GENDERED DIMENSIONS OF DISENGAGEMENT, DISASSOCIATION, REINTEGRATION AND RECONCILIATION

THE NIGER

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Acronyms

CTO	Centre for Transit and Orientation
DDRR	disengagement, disassociation, reintegration and reconciliation
GBV	gender-based violence
IDP	internally displaced person
IED	improvised explosive device
IOM	International Organization for Migration
ISWAP	Islamic State West Africa Province
JASDJ	*Jama'atu Ahl al-Sunna li-l-Da'wa wa-l-Jihad* (popularly known as Boko Haram)
NGO	non-governmental organization
PNPCR	*Programme National de Prise en Charge de la Reddition* (National Surrender Support Programme)
VEO	violent extremist organization

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We would like to thank the tireless work of IOM staff in the development and implementation of the IOM four-pillared disengagement, disassociation, reintegration and reconciliation approach in Cameroon, Chad, the Niger, Nigeria and Somalia, as well as other country offices, and for their commitment to gender mainstreaming and the design and implementation of gender-sensitive and gender-responsive programmes and projects.

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Executive Summary

Over a decade of violent conflict in the Lake Chad Basin region has had profoundly gendered effects. People of all genders have been concurrently involved in the conflict, either voluntarily or forced, most notably as part of community militias or groups such as *Jama'atu Ahl al-Sunna li-l-Da'wa wa-l-Jihad* (JASDJ), Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and similar groups.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM), which engages in interventions focused on disengagement, disassociation, reintegration and reconciliation (DDRR), recognizes that a gender-transformative approach, supported by a proper analysis, is essential. Taking a qualitative methods approach that draws on data collected in interviews with 51 people (17 women and 34 men) in communities in Diffa Region and Niamey, this study examined gender dynamics around the DDRR process in the Niger and formulated recommendations to enable gender transformation. This executive summary presents the study's key findings.

Approaches to disengagement, disassociation, reintegration and reconciliation

DDRR in policy. The official DDRR programme in the Niger had its beginnings with the declaration of general amnesty by the Minister of Interior, Public Security and Decentralization in December 2016 and, in 2018, the Government adopted the *Programme National de Prise en Charge de la Reddition* (PNPCR) ("National Surrender Support Programme") policy to cover the DDRR process. After providing general principles and the programme's legal framework, the PNPCR outlines the eligibility criteria for the process. It also outlines its objectives, results, target groups and the programme duration. It puts in place a clear process for reception for those associated with JASDJ, ISWAP and related groups and stresses the importance of reconciliation for reintegration. Additionally, it explicitly addresses children associated with these groups, who are to be automatically considered as victims and transferred to child protection services for rehabilitation and reintegration. As regards gender, the PNPCR states that women are key targets for rehabilitation and reintegration and commits to taking account of gender to ensure responsiveness to women's situation and needs. However, the PNPCR lacks in specificity and commitments. Yet, as this report finds, gender infuses and determines the DDRR process.

DDRR in practice. Outreach was undertaken by a number of actors. The military had developed a communications strategy that largely focused on persuading male fighters to hand over their weapons and return to mainstream society. Government officials from Diffa Region used their own personal and professional networks to reach (mostly) men and encourage their return. Information about the DDRR process was also passed to others by those going through it. Members of the community, and women in particular, were active in encouraging people to leave JASDJ, ISWAP and related groups and undergo the process, with some communities especially active in this regard. While community decision-making around DDRR was dominated by men, women played greater roles in outreach and faced risks for doing so.

A separate process was in place for (unaccompanied) children, although the extent to which gender was integrated could be improved. Concurrently, there was a clear and defined process on return to communities for adults. Although support had been given to help investigators judge if a person may have committed crimes against humanity, genocide and other war crimes, the implications of this decision were unclear. Efforts were being made to expedite the judicial process for those imprisoned. Those ajudged eligible for DDRR were transferred to the Goudoumaria Centre, but there was a lack of clarity as to the length of time they would spend there and the type and quality of interventions available. The Goudoumaria Centre constructed separate accommodations for women and men for the first batch of *repentis* sent there. Women and men received religious education aimed at de-radicalization, but there was a missed opportunity to counteract the gendered ideology of JASDJ, ISWAP and related groups through these sessions. Levels of psychosocial support and activities also fell after the first batch. A three-month programme of livelihood skills training was provided towards the end of their stay at the centre, but the options provided were not responsive to a prior market assessment or in line with the livelihoods in which these people were engaged before. People who spent time at Goudoumaria, particularly those in the first batch, generally spoke highly of it, but levels of government support and oversight dropped sharply after their release from the centre. Men were more likely to go through this government process than women, who found it easier to evade State scrutiny and received less support as a consequence. The regional dimension to DDRR is important, with people strategizing which country had better prospects when deciding to leave armed groups. The loss of support from international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and United Nations agencies for the Goudoumaria Centre affected the interventions available, with activities for men prioritized in times of resource scarcity. More sustained donor interest and financing of United Nations agencies and NGOs, to support the Government's DDRR process, was needed.

Experiences and perspectives of people associated with armed groups

Experiences with armed groups. Association with armed groups fell on a spectrum between forced and voluntary. While there were many similarities in the nature and circumstances of women's versus men's association with JASDJ, ISWAP and related groups, there were also key differences. For example, a large number of women were abducted and forced to join or somewhat coerced due to decisions made by male relatives.

Once associated with the group, people's lived realities depended on its changing fortunes. Women and girls were forced to marry, with a subsequent marriage arranged for a woman or girl after her husband's death. They were particularly bitter about strict restrictions on their freedom of movement and the isolation to which they were subjected. This controlling behaviour, which includes wives' forced isolation, and economic abuse were standard practices that all married couples were required to observe. Women and girls were under their husbands' control and, thus, had no autonomy. Women's power, status and options depended on those of their husbands, with wives of higher-ranking leaders seen to have better experiences. Some women fought back against these restrictions and were punished. Conversely, men and boys had greater freedom of movement and access to women and spent their time engaging in livelihood activities and/or fighting. These realities were in line with the gendered narratives that formed a significant part of religious preaching and indoctrination. There were also significant power dynamics between men and between women in armed groups.

Due to these restrictions, it was harder for messages encouraging people associated with armed groups to reach women. It was also more difficult for women to leave the armed groups, as while men could move about freely, any woman outside of their homes in the camps was questioned. Women strategized and helped other women and girls to escape before leaving themselves.

Perceptions by others. Respondents who had gone through the DDRR process said they had mostly been accepted by community members. While women were generally not seen as perpetrators of harm, their lesser power sometimes translated to worse treatment in the communities. Women community members were sometimes more receptive and open to the idea of reintegration than the men. Community perceptions changed over time to some extent due to changing contextual dynamics, as well as sensitization and outreach work. Meanwhile, government actors did not always have a uniform discourse and sometimes reflected gender stereotypes in their approach. Respondents working for NGOs and United Nations agencies understood the roles women could play in armed groups but also tended to see them as predominantly victims.

Current needs and realities. The primary need was for decent livelihoods and sustainable incomes. Experiences of economic hardship were gendered. Men found it difficult to meet breadwinner masculinity norms, while women were barred from certain income-generating activities. Government officials were aware of these dynamics and reflected on the need to change and improve economic interventions. Another key need was that of security, particularly for women and girls who had been abducted and worried that they would be taken again. Facilitating divorce for women and girls married to men associated with armed groups who wanted it was critical but not done. As a result of their experiences, people had gendered psychological support needs that were dependent on their role within the armed group. They continued to live with the impacts of the gendered narratives and indoctrination they received. Finally, as girls and women had been subjected to gender-based violence (GBV), a closer relationship between DDRR and GBV actors was needed.

Experiences and perspectives of victims and survivors of violence[1]

Needs and realities. The primary need expressed by most respondents was for security to enable stability in their lives. Their livelihoods were gravely affected by insecurity and government measures. Some women respondents shared how financial difficulties had raised tensions in the household.

Sensitization and outreach efforts. Significant efforts had been made by community members, government officials and NGOs to sensitize communities around acceptance of those who undergo the DDRR process. These efforts had enabled surface-level acceptance. However, these sensitization efforts were not of universal reach and had not been sustained. Moreover, sensitization was seen as unidirectional, rather than attempting to discover and address community perspectives.

1 This language is cognizant of the fact that some people refer to themselves as victims while others refer to themselves as survivors. It is used to make the research more inclusive of different people's approaches to their own experiences.

Perceptions of the DDRR process. Members of the communities in which the respondents now live, even when they had negative perceptions of people (formerly) associated with armed groups, believed that the DDRR process was needed to bring the violence to an end. However, those who had suffered more due to the actions of armed groups tended to be more resistant to living side by side with those who had been part of causing such harm. Respondents generally distinguished between those forced to join armed groups and those who chose to do so. Victims' requirements for reintegration included the assurance that people no longer posed a danger to them, that they have gone through a government process aimed at reorientation, and that assistance was provided to the whole community and not just to those who underwent the DDRR process. While there was a ceremony at the Goudoumaria Centre, whereby people who had passed through the process asked for pardon and were handed over to community representatives, there were no efforts at reconciliation and healing in the communities themselves.

Women's participation in the DDRR process

Women's participation in DDRR should be seen within the framework of the broader gender context. Although the Niger has a National Gender Policy, which includes women in conflict and security, and a National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, key informants who had worked for NGOs and United Nations agencies on gender, or aimed to take gender-transformative approaches, spoke about the barriers to doing so. However, women have some influence and power within their families and communities and have been instrumental in all aspects of DDRR programming. Yet women have been largely excluded from meaningfully participating in decision-making, particularly when it came to the development of DDRR policy.

(Please see 8. Conclusion and recommendations at the end of this report.)

1. Introduction

The Lake Chad Basin region has seen over a decade of violent conflict which, as of September 2021, had led to 10.6 million people in need of assistance, 2.8 million people internally displaced, and 400,000 children severely malnourished.[2] The conflict has profoundly gendered effects, with many men arbitrarily arrested, subjected to prolonged detention without trial and extrajudicially killed. Meanwhile, women are often left behind to negotiate with armed actors their own safety and well-being, as well as those of their children and elders. They have to strategize how to keep families secure, fed and sheltered, while also being more likely to be subjected to gender-based violence (GBV).

Moreover, people of all genders have been involved in the conflict, either voluntarily or forced and most notably in community militias or groups such as *Jama'atu Ahl al-Sunna li-l-Da'wa wa-l-Jihad* (JASDJ), Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and similar groups. Yet policy and practice continue to be based on gender stereotypes, tending to view most men as active agents and perpetrators while viewing most women as passive victims of violence. Furthermore, the voices and perspectives of women, including those working for women's rights organizations, and survivors of all genders are often not sufficiently considered in decision-making processes, which makes it even harder for these stereotypes to change and for actions to be responsive to their needs.

IOM, which engages in interventions focused on disengagement, disassociation, reintegration and reconciliation (DDRR), recognizes that a gender-transformative approach, supported by proper analysis, is essential. Building on previous desk research and data collection in Cameroon and Chad in December 2019 and February 2020, respectively, this study deepened analysis gleaned to date and formulated recommendations to enable gender transformation.

The specific research questions were as follows:

(1) What are the approaches DDRR policy and programming currently undertaken towards gender? How have these approaches evolved?

(2) How does gender affect the perceptions by others and experiences of people previously associated with *Jama'atu Ahl al-Sunna li-l-Da'wa wa-l-Jihad* (JASDJ), Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and similar groups during the DDRR process?

(3) To what extent do DDRR policy and programming address and integrate the needs, realities and perspectives of victims and survivors, including through the recognition that many people associated with *Jama'atu Ahl al-Sunna li-l-Da'wa wa-l-Jihad* (JASDJ), Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and similar groups do not easily fit the perpetrator–victim binary?

(4) To what extent do women and women's organizations meaningfully participate in the design, implementation and evaluation of all aspects of DDRR policy and programming and how can such participation be improved?

2 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), "Lake Chad Basin: Humanitarian Snapshot" (as of 22 September), infosheet (Geneva, 2021). Available at www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/west-and-central-africa/infographic/lake-chad-basin-humanitarian-snapshot-22-september.

(5) What entry points exist to enable DDRR policy and programming to be more gender-transformative?

After briefly providing context and explaining the methodology, this report addresses these research questions in turn. It starts by outlining the approaches that DDRR policy and practice take before studying the experiences and perspectives of people associated with armed groups and victims and survivors of violence. It continues by examining women's participation in the DDRR process, before ending with conclusions and recommendations for action. (Note that this report presents findings and recommendations pertaining specifically to the Niger. Please refer to the Chad report[3] for insights related to Chad.)

3 IOM, *Gendered Dimensions of Disengagement, Disassociation, Reintegration and Reconciliation: Chad* (Geneva, 2022).

2. Context

Even before the conflict, the Lake Chad Basin region had some of the worst social development indicators globally, especially for women and girls. The region experienced inadequate public service provision, underdevelopment and weak governance, particularly in rural areas and on the islands of Lake Chad. The years of violence further impacted access to education, health care and other services in rural areas, not to mention jobs and livelihoods, mental health and well-being and family structures, and have led to high levels of death, disability, displacement, injury, sexual violence and other human rights violations.

The conflict started in north-eastern Nigeria and spread across borders to neighbouring countries. Root causes include a fall in economic prospects, living standards and wage growth from the 1970s onwards, heightened by economic reforms introduced in the 1980s following the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank's prescribed structural adjustment programme, as well as higher levels of inequality, corruption, religious intolerance and fundamentalism[4] against a backdrop of major political shifts in Nigeria with the re-establishment of a democratic system of governance in 1999, the adoption of sharia codes shortly afterwards, and the often violent and unethical nature of political contestation, particularly around election season.[5] Harnessing widespread public critique, Mohammed Yusuf, an Islamic scholar who preached against social immorality and the corruption and inequality of "Western" democracy and linked institutions, including schools and the civil service,[6] garnered widespread popularity in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State in north-eastern Nigeria. Due to links and relationships across the region, there was a history of boys and young men coming to Maiduguri and other areas of Nigeria for Islamic study from Cameroon, Chad and the Niger, such that people across the region were exposed to such narratives during this time.

Increasing tensions with the Borno State Government led to attacks against Christians and Christian churches and police stations by Yusuf's group in July 2009, followed by the injuring and killing of hundreds of his followers, as well as Yusuf himself, by security agents.[7] His remaining followers went underground, strategized and returned to public notice, calling themselves "*Jama'atu Ahl al-Sunna li-l-Da'wa wa-l-Jihad*" (JASDJ), which translates to "People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad", but often referred to by the media as "Boko Haram". JASDJ became increasingly violent while Nigerian security agencies engaged in collective punishment against communities they blamed for not identifying the group's members. Over 2013 and 2014, JASDJ captured much of Borno's territory, portions of the neighbouring states of Adamawa and Yobe, and spread into neighbouring Cameroon, Chad and the Niger. The conflict was brought to national and international prominence by these events, in addition to the April 2014 abduction of almost 300 schoolgirls from Chibok, which was the most well known of such incidents.

