankana District).

Community voices on women Push vulnerability factors for joining VEOs

- "Most young women are unemployed are desperate and ready to accept an offer that will pay them well. These unemployed women and men easily fall for online recruitment in the name of securing a job online". (Young lady, FGD, Sissala West)
- "Some Foreigners lured a girl in my community and promised her a visa to country abroad, thy ended up kidnapping her and asking for huge sums of money which her parents couldn't pay, the girl hasn't returned till now". (Religious leader, KII, Bongo).



6. Recommendations

Drawing on the findings, the following recommendations are raised to policy actors, funders and CSOs

- **Integrate women's informal early-warning roles into formal conflict prevention and response system**

Given the significant role women already play in identifying and communicating early signs of conflict and potential violent extremist activity, conflict prevention interventions should recognise women as critical actors within community early-warning systems. Existing informal information networks involving women traders, mothers, women's groups, religious groups should be deliberately linked to community, district and national early-warning and response mechanisms. This should include establishing safe and trusted channels through which women can communicate emerging risks to relevant peace and security actors and receive feedback on actions taken. This can help bridge the gap identified by the study between women's access to community-level information and their limited connection to formal decision-making and response structures.

- **Strengthen and formalise women's roles in mediation and conflict resolution**

The study shows that women already undertake mediation roles, but much of this work remains informal, poorly recognised and disconnected from formal peace processes. Government institutions, the National Peace Council, MMDAs, traditional authorities and civil society organizations should therefore invest in identifying, training and supporting existing women mediators and creating pathways for their participation in formal conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms. Beyond mediation and leadership training, attention should be given to institutionalising women's participation, documenting their contributions and ensuring that women are represented in structures where conflict-related decisions are made.

- **Address the economic vulnerabilities that increase women's exposure to violent extremist recruitment**

The study identifies poverty and limited livelihood opportunities as the strongest perceived push factor, alongside unemployment, food insecurity, trafficking and marginalisation. Financial inducements were also the most prominent pull factor identified. PVE interventions should therefore integrate women's economic resilience as a core prevention strategy, particularly in communities with high vulnerability to violent extremism. Livelihood

interventions should move beyond short-term skills training to improving women's access to productive assets, finance, viable markets and sustainable employment and enterprise opportunities. Priority should be given to young women and women in economically fragile border communities.

- **Strengthen women's resilience to online recruitment, misinformation and extremist narratives**

The identification of social media and online inducements as potential recruitment factors, combined with relatively low educational attainment among respondents, points to an emerging area of vulnerability. The study notes that low education may increase exposure to misinformation and disinformation. PVE programming should therefore incorporate digital literacy, misinformation awareness and online safety, particularly for young women. Such interventions could strengthen women's ability to recognise manipulative recruitment narratives, financial scams and other forms of online extremist inducement.

- **Address women's vulnerability through an integrated rather than single-factor PVE approach**

An important implication of the findings is that women's vulnerability to violent extremism cannot be explained by poverty alone. The research identifies an interaction of economic pressures, unemployment, food insecurity, exclusion, trafficking, financial inducements, promises of marriage or status, online recruitment and the search for belonging and purpose. PVE interventions should therefore adopt a multidimensional approach that combines economic empowerment with social inclusion, protection, digital resilience, community belonging and access to trusted support systems. This will help respond more closely to the combination of push and pull factors identified by the research.



Conclusion

This study shows that women occupy a paradoxical position in the conflict and violent extremism landscape in Northern Ghana. They are both exposed to particular vulnerabilities and are indispensable actors in building community resilience. Women's embeddedness in households, markets and community networks places them in a unique position to detect early warning signals, mediate disputes and sustain families and local economies during periods of insecurity. Yet these contributions remain largely informal, insufficiently recognised and weakly connected to formal peace and security architecture.

The findings further reveal that women's vulnerability to violent extremist organizations does not arise from a single condition. Women's vulnerabilities are produced through the interaction of economic insecurity, unemployment, food insecurity, exclusion, with pull factors such as financial inducements, promises of status or marriage, online recruitment and the search for belonging and purpose. This means that PVE approaches that focus narrowly on security responses or treat poverty as the principal driver of vulnerability may not address these vulnerabilities effectively.

The central implication of this study is that effective PVE strategies in Northern Ghana must simultaneously reduce the economic and social conditions that expose women to recruitment while strengthening their agency, capabilities and influence within peace and security structures. Bridging the divide between women's informal contributions and formal conflict prevention mechanisms is particularly critical, to not only advance women's participation in peace and security but also strengthen the capacity of communities to anticipate threats, prevent conflict and build sustainable resilience to violent extremism.



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STAR-Ghana Foundation, Aar-Baakor Street, Ogbodjo-Accra, Ghana.
Digital Address: GD-084-6313.
Tamale Office: Naluro Estate, Along Elee Pharmacy Road, Tamale.
Digital Address: NS-094-8334. Tel: +233 (302) 554520 / 556429.
info@star-ghana.org | www.star-ghana.org