



WOMEN, MEN, AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

**IN NORTHERN GHANA:
INTERROGATING MOTIVATIONS FOR
ACCEPTANCE, SUPPORT AND
PARTICIPATION**

Summary

The upsurge in the activities of violent extremists in the Sahel region poses potential threats to neighbouring districts in Ghana. This has led state and non-states organizations in Ghana to intensify interventions, seeking to prevent and mitigate spill overs. As part of its Strengthening System for Resilience against Extremism project, STAR-Ghana Foundation commissioned this study to understand the motivations driving women and men to accept, support and participate in violent extremist activities. The study involved collecting and analyzing data from 594 women and men from 12 communities in the five northern regions of Ghana, using household surveys, focus group

discussions and key informant interviews. The study finds that motivations for potential acceptance, support and participation in VEOs are primarily economic, but are reinforced by social relationships and gendered inequalities and grievances arising from perceived corruption, exclusion and unequal access to opportunities. The study recommends strengthening sustainable livelihood and economic opportunities for young women and men; enhancing community resilience through gender-responsive awareness, social inclusion and early warning systems; and addressing governance grievances including fostering inclusive and responsive local governance.

1. INTRODUCTION

The increase in the activities of violent extremist organizations (VEOs) in the Sahel region poses a threat to Ghana's security. Although there have not been any recorded attacks in Ghana directly linked to the activities of violent extremists' organizations, the risk of spillovers into Ghana especially from Burkina Faso cannot be discounted.

The recent gruesome killing of eight Ghanaian traders in the town of Titao in Burkina Faso in February 2026 attests to the fact that Ghanaians are not immune to violent extremists (VE) attacks. Whilst investments in national security are paramount to securing the territory of Ghana, equally important is the security of individuals. As noted by UNDP (1994), "The world can never be at peace unless people have security in their daily lives" (p.1). The vulnerability of young women and men in Northern Ghana to the activities of VEOs is not far-fetched. This part of Ghana shares borders with countries that have been hit by VEO activities: Burkina Faso, Togo and Côte d'Ivoire. The porous borders make the infiltration of VEOs easier into Ghana. Furthermore, Northern Ghana's economy is dominated by agriculture, yet the sector's near-total dependence on rainfed farming limits its productivity and income potential. For young people weighing their economic futures, these structural weaknesses make farming a difficult and often unappealing choice.

The challenges of the agriculture sector have been exacerbated by extreme climate change. The economic challenges of Northern Ghana are further compounded by its less than 0.5% of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) coming into

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Ghana, further worsening the youth unemployment situation (UNDP, 2018).

STAR-Ghana Foundation for years has promoted and undertaken interventions to reduce and mitigate drivers of conflict and violence, particularly in northern Ghana. The Strengthening System for Resilience against Extremism (SURE) project is one of such interventions, implemented from August 2025 to March 2026 and in partnership with the Foundation for Security and Development in Africa (FOSDA) and the West African Center for Counter Extremism (WACCE), with funding from the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), of the United Kingdom.

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2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Research that examines Violent Extremist Organisations (VEOs) exclusively through the experiences of either women or men has been increasingly critiqued for overlooking the interconnected gender dynamics that shape violent extremism. Kapur et al. (2020) argue that women's and men's experiences, vulnerabilities and roles in VEO activities are relational and should therefore be examined concurrently. Consequently, single-gender approaches to Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) research may provide only a partial understanding of these dynamics, limiting their analytical robustness and their usefulness for designing comprehensive and gender-responsive policy and programmatic interventions. A key criticism of PVE studies focusing exclusively on women and men is that they tend to reinforce harmful gender stereotypes. Research focused exclusively on men often frames them as perpetrators,

combatants, or recruiters, while studies focused exclusively on women tend to cast them solely as victims or passive peacebuilders. These reductive portrayals obscure the complex and varied roles both genders occupy within violent extremist movements, including women's documented roles as recruiters, financiers, and ideological supporters of VEOs, as well as men's experiences of coercion, victimisation, and vulnerability to recruitment (Pearson, 2017; Sjöberg & Gentry, 2007). By fixing gender into binary and rigid categories, such studies distort the empirical reality of how VEOs operate and recruit across gender lines.