In response, the countries of the region formed the Multi-National Joint Task Force, which, working with community militias, recovered some of the captured territory. However, while JASDJ had used Cameroon, Chad and the Niger as bases to refuel and rest after previous

4 The term *religious fundamentalism* is used here as distinct from religious conservatism and to signify the project, whereby those engaged in it construct tradition in a way that is highly selective, at the same time dogmatically insisting that their reconstructions of sacred text are sacred and therefore cannot be questioned (Stephen Cowden and Gita Sahgal, "Why fundamentalism?", *Feminist Dissent*, 2:7–39 (2017)). They deny "the possibility of interpretation and reinterpretation even while its adherents engage in both and note the importance of control over women's bodies, sexuality and rigid gender norms" (Karima Bennoune, *Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here: Untold Stories from the Fight against Muslim Fundamentalism*, (New York, Norton Books, 2016), p. 16).

5 For more details, see: Abdul Raufu Mustapha and Kate Meagher (eds.), *Overcoming Boko Haram: Faith, Society and Islamic Radicalization in Northern Nigeria*, (Melton, United Kingdom, James Currey, 2020); Alex Thurston, *Boko Haram: History of an African Jihadist Movement* (Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2017).

6 Abdulbasit Kassim and Michael Nwankpa, *The Boko Haram Reader: From Nigerian Preachers to the Islamic State*, (London, Hurst and Co., 2018).

7 Alex Thurston, *Boko Haram* (see footnote 4).

operations in Nigeria, the involvement of the security agencies of these countries heightened insecurity with JASDJ, which is now engaging in attacks against civilians and security forces alike across Lake Chad Basin, including in the Niger's Diffa Region from early 2015 onwards.

In 2016, JASDJ allied with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and split into two distinct groups, largely as a result of disagreements over whether the targeting of Muslim civilians was permitted under opposing interpretations of Islam and the harshness of punishment levied against members for infractions of rules. A new group, *Wilayat al Islamiyya Gharb Afriqiyyah* (which translates to "Islamic State West African Province" (ISWAP)), was formed. Its objective was to focus on security agents and those who support them, rather than the indiscriminate targeting of civilians and it sought to distinguish itself from JASDJ by justifying its actions with doctrinal explanations.[8]

The countries of the region have put in place a range of efforts, including encouraging people who have associated with JASDJ, ISWAP and related groups to leave them. As will later be explored, the Government of the Niger has revised relevant laws, developed policy and instituted an interministerial committee to oversee the DDRR process. This process received external support at its inception from international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and United Nations agencies, including the IOM, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Search for Common Ground[9] and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). However, levels of funding have fallen recently, affecting the quality, holistic nature, impact and sustainability of interventions, particularly given the donor restrictions on funding that remains. Many donors, in fact, prohibit direct support for people formerly associated with armed groups.

Moreover, the security situation in Diffa Region, the main locus of the Lake Chad Basin conflict in the Niger, has deteriorated in recent years. Although government authorities in the Niger have been assisting internally displaced persons (IDPs) to return to their communities, food insecurity is high, with attendant risk of sexual exploitation along with other human rights violations. In June 2021, ISWAP confirmed its killing of Abubakar Shekau, the leader of JASDJ, upon the order of the interim leader of ISIL.[10] At the time of this report's writing, the implications of this event are still developing, with many people associated with JASDJ surrendering[11] while others, particularly those in the Niger, launch attacks on ISWAP.[12]

8 *Daily Trust*, "ISWAP's execution of aid workers", editorial, 28 July 2020. Available at https://allafrica.com/stories/202007280071.html (republished).
9 For more information, visit the Search for Common Ground website at www.sfcg.org.
10 Jason Burke, "Boko Haram leader killed on direct orders of Islamic State", *The Guardian*, 7 June 2021. Available at www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/07/boko-haram-leader-abubakar-shekau-killed-on-direct-orders-of-islamic-state.
11 Ruth Maclean and Ismail Alfa, "Thousands of Boko Haram members surrendered. They moved in next door", *The New York Times*, 23 September 2021. Available at www.nytimes.com/2021/09/23/world/africa/boko-haram-surrender.html.
12 Ahmad Salkida, "ISWAP confirms Shekau's death, says its fighters were following ISIS orders", *HumAngle*, 5 June 2021. Available at https://humanglemedia.com/iswap-confirms-shekaus-death-says-its-fighters-were-following-isis-orders.

3. Methodology

The principles of conflict sensitivity, gender transformation and social inclusion, which are seen as mutually reinforcing, guided the research. Initial discussions reflected on the dynamics between conflict and gender in the research locations and how to better ensure conflict sensitivity in ways relevant to different local contexts. Tools were designed and delivered in a conflict- and gender-sensitive manner to not only "do no harm" but also "do more good", aiming to ensure the research process had positive impacts on conflict and gender dynamics, including by integrating appreciative inquiry. Moreover, given that the research aimed to contribute to the transformation of unequal gender power relations and tackle the root causes of gender inequality, awareness of and sensitivity to gender dynamics was particularly integral. The study took intersectional feminist approaches – as such, it integrated analysis of other axes of social exclusion and examined how gender interrelates with other identities – to inform its research methodology, tool selection and design, coding, and analysis.

This study used a qualitative methods approach, drawing on a desk study conducted from July to November 2019 and further literature produced in the last two years, and data collected through one-on-one interviews in Diffa Region and Niamey held over a two-week period in October 2021. Given the sensitive nature of the subject matter and the risks of causing harm, focus group discussions (FGDs) were not held. As shown in Table 1, researchers interviewed 11 people (5 women and 6 men) formerly associated with armed groups, 12 (7 women and 5 men) community members, 4 (all male) designated community or religious leaders, 6 (1 woman and 5 men) government officials and 16 representatives (4 women and 12 men) of relevant national, international NGOs and United Nations agencies. Further, a (male) imam who worked at the Goudoumaria Centre and a man who worked with the military on outreach were also interviewed. While gender parity among respondents was achievable for community members and people formerly associated with armed groups, it was impossible to achieve in other categories, as the nature of gender power dynamics in the Niger means that positions in community leadership, government ministries, NGOs and United Nations agencies are dominated by men, even in posts related to women's rights.

Table 1. Study respondent composition

Respondent category	Women	Men	Total
People formerly associated with armed groups	5	6	11
Community members	7	5	12
Designated community and religious leaders	0	4	4
Government officials	1	5	6
Staff of national and international NGOs and United Nations agencies	4	12	16
Imams	0	1	1
Individuals who worked with the military on outreach	0	1	1
Total	17	34	51

Purposive sampling aimed to find respondents across a wide age range, with the youngest respondent aged 20 and the oldest aged, and a number of pathways to association and disassociation among the respondent category of people formerly associated with armed groups. Research methodology encouraged research participants, especially young people and others who often experience social exclusion, to feel comfortable with the research process and be empowered to discuss sensitive issues. Researchers explained the purpose of the interview, allowed them the opportunity to ask questions and put them at ease. The interview started with the researchers asking respondents to tell their stories, allowing them to begin on their own terms, and deciding the content and extent to which they wished to share. As the security situation made it difficult for researchers to travel, respondents from Bosso, Gueskerou, Kabalewa and Toumour were asked to come to Diffa Town for interviews, allowing the perspectives of people from a variety of geographical locations to inform the analysis.

Interviews were conducted in English, French, Hausa and Kanuri. Excerpts from respondents' statements, originally made in other languages and translated into English, are featured in this report serve as stylistic devices (the original language is indicated in footnotes). Notes were taken contemporaneously, with interviews with audio recordings serving as a reference point when needed. These notes were analysed and coded using a grounded theory approach.[13] Following the development of a draft report, findings were presented to key actors for validation at a workshop held in February 2022. Feedback at this workshop, as well as written comments from IOM colleagues, were subsequently addressed.

The study followed a robust ethical approach and put systems in place to ensure the highest standards were adhered to at all times by making sure that:

(a) The research study was ethical from a local perspective, as well as being in line with externally produced international ethical codes and guidelines.
(b) Respondents were clear about research aims and what involvement meant for them in terms of risks and benefits and provided informed consent.
(c) Respondents received adequate support during the research process to participate fully.
(d) Personal information was treated sensitively and confidentially, and anonymity was preserved (subject to defined limits, e.g. as regards child protection concerns).
(e) How respondents' participation in research impacts on their position within their families and communities was considered, with actions taken to mitigate the risk of negative consequences, including stigmatization.
(f) Existing referral pathways were known to researchers so they could be used to support respondents who became distressed or traumatized during interviews or those who disclosed experiences of violence and needed services. (No referrals were ultimately made.)

Research limitations included issues of security and access that restricted the locations the research team was able to reach, with respondents instead asked to come to Diffa Town. While this set-up enabled some geographical diversity, it limited study participation to those able to travel. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic and related requirements to quarantine and undergo testing prior to and after travel added to existing limitations in time and budget, which constrained the time in Diffa Region to only six full days, affecting the number of people the research team could interview and so the quantity of data. During this period, it was

13 Grounded theory is a process whereby data gathered is used as basis for the formulation of new theoretical concepts.

not possible to interview the Director of the Goudoumaria Centre or the social workers and psychologists working there. Several attempts to contact them through telephone were abandoned due to poor network connection.

Furthermore, the nature of the study restricted the pool of respondents to those known to the authorities and the research team and were willing to be interviewed at short notice. If the team had more time in the region, it may have been possible for the researchers to use snowball sampling and other techniques to gain the trust and confidence of others who may have had very different perspectives from those interviewed. Additional time would have also made possible the participation of more women active in civil society, as the period allotted for data collection included a weekend, during which many women contacted were unavailable.

4. DDRR approaches

This chapter first presents the research findings, looking at the approaches to DDRR currently taken then subsequently examines the experiences and perspectives of respondents. It is divided into two sections, the first outlining DDRR policy in place, detailing the provisions of the *Programme National de Prise en Charge de la Reddition* (PNPCR), before moving on to explore the process as experienced by both the *repentis* who had undergone it and the civil society and government actors involved.

4.1. DDRR in policy

The official DDRR process of the Government of the Niger was put in place with the declaration of a general amnesty by the Minister of Interior, Public Security and Decentralization in December 2016.[14] Although people had already been choosing to leave JASDJ, ISWAP and other groups and go back to their communities, the public pronouncement encouraging them to do so was the first from the highest government level. In the view of respondents working in the area of peacebuilding, the amnesty programme was carried out without sufficient consultation, community preparation and measures to ensure compliance with national and international law. As a result, a revision had to be introduced to the Penal Code to provide exemptions from criminal prosecution for members of groups planning or committing terrorist acts if they warn authorities of plans that would lead to the prevention of such acts or if they voluntarily surrender. This exemption, however, does not apply to perpetrators of crimes against humanity, genocide and war crimes.[15] In 2019, the Government of the Niger passed legislation to establish a centre in Goudoumaria for transit, de-radicalization, skills training and rehabilitation of people formerly associated with JASDJ, ISWAP and related groups. These developments were explicitly undertaken to be in line with United Nations Security Council resolution 2349, which encouraged countries in the Lake Chad region to develop and implement transparent, inclusive and human rights-compliant strategies for "disarmament, demobilization, de-radicalization, reintegration and rehabilitation", as well as encouraging defection.[16]

The Government adopted a policy in 2018, to cover the DDRR process. This development was a result of workshops that brought together officials from the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Defence and the High Authority for Peacebuilding (HACP), as well as administrative authorities and community leaders from Diffa Region, and took place with the support of external partners, including IOM. The policy document was revised in 2021 to give it a national dimension, given that DDRR was being carried out in multiple regions of the country, and finalized in August as the PNPCR, a national policy to guide stages of the DDRR process and define the modalities of interventions to be employed by different actors.[17]

14 Fonteh Akum, Remadji Hoinathy and Malik Samuel, "Managing the journey out of violent extremism in the Lake Chad Basin", report (Pretoria, Institute for Security Studies, 2021).
15 According to amended article 399-1.20 of the Penal Code, Act No. 61-27 of 15 July 1961, as amended by Act No. 2003-025 of 13 June 2003.
16 United Nations Security Council resolution 2349 on Peace and Security in Africa, adopted on 31 March 2017 (S/RES/2349).
17 Government of the Niger – Ministry of Interior, Public Security and Decentralization, *Programme National de Prise en Charge de la Reddition* [National Surrender Support Programme] (Niamey, 2021) (in French).

The PNPCR policy document starts by laying down the general principles and the programme's legal framework, then proceed to outline the eligibility criteria for the DDRR process. Framed in international law and relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions, the general principles of the PNPCR include that surrender is an individual and voluntary act. It affirms the importance of respect for the principles and standards enshrined in the Constitution of the Niger and international law, including international human rights law, as well as commitment to national ownership, transparency, inclusive approaches and rapid action. The policy states that people are to be profiled in reception centres for up to 30 days to determine if there is any reason for them to be suspected of having committed crimes against humanity, genocide and war crimes. After declaring that unaccompanied minors are to be transferred to child protection services, and that people with serious physical or mental disabilities or problems are to be referred to specialized centres, it states that women are key targets for rehabilitation and reintegration, given that they suffer the brunt of conflicts and have a central role in resolving them and strengthening social cohesion, but also that they may be actors of violence. It commits the process to taking account of gender specificities to ensure that is that responds to women's situation and needs. (This section is the only place in the policy document where women are explicitly addressed at some length.)

The PNPCR policy document next outlines programme objectives, results, target groups and duration. Expected results of the programme include the establishment of operational and defined mechanisms for management and coordination; the reception, care, recording, profiling and sorting of those who surrender, often referred to as a *repenti* (literally, "one who repents") in policy documents and discourse; the rehabilitation of those who meet the eligibility criteria for DDRR; community acceptance of those who undergo the DDRR process and their reintegration into communities; and the reconstitution of the social fabric. The policy goes on to outline the phases of the process: management and coordination mechanisms; development and strengthening of the communications strategy; reception and handling of *repentis*; registration, profiling and sorting; rehabilitation; reconciliation with communities; and certification of programme completion and reintegration into communities. It commits the Government of the Niger to take the following actions:

(a) Develop relevant legal frameworks, including by drafting a regulatory act creating a Steering Committee, a decree on the National Coordination Unit and standard regulations for a reception centre for people who surrender.

(b) Create coordination structures at the national and local levels, including:
   (i) A Steering Committee to define the DDRR programme and monitor results;
   (ii) A National Coordination Unit to ensure proper implementation and prepare reports for the Steering Committee;
   (iii) A Regional Committee to bring together actors in the region and implement the programme, as defined by the Steering Committee;
   (iv) Local committees to coordinate communication, reception, reconciliation, reintegration and monitoring.

