Remarks on Women and Countering Violent Extremism

(As Prepared for Delivery)

Good evening everyone. Thank you Ambassador Schuwer for your kind words and for hosting all of us at your beautiful home this evening. Let's just say this is not what Monday night normally looks like at my house. I'd also like to recognize the Dutch government for its excellent leadership as co-chair of the Global Counterterrorism Forum.

And of course, thanks to the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security, and my friend, Ambassador Verveer, whose consistent advocacy for including women in matters of peace and security helped lay the foundation for this evening's discussion. Today's symposium is just the latest evidence of how the Institute continues to help policymakers find thoughtful, inclusive solutions to the security threats we face.

And in many parts of the world, there is no greater threat to the rights of women and girls than violent extremism. In my travels from Mali to Indonesia, I've been struck by how predictable the spread of violent extremism is by measuring changes in local mores – often promoted under religious guises to challenge or deny rights for women and other vulnerable groups, like religious minorities and LGBTI persons.

In many communities around the globe, the influence of radical Salafism – often fueled by outsiders – is signaled by controls on women: denying girls access to education or the workplace, insisting that females dress in a particular way, encouraging gender-based violence, including child marriage and female genital mutilation and cutting.

Once these radical ideologies take root, the violence they unleash disproportionately targets women: girls as young as 13 lured by terrorist recruiters into leaving for Syria to become "brides of the Caliphate" who wind up trapped with children and no means to return; Nigerian schoolgirls kidnapped, brainwashed, and coerced into suicide bombers; Yezidi women and girls enslaved, sexually abused, and traded like chattel.

In too many areas around the world, violent extremists threaten generations of hard-won progress for women and vulnerable minorities. To defend that progress – and to prevent a reversion of what Secretary Kerry calls "medieval thinking" – we must defeat violent extremism.

This is why I believe that countering violent extremism is fundamentally a feminist issue.

Just yesterday, our nation marked the fifteenth anniversary of 9/11. We've learned many hard lessons in the years since, but perhaps the most important is this: military force can defeat terrorists, but it cannot defeat terrorism. It cannot discredit the ideologies themselves, which is best done by strengthening outreach by local voices of tolerance and inclusion. Nor can it address the underlying grievances that fuel – or are cynically used to expand – new violent extremist threats.

Attacking root causes requires governments to take governance seriously by rejecting corruption and respecting human rights. It also demands resilient communities that know how to push back when violent extremists try to push in.

Without these elements featured centrally in U.S. policy, we'll remain stuck playing terrorist whack-a-mole. The last 15 years prove that destroying and dispersing today's terrorist groups does not always lead to lasting reductions in the future terrorist threat.

Countering Violent Extremism, or CVE, is our answer to that truth.

CVE is less about responding to the current terror threat than it is about preventing its expansion by addressing specific factors enabling radicalization to violence in the most vulnerable communities.

Accordingly, CVE injects women's inclusion and empowerment squarely in the conversation about terrorism. While that's partly because advocates from the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) community over the past decade-and-a-half advanced our understanding of the centrality of gender to security challenges, it's also because the world has seen violent extremist groups use women propagandists and overt gender appeals to recruit female followers.

Violent extremists have even tried to *appropriate feminism* to recruit women. For example, Daesh circulated an image on social media of a fully clad woman under the heading, "The Original Cover Girl." Violent extremists exploit gender stereotypes by deploying female suicide bombers deep into crowded markets, assuming they'll be viewed as non-threatening and better able to slip by security. And sadly, we've seen a rise in the number of female attackers. Just last Thursday, French authorities arrested three young women who tried to detonate an explosive in central Paris after they were prevented from traveling to Syria to join Daesh.

So women are a growing terror threat even as their sisters are of its primary – and often earliest – victims.

These realities have led to a growing recognition that we cannot reduce extremist violence without women. While there has been much needed discussion about the importance of mothers and sisters to spot signs of radicalization, women's role goes well beyond the boundaries of family. We need women religious leaders to refute misogynist perversions of Islam; women in police and military forces to strengthen ties with the communities they protect; and women parliamentarians to ensure counterterrorism policy reflects their experience.

Women are not just one element of CVE; they are critical actors in all elements of CVE.

In U.S. policy, gender perspectives increasingly marble our entire approach to CVE. I'm pleased to report that CVE is a new and central objective of the President's National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security. Women's empowerment is also a key part of the joint CVE Strategy State and USAID released this past May. Women and girls are part of the counter-messaging effort spearheaded by the Global Engagement Center. They are part of the global networks we helped establish to connect mayors, youth leaders, and local researchers working to build local resilience to violent extremism.

And women's issues are being mainstreamed into our new programs for prevention. Most recently, we integrated gender into every part of a new, roughly $20 million CVE program we're launching in North Africa this year. For example, we'll help women police officers in Tunisia assume greater leadership roles in the male-dominated force, so it can better engage with communities most targeted for terrorist recruitment.

In Morocco, we'll help women's groups speak out against violent ideologies. And in the Morocco program, it's not just inclusion as process. We'll make sure that women are not only included in trainings but also the substance, for example by ensuring that trainings include a focus on the specific factors that can drive women to terrorist groups. We'll be sure that women are included in our baseline data, analysis, and metrics to evaluate impact. We're hopeful this North Africa pilot will lead to best practices as we mainstream gender in our CVE programming. And I look forward to hearing ideas and recommendations from today's symposium to strengthen these programs further still.