Furthermore, radicalization is fundamentally a relational and social process. Men and women often influence each other's pathways into or out of extremism through family bonds, intimate relationships, peer networks, and community ties (Bjorgo, 2013; Khalil et al., 2019). Studies that examine only one gender

therefore fail to capture these dynamic interactions, producing an incomplete picture of how radicalization unfolds in practice. For instance, understanding how a male family member's radicalisation affects the women around him and vice versa requires a concurrent analysis of both genders. Without this relational lens, PVE interventions risk addressing symptoms rather than the underlying social drivers of extremism.

Beyond conceptual limitations, PVE studies focusing exclusively on women or men are also methodologically flawed. They are prone to selection bias, as findings derived exclusively from one gender cannot be generalised to mixed-gender populations or used to design comprehensive PVE interventions (Cook & Vale, 2018). This weakens the external validity of such research and limits its policy relevance. Moreover, a single-gender focus overlooks how gender intersects with other social identities including age, ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status in shaping vulnerability to radicalisation. This failure to apply an intersectional analytical framework further constrains the depth and applicability of findings.

The consequence of these methodological and analytical shortcomings is that PVE programmes designed on the basis of single-gender research tend to be narrow in scope, failing to account for the gendered social ecosystems within which extremism thrives. Policymakers and programme designers

require a holistic evidence base that reflects the full gender landscape of violent extremism (UNDP, 2016). Research that isolates one gender produces fragmented evidence, making it difficult to design coherent, gender-responsive national and regional PVE strategies. This ultimately undermines the sustainability and effectiveness of counter-extremism programming.

Despite these well-established criticisms, recent studies have continued to adopt single-gender approaches. For example, UNDP (2023) focused exclusively on women and girls and did not apply the recommended interconnected analytical framework. While such studies make valuable contributions to understanding the gendered dimensions of violent extremism, their exclusive focus on one gender perpetuates the very methodological gap that scholars have sought to address. As Kapur et al. (2020) contend, the gendered dynamics of VEO activities are inherently interconnected, and any analytical framework that severs this connection risks generating incomplete and potentially misleading conclusions. It is against this backdrop that the present study examines the activities of VEOs through a concurrent gendered lens, integrating the experiences and perspectives of both men and women to produce a more comprehensive and empirically grounded analysis.

3. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

The study employed the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and the Human Security Conceptual Framework. The RSCT is a theory of international relations and security studies developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver and advanced in their 2003 work *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. RSCT posits that international security should be examined from a regional perspective. It opines that the relations between states (and other actors) exhibit regular, geographically clustered patterns. This implies that states located within the same cluster and closer to each other tend to experience similar security concerns. This is because states within a regional cluster tend to be interconnected economically, socially and politically. This paper therefore starts by examining the level of awareness of men and women in Northern Ghana about the VEOs

activities in the Sahel region. This is important because the insecurity problems in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger are not just domestic problems but potential problems for Ghana. Such awareness is imperative because Northern Ghana shares borders with Burkina Faso which is heavily hit by VEO activities. There is also regulated and unregulated trade relations between the two geographical areas as well as religious and ethnic ties. This establishes the fact that the VEOs activities in Burkina Faso and other countries within the West African regional cluster could easily spillover into Ghana through its northern regions. The religious, trade and ethnic relations between the people of Northern Ghana and the Sahel region could equally aid the infiltration of VE into Ghana. The above arguments explain why the paper is situated within the Sahel region.

The paper also employed the Human Security Framework in its analysis. It starts with the realization that the security of a people is the sum of national security and human security. It encompasses the protection of people from risks to their emotional, psychological, physical safety, dignity and wellbeing (Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy, 2007). The Commission on Human Security (2003) posits that human security entails protecting the fundamental freedoms of individuals. It is the protection of people against imminent threats, it is about developing their potentials. Its ultimate aim is human dignity, survival and livelihood security. In the view of UNDP (1994),

human security should guarantee the safety of people from chronic threats and their protection from sudden disruptions in daily lives. UNDP identified seven types of security under the umbrella of human security. These are food security, economic security, health security, environmental security, physical security, community security and political security. The paper therefore examined these seven domains to ascertain the factors that may motivate men and women from Northern Ghana to accept, support and participate in the activities of VEOs.