(c) Build capacity through training and by providing coordination structures with material, logistical and technical resources, including training and supervision modules with content on human rights, gender, protection of minors and the legal framework.

(d) Undertake a communications campaign by informing and raising awareness and conducting studies and analyses of perceptions of return and reconciliation, while encouraging defection and surrender, with targeted messages addressed to all sections of the population, including women, young people, opinion leaders, community leaders and civil society.

The PNPCR also puts in place a clear process for reception for those (formerly) associated with JASDJ, ISWAP and other relevant groups. Prospective *repentis* are to first go to the *chef de village*, who will take them to the *chef de groupement* or the *chef de canton* or refer them to child protection authorities if they are minors. The Prefect will inform the state governor of developments, and *repentis* will be taken to the Counter-Terrorism Unit for registration, surrender of any weapons they may have and transfer to reception centres within 24–48 hours. In these centres, people are to be housed, given a health, psychological and professional assessment to inform their rehabilitation, and profiled by the Counter-Terrorism Unit to determine whether they have been involved in crimes against humanity, genocide or war crimes and if they qualify for the DDRR process under the conditions set in amended article 399-1.20 of the Penal Code. Those who voluntarily surrender but are suspected of crimes against humanity, genocide or war crimes are not eligible for DDRR and will instead be subject to judicial proceedings. Those who qualify for the DDRR programme are to: (a) undergo de-radicalization training conducted by specialists who will consider their psychology and social realities; (b) receive economic rehabilitation, vocational training, work tools and start-up capital according to their needs and the reintegration pathway they have chosen; and (c) be certified as ready for return and reintegration into the communities of their choice.

The PNPCR also stresses the importance of reconciliation for reintegration. Local committees are to coordinate awareness-raising and public forgiveness and apology ceremonies. They should also commit to reparations projects for victims, envisaged as interventions to provide basic services, agricultural inputs and training for young people and women (at a ratio of five members of the host community for every *repenti*), so that not only people completing the programme and leaving the transit centres benefit. Once areas of return are identified, community projects are to be set up to facilitate reconciliation, pacify any feelings of resentment of the perceived preferential treatment of *repentis* and mitigate risks of future recruitment. Finally, a community monitoring mechanism is to be put in place, with the actors involved to be responsible for informing authorities of developments to ensure recidivists are identified.

The PNPCR explicitly addresses the handling of children associated with JASDJ, ISWAP and related groups. In line with a 2017 protocol, the PNPCR states that minors are automatically considered victims. The first person in a position of authority who comes across a minor should transfer the minor to child protection services for rehabilitation and reintegration. Dependent minors are to be cared for, according to protection principles, by their extended or foster families, with family ties maintained and guaranteed. All minors are excluded from biometric registration and profiling by the Counter-Terrorism Unit. Unaccompanied minors are to be referred to the Centre for Transit and Orientation (CTO) run by the Ministry for the Promotion of Women and the Protection of Children.

As regards gender, the PNPCR states that women are key targets for rehabilitation and reintegration and commits to taking account of gender to ensure responsiveness to women's situation and needs, although it lacks in specificity and commitments. However, beyond mentions of women as recipients of communications messaging and training, the PNPCR provides no analysis of how gender affects DDRR in its "Context" section or of the gender specificities to

which the process needs to be responsive, nor does it give specific commitments to ensure that recognition of gender dynamics informs the outlined DDRR process and the actions taken in it. Moreover, while the Steering Committee counts the Minister for the Promotion of Women and the Protection of Children (or a ministry representative) as a member, it does not include any representation from women's rights associations or organizations.

As this report finds, gender infuses and determines the DDRR process. The critical role played by gender is both in terms of the past experiences and current lived realities of people formerly and currently associated with JASDJ, ISWAP and related groups, as well as victims and survivors of conflict, among other civilians. Thus, women and women's associations play critical roles in the process. The scope to influence policy and programming will be an area for reflection in Chapter 8 of this report.

4.2. DDRR in practice

While the previous section outlined the contours of DDRR policy in the Niger, this section examines how DDRR works in practice specifically in Diffa Region. It looks at the different stages of the process, starting from the outreach work to encourage people associated with JASDJ, ISWAP and related groups to leave them. It then briefly describes the process for children and that for individuals slated to undergo judicial proceedings, before examining the interventions at the Goudoumaria Centre and the process of return to communities. It ends with a general assessment of the entire process.

Outreach was undertaken by a number of actors, including government officials and security agents, community members and those who had previously undergone DDRR. After the presidential pronouncement of amnesty provided direction, outreach efforts were initially successful, persuading hundreds of people to enrol in the DDRR process, with promises made that they would not face extrajudicial killings or reprisal action at the hands of the State, that communities wanted their return and were willing to accept them, and that the State would help them re-establish their lives.

The military had developed a communications strategy which largely focuses on persuading male fighters to hand over their weapons and return to mainstream society. Communications materials and messages were developed with the support of a team from the United States, in partnership with the Niger military. Training was provided by an international NGO working in radio communications. Leaflets developed contained a comic strip portraying the different stages of the DDRR process: a male fighter surrendering to authorities, handing over his weapons, receiving support and being reunited with his family and friends. These leaflets provided contact details so prospective *repentis* could find out more about the process. Women were depicted only as family members welcoming back the former fighter and never as *repentis* going through the process themselves. The leaflets were dropped from the air, handed out to civilians or left by soldiers in the bush as they went on operations, and were complemented by stickers. Radio programmes, including through *Radio Bouclier* (the military radio network), also disseminated messages asking people in the bush to return and providing instructions on how those with relevant information could pass it on to the Government. According to a man who was working with the military on outreach (interviewed in English), *Radio Bouclier* "organized a programme to have one message after every five songs. These messages can be about social cohesion, defection, how to involve oneself in activities to generate peace in town, how to

help develop some activities to keep young guys in town." By disseminating these messages, which are mostly in French, Hausa and Kanuri, but also in Arabic, Buduma, Fulfulde and Tougou, the Government developed a network of informants, with information passed on to relevant parts of the military, and encouraged defections. Although there were attempts to work with influential women in the community to pass on these messages on the radio, this effort was vetoed by the military, which did not want to expose civilians to danger, as they were unable to guarantee their protection.

> "We did not do anything in particular in the process of [encouraging] defections to reach women."
>
> – Man working with the military on outreach (interviewed in English)

Government officials from Diffa Region relied on their own personal and professional networks to reach mostly men and encourage their return. Civil servants recounted how they spoke with and instructed their networks of informants, as well as community members who they knew were in touch with family members in the bush, to convey messages that fighters (and other persons who had associated themselves with armed groups) could return to their communities and to give them their contact details to discuss the DDRR process further. As a result of these efforts, they were able to speak with several people who were interested in leaving JASDJ, ISWAP and related groups to explain the process and give assurances of good treatment. These civil servants continued to remain in touch and provide support, such as by tracing family members, as those people underwent the DDRR process and reintegrated into their communities. A woman civil servant described how she persuaded a relative to return (one of the first men to do so) to reach out to others: "Little by little, we talked with him to make him agree to collaborate and call other people and make them come back. We tried our best to convince him and he accepted and started calling people."[18] Following this development, she was part of efforts to convince community members, particularly women, to not fear but rather accept those who were to return. However, as will be discussed later, there were particular issues with the outreach to women, with interviewed civil servants reporting that it was mostly men who were reached out to in the way described. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize the courage and commitment of government officials engaging in the DDRR process and the risks they run. As one male civil servant said, "Everyone has a role to play. It is our country. If I don't expose my life in this way, who will do it? The situation will only become worse."[19]

Information about the DDRR process was passed on by those going through it. Telephones were given to men so they could reach out to their erstwhile colleagues still in the bush. Although telephones were not necessarily distributed to their female counterparts, partly as the focus of the programme was on defecting male fighters, women going through the process also spoke with people they knew who were still associated with armed groups. A woman who no longer reached out to her friends after her phone was stolen said, "I used to call and talk with people [in the bush]. I would tell them the truth – that here is better than there, how I was struggling [there with them] and [now I have] all the better phases of life [here after I have left the group]."[20] Those still with JASDJ, ISWAP and related groups perhaps get the most honest assessment of the situation during such communications and have the highest trust in them. Respondents recounted how telephone calls from people they knew convinced them to

18 Interview (in Hausa) with a female civil servant (respondent no. 39), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.
19 Interview (in French) with a male civil servant (respondent no. 15), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.
20 Interview (in Hausa) with a woman formerly associated with an armed group (respondent no. 36), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.

leave their respective groups and undergo the DDRR process. However, as people struggled for livelihoods while they reintegrate into their communities, the telephone calls no longer took place. As one (female) respondent said, "It is not easy as when you face a very difficult [economic] situation. What are you going to recommend to someone over there? What are you going to tell them? What arguments do you have? When I say I am suffering, maybe you wouldn't understand. Can you imagine how it is to pass a day without eating? When you have a hungry stomach, can you talk with someone and encourage them to defect?"[21] Knowledge of this hardship was transmitted by people who travelled to areas where people associated with JASDJ, ISWAP and related groups were present. Indeed, several respondents – people formerly associated with armed groups, civilians and government officials alike – stressed that a good way to encourage people to leave these groups was to ensure those who had already done so had good lives.

Members of the community, particularly women, were active in encouraging people to leave JASDJ, ISWAP and related groups and undergo the DDRR process. Respondents recounted how friends and family members spoke with them to persuade them to return to their communities and connected them to their *chef de village* and/or other relevant authorities to discuss and facilitate the process. The strength of these bonds was therefore clear despite the years they had spent away and the activities in which they had been engaged. According to one (male) respondent, "[My uncle who is a community leader] was the first person who talked with me about coming back. … The first thing he asked me was if I was still alive. Then he told me to get back to his palace before 8 o'clock [morning of] the next day. I asked what if I come and the military takes me? He told me, "If you die, [at least] you will die in front of your mum – unlike over there." I was thinking about this call – this is my uncle, the older brother of my mum. How did he get my number and call me? Then, in this mood, I got a call from my mother. She talked directly about [my uncle]: "Did [he] call you?" Then she asked me to do what [he] wanted and asked, "Can you promise it to me?" and I said "yes". So there was nothing [for me] to do but to go back to [my] village. … After that, I was ready to go back whatever would happen."[22]

Some communities had been especially active in outreach. In Toumour, for example, a committee comprising three advisors to the community leader and four representatives from displaced populations (all men) developed an outreach strategy. This strategy included working with women in the community and Fulbe pastoralists, who went to the bush to graze cattle, to show people associated with JASDJ, ISWAP and related groups photographs of the Goudoumaria Centre, describe the DDRR process and pass on telephone numbers that can be contacted for more information. During the resulting telephone calls, committee members, according to a (male) member of this committee (interviewed in Hausa), "took the opportunity to explain to them that "there is no problem. Don't think that the community will do anything bad [to you]. We know that you messed up and there is a way [out]. Come back and you will be in better care. Where you are now, what do you get? Nothing. And you left your family [for nothing]"."[23] Those engaged in outreach did so at great risk. Their work was discussed and condemned by the groups concerned and they were targeted for violence. Two members of the seven-person committee coordinating the outreach efforts were killed. One respondent said that the threats and the perceived lack of recognition and support from the Government dampened their motivation, resulting in decreased efforts: "The authorities know what we are doing and don't care. The first of my colleagues was killed three years ago and the second killed two years ago, and it is since then that my motivation has decreased. At this moment, you balance that you

21 Interview (in Hausa) with a woman formerly associated with an armed group (respondent no. 29), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.
22 Interview (in Hausa) with a man formerly associated with an armed group (respondent no. 31), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.
23 Interview (in Hausa) with a male community leader (respondent no. 23), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.

are exposing your life and they start killing us, and on the other side, people do not care – so why expose your life to danger for nothing – not even respect and recognition?" He asked for livelihood or professional orientation and training to reinforce capacities, some material reward, no matter how small, and support for other communities to take similar action.

> "You are moving around [the community] to sell your things and have contact with one or two of them, so you create a reason to talk. You initiate an exchange to spread "standard gossip" about the kind of situation that those who had already come back are in by putting out all the positive things they have been experiencing since they came back. … The [intermediaries] do not know what we are doing. We "use" them. We had people coming back telling us about the [intermediaries] talking with them. That is the reason why some of those who defected came back."
>
> – Woman engaged in outreach activities (interviewed in Hausa)

While community decision-making around DDRR was dominated by men, women played greater roles in outreach and faced risks for doing so. According to a man from an international NGO that works in the area of peacebuilding and DDRR interventions, "The informal volunteers who negotiate with Boko Haram – many of them are their mothers – and children maintain contact with their mothers and call them to let them know they are okay when they find a phone. So it's not about trying to integrate gender – it's naturally there. Women really play a big role. People from all the villages called the children who had left. Each *chef de village* knew the children who left and asked their mothers to call them."[24] In Toumour, the outreach committee consisted of seven men, but more women were involved in outreach work, and their level of effort was widely recognized by the committee. Women visited homes to ask people to reach out to their family members in the bush. As Fulbe pastoralist men went back and forth from communities to the bush to graze cattle, Fulbe women asked their male relatives to share DDRR information and messages when doing so and spoke with their contacts who were associated with JASDJ, ISWAP and related groups to encourage them to leave them and return to their communities. One of the women traders supported by the committee with start-up capital to enable this work, went to the bush to gather information and share photographs and news of people who had already left the group. She gave information about the DDRR process while encouraging return. Other women traders used their networks to identify "intermediaries", who came to the community to buy goods for JASDJ, ISWAP and related groups. Once identified, they started to gain their trust and confidence to glean information and use them to convey messages to the bush without knowing they were doing so. Many of these women had received mediation and peacebuilding training from NGOs and spoke about how it helped them to undertake these activities. The challenges they faced included the financial costs of engaging in this kind of work (which involved feeding identified intermediaries to establish friendly relations with them) and the dangers they faced. Community decision makers reasoned that women who mobilized in this manner faced less suspicion due to their gender. However, these women became at risk once their efforts were discovered by JASDJ, ISWAP and related groups. At least one of these women has been kidnapped as a result of this work.

24 Interviews (in English and in French) with a male peacebuilder working for an international NGO (respondent no. 47), conducted in Diffa Region and Niamey in October 2021.

