

Intergenerational Peacebuilding Among Women

Leveraging the Power of Collaboration

CASE STUDY: MOROCCO

This case study is part of the Intergenerational Peacebuilding Among Women: Leveraging the Power of Collaboration report created by the Women PeaceMakers program.

Intergenerational peacebuilding among women

Compounding crises related to inequalities and violence, health, the environment, and food and water insecurity affect people across generations, and solutions to build lasting peace require the involvement and leadership of people of all generations. This case study forms part of the [Intergenerational Peacebuilding among Women: Leveraging the Power of Collaboration](#) report, focused on understanding how generation and age differences affect peacebuilding work among women by analyzing how women and women's organizations are using intergenerational strategies and partnerships to build peace.

The report argues that women's and women's organizations' intergenerational peacebuilding efforts and potential need to be better recognized, supported, developed, and encouraged at the national and international level alike. Through the case studies, the report shows examples of existing efforts, opportunities, and challenges, with the goal of shaping and influencing how decision-makers and funders approach intergenerational partnerships and strategies as part of peacebuilding work.

The report is co-created as part of the Women PeaceMakers Fellowship, led by the voices and perspectives of the 2021-2022 Women PeaceMaker Fellows. The report drew from the lived realities of women peacebuilders and their partners, and from experts working in the Women, Peace and Security and Youth, Peace and Security spaces. The full report provides both an international analysis and context-specific case studies.

Since 2002, the Kroc IPJ has hosted the Women PeaceMakers Fellowship program. The Fellowship offers a unique opportunity for women peacebuilders to engage in a cycle of learning, practice, research and participation that strengthens peacebuilding partnerships. The Women PeaceMakers Fellowship facilitates impactful collaborations between women peacebuilders from conflict-affected communities and international partner organizations. The Fellows also co-create research intended to shape the peacebuilding field and highlight good practices for peacebuilding design and implementation. This case study was created as part of this process and is also featured in the full *Intergenerational Peacebuilding among Women: Leveraging the Power of Collaboration* report.

In this case study, Woman PeaceMaker Fellow Youssra Biare explores the intergenerational peacebuilding of Mourchidate women, a group of religious leaders confronting violent extremism in Morocco. This research explores the ways in which Mourchidates work with people of different generations and backgrounds, as well as the challenges and strengths of the state-led program.



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Morocco Case Study: The role of Mourchidates in peacebuilding and preventing violent extremism in Morocco

CASE STUDY

By Yousra Biare; Contributor: Salaheddine Bouih

Highlighting the role of national-level intergenerational programming in countering violent extremism in Morocco

Context

After the terrorist attack that took place in Morocco in 2003,¹ the Moroccan government felt the need to equip the country's clerics with solid theological foundations. Clerics were seen as important, influential stakeholders who could potentially help prevent violent radicalization. At the same time, there was a need to review women's status in Moroccan society.

Intergenerational work is defined as the transmission of experience and knowledge between people of different ages.² Intergenerational activity can promote greater social cohesion, stronger solidarity and development.³ Dialogue between people of different ages can be a real lever for growth. The intergenerational work conducted through the Mourchidate program has had positive impacts on supporting the message of interfaith tolerance.

The Mourchidates are women religious leaders who take on all the same roles as imams except that they cannot lead a congregation in prayer — a role reserved for men.⁴ The goal of the Mourchidate initiative is to counter religious radicalization. Mourchidates intervene in mosques, prisons, youth centers, hospitals and schools. They present a tolerant vision of Islam and try to deconstruct the narratives that encourage extremist drifts.⁵ Their role is primarily preventive, but they also intervene in more serious cases. In addition, they may redirect their interlocutors to other authorities when the problems they are asked to address are not religious in nature.

Aware of the importance of women's participation in the country's social and economic development, Morocco has introduced reforms in this direction over the last couple of decades — the most important being reforms to the Family Code, which previously enshrined women's subservient role in reproduction and the private sphere only.⁶ These reforms aim to integrate "the principle of equal rights and obligations for men and women and promote the full and active contribution of women at the highest levels in all domains, be they political, economic, social, or cultural."⁷ One important such reform was the introduction of a gender quota in Parliament, where 60 of 395 seats are now reserved for women in the



Lower House. In addition, one-third of the seats in regional councils are now reserved for women.⁸ Furthermore, Morocco recently mandated a 30 percent minimum for female representation on the boards of public companies by 2024, and 40 percent by 2027.⁹ In alignment with these reforms, the Moroccan government started a program to further support the Mourchidate women religious leaders responsible for promoting religious moderation and tolerance, particularly among the most vulnerable populations.