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4. METHODOLOGY

Study Area

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

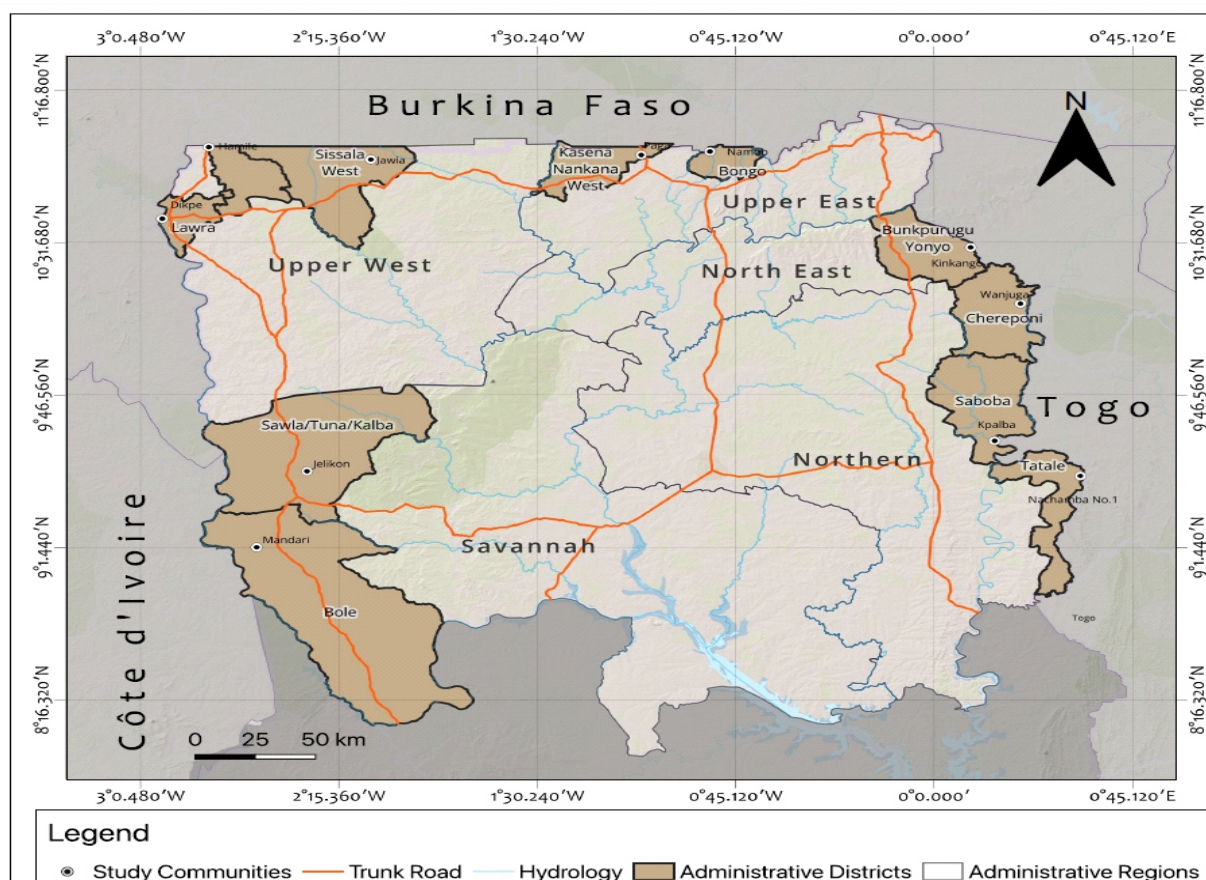


Figure 1: Map of Study Area

Source: SURE, Project Research, 2026

The study communities and districts share borders with Burkina Faso, Togo and Côte d'Ivoire who have suffered attacks by VEOs. The selected communities and districts are largely agrarian and with the increasing population and climate change extreme events such as floods and drought have increased competition over land and

water resources. This has resulted in some communal and land conflicts. Districts such as Sissala West, Bongo and Bole are also known for illegal gold mining activities attracting people from other parts of Ghana and the West African sub-region into these districts. The selected districts also have porous borders which makes it possible for

unrestricted movement of people in and out of them. The above factors therefore influenced the choice of the selected districts by STAR Ghana Foundation for the implementation of the SURE project.