> "There were more women than men doing this work because women establish contact and can travel everywhere more easily. It is possible for them to approach many dangerous places without being exposed to danger. Normally, a woman is a person to protect, not to harass. Women are respected by people more than men, who are considered a danger. When you see a man, you automatically think that something bad would happen and investigate him. You are more confident with a woman than a man. If we had asked men to do this, they would have been more at risk than the women."
>
> – Male member of the Toumour committee

A separate process was in place for (unaccompanied) children, although the extent to which gender was integrated could be improved. The Ministry for the Promotion of Women and the Protection of Children created the CTO. Since 2015, the CTO has taken care of children associated with JASDJ, ISWAP and related groups who fall under the international protections offered to children associated with armed forces and armed groups. The first batch of individuals transferred to the Goudoumaria Centre included unaccompanied children, but the Ministry for the Promotion of Women and the Protection of Children and UNICEF intervened. They were transferred to the CTO, with instructions that the Counter-Terrorism Unit should inform the Regional Direction of Women and Children's Affairs when they come across children in future. According to a male government official, the military would now bring children they encountered during the course of operations to Niamey for investigation by the Counter-Terrorism Unit: If they were found not to be involved with armed groups, they were sent to the CTO while, and if any link with armed groups is found, these children were sent to undergo the judicial process, in which a judge would rule that they be taken to the CTO.[25] At the CTO, children were taken care of, fed, given psychosocial support and had opportunities to learn skills while efforts were made to find their families, judge community receptiveness to their return and ensure acceptance before being transferred to Diffa Town and reunited with their families. Interviewed United Nations staff said that there was specific treatment and interventions for girls – for example, focused psychosocial support for those who were forcibly married and knowledge-raising on rights, including sexual and reproductive health and rights – and that gender was integrated into training modules for social workers posted at the CTO.[26] However, government officials said the CTO held no girls.[27] Their absence was puzzling given the considerable number of girls abducted and forcibly married off by or otherwise associated with armed groups. It was unclear whether these girls were less likely to leave these groups than boys or if they were more likely to be seen as adult women considering the absence of documentation, as many did not know their own age and social norms linked adulthood to marriage. Moreover, many government respondents found it difficult to articulate how children's needs and lived realities differ according to gender. The CTO and other child protection services did not implement specific interventions needed by girls, such as facilitating divorce for girls (forcibly) married off to fighters.

25 Interview (in French) with a male civil servant (respondent no. 3), conducted in Niamey in October 2021.

26 Interview (in French) with a woman working in child protection, for a United Nations agency (respondent no. 5), conducted in Niamey in October 2021; interview (in French) with a woman working in child protection, for a United Nations agency (respondent no. 6), conducted in Niamey in October 2021.

27 Interview (in French) with a male civil servant (respondent no. 3), conducted in Niamey in October 2021. (In an interview (in French), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021, a female politician who had previously worked in child protection (respondent no. 17) said that there had been no girls during her time doing this work.)

There was a clear and defined process on return to communities for adults. Respondents spoke about how, after they returned to their communities, they either knew that they should go to their community leader(s) or were informed that this was the procedure by friends and relatives. This leader then called security agencies, which transferred them to Diffa Town, where they were held for some time in a police station, where registration, investigation and profiling were carried out.

Although support had been given to help investigators judge if a person may have committed crimes against humanity, genocide and war crimes, the implications of this decision were unclear. With the input of the Office of the Prosecutor and the support of IOM, the Counter-Terrorism Unit developed a questionnaire to be administered which, linked to a software application, determined if the person being questioned was at low or high risk of commission of acts that exempted them from the DDRR process under amended article 399-1.20 of the Penal Code. Once this risk was flagged, there was a process of verification before transfer for prosecution. However, a (male) respondent indicated this process had not been strictly observed and most people had been released, even if the system had flagged the need for further information. There were related tensions between the state governor and the Director of the Counter-Terrorism Unit and worries that prosecutions would lead to perceptions that the Government had lied to encourage defections, only for those who came forward to be arrested.[28] This dynamic led to the governor distancing himself from the DDRR process.

Efforts were being made to expedite the judicial process for those imprisoned and undertake interventions in prison. As discussed earlier, the number of people referred for judicial processes, on suspicion of commission of crimes against humanity, genocide and war crimes, is unclear. Nevertheless, judicial processes were already underway for those imprisoned for reasons linked to the conflict. According to a government respondent, "Those who are captured in combat are sent to the justice process, prosecuted and found guilty and imprisoned in Kolo, where they are trained."[29] Moreover, according to respondents working in this area, over 1,000 people, mostly young men, were arrested arbitrarily and imprisoned, which not only violated their human rights but risked their radicalization.[30] In these prisons, NGOs supported the Government to engage those imprisoned in de-radicalization, skills acquisition and leisure activities while awaiting judgement. If they were released due to the lack of proof, or as they were ajudged innocent, NGOs then supported their reintegration into communities.

Those ajudged eligible for DDRR were transferred to the Goudoumaria Centre, but it was unclear how long they would spend there and what types and quality of interventions were available. An imam working there described an escape attempt after people, told they would spend only three months at the centre, found that over six months had already passed.[31] One (male) respondent, who ended up spending over two years at the centre, said that he "was worried it was a prison" and felt "abandoned."[32] Those working for international NGOs and United Nations agencies said that factors affecting Goudoumaria Centre's effectiveness and impact included lack of government resources, reliance on external partners for interventions, the cessation of funding for United Nations agencies and international NGOs working in DDRR,

28 Interview (in English) with a man working for a United Nations agency in the area of DDRR process support (respondent no. 1), conducted in Niamey in October 2021.
29 Interview (in French) with a male civil servant (respondent no. 50), conducted in Niamey in October 2021.
30 Interview (in French) with a male peacebuilder working for a national NGO (respondent no. 2), conducted in Niamey in October 2021; interview (in French) with a male peacebuilder working for an international NGO (respondent no. 16), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.
31 Interview (in Hausa) with an imam who worked at the Goudoumaria Centre (respondent no. 44), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.
32 Interview (in Hausa) with a man formerly associated with an armed group (respondent no. 10), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.

and government agencies fighting over issues of turf and resources.[33] As a result, as will be later shown, there was been a decline in the interventions available to the second versus the first batch of *repentis* at Goudoumaria. As of the time of writing in November 2021, 18 people were at the Goudoumaria Centre with minimal interventions beyond food and health care provided to them.

While the first batch of *repentis* were there, the Goudoumaria Centre constructed separate accommodation for women and men. Given that people of all genders, married and unmarried, passed through the Goudoumaria process and many women were getting pregnant and giving birth during their time there, the Government requested help from IOM. The Organization constructed a building for married couples, separate from women and men who were not with their spouses present.

At the Goudoumaria Centre, women and men received religious education aimed at de-radicalization, but there was a missed opportunity to counteract the gendered ideology of JASDJ, ISWAP and related groups through these sessions. The Government connected four religious leaders and teachers to reputed scholars to develop a programme of instruction for *repentis*. While the dangers of doing this work led to others dropping out, one male imam continued and worked with those who formed Goudoumaria's first batch of *repentis*. The curriculum included content on *tawhid*,[34] *mashab* and the foundational *surat*; the meaning and different forms of jihad; cohabitation with others, including those who are not Muslims; intolerance for modifications of Islam; *tasamuh*[35] and the need to pardon those who have done one wrong, so that everyone lives in peace; human rights; ethnic differences; and terrorism.[36] This imam worked separately with women and men in large groups, delivering three hours of instruction for the men and one hour of instruction for the women daily, five days a week for three months. These were interactive sessions, with students encouraged to ask questions, the number of which determined the length of the sessions. As there were more men than women (over 200 men compared to less than 20 women), it took longer to discuss the questions the men had. The imam said that the women were hesitant to speak at first, but after he made concerned efforts to put them at ease and promised them confidentiality, they started to ask questions and requested teaching in basic literacy (so the hour spent with them was split between literacy and religion).[37] While such topics were outside the purview of the curriculum developed, the women were keen on discussing Islam's position on women's rights and freedoms and how women were treated in the bush, asking whether it was proper for women to be locked up, to be seen as inferior to their husbands and to be forcibly married. However, not only was there no content developed or training on these subjects provided to the religious instructions, but these discussions also did not take place among the men at Goudoumaria. This was an area that requires focused intervention, including through the involvement of women religious leaders and increased education in the less patriarchal interpretations of Islam, particularly given the continued impact of the internalization of teachings on traditional gender roles received in the bush. As the leader of a Diffa-based women's association said, "A crucial point in de-radicalization and reintegration is around gender norms."[38] Moreover, despite a second iteration of the curriculum being developed, there had been no religious instruction given at the

33 Interview (in English) with a man working for a United Nations agency in the area of DDRR process support (respondent no. 1), conducted in Niamey in October 2021; interview (in French) with a male peacebuilder working for an international NGO (respondent no. 16), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021; interviews (in English and in French) with a male peacebuilder working for an international NGO (respondent no. 47), conducted in Diffa Region and Niamey in October 2021.
34 The doctrine on the indivisible oneness of Allah (monotheism).
35 The principle or doctrine of tolerance.
36 Interview (in Hausa) with an imam who worked at the Goudoumaria Centre (respondent no. 44), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.
37 Ibid.
38 Interview (in French) with a woman civil society leader (respondent no. 18), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.

Goudoumaria Centre after the first batch, perhaps due to the cessation of programme funding and non-renewal by donors.

Levels of psychosocial support and activities fell after the first batch. While members of the first batch spoke of engagement by psychologists, training in literacy and leisure activities, including sports and film viewings, this same level of variety of interventions, particularly for women, was lacking in subsequent batches. Women who were part of the second batch said that their only leisure activity was to watch the men play football. Moreover, there seemed to have been little case management between people who worked at the Goudoumaria Centre with, for example, development of synergized approaches – or even interactions and discussions pertaining to the same – between the imam, who was engaged in religious instruction, and the social workers, who provided psychosocial support.

A three-month training programme in livelihood skills development was provided towards the end of the stay at the Goudoumaria Centre, but the options provided were not responsive to the market assessment done prior or aligned with the livelihoods in which the repentis had been previously engaged. Women were given the choice of learning food preparation (including baking), processing of agricultural products, construction of wire mesh screens and tailoring. Men had the options of bakery training, tailoring, construction of wire mesh screens, metal work, carpentry, plumbing and welding.[39] However, while tailors in Diffa Region sew clothes for both genders, women were taught at the Goudoumaria Centre how to sew only women's clothes, while men's instruction was restricted to the sewing of men's clothes. Many respondents pointed to areas where livelihood support could be improved – from aligning the livelihood training programme with livelihoods people had actually undertaken in the past, to designing a longer and more in-depth training programme and developing options based on a market assessment and exploring opportunities to provide non-gender-stereotyped skills. Government officials insisted that there was no distinction between the training and other opportunities given to women and men.[40] Yet women respondents from the second batch said that there were women who provided them with orientation on re-establishing their lives in their communities without receiving any education or training, as this opportunity was given only to the men.[41]

People who spent time at the Goudoumaria Centre, particularly those in the first batch, generally spoke highly of it. They said they were treated decently, cared for, fed and clothed well, had access to health care, psychosocial support and leisure activities, and were provided opportunities to acquire literacy and livelihood skills, as well as religious instruction. The only drawback stated was the lack of contact with their families. However, some respondents characterized the Goudoumaria Centre as a prerequisite for return and were bitter about the lack of support upon release. One man said, "The only importance it has is that if you want to join your family in peace, you have to go through it. But there is nothing like a benefit to it [i.e. the "Goudamaria process"]. Since we left, there has been nothing."[42]

Levels of government support and oversight dropped sharply after release from the Goudoumaria Centre. Although there was some surveillance and vigilance by community members and security officials, respondents spoke of a general lack of follow-up and continued support to ensure that people who had finished the programme at the Centre were able to re-establish

39 Note that some men were also asked to work with security agencies and received payment for doing so.
40 Interview (in French) with a male civil servant (respondent no. 50), conducted in Niamey in October 2021.
41 Interview (in Hausa) with a woman formerly associated with an armed group (respondent no. 36), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.
42 Interview (in Hausa) with a man formerly associated with an armed group (respondent no. 14), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.

their lives. The gap in support was particularly noted as regards livelihoods, which had led some graduates of the Goudoumaria process to return to armed groups. Civil servants spoke of the need for the *mairie (de la commune rurale)* and other organs of the state authorities to go beyond community sensitization to provide material support and guidance. One male civil servant explained the need to learn from the previous process whereby released prisoners were required to report to the authorities, narrate their situation and the challenges they face, and receive a small sum of money, as opposed to the abandonment that he characterized as the current situation.[43]

Men were more likely to go through the government DDRR process than women, who found it easier to evade State scrutiny and received less support as a consequence. While it was not possible to speak with women who had reintegrated into their communities without passing through the official channels due to the shortness of the period of data collection, several respondents working for national and international NGOs said there were many such women who had decided to leave JASDJ, ISWAP and related groups. According to one man working for a national NGO, "It is easier for women to come back to communities without being picked up by the State than men, [but] men are more likely to undergo the State process and receive training, support and funds, among others, whereas women do not."[44] Further, even if these women were unknown to the State, their past was often known to their communities, with attendant stigma and vulnerabilities linked to their former association with JASDJ, IWAP and related groups, particularly if they were unmarried.

The regional dimension of DDRR is important. When deciding to leave JASDJ, ISWAP and related groups, people strategized which country had better prospects. Respondents working for international NGOs said some may have chosen to present themselves to authorities in Chad, as the DDRR process there was less rigorous; they could also return to their communities in less time than in the Niger. Some may have chosen to come forward in the Niger, as its military was seen as less likely to treat surrenderers harshly compared to their Chadian counterparts.[45] Conversely, if authorities in the Niger were to identify surrenderers from neighbouring countries in its own DDRR process, they informed the relevant government, gave the choice to those concerned whether to stay in the Niger or return to their country and facilitated their transfer, with assurances in place as to good treatment. The lack of a coherent and coordinated approach across Cameroon, Chad, the Niger and Nigeria was seen by a government official involved in the DDRR process as a significant challenge.[46]

The loss of support from international NGOs and United Nations agencies for the Goudoumaria Centre affected the types of interventions present, with activities for men prioritized in times of resource scarcity. According to a man working for an international NGO, providing support to the DDRR process, those present at the centre were grouped into *repentis* and *associés* – those seen as having participated in actual fighting and those seen as not having played this role, respectively. Training and other opportunities were provided for the former group.[47] A male government official said that the second wave had 38 *repentis*, including three women and 35 men, with the remainder classified as victims.[48] This is a gendered distinction: While the category of *repenti* is open to women who took up arms, men tended to be seen as playing

43 Interview (in French) with a male civil servant (respondent no. 9), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.
44 Interview (in French) with a man working for a national NGO (respondent no. 8), conducted in Niamey in October 2021.
45 Interviews (in English and French) with a male peacebuilder working for an international NGO (respondent no. 47), conducted in Diffa Region and Niamey in October 2021.
46 Interview (in French) with a male civil servant (respondent no. 50), conducted in Niamey in October 2021.
47 Interview (in French) with a male peacebuilder working for an international NGO (respondent no. 16), conducted in Diffa in October 2021.
48 Interview (in French) with a male civil servant (respondent no. 50), conducted in Niamey in October 2021.

active roles in combat while women were often seen as passive victims. As a male civil servant said, "We think the true *repentis* are the men, as the women are there by force and under the authority of the men."[49] This gender stereotype overlooked the crucial roles played by women in armed groups, for example, encouraging men to join, recruiting other women, and providing food and nourishment. The implications of this classification also increased women's vulnerabilities, including to GBV, upon their return to their communities and heightened their difficulties with reintegration.