Morocco is 99 percent Muslim (mainly Sunni), with the remaining one percent of the population made up of Christians and Jews.¹⁰ It is divided into 15 regions and covers an area slightly larger than the state of California, with each graduating Mourchida being “appointed in an administrative region in which there is a local religious council and a representative of the Ministry of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs, thus ensuring full coverage of the national territory.”¹¹ The level of urbanization in the country has reached almost 60 percent,¹² with Mourchidates working in both high-density urban areas and remote, rural areas. To react to the rise of radicalization, the Moroccan government proposed to support women’s greater involvement within the religious sphere through the creation of the Mourchidate program, which was enacted in 2005 by order of Morocco’s Islamic Affairs Ministry.¹³ The program aims to counter violent extremism and extremist ideologies of Islam, but over time it has also become a strategic instrument of the country’s foreign policy, which seeks to present Morocco as an advanced and innovative spiritual hub.¹⁴

The Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams, Morchidines and Morchidates trains classes of “students of 32 nationalities from Africa, Asia and Europe.”¹⁵ They follow a religious curriculum based in moderate Islamic thought, supplemented by vocational training classes, such as language skills, computer literacy and trade-based skills in order to make their work more financially viable.¹⁶ The first applicant pool consisted of 745 imam applicants and 515 Mourchidate applicants,¹⁷ of which 50 Mourchidates were certified.¹⁸ All candidates, regardless of gender, must be younger than 46 years old and hold a bachelor’s degree from a Moroccan or equivalent university.

The first class of the Mourchidate program graduated in 2006. So far, the Institute has trained 1,200 Mourchidates at the rate of 100 each year. The goal is to increase this total to 2,000 by 2030. As of 2022, more than 500 Mourchidates are in service in Morocco. They work in mosques, communities and prisons, reacting to the rise of radical Islam and taking an active role in peacebuilding. They act as social workers, delivering social services and outreach to at-risk communities. Through their work, the Mourchidates aim to promote moderate Islam and ideologies by correcting misconceptions on the Quran’s teachings and emphasizing the Quran’s principles of peace, tolerance and moderation in Islam.¹⁹ Their targets are younger women and men from marginalized regions who are at risk of being radicalized, as well as those already convicted and imprisoned.

The Mohammed VI Institute stands out as the only institution to provide both men and women with modern religious training. Its emphasis on moderation and the application of Islamic principles of tolerance and love to social issues has positively impacted affected communities, especially women, who for so long have been barred from official peacebuilding efforts. Training Mourchidates not only gives women more direct religious and political influence, but it also allows this message of peace to reach deeper into local communities.

Countering violent extremism is only one important component of the Mourchidate program. The training project for Mourchidates is part of the Moroccan Kingdom’s broader strategic vision linked to reforms grounded in the values of citizenship, the improvement of Moroccans’ living conditions, and the management of religious affairs. In addition to working to prevent violent extremism, the Mourchidates advise women on legal issues and the position of Islam on various social issues.²⁰ They also provide training on good parenting techniques for women in order to improve peace in the home.²¹

The introduction of the Mourchidates is seen by some a real “revolution” in the Muslim world, as it widens the place of women in a traditionally masculine space — the mosque — and strengthens their right to interpret sacred texts in order to spread a culture of tolerance and peace. Mourchidates work predominantly with women between the ages of 22 and 80, young men between the ages of 14 and 22, and children, with the aim of combating the factors that drive extremism.

In light of the positive impact it has had on society, this program serves as a model for other Muslim countries — particularly with regard to the powerful role of young women in Muslim society. The success of Morocco's initiative has resonated with many countries. A number of imam students in France²² and sub-Saharan African countries²³ are traveling to the Institute in Rabat for training, to become certified and work towards countering violent extremism in their home countries. Sub-Saharan African countries in particular are hoping that by sending their next generation of imams to Morocco, they will solve the problems they have had with religious radicalism while still preserving the teachings of Islamic faith.²⁴

The objective of this case study is to identify significant stages of the process by which the Mourchidate program emerged, understand the role of Mourchidates in social change and examine the role of young Mourchidates in particular in peacebuilding.

Methodology

This study focused on addressing the following research question:

- How do Mourchidates work with people of different generations to reduce participation in violent extremism?