Research Approach

The study adopted a mixed-methods research approach and a convergent parallel design. The total number of women and men who participated in the study was 594. The data collection methods include; household surveys, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and the instruments used were questionnaires and interview guides. The sample size for the household surveys was calculated using Yamane formula. This was based on a

population of 1,200 beneficiaries of the livelihoods support component of the SURE project with 5% margin of error. The household survey was designed using the Kobocollect App and the data collected electronically using tablets and smart phones by research assistants. The samples were drawn for the list of 1200 beneficiaries of the livelihood enhancement component of SURE. This approach ensured that every household had an equal probability of being selected, thus minimizing sampling bias. In total, 300 respondents (66% women and 34% men) were sampled for the household surveys. For the qualitative component, participants for the FGDs and KIIs were selected using the purposive sampling technique. Table 1 shows the category of respondents and sample sizes used for the study.

Table 1: Categories of Respondents and Sample Sizes

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

Source: SURE, Project Research, 2026

Quantitative data was analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 31 and thematic analysis used

for the qualitative data collected from the FGDs and KIIs. The findings were presented in the form of graphs and tables.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION



5.1 Demographic Characteristics and Vulnerability

The key demographic characteristics examined were sex, age and educational attainment, as presented in Table 2. These characteristics provide important context for understanding patterns of vulnerability to violent extremism and identifying population groups that may require targeted PVE interventions. Of the 300 survey respondents, 66% were women and 34% were men. The higher representation of women is particularly relevant given concerns that research on violent extremism has often accorded greater attention to men's experiences and roles, resulting in comparatively limited attention to women's perspectives and experiences (Cook, 2024; Mahmood, 2021; True, 2021).

Age is equally important for understanding vulnerability to VEO recruitment, particularly because young people are frequently identified as a key demographic targeted by extremist organisations. In this study, 61% of respondents were between 18 and 34 years, indicating that the sample predominantly comprised young adults within the productive working-age population. This demographic profile is particularly significant in contexts characterised by limited employment and livelihood opportunities, which may heighten young people's exposure to recruitment incentives.

Educational attainment among respondents was notably low, a factor that independently elevates vulnerability to VEO recruitment. Specifically, 17% had received no formal education, while a further 44% had attained only primary or junior high school level qualifications, insufficient to equip individuals

with the skills needed for formal employment. Together, the prevalence of low educational attainment and a predominantly youthful population in these Ghanaian communities'

points to compounding risk factors that demand coordinated, urgent intervention to prevent VEO recruitment.



Table 2: Socio-demographic characteristics of Respondents

Variables	Categories	Frequency	Percent
Sex	Female	198	66.00%
	Male	102	34.00%
Age Group	18-24 years	60	20.00%
	25-34 years	123	41.00%
	35-44 years	60	20.00%
	45-54 years	39	13.00%
	55-60+ years	18	6.00%
Education	Islamic/Arabic Education	21	10.00%
	Junior High School	55	26.00%
	Senior Secondary School (SHS)	55	26.00%
	Primary Education	38	18.00%
	Tertiary Education	21	10.00%
	No formal Education	36	17.00%
	Non-formal Education	8	4.00%

Source: SURE, Project Research, 2026

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5.2 Level of Awareness of VEO

Awareness of Violent Extremist Organisations (VEOs) refers to the extent to which community members recognise, understand, and can identify the presence, activities, and risks associated with groups that promote or engage in violent extremism. It encompasses not only familiarity with the term “VEO” or “violent extremism” in its formal sense, but also the capacity to identify radicalising influences, recruitment tactics, and early warning signs within one's own social environment. Low levels of awareness are widely regarded as one of the primary enabling conditions for the spread of violent extremism, as communities that are unfamiliar with the phenomenon are less equipped to resist recruitment, report suspicious activities, or engage in prevention efforts. Awareness therefore serves as the foundational precondition for all other Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) interventions at the community level.

The low level of awareness documented in this study is particularly concerning because it exists against a backdrop of heightened securitization. In Ghana and globally, the response to VEOs has been predominantly framed through a security lens and prioritized for law enforcement, intelligence gathering, and counter-terrorism operations over community sensitization and public education. While securitization has its place,

an over-reliance on this approach has historically created an awareness gap: resources and policy attention flow toward state security actors rather than toward the grassroots communities most vulnerable to radicalisation. The result, as this study reveals, is a population that has not been adequately sensitized to the threat. The low awareness levels recorded are therefore not incidental; they are, at least in part, a consequence of a Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) architecture that has prioritised hard security responses over civilian awareness and education.