> "Why is only the risk of recidivism being addressed and not, given this is a group of young men that have been radicalized in a certain way as regards gender, the risk of domestic violence as well [with domestic violence often linked to women's dependence on men and lack of financial autonomy]? If you look at social reintegration, this is not done one time but in stages, with economic autonomy key to this. If a person has an elevated risk of vulnerability, they have greater need for socioeconomic activities to reinforce their reintegration in the community, especially the women who also are at risk of recidivism."
>
> – Woman working in gender issues and GBV for a United Nations agency

More sustained donor interest and financing of United Nations agencies and NGOs, to support the Government's DDRR process, was needed. Respondents working in DDRR spoke of how different agencies had been working in different areas of specialization in a coherent and holistic way and building momentum. However, despite the continuing need and government requests, programmes that had ended were not renewed. IOM was the main actor that remained. Due to the reduced support, the DDRR process was already losing impetus, effectiveness and impact. One male respondent described how his organization and the government actors with whom it engaged had been learning from previous experiences to adapt continued programming but that, due to lack of donor support, "All activities are closed now, there are challenges [for people leaving Goudoumaria] in the community and no plan B to support them. … The second wave should have been better than the first wave but, unfortunately, it was the other way around, and lots of interventions were dropped."[50] He linked this situation to fewer people coming forward to participate in the DDRR process, thus resulting in reduced prospects of the conflict ending.

49 Interview (in French) with a male civil servant (respondent no. 15), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.
50 Interview (in French) with a male peacebuilder working for an international NGO (respondent no. 16), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.

5. Experiences and perspectives of people associated with armed groups

Having detailed the DDRR process in the previous section, the report now presents the experiences and perspectives of people associated with armed groups. It takes a chronological approach, starting with their experiences being in those groups, then proceeds to describe the ways they are perceived by others, before ending with their current realities and needs. It features largely the viewpoints of people who have undergone the DDRR process themselves. It is out of the scope of this study to provide a detailed examination of the dynamics between gender and association with JASDJ, ISWAP and related groups. Rather, the aim of this chapter is to highlight aspects relevant to the DDRR process. There were research limitations on who it was possible to interview for this study due to the sex composition of people who had undergone the DDRR process and the fact that many of the women respondents were abducted and/or had low status and power. Moreover, gender stereotypes infused DDRR approaches and meant that women tend to be thought of as "victims" and treated as such, with strong incentives for women to present in this way. Their perceptions of these respondents were therefore not necessarily reflective of the experiences of all women and girls. Indeed, there is significant research and evidence that shows that women can find meaning, purpose, status and benefits from their association with armed groups.[51]

5.1. Experiences with armed groups

Association with armed groups fell upon a spectrum between forced and voluntary. People of all genders were both abducted, forcibly recruited and otherwise coerced to join and chose to do so for ideological and financial reasons. For example, in 2019, fighters came into communities with lists of young men who wanted to join the army whom they targeted for abduction and forceful recruitment. Nonetheless, abductions and forceful recruitment of women and girls were a particular phenomenon in the Lake Chad Basin conflict,[52] and many women traced their association with armed group to the decision of male family members to join them.[53]

51 See, for example: Akum et al., "Managing the journey out of violent extremism in the Lake Chad Basin" (see footnote 13); Jeannine Ella Abatan and Boubacar Sangaré, "Katiba Macina and Boko Haram: Including women to what end?", report (Pretoria, Institute for Security Studies, 2021); Chitra Nagarajan, "'We were changing the world': Radicalisation and empowerment among young people associated with armed opposition groups in northeast Nigeria", report (Washington, D.C., Equal Access International, 2018); International Crisis Group, "Returning from the land of jihad: The fate of women associated with Boko Haram", Africa Report No. 275 (Brussels, 2019).

52 Elizabeth Pearson and Jacob Zenn, *Boko Haram, the Islamic State, and the Surge in Female Abductions in Southeastern Niger* (The Hague, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2021).

53 For more information, see, for example: Abatan and Sangaré, "Katiba Macina and Boko Haram" (see footnote 50).

While there were many similarities in women's and men's associations with JASDJ, ISWAP and related groups, there were also key differences. Male respondents spoke of deciding to join, as they wanted to "better practice" Islam or due to financial imperatives. Some were abducted. Others joined due to the influence of their girlfriends and as they wanted to appear as "heroes" and as "real men" in their eyes. One male respondent, who used to be a trader in Nigeria, said, "All my friends were joining the conflict. … I knew my friends would come and I would have to join them anyway, so I decided to join them – especially as I was finding it difficult to survive. When I joined the group, it was not in order to be a fighter, or because I believed and trusted in what they were doing and agreed with their ideology, but I joined them to survive. When I had some money already, this allowed me to get a motorbike and restart my trading activities."[54] Meanwhile, women spoke of being abducted by fighters and choosing to join, as they were struggling financially and had few other options. Indeed, research and analysis has shown how women's empowerment, including through education, religious knowledge and financial security, can lead to greater resistance to recruitment.[55] Further, a female GBV specialist also spoke of a high incidence of kidnapping of women and girls by armed groups, who were set free after payments of ransom but returned to their communities already pregnant.[56]

> "I married someone I did not like. I had two children then finally quit the house. I was struggling and living by myself for eight years. During this time, I got pregnant and had one child. … I thought that life over there was better than here…that was why I decided to go over there – to have a new life as I thought I would have the chance to be happy."
>
> – Woman formerly associated with an armed group (interviewed in Hausa)

Once they were associated with a group, people's lived realities depended on its changing fortunes. Some male respondents reflected on positive experiences, such as the ability to pursue livelihoods, being given financial assistance and having access to good food and other resources. As one of them said, "We had the same configuration as a town here. We had markets, houses, places we went to work, places for people who acted as our military. It is the same life. You went to work and could have a contract for a day, a week or a month, depending on what they gave you as your task. … When I was on the other side, there were moments that were good. I ate good food and had a good life."[57] However, memories of their time "over there" tended to be negative overall. Respondents reflected on how they were often under stress for fear of attacks, received misinformation and did not have proper food to eat or shelter for long stretches of time. One woman respondent said, "Life over there had problems. There was a time when I spent around three months eating the leaves of trees with water to survive."[58] This outlook could be linked to the profile of people who came forward for DDRR, as access to resources can be determined on status within the group, with those in positions of leadership able to keep supplies for themselves and had access to more resources. As a female community member, who expressed support for defectors, said, "It is just the wives of the key leaders, the *amirs* ("commanders"), who are in a good situation and living a good life. All the rest, they have been passing through suffering and many problems. [It is the same] even with the men. It is only the *amirs* living a good life."[59]

54 Interview (in Hausa) with a man formerly associated with an armed group (respondent no. 13), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.
55 Jeannine Ella Abatan, "What makes women resist violent extremism in Mali and Niger?" *ISS Today*, 25 November 2021. Available at https://issafrica.org/iss-today/what-makes-women-resist-violent-extremism-in-mali-and-niger.
56 Interview (in French) with a woman working in GBV for a United Nations agency (respondent no. 51), conducted in Niamey in October 2021
57 Interview (in Hausa) with a man formerly associated with an armed group (respondent no. 35), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.
58 Interview (in Hausa) with a woman formerly associated with an armed group (respondent no. 36), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.
59 Interview (in Hausa) with a female civil servant (respondent no. 39), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.

Women and girls were forced to marry, with subsequent marriages arranged after husbands' deaths. Respondents described how men who wanted a wife would come to the compound where single women and girls were being kept, to discuss their "requirements" with the man in charge. The women and girls concerned had no choice in what would happen. Several of them said they were treated as objects, with their humanity not recognized, forced to marry a string of men with hardly any breaks between one husband dying and being married to another. Doing so is in contravention of the widely accepted Islamic requirement for women to wait for four months and ten days after the death of their husband before they could re-marry, to allow time to mourn and to ascertain if they are pregnant. Even some male respondents were unhappy with women's realities: "The women are treated in ways that, in my opinion, are not decent. They are used like objects. They are kidnapped or taken from their communities to the [armed] group's camps, and there is a place where they keep them. … As a fighter or a man of the group, if you need a woman, you can go and see one head acting like an imam. You can ask for approval to go and check and choose one to get married to her. … A girl who reaches 10 years old will be forcibly married."[60] Indeed, other research found that women are used as "bait" to lure and reward men in search of wives.[61]

> "The single women were kept apart, and married women were with their husbands who would go on missions or operations, and if he didn't come back, the wife would be taken and kept with the single ones. We were treated as objects, without acknowledging our humanity. … You get married and have to follow instructions of your husband. You accept that finally, and once he dies, another man can marry you without giving you time. Here, if your husband dies, you spend a transition time [between marriages] but there [in the camps], it is not the same and the authorities can marry you off as soon as [your current husband] dies. They do not follow the iddat period and if your husband dies, they marry you off the next week. If you're pregnant and don't know who the father of the baby is, and they wouldn't care."
>
> – Woman formerly associated with an armed group (interviewed in Hausa)

Women were particularly bitter about strict restrictions on their freedom of movement and the isolation to which they were subjected. While men were largely able to move around the camps, women were subjected to constraints. Married women, who lived with their husbands, had some relative freedom of movement, but were not allowed to leave the house without the permission of their husbands and without wearing clothing that covered their whole bodies. However, the situation could suddenly change on any given day with instructions that no woman in the camp could leave her house. If a woman's husbands died, she would be transferred to another compound to join the single women, who were kept apart, with no freedom to leave at all. Women were isolated and barred from social interactions as this respondent describes: "It was very dangerous to talk to anyone and have an exchange, as you could expose your life and be killed just because you had an exchange with someone, and they suspected you of talking about something that went against their rules. … Even the radio and news, listening to it could cause you serious problems."[62] Even if family members, including their parents, were also associated with the group and in the same camp, women and girls were unable to stay with them or to visit one another. A woman respondent described the situation as thus: "It can be your own children and they cannot come to your house without permission. According to their

60 Interview (in Hausa) with a man formerly associated with an armed group (respondent no. 10), conducted in Diffa in October 2021.
61 Abatan and Sangaré, "Katiba Macina and Boko Haram" (see footnote 50).
62 Interview (in Hausa) with a woman formerly associated with an armed group (respondent no. 29), conducted in Diffa in October 2021.

rules, my own daughter or son cannot enter my house without asking for permission. Going to see another woman can expose you to her husband and he would chase you away."[63]

Women and girls were under their husbands' control and were without autonomy. Many women respondents spoke of how they were forced to be under the authority of men they had married, with some of these marriages being against the woman's will. They were unable to engage in livelihood activities or have any form of financial self-sufficiency. As one of them said, "It's not good to be over there because you don't meet other people, you don't see other people, you don't have the right to do anything, you are just there as an "object". … There's a dictatorship and someone takes control of you, and you do everything under his authority. You cannot do things to satisfy your own needs. You are in the process of being controlled by someone who does what he wants. If you want to do something, he would need to consider whether you may do it. Your life will be linked to a man and everything that you do will be based on the dictates of his authority."[64]

Controlling behaviour, forced isolation and economic abuse were standard practices that all married couples were required to observe. Such actions and behaviour constituted domestic violence and abuse in and of themselves and were often accompanied by intimidation, including through the use of coercion and threats, and outright physical violence. Moreover, as many of these marriages were forced, women and girls were unable to meaningfully consent to sex within them, leading to the normalization of marital rape and other forms of sexual violence.

Women's power, status and options depended on those of their husbands, with wives of higher-ranking leaders seen to have better experiences. It was not possible to interview the wife of any of the commanders, with some respondents saying that none of them had come forward to participate in the DDRR process. As a result, many women respondents were those who had been abducted or had lower status in the group, with their negative experiences stemming from this reality. They perceived the wives of commanders as having more power and influence. They said they had more independence, better treatment and more relative freedoms. Through their husbands, they had more access to resources, were given money and other forms of support and could place their children in important positions – for example, among the staff of senior commanders.

Some women fought back against the restrictions imposed on them and were punished. The respondent quoted in the preceding paragraph went on to recall how women who broke these rules were punished: "I didn't have the right to move or go anywhere. Whenever I tried it, it was a serious punishment and repression. I would spend at least six days in "prison" [as punishment] every time I tried to move just a little bit without consent or authorization. … I was not alone. There were many women with me and they had different reasons why they were locked up. Some it was because tried to cross the camp border; some, because they had a fight with their husband; some, it was because they did not respect the rules. … There were between 10–15 women locked up with me. And, depending on the charges against them, there were some that could have been killed or kept continuously locked up."[65]

63 Interview (in Hausa) with a woman formerly associated with an armed group (respondent no. 29), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.
64 Interview (in Kanuri) with a woman formerly associated with an armed group (respondent no. 11), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.
65 Interview (in Hausa) with a woman formerly associated with an armed group (respondent no. 29), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.