This study focuses on the work of Mourchidates with younger women and men in two rural and three urban areas. The study is based predominantly on interviews with Mourchidates, two representatives of Morocco's Islamic Affairs Ministry and two representatives of the Rabita des Ulamas Council. Notably, a representative of the Moroccan Islamic Affairs Ministry accepted to meet but refused to be interviewed on the Mourchidates Program, as it is considered a public national program, and therefore the interview needed to be authorized by the higher council. Interviews with Mourchidates were conducted in each of the following locations: Rabat, Casablanca, Salé and two rural areas of the country — one near Beni Mellal and one in Marrakesh-Safi. Additional interviews took place via Zoom. In addition to the interviews, data were gathered through three focus groups. Two of the focus groups included six Mourchidates each, and one focus group included six youth beneficiaries of the program. The researcher made an effort to include Mourchidates and beneficiaries from different parts of the country because rural areas are key areas for recruitment of youth into extremist groups.

Intergenerational peacebuilding in the context of this case study

The Mourchidates work across generations in two different ways: older and younger Mourchidates work together, and Mourchidates work to reach younger community members. The Mourchidates have direct contact with decision-makers, which provides them with an important platform and helps them foster dialogue among youth, other Mourchidates and decision-makers. According to the interviewees, these dialogues contribute to intergenerational social cohesion and thus to the creation and maintenance of a more peaceful society.

Imams can more easily influence men, and Mourchidates can more easily influence women. It is easy for Mourchidates to bring women and youth closer and break down the barriers between generations, using a participatory approach to facilitate communication and promote peace and tolerance. This work is particularly important, as equal partnerships between older generations and youth are vital in ensuring young people's meaningful participation in society, including in peacebuilding and in countering violent extremism.²⁵ The Mourchidates are from a different generation than the youth participating in the sessions, who ranged from 16 to 30 years old.

The Mourchidates highlighted the significant role that religion plays in young men's and women's lives. However, it is also important to engage with them beyond interreligious dialogue, helping them build their capacity through a variety of specific activities. Due to support from the Religious Council, Mourchidates have legitimacy and the possibility to reach a diverse set of people within their society, including men, women,



youth, community leaders, activists, educators and social workers. This makes their impact range wider than that of other peacebuilding actors.

Mourchidates work with individuals through group sessions that discuss religious texts and their relation to different social issues. Sessions related to self-empowerment and socio-economic independence, not to mention tolerance, are a crucial component of the program. Women engaged in the socio-economic sector in their regions are active in their communities and therefore contribute to the development of the country. According to a Mourchida from the program, "An educated, tolerant woman, means a tolerant child, means a tolerant country."²⁶ This is important because women are often the channel of information for the entire family and therefore for the entire community. Women are not passive; they are important actors in peacebuilding and countering extremism. Mothers, for example, can be the first to detect changes in their children and should be equipped with the right tools to act as urgent preventers.

To work on peace at a national level, the linguistic and cultural specificities and identities of each region are considered and reflected in the work. The majority of the rural population in Morocco is comprised of the Amazigh ethnic group,²⁷ which has different language dialects depending on the region in which they live. Mourchidates choose to work in specific regions based on their language skills and knowledge of the traditions and customs of the region.

Mourchidates reported interacting directly with more than 100 young men and women each month in each of their assigned regions. They lead interactive group sessions in schools and mosques. According to younger women Mourchidates, receiving training from Mourchidate peers can break down barriers and allow for a more engaging learning experience. A Mourchida in Salé noted that having a younger fellow Mourchida with her during her sessions improved her effectiveness in delivering her lesson and promoting her message through religious classes.

The impact of intergenerational work among these women differs by location. For example, the age gap was a challenge for both Mourchidates and younger beneficiaries in rural regions, where the younger women abstained from attending classes after the first two sessions. In larger cities such as Casablanca, Rabat and Tanger, the age gap was not a determining factor of program success.

One Mourchida from Salé noted that she adapts her methods depending on the nature and the location of the people she is dealing with, choosing the tools that are most appropriate for the situation. For example, she approaches older women, younger women and children in different ways; the approach also depends on whether her work is in schools, prisons or mosques. This Mourchida stated:

The younger women can be very interested in what we preach if we approach them the right way, providing these younger women with a safe space and a safe platform for discussion and debate... after all, Islam is about communication and understanding, and if we can't promote safety within our small sessions, how can we promote peace within a larger society?²⁸

The Mourchidates' work with youth has proven important in preventing the negative consequences of conflict for young people, helping them to deal with the conflict they face in a positive way and to learn from it. Youth are often involved in conflict, whether divided between people of different backgrounds, ideologies, neighborhoods, countries, sexes or levels of authority. While challenging for participants and facilitators, these types of conflicts are also opportunities for learning. They can act as creative catalysts for all parties involved by encouraging them to reconsider their values, positions and beliefs and to imagine how to work together in the interests of each.