The U.S. also recognizes that, while we can show leadership in our own approach, real impact requires similar steps by the broader international community. That's why the U.S. helped pass U.N. Security Council Resolution 2242, which called on all member states to integrate the WPS and CVE agendas. And it's why the U.S. has championed the U.N. Secretary-General's Plan of Action for Preventing Violent Extremism released earlier this year, which included – among other things – women's empowerment as a

pillar of its comprehensive approach.

Thanks in part to vigorous U.S. diplomacy, on July 1 the U.N. General Assembly endorsed the Plan's recommendations for all member states. Now, entities like UN Women, UNDP, UNICEF, UNESCO, and the UN CT organizations are mobilizing for this challenge. Countries are developing CVE National Action Plans, and supporting this process has become a key part of our diplomacy and the CT/CVE Bureau's work. Other bodies like the World Bank, World Economic Forum, and OSCE become increasingly engaged. I hope many of you already have encountered elements of these shifts now underway in the conversation about terrorism, not just here in the U.S., but in many foreign governments and multilateral institutions.

I'm excited to see security discussions take women seriously, and I believe this presents a rare opportunity for the WPS community. We can help ensure that what the international community *says* about the importance of women in CVE is reflected in what it *does* and what it *spends* in the years to come. Policy implementation isn't always the most exciting or high-profile stuff, but we know that without follow-through, we have only words – and intentions are cheap.

By emphasizing a role for civil society and communities, CVE invites a broad range of contributions by women to one of the greatest security challenges of our time. It is congruent with the holistic approach to security that the WPS community has advocated for so long, by opening the door for civil society and women's groups to work in partnerships with governments that might once have previously dismissed them outright.

Now that CVE has been institutionalized as a pillar of our approach to terrorism, we need the WPS community to champion these efforts, and to bring its expertise, lessons, and passions to this cause. And let's be honest: even though we may intellectually acknowledge the limits of military approaches to terrorism, it remains very tempting for governments to resort to old habits, to reach for the well-financed military tools that offer measurable, if often fleeting, success.

So your engagement is critical – not simply to ensure that CVE fulfills its promise to women – but that our overall counter-terrorism policy fulfills its commitment to a holistic, preventive strategy. Around the world, women are eager for more support. They're ready to push back against the heinous groups that would corrupt their children, erode their rights, and turn back the progress they've fought so hard to achieve.

When I think of the many opportunities before us when it comes to women and

countering violent extremism, I think of Latifa ibn Ziaten, whom Secretary Kerry honored this year with an International Women of Courage Award.

Latifa immigrated to France from Morocco as a teenager. Her son Imad served proudly in the French army, but was killed in a terrorist attack in 2012. She could have given in to grief, and no one would have blamed her. Instead, she went to the community where her son's killers grew up. She spoke with the people, and decided to launch a new group in her son's name – the Imad Association for Youth and Peace – to help young people resist the lure of violent ideologies. Her association provides alternative paths by supporting after-school programs, educational initiatives, counseling services. When asked why she did this, she said: "I want to save those who are the cause of my suffering."

That's what Latifa did on her own. Think how many more Latifa's could be supported to make a difference in their communities. That's the kind of resilience and strength we need to unleash to turn back the threat of violent extremism.

Although we've taken steps forward with CVE, we are also clear-eyed about the challenges.

Resources remain limited, even as we've expanded funds for CVE programs at State. Consider this – over the last year, military operations against Daesh cost roughly $4 billion. By contrast, State and USAID planned to spend about $200 million on CVE programs worldwide with 2015 funding. If you do the math, that's about $1 of prevention for every $20 of cure. So we need to find additional resources to support CVE.

Here, the WPS community can serve as a powerful ally. For example by directing existing programs aimed at advancing women's capacity to areas most at-risk of terror infiltration or recruitment. Private sector efforts by foundations and non-profits could contribute to work financed by governments and multilateral bodies.

Second, the WPS community can help make the case for why we need CVE resources overall – and for women's engagement. The Senate, for example, has included a provision in the current appropriations bill for $20 million to support women and girls affected by violent extremism.

Another way to contribute is by helping to build research capacity to increase our understanding of CVE at the local level, because CVE efforts must be closely tailored to the specific dynamics fueling radicalization within a community.

You can also help bolster the capacity of women's groups to manage programs – so that we can include them in the roster of organizations receiving CVE funds. At present, local capacity to administer both finances and reporting precludes CVE partnerships with those we most need to engage at the local level.

In high policy discussion and advocacy, in field work and programming, in mentorship and capacity-building – there are countless opportunities for the WPS community to advance its central objective through CVE. CVE needs your help – your issue advocacy, your expertise, your sustained engagement on this agenda.

Violent extremists threaten everything the women's community has worked to achieve. So let's work together on behalf of this fundamental truth – defeating violent extremism is essential to women's empowerment, and women's empowerment is fundamental to defeating violent extremism.

I hope we can count you, leaders in civil society and the women's movement, as allies in this effort. Thank you all very much.