Men and boys had greater freedom of movement and access to women and spent their time engaging in livelihood activities and/or fighting. Some young boys were kept separately and given religious instruction until they were deemed ready to fight, asked to wear IED vests and conduct attacks,[66] and participate in the group's other activities, for example, taking animals to pasture to graze. If a boy's father was part of the group, the boy would have fewer restrictions and enjoy more possibilities and opportunities. Men were able to farm, fish or trade or engage in other livelihood activities. However, while male respondents themselves said they had few specific, gendered problems during their time in the bush, community women who had expressed support for defectors and government officials overseeing the DDRR process spoke of the mental health impacts of taking part in operations and committing violence. They said that the amirs tended to stay behind and send mostly adolescent boys and young men to fight, often in successive operations with no respite in between. A government official said that while boys and girls had both participated in attacks, boys tended to be more often used and therefore more exposed to the commission of related atrocities.[67] A woman community peacebuilder said, "Men in the bush…are all the time in movement and organizing something. They are busy to go kill and harass people so don't have peace in their mind. … They are now in regret and talk about the bad things they have done in the past and they are looking for a way to have the pardon of the community."[68]

The realities were in line with the gendered narratives that formed a significant part of religious preaching and indoctrination. According to a male respondent, men were told, "Women don't have the right to go to the market and even your importance in the society is not the same. [As a man,] you are more important than women. … So we don't have the responsibility to give respect to women, as she is not [really a part of] society – because of religion – and does not have rights and any degree of importance."[69] Indeed, women were generally allowed to leave their compound and gather only for religious instruction, recitation of rules, public executions and other punishments. As a female respondent described, "Preaching was [about] rules…dictations telling us how to behave and be. …. For example, we were not allowed to speak out loud as women. You may have a blood brother and he can't come into your house. Even other women you came to the camp with cannot come inside your house without a reason."[70] While patriarchal gender relations were generally the norm in Diffa Region, respondents contrasted such narratives, that is, their lived realities when they were still with the armed groups, with the situation outside the camps, where women were more able to socialize, engage in income-generating activities and have some autonomy. The young man quoted above reflected about his experience in the armed group saying, "It was different from what the situation was like in communities before. … It was a lie, everything that they were saying. They were disrespecting the women and holding them in poor regard and we discovered [after we left] here that it is not the same. I was young when I joined and [even then] had the feeling that it was not the same before [I joined] as I was living with my mum and she was taking all the decisions for us."[71]

There were significant power dynamics within armed groups between men and between women. Although it was difficult to gain insight into the perspectives of those who had some power within armed groups (due to the composition of *repentis* undergoing the DDRR process

66 While the term *suicide bombing* is often used to describe such incidents, this report will not use this description, as the degree of agency of the people involved, many of whom are drugged or children while others have full awareness of their actions, is unclear.
67 Interview (in French) with a male civil servant (respondent no. 3), conducted in Niamey in October 2021.
68 Interview (in French and Hausa) with a community woman engaged in DDRR work (respondent no. 25), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.
69 Interview (in Hausa) with a man formerly associated with an armed group (respondent no. 10), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.
70 Interview (in Hausa) with a woman formerly associated with an armed group (respondent no. 29), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.
71 Interview (in Hausa) with a man formerly associated with an armed group (respondent no. 10), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.

at the time of the study and as respondents tended to downplay their role within the group), respondents spoke of the use and abuse of power by others. Women, particularly those who had been abducted and forcibly recruited, shared how both women and men insulted and maltreated them. They said that the wives of commanders had more power and privilege, acting as "gatekeepers" for their husbands. Other women had to inform them of their needs and requests so they can be granted, in return for attempts to persuade them to wear IED vests and engage in attacks.[72] Commanders' wives could engage in verbal and physical violence against other women, particularly abducted women initially taken to their compounds to engage in housework. Other women were also resentful that they had more food and other resources, which created tensions: "Everything they got when they went for attacks, they would keep this "treasure" [booty] in the house of the *amir*, and the rest of the people or their wives would come to the *amir* to request for items they need. There would be problems, as wives complained that their husbands went to expose their lives and you keep the treasure, so this is not normal and not correct. This is the reason why there were tensions."[73] Among the men too, power dynamics played a critical role. Men shared how rigid hierarchies were in place and that punishment could depend on family or other connections. When disputes and fights broke out between two men, *mallams* (Islamic scholars) brought the conflicting parties together to reconcile but could also use their power to ask a host of questions aimed at provoking a reaction that could be used as justification for punishment. Particularly during the time when the group split, there were many suspicions levied against men of being with "the other side" that could lead to questioning, punishment and even execution. Respondents continued to be unhappy about these dynamics and with how those with status could abuse the power they held over them to cause harm.

> "When the men went for attacks and had the chance to take the village or town, the population inside the village or town came under their authority and they could take women back to [their base]. Before [single] women are taken to their compound, they can be temporarily taken to the amir's house to do housework, take care of his children, and prepare work before they were taken to the [single women's] compound and locked up there. Of course, the wives of commanders would beat and verbally abuse the other women. It depends on what they consider that you have done as a "fault". They can give you 15 strokes in the morning, 15 strokes at midday and 15 strokes in the afternoon. The women order for it to be done and it was men doing this beating."
>
> – Woman formerly associated with an armed group (interviewed in Hausa)

Due to the restrictions, it was harder for messages encouraging people associated with armed groups to reach women. Women respondents said they hardly got any news from the outside world during their time with the group. Respondents who were engaged in outreach work said that men tended to be the ones to contact them to discuss the possibility of defection and surrender. However, although government outreach efforts, as discussed previously, are largely not aimed at women, communications, particularly leaflets dropped by aeroplanes, did reach them. According to a woman who was in the bush at the time, "There were planes that dropped handbills and flyers talking about the Government of the Niger encouraging people to leave and come back. When we saw the plane, we thought it was an air force plane and an

72 Another study has found that women and children are used to carry out these attacks because of their supposedly unthreatening nature, their perceived ability to evade security checks, and as communication and propaganda tools to gain media attention and notoriety. The use of women in these missions is also a way to encourage men to get involved by playing on their feelings of honour and pride. (Abatan and Sangaré, "Katiba Macina and Boko Haram" (see footnote 50))

73 Interview (in Hausa) with a woman formerly associated with an armed group (respondent no. 29), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.

airstrike was about to happen, so we ran away. Then when we saw they were dropping these white things [flyers]. We ran to catch some and got enough to pass to everyone."[74]

It was more difficult for women to leave because, while men could move freely, any woman seen outside her house was questioned. As a result, that fewer women had completed the DDRR process did not necessarily mean that women were not associated with armed groups or that those who were did not want to leave. Male respondents, on the other hand, recounted the relatively easy way they left their groups. For example, while they were supposed to be on operations and other missions, women often had to strategize and make repeated attempts before they were successful. Indeed, the men who spoke of encountering difficulties with their departure were those who wished to take their wives with them. Some men had to leave their wives behind, either due to the difficulty of leaving with them or because they suspected they would not want to go anyway and may report their plans to leaders. Some men also wanted to test the waters to check if the Government was genuine in its DDRR messaging, and so they left their wives in a location in between the group's base and where they encountered authorities until they had assurance that no harm would befall them.

> "The first time [I tried to escape], I was pregnant with my first child. I tried to cross the border [of the camp] and they caught me and took me to the person responsible, who decided to keep me in prison without punishment because of my condition [i.e. pregnancy]. The second time was one week after I delivered and then they beat me and punished me. They told me that the next time would be the last one and they would leave me in the hands of the person in charge to kill me. There was a situation with my younger sister, as her husband found a way to escape. She tried to join him, so she was also kept in prison. We fell into a situation where our lives were in danger, as they knew we were sisters. … My younger sister had a little money, around NGN 30,000, and found a way to have an arrangement with someone among them who had a motorbike and promised to cross with her. … On the day we chose for escape, the man took me on the motorbike to one of the commanders. We discovered it was a set-up. We were taken in a prison where they kept people they were about to kill. … Since then, we stopped trying to escape until air strikes became continuous. Every time there was an air strike, we would be in a panic, running away, while the other women were kept in prison and as hostages. This was when we took the opportunity to run. This is how my younger sister first escaped then I found a way myself to go."
>
> – Woman formerly associated with an armed group (interviewed in Hausa)

Women strategized and helped other women and girls to escape before leaving themselves. They recounted how the fear of being captured and killed prevented escape attempts and how they discussed strategies among themselves. These strategies included not escaping in large numbers, as doing so was more likely to lead to detection, maximizing opportunities created by air strikes when there was widespread panic and people running to escape, and putting laundry outside their homes so people would think they were still around.

74 Interview (in Hausa) with a woman formerly associated with an armed group (respondent no. 29), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.

"I had my relatives and family in the camp, as we were taken together and I didn't want to escape and leave them behind. I wanted to stay back until maybe I was the last one or [among the] last two or three, as I did not want to run leaving my relatives behind. As we were suffering together, we became a family and there was no difference between my relatives and others, which is why I helped others who were not my [biological] family to escape also. … Most of the times it would be in a panicked manner. We would take the opportunity of panic caused by air strikes or military confrontations, when everyone was running. They could see us but could not stop us escaping, as they were running for their lives. … When people saw me, I would justify [my presence] saying I was looking for children who may be lost. This was how I escaped – which others don't know about. I spoke about it with friends and relatives who wanted to escape. I would tell them to be ready, as we just need to wait for a situation of panic and this is the way we do it."

– Woman formerly associated with an armed group (interviewed in Hausa)

5.2. Perceptions of the community

Respondents who had gone through the DDRR process said they had mostly been accepted by community members. They shared how relatives, friends and other community members had provided them with shelter, food and other necessities and had taken care of them without stigmatization or marginalization. Even when there were problems with community members, they were largely understanding of the great effort it took to be accepted. This orientation towards acceptance of *repentis* back into communities was in largely due to the significant sensitization and outreach work undertaken by community members themselves, government officials and NGOs, as will later be discussed. However, there were different levels of community acceptance, and just because there was no verbal abuse or threats of violence made and support was received from relatives and friends does not mean that there was widespread acceptance from the whole community or that this translated beyond tolerance. These dynamics, from the viewpoint of community members, including victims and survivors, will be further discussed in the next paragraphs.

"For someone who went to the bush, to come back and find the people that he once harassed agreed to live with him and gave him the opportunity to survive and gave him a way to take care of himself, I thank God. … I am a reasonable person. … This beyond what I can accept and I am thankful. … I am supposed to be patient, as I know what I did to the community. There are some simple things against which I can't take offence. For example, treating you like an old Boko Haram guy is an insult for someone who didn't go to the bush and come back. … but I know I went there and came back, so treating me like a Boko Haram guy cannot be an offence to me because it is true."

– Man formerly associated with an armed group (interviewed in Hausa)

While women were generally not seen as perpetrators of harm, their lesser power sometimes translated to worse treatment. Most civil society, government and community respondents said it was easier to persuade communities to reintegrate women who were more likely to be seen as victims, as opposed to men who were viewed as those who killed and harmed communities. However, acceptance did not necessarily translate to good treatment of women. Their financial and other vulnerabilities, in particular, left them subject to verbal abuse. One woman said, "There are some people who avoid me. Even now, there are some girls who do not want to deal with me. They do not say anything to me and I do not hear [what they are saying], but I have the feeling that they are talking about me, that they see me as someone who went [to join an armed group], came back and may return."[75]

> "I don't know if it is because people fear men more than women and think women are very weak people and not dangerous, that is why they treat women more poorly than men. … For example, women who have children, if her children have problems with other children, people can insult her and treat her badly, reminding her: "Don't forget where you are from." There are many situations where they take the opportunity to tell her and remind her, showing her that until now, they don't accept her. They pretend that they accept but, really, they don't. In this situation, women suffer more than us as they are treated worse than us."
>
> – Man formerly associated with an armed group (interviewed in Hausa)

Women community members were sometimes more receptive and open to the idea of reintegration than the men. According to Search for Common Ground's conflict analysis, women are a "pivot", which is crucial as regards both the conflict and the DDRR process. They are less apprehensive about the idea of children returning and can be the first to agree to it – particularly as they may have been less targeted for direct violence, given that fighters tend to target men.

Community perceptions changed over time to some extent due to changing contextual dynamics, as well as sensitization and outreach work. JASDJ was initially not seen as a proble m, as they did not conduct attacks in the Niger. When the attacks started, there was widespread fear and distrust of anyone known (or perceived) to have supported JASDJ, ISWAP or related groups, particularly after civilians were targeted for ransom, abduction, theft of cattle and goods, and killing. However, people had a strong desire for peace and some understanding of the reasons why others chose to associate with armed groups. Sensitization and outreach work conducted by communities, the Government and NGOs led to further change – which was seen, for example, as improvements in the security and livelihood situation, and community members coming to know of returnees' struggles. However, some residual distrust can remain, most often perceived in matters regarding livelihood opportunities, as discovered by a male respondent: "There is a total blackout and I tried to get [any kind of work], but I didn't find any. … At the beginning, me and others tried to go via a reference person to look for jobs. [The person] would go to search for work for us and, to avoid problems, would let people know we are defectors. Then [these people] would not give us jobs. So now we go directly to people to ask for jobs. Some of the people don't know us, so they give us jobs – which is why we have a greater chance [this way]. The people who knew who we are, have not changed [how they see us] and don't trust us."[76]

75 Interview (in Hausa) with a woman formerly associated with an armed group (respondent no. 36), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.
76 Interview (in Hausa) with a man formerly associated with an armed group (respondent no. 10), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.

> "Some of those resistant have changed their mind [about us] over time, but not all of them. They accept us coming back and try to find a way for us to live together. They changed [of heart] as the weight of the problem is decreasing and the situation is getting better."
>
> – Man formerly associated with an armed group (interviewed in Hausa)

Government actors did not always share the same perspective, and gender stereotypes were sometimes reflected in the approaches they took. Respondents working for civil society and United Nations agencies perceived a difference in understanding of DDRR between Diffa and national-level actors. They saw those in Diffa, particularly the governor, as more likely to push for blanket amnesty and reintegration, as opposed to the national viewpoint. Government respondents, while aware of its flaws and areas for improvement, saw the DDRR process as a success, as evidenced by the low numbers of people who had returned to the bush and the widespread community acceptance of their reintegration. However, while some government officials had nuanced views of gender and DDRR, other respondents spoke about how only men could be "true *repentis*" and, although interventions were needed for returnee women, as they were victims, the focus of DDRR programming should be on men – that is, from a conflict mitigation perspective, as they were the conflict actors.

Respondents working for NGOs and United Nations agencies understood the roles women could play in armed groups but tended to see them predominantly as victims. For example, a man working for a national NGO, on DDRR and peacebuilding, said that "women have weak spirits," that they could follow their husbands into armed groups then later have regrets, and that "the women here do not have the intelligence or access to do [recruitment and other activities].[77] While many women and girls were victims, there were women who chose to join, and even those who were forcibly recruited showed agency, as described above. Moreover, while respondents from NGOs and United Nations agencies felt that women and men may be treated differently on their return to communities, with more resistance and fear towards men, who were seen to be perpetrators of violence, the subtle ways in which women and girls experience rejection were not always recognized.

5.3. Current realities and needs

> "There are NGOs that try to have a gendered analysis, and people pay more attention now that there are a lot of women and men who are victims and abducted, and [women and men who] also perpetrated [violence]. People's roles during their time with the group can evolve. People pay more attention now to the nuances as time has passed, but from time to time, there is also a tendency to fall back into stereotypes."
>
> – Man working in gender for a United Nations agency (interviewed in French)

77 Interview (in French) with a man working for a national NGO (respondent no. 8), conducted in Niamey in October 2021.

The primary need raised by respondents was for decent livelihoods and sustainable incomes. Many were subjected to poverty and struggling to look after themselves and their families. Despite skills training and provision of related kits (such as carpentry tools or sewing machines), it proved difficult for them to translate this knowledge into livelihoods. Instruction provided was not of sufficient depth and the men lacked support to find places of work and seek out customers. As a result, many respondents found it impossible to establish themselves in the livelihoods in which they had been trained, with little option but to sell the materials they had been given to raise money. Respondents who had expressed support for returnees spoke of cases in which a husband had sold the equipment he had been given, then also sold the equipment his wife uses, even if she was earning income from it, thus limiting her ability to work. For the second batch of *repentis* at the Goudoumaria Centre, kits were shared between two people in order to prevent them being sold – but this measure did not address the reasons people had for selling these materials and tools. Many respondents were unhappy about what they perceived as false promises made and a lack of support: "There is a promise of a good life and living in peace with communities – that is real, as we live in peace with our communities. But that is it. For the rest, there is a promise that people make, saying that good things will follow but we have not seen anything until now. Nobody cares about us and we are abandoned to fend for ourselves."[78] They contrasted their situation with the support they saw provided to others, such as people in IDP camps. If care is not taken, these economic realities may intersect with the frustration and desire for vengeance against what they perceived as the wrong done against them by communities and the State, which drove people to associate with armed groups.

