"By silencing women during the pandemic, we actually weaken our response to it"

El Mostafa Rezrazi is a Moroccan Professor of Crisis Management and has worked at several Moroccan universities, as well as at Sapporo Gakuin University, Japan. He also works as a Clinical psychologist and heads the Moroccan Observatory on Extremism and Violence, a civil research organization created in 2016 to increase knowledge on the link between violent extremism and gender in North Africa and the Sahel.

1. How has COVID-19 impacted violent extremism and radicalization in North Africa?

There has been recently a lot of discussions about COVID-19's impact on violent extremism, but the empirical fact findings are still limited and do not allow us to define clear trends yet. To fill this gap, our observatory has been monitoring most of the reactions of terrorist and violent extremist groups since the outbreak of the pandemic. Gathered findings so far have shown that these groups were able to take advantage of the pandemic and adjust their narratives accordingly. For example, at the beginning of the pandemic, the Islamic State (IS) promoted the idea that the virus was God's punishment to weaken the enemy. However, when the pandemic broke out in their areas of control, their propaganda shifted to promoting prevention measures to contain the spread of the virus amongst its members. Then, it shifted again to a call for the expansion of their terrorist activities while states were busy with combatting the pandemic.

There is also an urban and rural divide in terms of how border closures and quarantine measures have impacted violent extremists' groups in different settings. If social distancing and quarantining are more urban measures, we have observed in remote area that terrorist groups are still present and have even have gained territoriality (like in the Sahel), and increased their activities.

2. **We know that globally COVID-19 is having a disproportionate impact on women. Has this been the case in North Africa?**

During the pandemic, married women witnessed an increase in the burden of managing household chores and caring for children, in addition to the fact that many of them have lost their jobs, either because of the male dominated workload, or because of the need to take care of their children in light of the closure of schools. All these factors have affected women psychologically, emotionally, and socially, and put them in a critical and vulnerable position, exposed to exploitation, and frontline target by violent extremist groups.

3. **In your opinion, how can we mitigate some of these risks?**

We can empower women during the pandemic by involving them in all aspects of the response to it. Unfortunately, the crisis has created its own set of priorities, and the fight for women rights has been shelved. But it is key that we increase the social awareness about the important role women they are playing in combating the pandemic, and in reducing the side effects of the social implication of the lockdown. By silencing women, we weaken our capacity in facing the pandemic and its effects, and we make recovery even harder.

4. **How has COVID-19 impacted women internet and social media users?**

Our observatory has witnessed an increase of women and girls who have become responsive to conspiracy theories online. This is a particularly serious concern, since it can expose them to violent extremism activism. For example, extremist groups have diffused narratives related to the delay in the distribution of COVID-19 vaccine to some countries, to generate a conflictual paradigm 'us' versus 'them'. There are also other narratives that depict the vaccine as a Western tool to control governments in the region. We need joint efforts between the security apparatus and civil society to create sophisticated responses and campaigns that counter the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories.

5. **How can the UN and international community help combat extremisms during Covid-19 and beyond?**

We need more support for organizations working on the rehabilitation of foreign terrorist fighters who returned from zones of tensions and their reintegration into society. We are currently working with returnee families and with former inmates, but we need more focused programs and support based on evidence and research, and this should continue even during crises.

Over the past few years, UN Women and CTED have partnered to establish an Expert Platform on Gender and Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in North Africa. The COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted research, and civil society and governments' action aiming to prevent violent extremism. To shed light on the consequences of COVID-19 on violent extremism in North Africa, UN Women and CTED give a voice to members of the Platform, in order to better understand how the pandemic has changed their work. Find out about the Expert Platform on Gender and Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in North Africa, and read other experts' interviews.