Perceived impact of intergenerational peacebuilding among women

Due to lack of education and work opportunities the prevalence of poverty in rural areas,²⁹ recruitment of young women to extremist groups may happen primarily in rural regions of Morocco and thus deserves the attention of the Mourchidates. Rates of female radicalization in rural areas are significant,³⁰ and empowering these women is a critical radicalization prevention tool.³¹ Rural areas in Morocco often lack access to informal trainings and workshops, and school drop-out rates are high compared to other regions in Morocco,³² so younger women are the primary target for educational and vocational programs and workshops. Communicating with the rural women participants requires specific skills and techniques, which the Mourchidates learned during their 12-month program; these skills are key to reaching out to younger women and to building a bridge between the two generations of women. However, the cultural context of rural areas tends to differ from the context in cities such as Casablanca, Rabat or Fes. In Beni Mellal, communication needs to be conducted in the Amazigh dialect, and, in the Rif region, communication needs to be conducted in the Tarifit dialect.³³ Most Mourchidates do not speak these dialects, so they cannot impact most of the women or youth in those regions due to language differences and difficulties; although these women are a priority audience, access to programming is limited.

Sixty percent of respondents, across both Mourchidates and participants, said that they understand the importance of intergenerational work in peacebuilding and across social issues in Morocco. Although the Mourchidate program is open to anyone 22 or older, most women succeed in joining the program at 39 years or older. While the Mourchidates have been successful in reaching older women from rural areas, who reported that the program was eye-opening for them, they have struggled to capture younger women's attention and engagement, due to the age difference between the participants and the Mourchidates.

Another challenge is the mentality of the families in rural areas where women are not allowed to participate in trainings or workshops. That said, Mourchidates are perhaps the actors best positioned to overcome this challenge, as rural women are most likely to be allowed to participate in gatherings with other women.

According to the interviewees, aside from the regions around big cities, the Mourchidates' programs are only able to cover a few rural regions, although the need in rural areas is high. Both participants and Mourchidates recommended a shift in focus to rural areas in order to work with younger women, focusing on their social and professional engagement and capacity-building.

To address the challenge entailed in connecting with younger women, Mourchidates reported applying the techniques taught in their training program, including the following:

- Identify common interest with their beneficiaries.
- Volunteer together in the field through social actions and mobile promotional campaigns.
- Use audio-visual methods to deliver sessions and teachings.
- Use interactive sessions instead of more traditional teaching methods.
- Share values, beliefs and ethics.
- Build trust with younger women and men so that youth are more comfortable speaking about their social issues.

Using these techniques helps facilitate the interfaith dialogue and tolerant communication between the Mourchidates and youth; ensuring that the youth are comfortable helps them provide insight on the region and implement solutions relevant to the area. The Mourchidates act as a channel to connect youth to decision-makers, allowing the youth to speak about their social issues and indirectly affect peacebuilding. In addition, the Mourchidates have access to important platforms to speak about regional and national issues, particularly related to radicalization and extremism.



Communication is also key to the Mourchidates' role in prevention. They provide trainings that are adapted to the needs of the participants and focused on empowering and supporting youth to enter the professional sphere, including trainings on self-development and self-confidence. Working across generations helps attract more younger women into the program and grants further credibility to the Mourchidates' work.

Mourchidates are increasing their representation, participation and leadership in all public institutions, including in peacekeeping, the security sector and peacebuilding, and are supporting the development of the country. Their work is conducted not only at religious sites but also in prisons and schools. The Mourchidates support the families of returnees from conflict zones and act as social workers as well as religious teachers. This impact is strengthened through intergenerational work, dismantling harmful gender norms and implementing protective measures.

Conclusion and recommendations

The Mourchidate initiative provides a unique contribution to intergenerational peacebuilding efforts and is an innovative state-led program. The community of Mourchidates spans generations and bridges age differences between the Mourchidates and the participants. This program is foundational for preventing radicalization and expanding the channels of communication between youth and decision-makers. Through the research for this study, the following recommendations were identified:

Recommendations for Mourchidate training program leaders:

- Make the recruitment process easy and captivating for younger women so that a greater number of young women are able to become Mourchidates.
- Pair younger Mourchidates with older Mourchidates who can serve as mentors.
- Expand the program in rural areas and provide additional language training for Mourchidates, including in Amazigh and Tarifit.
- Mobilize more materials, tools and human resources to support Mourchidates' efforts to communicate with participants.

Endnotes

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