Experiences of economic hardship were gendered. Men spoke of the heavy weight of responsibility due to gendered expectations of being family breadwinners. Social norms and familial injunctions restricted women from undertaking certain income-generating activities. For example, they were unable to engage in construction or the transport of people and goods on motorcycles. As a result, they were likely to be dependent on their family members, particularly their husbands, who may be unable or unwilling to take care of the family. Respondents working for NGOs and United Nations agencies stressed the need for women to be self-sufficient to mitigate the risk of various forms of GBV, particularly sexual exploitation and domestic violence. According to a male peacebuilder, "There is a lot of GBV and sexual exploitation. A woman who does not have a husband does not have a "cover" – she is not "covered". She is very vulnerable as nobody supports or looks after her. We are very far from law and institutions. There are no institutions to protect and even if they are there, they do not work. … Unfortunately, in practical reality, there are small services that someone will [do to] help due to pity, sentimentality, et cetera, and this can grow and become another thing. … People will never report or discuss [sexual exploitation or survival sex] openly."[79]

Government officials were aware of the dynamics and reflected on the need to change and improve economic interventions. Their suggestions included providing placements for people who left the Goudoumaria Centre and basing interventions on a market analysis and the livelihoods in which people were engaged before – for example, training farmers in climate-resilient agricultural practices or pastoralists in new techniques of nourishing and breeding cattle and giving them two or three cows on credit after leaving Goudoumaria. A government official who oversaw the DDRR process said there were plans to improve livelihood support, with focus on agriculture, fishing, pastoralism, agricultural and fish-processing, food-vending, hair salon, agrifood and food conservation, based on a market analysis done by economists.[80]

78 Interview (in Hausa) with a man formerly associated with an armed group (respondent no. 13), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.
79 Interview (in French) with a male peacebuilder working for an international NGO (respondent no. 16), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.
80 Interview (in French) with male civil servant (respondent no. 50), conducted in Niamey in October 2021.

Another key need was that of security, particularly for women and girls who had been abducted. The current situation of insecurity had led many people who underwent the Goudoumaria process and returned to their communities to become displaced to Diffa Town. The fear of being forcibly recruited remained, particularly given the changeable nature of the security situation. Moreover, one of the key reasons why women and girls who had been forced into marriage found it difficult to move on, including by getting married and establishing a new family, was because of community fears that their erstwhile husbands in the bush would not allow this to take place and the attendant risks of the woman or girl concerned being taken again and/or her new husband being targeted and killed.

Facilitating divorce for women and girls married to men associated with armed groups who wanted it was critical but was not being done. As previously described, many girls and women had been forced to marry men associated with armed groups against their wishes. Even those married prior to their husbands' association with JASDJ, ISWAP and related groups had left the group and no longer wished to stay married to their husbands. However, despite years of separation from their husbands, these women could still be considered – by others and by themselves – to be married. Religious leaders could for arrange a divorce, but this option was not offered to all women and girls, partly due to fears that doing so may lead to the community being attacked. This situation left these girls and women in a state of limbo for years, raising the risk of sexual exploitation, given that patriarchal gender power dynamics meant that women were often economically dependent on men and/or stigmatized as a result of pregnancy outside marriage.

As a result of their experiences, people had gendered psychological support needs that were shaped by their role within the armed group. While girls and women were subjected to domestic violence, early and forced marriage, restrictions on movement and other forms of GBV, boys and men were forced to fight and commit violence, including that which was gender-based. These past histories had gendered psychological impacts, not all of which were recognized. Although government officials spoke of the psychosocial support needs of girls and women related to their forced marriages, other aspects – such as supporting girls and women to adjust to life after a period of confinement, helping boys and men to live with having been perpetrators of violence and facilitating new forms of communications and relationships between married couples who had spent time in the bush – were either not recognized or under-addressed. Given that it was not possible to interview social workers posted at the Goudoumaria Centre, whether such understandings informed the psychosocial support offered there is unknown.

Women and girls continued to live with the impacts of the gendered narratives and indoctrination they received. While efforts were made at countering this messaging, at least for the first batch who underwent the Goudoumaria process, as discussed earlier, none addressed gender roles and women's rights and freedoms. There is a need to not only rectify this omission, but to do so in ways that harness the work of women *ulema* (religious scholars) who work in the area of women's rights.[81] While some men reflected on the maltreatment proffered to women by armed groups and spoke of the need to respect girls and women, there was evidently more work needed to challenge gendered narratives about women and girls, as well as ideas of masculinity and how boys and men should be.

81 The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has a specific programme of work with these women *ulema* who engage in social mobilization campaigns and other activities on the rights, roles and responsibilities of women in Islam, countering dominant patriarchal interpretations.

As many girls and women had been subjected to GBV, a closer relationship between DDRR and GBV actors was needed. While interventions provided health care, psychosocial support and reintegration assistance to girls and women, the extent to which a holistic GBV approach is taken was unknown. Indeed, most gender-focused United Nations agencies and NGOs interviewed had little, if any, involvement in the DDRR process and girls and women associated with armed groups were seldom the focus of GBV coordination efforts.

> "[The DDRR programme] works but is badly exploited and there is no follow-up. The work starts when people leave the camp, but donors will not fund this and the State does not do anything either. If you do not have the money to manage [the process], why do you keep encouraging people? You are creating a problem and discrediting the programme if it continues without having the means to do it properly."
>
> – Male civil servant (interviewed in French)

6. Experiences and perspectives of victims and survivors of violence

After having presented the experiences and perspectives of people associated with armed groups, the report now examines the perspectives of victims and survivors. It proceeds with the understanding that, given widespread displacement and conflict-related impacts on economic activities and social services, all civilians are victims to some extent. Although it includes analysis from representatives of government, NGOs and United Nations agencies, it reflects largely the viewpoints of civilians themselves. It starts by discussing their needs and realities, before considering community sensitization and outreach efforts, then ends with their perceptions of DDRR.

6.1. Current needs and realities

It is beyond the scope of this study to do a thorough needs assessment of all communities in which data was gathered. Key points made by respondents are presented below.

The primary need expressed by most respondents was for security, which would enable stability of life. Respondents shared how insecurity and attacks, as well as threats thereof, affected their lives and livelihoods, caused displacement and had lingering psychological impacts. As a woman trader said, "We have been struggling and nothing is stable in our lives. We need stability. We need to know we are here and it's finished, that we won't have to run away, that we are safe and secure. … The first thing is peace. If you have peace, you can manage yourself to go for farming and do other things that can generate something for you. Without peace, everything that you do, you are exposing yourself to danger."[82] Moreover, respondents spoke of the phenomenon of kidnapping for ransom, which had not only led to heightened perceptions of insecurity but also depleted community coffers, as the value of community solidarity required everyone to contribute ransom money. They wished an end to insecurity so they could return to the areas around Lake Chad, where livelihoods were more possible.

> "I used to sell *kunnu* [a type of beverage] – I would prepare and treat groundnut, make *kunnu* with it and sell it. I would gather the money and when I had enough, I would travel to Geidam and other places to buy things to sell. I used to have a good and decent life. … [One day, I was on the way to get medical treatment for diabetes with my uncle] when four men dressed like soldiers killed my uncle, harassed me, and I discovered that my village was burned. Apart from what I was wearing, I had nothing left. This is what displaced me here. I used to have animals and all I had was burned. [Since then,] I have been in Diffa and taken care of by my relatives."
>
> – Displaced woman (interviewed in Hausa)

82 Interview (in Hausa) with a woman trader (respondent no. 21), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.

Communities' livelihoods were gravely affected by insecurity and government measures. They described how movement restrictions, orders to leave areas on the shores of Lake Chad and other security measures had stifled the region's social and economic activities, and expressed related frustrations and grievances. High levels of insecurity restricted the areas to which they could go to farm, fish, graze and trade, with other factors such as climate change also affecting livelihoods. Moreover, host communities had supported high numbers of IDPs for many years and were now struggling to cope. Meanwhile, IDPs had left their lands, goods, tools, other materials and animals behind and found it difficult to restart their livelihoods. While humanitarian assistance met some needs, respondents said that these interventions were often of short duration and/or insufficient. Respondents were worried that the economic hardships experienced by many, particularly those linked to military actions, risked pushing some members of their community towards joining armed groups. NGOs and United Nations agencies were aware of these dynamics but faced difficulties in meeting the communities' needs, given the scale, low levels of funding and the fact that the areas near Lake Chad and the River Komadugu that were ideal for livelihoods were seeing the presence of armed groups.

> "My communities are facing serious survival problems as…I have displaced people I need to take care of together with my community. We used to farm and herd, and all these activities are not possible now due to insecurity. … I asked the governor to give us permission to fish so we could fish and sell and so we can provide for ourselves and he gave permission. When we started fishing, again there was a problem – not with Boko Haram, but with the military. The military took the fish and burned it without caring about how people will survive. … [They also] were taking goods and food that we had bought from selling fish, accusing us that we were giving them to Boko Haram. Do they want to kill us? … Before coming to talk with the governor, I already spoke with the military to tell them that the actions they were doing will be the reason for some young guys to join Boko Haram, so they should stop. When I met with the governor, I explained to him these reasons. When I returned, there were some boys who had [already] joined due to this reason [to get revenge against the military and as they felt there was no chance for a decent life and to take care of themselves and their families here]."
>
> – Male community leader (interviewed in Hausa)

Some women respondents shared how financial difficulties had raised tensions in the household. For example, one woman said, "I have been trying to survive and my husband and I have problems trying to understand each other. I have been struggling and he has, too. We were trying to combine our strength and live together without problems, but insecurity came to destroy all we had and we now have recurrent misunderstandings due to insecurity and the resulting poverty."[83] Gender specialists spoke about how violent conflict and linked displaced had increased household conflict, which could sometimes escalate to domestic violence.

83 Interview (in Kanuri) with a woman community member (respondent no. 27), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.

6.2. Sensitization and outreach efforts

Significant efforts had been made by community members, government officials and NGOs to sensitize communities towards acceptance of those who had gone through DDRR process. These efforts were broad based, with emphasis placed on involving people from all communities, including women and young men, with resulting outreach into different segments of society. Leaders, including women and young men, were identified and provided with training in reintegration and sensitization, then tasked with disseminating messages in their communities. In addition to one-off caravan events that enabled discussion, these people were to serve as reference or focal points for this work in community meetings and social occasions such as weddings, naming ceremonies and burials. In addition to these in-person meetings, there were many interventions focused on radio and other forms of media. The role played by women and women's associations will be further examined in Chapter 7.

The efforts thus far had enabled only surface-level acceptance. As earlier described, people who underwent the DDRR programme generally were not recipients of verbal or physical abuse. Many respondents who had been involved in outreach efforts stressed the need for acceptance and forgiveness, no matter how difficult this may be for them. They saw allowing those who wanted to leave armed groups to return to communities as key to bringing the violent conflict to an end. As a man working for an international NGO, in the area of social cohesion, said, "There are certain community member who do not accept [these returnees] and there is still work that remains to persuade people to accept and reintegrate [them] into society."[84] Community perceptions of the DDRR process will be discussed in section 6.3.

> "The State was talking about [the DDRR process] on the radio, and there were project guys around who sensitized us about it. After all of this, people started coming. They would gather [community members] and let them know that the people who came back, we do not have to oppress them or punish them, but just take them to the authorities, follow [the authorities' instructions] and take it easy. [The authorities] would gather us and tell us to go easy on them. This sensitization was done in the village, sector by sector, side by side – not everyone together at once, but done sector by sector. We would be more than 100 at a time. There would be men and women and even children. It happened many times and it changed our minds – that was why people defected. … We are obliged to live together and stay together. You are obliged to greet your friend, neighbour or older brother whose son came back because to the good relationship you have. It can be that even if you don't like it and don't believe in it, you would just do it."
>
> – Male farmer (interviewed in Kanuri)

These sensitization efforts were not of universal reach and had not been sustained. Some respondents spoke of a complete lack of knowledge of the process. Others said they had been part of engagements, but there had been no follow-up to discuss how the process was progressing. Their main constant sources of information were radio programmes or word-of-mouth overheard from others (who may or may not be knowledgeable) talking about the DDRR process in their communities. Moreover, the bulk of sensitization efforts had taken place in communities of return, but insecurity meant that people who had returned were displaced to Diffa Town shortly afterwards. Respondents had very precise ideas of what they thought

84 Interview (in French) with a man working in the area of social cohesion for an international NGO (respondent no. 33), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.

should be in place before people were allowed to return, for example, a process of verification as to the genuineness of the returnees' intentions. They were unclear, however, as to whether these requirements were in place. Indeed, for some respondents, their knowledge of the DDRR process came from those who had undergone it rather than any other source.

> "I know that those people come back and are taken to a camp to undergo treatment and there are people there to take care of them and bring them back to the community. … Nobody has spoken with me to get my input and ideas, or to inform me of what is happening. I got the news from the *repentis* of [name of community] when they came back to the community as they told me what had happened. Nobody talked to me first. I just found the people from the camp coming back."
>
> – Male farmer (interviewed in Kanuri)

Sensitization was seen as unidirectional rather than attempting to discover and address community perspectives. Respondents said victims and survivors had little opportunity to shape the process, as engagement focused on persuading them to accept those who returned. If communities were reluctant, efforts were made to convince those who spoke on their behalf. If resistance persisted, the decision was made for reintegration to occur elsewhere. This top–down method was seen by NGO representatives as being in contrast to an approach that took individual and community needs and desires, including of those who had been directly harmed, as the starting point with policy and practice developed only in response to these dynamics. As one male NGO worker said, "Sensitization campaigns happened but were one-way and without offering enough opportunity for communities to give opinions and influence the process. This is the approach authorities have to sensitization – it is only one-way. If you allow the community to speak, each one would speak and ask to know more about why the *repentis* left and then came back. This is what the people want to know – whether the *repentis* truly regretted [their actions] or returned because [life there] was "not good"."[85]

6.3. Perceptions of the DDRR process

Members of the communities, even when they had negative perceptions of people (formerly) associated with armed groups, believed that the DDRR process was needed to bring the violence to an end. Community members stressed their commonalities with the returnees. They emphasized that they were from the same communities, often relatives, and that they could be understanding of reasons that drove people to join armed groups. As a male farmer said, "It's like your hand, when it has a serious problem and hurts, you will not cut it off but will manage and take care of it. … These are our sons, our brothers, our families so we are the same."[86] Some respondents understood the drivers that led people to associate with JASDJ, ISWAP and related groups, speaking of how unemployment, poverty, military restrictions and behaviour had caused difficulties and pushed people to join. Even those who were scathingly critical of the actions of these groups and who characterized them as "terrorists, people who decided to act against good human beings and behaviours,"[87] went on to say they had pity for those who joined, whom they saw as being misled with promises of a better life, only to

85 Interview (in French) with a man working in the area of social cohesion for an international NGO (respondent no. 33), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.
86 Interview (in Kanuri) with a male farmer (respondent no. 28), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.
87 Interview (in Hausa) with a woman trader (respondent no. 21), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.

become stuck and unable to return. These community members could be advocates for them. They spoke of their needs and living situation, including the psychological impacts of their experiences in the bush and their difficult economic situations and believed that authorities should support them with livelihood training, capital and other assistance.