The findings in the study show that across the communities, a large proportion – close to six out of ten respondents (56%) – indicated they had not heard of VEOs activities in the last 12 months while nearly 4 in every 10 (38%) respondents indicated that they had heard of VEOs activities in the last 12 months, as shown in Figure 2. Together, these figures reveal a significant awareness deficit. The majority of community members remain uninformed about or unable to identify VEOs and their activities within their vicinity, which directly undermines their ability to participate meaningfully in prevention and early warning efforts. This pattern is consistent with the securitization argument above: awareness-raising campaigns on PVE are either insufficient in reach, poorly targeted, or not designed in ways that resonate with ordinary community members.

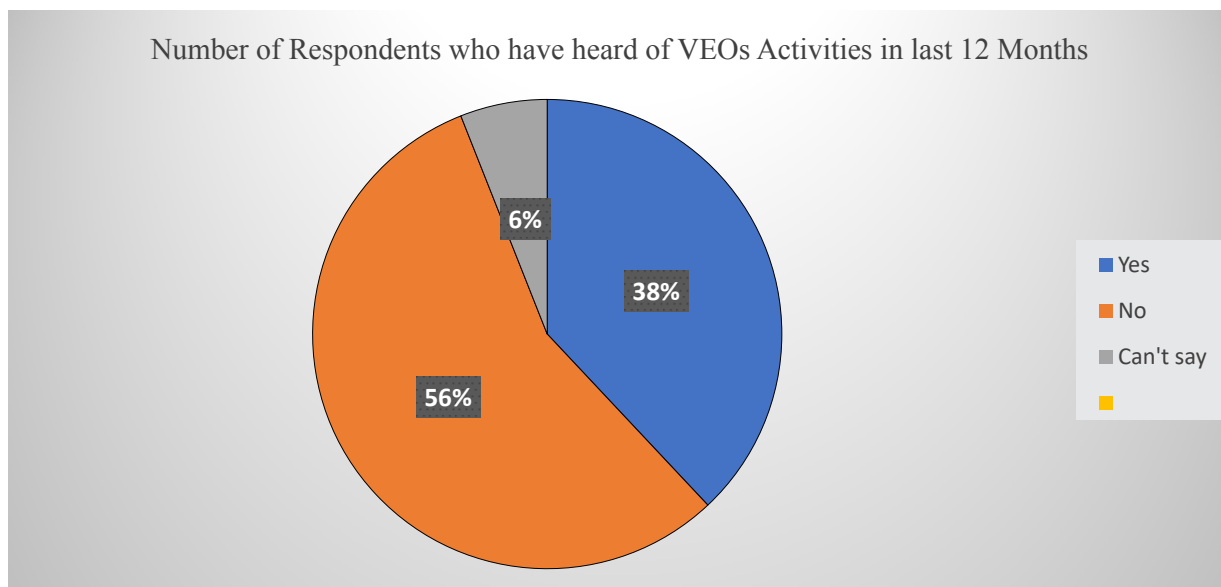


Figure 2: Respondents Awareness of VEOs Activities
Source: SURE, Project Research, 2026

The research also surfaced a critical and specific challenge that has important implications for how awareness programmes are designed and delivered in the study communities: the problem of terminology and local language equivalence. Discussions with community members revealed that the term “Violent Extremism” (VE) and its abbreviation “VEO” carry limited meaning among a substantial portion of the population. These terms are predominantly English-language, technically derived, and associated with formal policy and security discourse. For community members in the study area who are within rural settings with the dominant languages not English these concepts do not translate naturally into local vocabulary, cultural frameworks, or everyday understanding. The research indicates that communities may indeed be aware of the activities and behaviours associated with violent extremism (such as the sudden appearance of armed strangers, instances of youth recruitment, or religiously motivated violence), yet fail to identify these as “VEO activity” when asked in a formal survey context. This disconnect between formal terminology and lived community experiences may be contributing to the underreporting of

awareness captured in Figure 2, and calls into question whether the 56% who reported no awareness are genuinely uninformed or simply unacquainted with the technical language used in the survey instrument.

These findings align with the broader literature on PCVE education. Security studies scholars including Davies (2018), de Silva (2017), UNESCO (2017), Ghosh et al., and Fink et al. (2013) have advocated for the use of civic awareness, community education, and inclusive educational programmes to prevent and counter VE and radicalization in communities. However, these scholars also emphasise that effective education must be contextually grounded. It cannot simply transplant global or national security discourse into local settings without adaptation. The evidence from this study reinforces that position. Based on the research findings, the following specific areas for attention emerge in relation to education and awareness:

First, local language equivalence and conceptual translation: Awareness programmes must invest in identifying and validating



appropriate local language equivalents for terms such as “violent extremism,” “radicalisation,” and “VEO.” This is not merely a translation exercise; it requires culturally sensitive framing that connects these concepts to recognisable phenomena in community life. Working with local linguists, traditional authorities, and faith leaders to co-develop terminology is essential if awareness messages are to be meaningful and actionable for ordinary citizens.

Second, targeted sensitization of high-risk and hard-to-reach populations: The research findings suggest that awareness is not uniformly distributed across communities. Youth, women, and those in more remote or economically marginalised settings may have even lower exposure to formal PCVE messaging. Awareness programmes should specifically target these groups through channels that are accessible and

trusted, including community radio, religious gatherings, local theatre, and school-based curricula.

Third, rebalancing the security-education nexus: Given that securitization has crowded out civilian awareness programming, it is imperative that PCVE strategies in Ghana explicitly reallocate attention and resources toward community education and sensitization. Formal security responses alone cannot generate the community resilience needed to resist radicalisation. The integration of awareness-raising into national and district-level PCVE frameworks with dedicated budgets, monitoring indicators, and civil society partnerships is therefore a necessary structural response to the awareness gap documented in this study.



5.3 Motivations Fueling Women's and Men's Acceptance, Support and Participation in VEOs Activities

The findings reveal that economic motivations are the dominant driver for both men and women who are willing to support, accept, or participate in VEOs activities in the study communities. Employment and business opportunities emerged as the leading motivation (26%), followed by the prospect of receiving large sums of money (19%). **Across both genders, participation in VEOs is fundamentally a survival calculus:** extremist groups are perceived not primarily as ideological movements, but as alternative economic systems capable of providing material security in

environments where the state and formal economy have failed. Social pressure from trusted peers, compatriots, and family members, combined with the desire for power, constitutes the second cluster of motivations (12%), followed by perceptions of corruption and unequal resource distribution (7%). **Notably, religion emerges as a very low motivating factor (4%) for both men and women in the study communities, a finding that significantly disrupts dominant narratives which frame VE in the West African context predominantly as religiously motivated.** The full distribution of motivations is presented in Figure 3.

While the primacy of economic motivation is shared by both men and women, the research points to important, **gendered differences in how economic need is experienced, what financial participation means within each gender's social context, and what individuals perceive they can use the money for.** For men,

the economic pull of VEOs is closely linked to social expectations of breadwinning, provider roles, and the inability to meet these expectations in a context of high youth unemployment, limited formal employment, and competitive informal labour markets. Men who perceive themselves as economically failed or marginalized and unable to support a household, pay bride price, or access land and capital are particularly susceptible to the economic offers of VEOs, which present an immediate route to income, status, and masculine social validation. In this sense, for men, the money is also about dignity and social standing, not merely subsistence.

For women, the economic motivation is shaped by a distinct set of gendered vulnerabilities and constraints. Women in the study communities are frequently economically dependent, with limited access to independent income, land, credit, and formal employment. In this context, the financial offers of VEOs whether in the form of direct payments, gifts, or the income associated with relationships with VEO members represent a form of economic agency that is otherwise structurally denied to them. Critically, women's entry points into VEOs are often mediated through relational and social channels rather than direct recruitment: financial inducement through a husband, boyfriend, or community elder who is already affiliated, or through social networks where participation confers both income and protection. What women see they can use the money for also differs: the findings suggest that women's economic motivations are frequently tied to the welfare of children and dependents, meeting household needs, and navigating situations of domestic precarity which are motivations that are structurally embedded in women's care roles rather than individual ambition or ideological conviction.