Those who had suffered more due to the actions of armed groups tended to be more resistant to living alongside those who had been part of causing harm. This category included IDPs, refugees, returnees and those whose family members had been killed. As a male trader said, "I have always felt that they should come back, [but] others say they cannot be accepted, that this is unacceptable and it is not acceptable for us to pardon them. Some of them [who are reluctant] are victims of those guys, as their parents were killed while others were displaced and had to abandon everything, as opposed to us, which is why they think that way. Those who suffer more than others are the ones who have problems accepting."[88] However, this trend was not across the board. Some of those who had personally suffered, for example, a male farmer whose two children had been killed by fighters, said it was difficult to have people who had harmed them living among them, but were insistent that doing so was the only way towards peace. Nevertheless, tensions over DDRR, for example, between relatives and friends who were supporting those who had gone through the process and those unhappy about developments, was seen by a respondent working in social cohesion as an area where more peacebuilding interventions were needed.[89]

Respondents generally distinguished between those forced to join armed groups and those who chose to do so. They tended to classify children as victims misled by "bad company" and the adults around them, viewing especially younger ones as having on capacity to make sound decisions of a certain level. There was more understanding and sympathy for those abducted and even those who joined for financial reasons without knowing the actions in which the group was engaged but respondents also said that it could be difficult to exactly disentangle motivations:[90] "People who decided to go themselves are terrorists, as it was a choice but those ones who were kidnapped and forced to go have an excuse and every time they had an occasion to flee, they would run away. There is no way you can tell which one is which. When they are there in front of you, you don't know who was taken by force and who chose to go. You see them all as terrorists. It is only when you get to know them that you know whether they were taken by force. If you know they were taken by force, you have pity on them and have compassion."[91]

Victims' requirements for reintegration included the assurance that people no longer posed a danger to them, that they underwent a government process aimed at reorientation, and that assistance was provided to the whole community and not just to those who underwent the DDRR process. They spoke of the need for people returning from the bush to hand over their weapons and be certified as no longer being a danger to the community. They had trust in the Goudoumaria process to reorient people on how to live in society and not cause problems to the community. They understood the need for interventions focused on them but were also clear that benefits should not be restricted to those who had been part of a group that committed violence, as other community members also needed assistance. As a woman trader said, "If they come and stay in poverty, the same thing [joining armed groups] would happen – but if they got this support and the rest [of us] did not, this would also be a problem. The

88 Interview (in Hausa) with a male *keke napep* (a type of tricycle) driver (respondent no. 22,), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.
89 Interview (in French) with a man working in the area of social cohesion for an international NGO (respondent no. 33), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.
90 A point also made in the following study: Akum et al., "Managing the journey out of violent extremism in the Lake Chad Basin" (see footnote 13).
91 Interview (in Hausa) with male trader (respondent no. 20), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.

community would complain and say we all have needs. If it's like this, it would affect how we see them and maybe change our perceptions of them, so we are willing to accept but would get aggrieved [at the differential support]. Even now as I am speaking, I am saying that I will not accept it."[92] Indeed, a male peacebuilder recounted how peace platforms had reported frustrations from community members that people who committed crimes against them were being rewarded while their victims were given nothing.[93]

While there was a ceremony at the Goudoumaria Centre, whereby people who had completed the process asked for pardon and were handed over to community representatives, there were no efforts at reconciliation and healing in the communities themselves. Indeed, the Goudoumaria ceremony can be characterized as largely performative, aimed at asking for absolution from the State and reconstructing the State–citizen dynamic, rather than recognizing the wrong done to the people and communities harmed and rebuilding that relationship. The Government considered carrying out a second phase of reconciliation in communities but was hampered by the lack of funding, as well as some concerns that revealing the identities of those who have gone through the DDRR process may harm reintegration. Yet NGO representatives engaged in peacebuilding spoke of the importance of putting in place a community-based process of transitional justice, reconciliation and healing. They emphasized the need to bring those who had gone through the DDRR process together with victims and survivors and warned of the long-term consequences of the failure to do so. They stressed that reconciliation was not a one-day event or forum but a long-term process. This point was also made by community members, with one male trader saying, "Those who don't want them to come back and those who come back do not have a direct relationship or exchange. … Time can fix this situation. If there is a process oriented towards bringing them together, accepting each other, this can work. It would be a solution and can create harmony if there was a recognition of wrongdoing and an issuance of apology."[94]

> "I have never witnessed a process of pardon or reconciliation. For the first batch, they had a ceremony with the Minister of Interior – and here the repentis swore on the Qur'an that they have repented and would never go back to the activities of Boko Haram, but there was no ceremony of reconciliation or pardon between the repentis and the community. The ceremony was at Goudoumaria, not in the communities. Reconciliation and pardon are very important to ensure social cohesion, as these are the people who have participated somehow in the activities of armed groups and, even if they have not affected the community directly, they should beg their pardon to enable reintegration. It is not happening because authorities organized sensitization in communities touched by crisis, but do not think there is any need for reconciliation or pardon as, already, they have asked communities for pardon on behalf of the repentis. [Yet] it is also important for the repentis to directly ask for pardon themselves, especially as even justice has abandoned its pursuit of them and they have all been given amnesty. The communities are not all content with the amnesty. The members of their families are happy with this, but others, even in urban centres, think it is not good, as these are people who committed crimes."
>
> – Man working in social cohesion for an international NGO (interviewed in French)

92 Interview (in Hausa) with a woman trader (respondent no. 21), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.
93 Interview (in English) with man working in the area of social cohesion and peacebuilding for a United Nations agency (respondent no. 7), conducted in Niamey in October 2021.
94 Interview (in hausa) with a male *keke napep* (a type of tricycle) driver (respondent no. 22), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.

7. Women's participation in the DDRR process

After having examined the DDRR process and the experiences and perspectives of those who have undergone or going through it, as well as victims and survivors, this chapter focuses on assessing the role of women and women's associations. It provides context to gender relations in the region before looking at the roles women played (or did not play) in DDRR programming and practice.

Women's participation in DDRR should be seen within the framework of the broader gender context. Although the Niger had a National Gender Policy, which included women in conflict and security and a National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, respondents who worked for NGOs and United Nations agencies, on matters of gender, or aimed to take gender-transformative approaches, spoke about the barriers to doing so, even at the level of employing women in their programmes or dealing with resistance from men to work in women's rights in their own organizations. While the gendered narratives and roles seen as permissible by JASDJ, ISWAP and related groups are intensely patriarchal and in contradiction to lived realities, according to women working in women's rights, they have some resonance with gender norms in mainstream society, for example, with some (male) religious leaders talking about the need for women to have permission from their husbands to leave the house.

Women had some influence and power within their families and their communities. Women respondents reflected on the work they were doing to support their communities, assist GBV survivors, ensure child protection, mediate household and community disputes, and build peace. They played critical roles in community child protection committees and the reintegration of children (formerly) associated with armed forces and armed groups (CAAFAGs). Many women had been doing this work with minimal education or support from others. They found interventions by humanitarian, development and peacebuilding organizations in their communities to be sources of knowledge, recognition, training and other support. Indeed, the conflict led to a transformation of gendered realities and roles, even if gender norms were slower to evolve. Focused programming was having some impact in terms of opening opportunities up for women and changing men's behaviour.

> "Culture, tradition, roles and responsibilities, for the region of Diffa – these aspects are very sacred…and do not promise a lot regarding gender. … In all aspects, men are ahead. In decision-making, the last word always goes to men. Women have normalized this behaviour and they themselves will say they should not make decisions…they find it is normal and even until today, a matter that concerns the whole family is not spoken about in front of women and girls, and men take it upon themselves to decide. … Since the crisis started in Diffa until this year, there are women who are leaders in their communities and integrated in groups who have started to participate and speak in women's spaces and engage in income-generating activities. There is involvement and participation in decision-making, but their opinions are not taken into account in decision-making spaces."
>
> – Woman working in GBV for a United Nations agency (interviewed in French)

Women were instrumental in all aspects of DDRR programme. Women engaged in these efforts recounted how they simultaneously did work to prevent people from joining these armed groups, to encourage those who were associated with them to leave and to persuade their communities to accept people who returned. Earlier chapters described the critical role played by women in conducting outreach to those associated with JASDJ, ISWAP and related groups to persuade them to participate in the DDRR process. One of the women involved in this work shared how they engaged women they knew to have links with people in these groups by forming a savings and loans group, which became a way of supporting them financially and conveying peacebuilding messages. Once all members had the same level of understanding and motivation, each woman in the group conducted door-by-door sensitization of other community members, asking them to reach out to contacts in the bush to persuade them to return. Women were also involved when it came to community outreach on the importance of acceptance and forgiveness. For example, the Programme de Cohesion Communautaire du Niger (PCCN) organized women-only sessions or had gender-segregated spaces to enable women to contribute to discussion. Although the programme aimed to have women in positions of leadership, teams tended to be dominated by men, with women comprising only one or two in a team of five to seven people. Other agencies supporting community-led outreach included Search for Common Ground, ID Vert, the Union of Women Leaders and IOM, and each of these agencies sought to have women involved in sensitization efforts. However, there was room for improved engagement of women. As an NGO respondent stated, "The women are involved but not sufficiently – we need more – in the people who give the sensitization. There is not an objective reason, but perhaps negligence on the part of the people [working for NGOs and United Nations agencies] responsible for the youth and women, and more focus [should be given to] the community and religious leaders. You must explain to people so they become able, by themselves, to accept."[95]

Women were largely excluded from meaningfully participating in decision-making, particularly when it came to development of DDRR policy. Few of the women interviewed who had been doing DDRR work in their communities and in Diffa Region more broadly had been involved in the formulation of the PNPCR. Those involved spoke of efforts to include women in discussions, but that it had been difficult to influence policy-drafting. Women engaged in DDRR and peacebuilding work spoke of the importance of networking, with counterparts in other Lake Chad Basin countries and the opportunities for learning and sharing of experiences available through the Women of G5 Sahel platform which brings together women from Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and the Niger, as well as the Lake Chad Basin Forum. However, even in these spaces, women's participation was limited by its budget, with women from Diffa able to participate in the Lake Chad Basin Governors' Forum held in Niamey, but not the one held in Cameroon.

95 Interview (in French) with a man working in the area of social cohesion for an international NGO (respondent no. 33), conducted in Diffa Region in October 2021.

8. Conclusions and recommendations

1. Mainstream gender considerations in policy development and implementation

1.1 Ensure that the PNPCR is gender-transformative by:
- (a) Including an analysis of gender dynamics and differentiated needs in the DDRR processes;
- (b) Outlining steps on how the process will integrate recognition of these gender dynamics;
- (c) Training government officials on gender-transformative implementation of policy, including through the identification and training of specialists;
- (d) Sustaining community engagement, ensuring that it is an open process through which community members can share their concerns and desires, and including women-only spaces to better enable women's participation;
- (e) Guaranteeing sustained funding for implementation.

1.2 Adapt existing DDRR strategic communications plans to improve outreach to women and girls and be responsive to the greater obstacles they face from leaving violent extremist organizations (VEOs).

2. Ensure the meaningful participation of women in all aspects of the DDRR process

2.1 Ensure the meaningful participation of women and women's associations at the community level, in regional and national steering committees, coordination units and other decision-making processes, including in policy development and revision.

2.2 Strengthen the capacities and skills of women, including by creating spaces for activists, associations and peacebuilders across the Lake Chad Basin working in DDRR and other related areas to engage in peer learning and experience-sharing, and by supporting risk assessments and developing security and safety strategies.

2.3 Provide sustained, long-term and flexible funding to women's organizations to engage in all aspects of the DDRR process.

3. Ensure that registration and screening tools and processes are gender-sensitive and -responsive

3.1 Establish gender-sensitive screening processes that are implemented by women with all staff trained in gender, GBV and DDRR.

3.2 Conduct a gender analysis of responses gathered during registration and screening processes to better understand the gender dynamics and contribute to feedback loops to better address gendered needs.

3.3 Involve human rights and GBV actors in screening and ensure referrals to medical care and mental health and psychosocial support.

4. Improve rehabilitation and reintegration outcomes

4.1 Develop gender-transformative livelihood interventions in line with the results of (gender-integrated) market assessments and information on known livelihoods; provide ongoing support after reintegration into communities.

4.2 Support women *ulema* to talk about women's rights and freedoms and address certain norms of masculinities in lieu of the gender ideology perpetuated by VEOs.

4.3 Support individuals, couples and families previously associated with VEOs to engage in new forms of communications and relationship-building.[2]

4.4 Expand mental health and psychosocial support to be more responsive to the differentiated gendered needs of those formerly associated with VEOs (supporting girls and women to adjust to life after forced confinement and limited social contact; helping boys and men to cope with the guilt and experience of having been perpetrators of violence).

4.5 As part of establishing a person's legal status and delivering official documentation, provide support to women and girls to resolve the marital situation imposed upon them under VEO practice.

5. Strengthen social cohesion and reconciliation

5.1 Communicate with communities on the dual-track support approach (which benefits both communities and former VEO associates) of DDRR efforts, including on livelihoods, so as to counter existing perceptions of favouritism towards former associates.

5.2 Ensure trauma-informed processes by making mental health and psychosocial support available in communities where reintegration takes place, with emphasis on reaching victims, survivors and their families.

5.3 Develop a gender-transformative process for transitional justice, reconciliation and healing with the full involvement of women and responsiveness to the gendered nature of the harms committed.

5.4 Explore the possibilities of economic and livelihood activities, serving as the locus for peacebuilding that brings together people formerly associated with armed groups and other community members – but do so when people are ready for these interactions, rather than as a precondition to livelihood support.

6. Improve coordination and peer learning

6.1 Create better synergies between DDRR and GBV actors by:
- (a) Encouraging GBV actors and the subsector to integrate DDRR interventions into their strategies and plans;
- (b) Receiving the support of GBV actors to integrate a GBV approach into DDRR.

6.2 Integrate the gendered needs and realities of people previously associated with VEOs into development, humanitarian and peacebuilding to leverage interventions across sectors as part of a triple-nexus approach.

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