The role of social pressure and peer networks (12%) also warrants gender-differentiated analysis. For men, peer pressure operates largely through bonds of male solidarity, loyalty to a group, and the desire to be seen as brave, capable, or resourceful within a social circle. The recruitment pathways are often direct and transactional. For women, social pressure functions differently. It involves operating through intimate relationships, family ties, and community belonging. Women are more likely to be drawn into VEO-adjacent activity through compliance, loyalty to a partner or family member, or fear of social exclusion, rather than through the same aspirational or transactional dynamics that characterise male recruitment. This distinction matters for intervention design: programmes targeting men must address masculine identity and status, while those targeting women must address relational dependency, protection, and the social costs of refusal.

The finding that corruption and unequal resource allocation (7%) constitutes a motivation for both genders is also significant, though again gendered in its expression. For men, this grievance is often articulated in terms of political exclusion, unfair competition, and blocked opportunity that is a feeling that systems are rigged against them and that VEOs represent a means of bypassing or challenging an unjust order. For women, structural inequality manifests less as political grievance and more as lived deprivation: limited access to land inheritance, exclusion from decision-making processes, and dependence on male gatekeepers for economic resources. Both represent forms of structural violence that VEOs exploit, but the gendered texture of these grievances demands tailored responses in programming and policy.

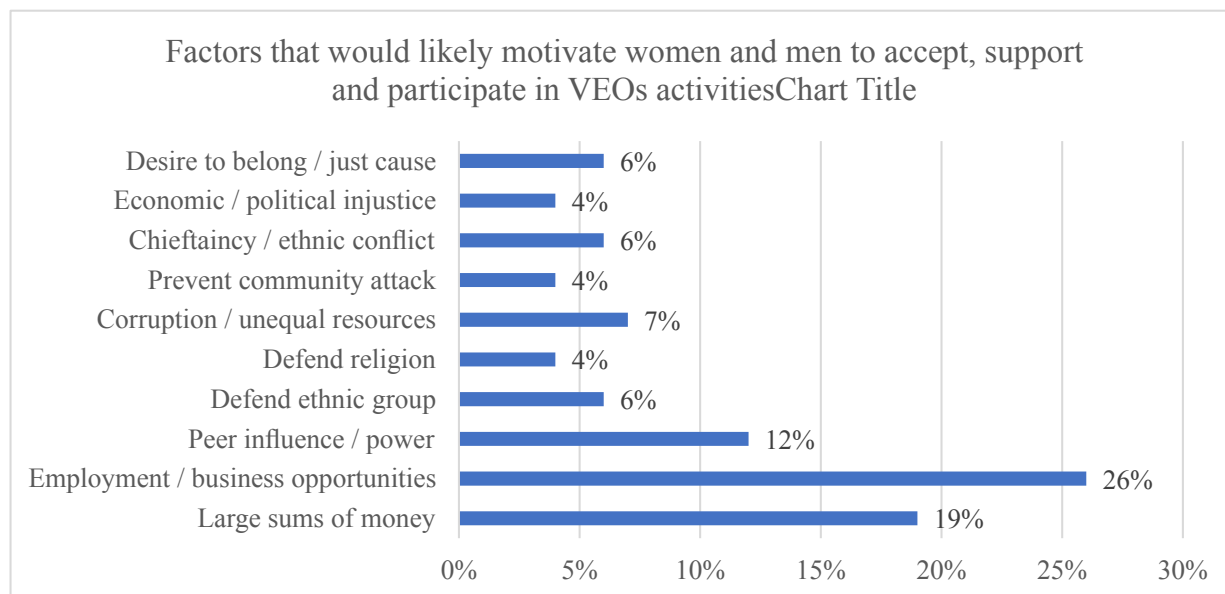


Figure 3: Motivations for Women and Men Joining VEOs

Source: SURE, Project Research, 2026

These findings align with and affirm a well-established body of literature on the drivers of violent extremism, while also extending it in important ways. The human security framework (UNDP, 1994) articulates the importance of economic security, social security, and political security as pillars of individual wellbeing, safety, and dignity. When any of these pillars is compromised particularly in contexts of poverty, unemployment, and exclusion individuals become vulnerable to alternative structures that promise to fill the gap, including VEOs. This study's findings confirm that the human security framework remains applicable and analytically powerful in the Ghanaian community context.

The findings are also corroborated by scholars such as UNDP (2017), Idris (2016), Blair et al (2013) who identified poverty, economic exclusion, and unemployment as the primary motivators that drive individuals toward VEOs. This study affirms these conclusions. However, it is important to note what this research adds beyond what is already known.

While the existing literature establishes the economic driver as dominant, it has often done so without adequately disaggregating findings by gender or examining the specific ways in which poverty and exclusion are experienced, interpreted, and acted upon differently by men and women. This study contributes precisely that disaggregated lens: it confirms the economic motivation is primary for both genders while revealing that the meaning of that motivation, the pathways through which it operates, and the intended uses of financial gain are shaped by gendered social structures, roles, and vulnerabilities. This is not simply an affirmation of what is already known but a gendered deepening of it, grounded in the specific community contexts of this research.

As advanced by the Regional Security Complex Theory (Buzan and Wæver, 2003), security dynamics in a given region are deeply interdependent. The economic challenges fuelling VEOs activities in countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger should not be interpreted by Ghana as purely domestic



issues confined to those states. These are regional drivers that follow porous borders, shared ethnic identities, and transnational recruitment networks. The same conditions of poverty, unemployment, exclusion, and weak state presence that make communities in the Sahel susceptible to radicalisation are present, to varying degrees, in communities in northern and Upper East Ghana. The findings

of this study therefore carry a regional warning: Ghana cannot afford to treat economic vulnerability as a problem elsewhere. Addressing the structural economic and social conditions that this research identifies as motivating factors is both a domestic PCVE priority and a contribution to regional security.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS



- Strengthen community-based awareness and early warning systems: State and non-state actors should intensify community education on violent extremism, recruitment strategies and early warning signs, with particular attention to border communities. Awareness interventions should move beyond technical terminology such as violent extremism and VEOs and use locally understood concepts, languages and examples that enable community members to recognise recruitment behaviours and emerging threats. On whom is best fit for this? Traditional and religious leaders, women's groups, youth groups, community radio and other trusted local actors should be engaged as key channels for sustained education and early warning.
- Position livelihood and economic resilience as a core component of PVE interventions: Government, development partners and civil society organisations should strengthen livelihood interventions for young women and men in vulnerable communities through market-responsive skills development, entrepreneurship support, access to finance, mentorship and linkages to sustainable employment opportunities. Rather than

implementing stand-alone or short-term livelihood activities, interventions should address the structural economic vulnerabilities that make the financial incentives offered by VEOs attractive.

- Design gender-responsive PVE interventions that address the different ways through which women and men become vulnerable: PVE programmes should move beyond treating women primarily as victims and men as potential perpetrators and recognise their diverse roles, vulnerabilities and pathways into violent extremism. For women, interventions should address economic dependency, unequal access to land, credit and employment, as well as vulnerabilities arising through intimate relationships, family and social networks. For men, interventions should consider how unemployment and economic exclusion interact with expectations around breadwinning, social status and masculine identity.
- Strengthen women's economic agency and participation in community peace and security structures and decision making on natural resources management: complement women's economic

development with deliberate measures to increase women's meaningful participation and leadership in community peacebuilding, early warning, conflict-prevention structures and community natural resource governance. Existing mechanisms such as women's peace circles can be strengthened and connected to formal district and community security and early warning systems as well as local governance structure. The study itself included women engaged through local women's peace circles established to support mediation and PVE education, providing an institutional entry point for strengthening women's roles.

- Address social exclusion, corruption and unequal access to opportunities as PVE concerns: PVE strategies should extend beyond security-focused responses to address governance deficits, perceptions of corruption, unequal resource distribution and exclusion from economic and decision-making opportunities. Strengthening transparency, responsive local governance and meaningful participation of young women and men can help address grievances that VEOs may exploit.

7. CONCLUSION

This study shows that vulnerability to violent extremism in Northern Ghana cannot be adequately understood through a single driver or through assumptions that position women and men in fixed roles. The willingness to accept, support or participate in VEO activities emerges from an complex factors of economic insecurity, social relationships, gendered expectations, exclusion and governance grievances. Although economic motivations, particularly employment opportunities and financial rewards emerged most strongly, the study shows that these motivations are experienced differently by women and men and are

mediated through their distinct social roles, relationships and access to opportunities.

Resilience building against violent extremism requires prevention strategies that address the conditions that make extremist narratives and incentives attractive. This means levelling the economic playing field for young women and men, strengthening community awareness and early warning systems, addressing exclusion and governance grievances, and ensuring that interventions recognise the different ways in which women and men experience vulnerability and exercise agency.

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