
To Fight Extremism, the World Needs to Learn How to Talk to Women

From Iraq to Pakistan to Nigeria, groups like the Islamic State and Boko Haram are winning the war for women's hearts and minds — and it's time to stop it.

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AUGUST 12, 2015

About three years ago while traveling in Pakistan, I met with a prominent female civil society activist who described how some women in northwest Pakistan were supporting militants by donating their most precious gold and jewelry and endorsing their sons' radicalization.

We had been having a conversation about engaging Pakistani women to de-radicalize youth, and she warned me that extremists were speaking more effectively than moderates to women, leveraging their influence in the home, family, and the community. Women could be engaged to potently combat violent extremism, but it would require a focused, concerted effort to reach out to, counter-message, and actively engage the vital female constituency.

Her message was clear: As violent extremist movements have strengthened, the international community needs to engage more intentionally with women in countering violent extremism, or CVE.

The tools are already in place. The international community has passed a series of United Nations Security Council resolutions (UNSCRs) that provide a foundation to better engage women in promoting peace and conflict resolution. In 2000, the U.N. passed its landmark resolution on women, peace, and security, [UNSCR 1325](#), which called for special measures to increase women's participation in peace processes and to protect them from conflict-related, gender-based violence. Over the next 15 years, it followed with more measures to challenge impunity for sexual violence in conflict and to enhance accountability for advancing the agenda as a whole. These were complemented by a host of national and international policies and strategies. But explicit references to emerging issues, such as countering violent extremism, are often lacking. As a result, women are insufficiently considered in CVE efforts, and the path to their engagement remains ill-defined.

This year presents an opportunity for the United States, like-minded governments, and partner organizations to correct the oversight and emphasize that women's empowerment, protection, and participation are vital to any effort to fight violent extremism, a focus of the 2015 [Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review](#) released in April. In October, the United Nations will convene member states around the 15th anniversary of [UNSCR 1325](#) to assess progress and decide what to do next. At the same time, the U.S. government will complete its first review of the 2012 U.S. National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security — better known as U.S. NAP — [the road map](#) the United States is using to ensure women are included in all efforts to advance peace and security. In the fall, the U.N. will also endorse an international action plan to address violent extremism. The timing could not be more important. These moments of

reflection provide the U.S. government and the broader international community the opportunity to spotlight the intersection of CVE efforts and women, peace, and security agendas.

Today, women and girls are facing unimaginable brutality at the hands of extremists globally. Since 2014, Amnesty International [estimates](#) that 2,000 women and girls have been kidnapped, raped, or forced into marriage by Boko Haram in Nigeria. And, according to the United Nations, [approximately](#) 2,500 women and children are being held captive in Syria and northern Iraq by the Islamic State; some 1,500 civilians may have been forced into sexual slavery.

Violence against women and girls is a calling card and strategy of many radical groups. Advances by violent extremist groups are almost always coupled with attacks on the rights of women and girls. During a panel discussion at the U.S. Institute of Peace in July, [Zainab Bangura](#), special representative of the U.N. secretary-general on sexual violence in conflict, eloquently [described](#) the interconnections in the work of the Islamic State. The world, she said, is “seeing a new phenomenon — sexual violence being used as a tactic of terror — to displace communities and destroy existing family and community structures, to strike fear into the heart of civilian populations, to extract intelligence, and to generate revenue for trafficking, trading, gifting, auctioning, and ransoming women and girls as part of the currency by which [the Islamic State] consolidates its power.” There is, she continued, a “battle that is being waged on the bodies of women and girls” in which sexual violence has become a “tool of terror.”

The secondary effects of violent extremism, particularly when they prolong displacement and hardship, are proving similarly dramatic for women and girls. Since the onset of violence in Syria, early marriage has risen dramatically. The

U.N. [estimates](#) that while about 13 percent of Syrians under 18 were married before the war, rates skyrocketed to 32 percent by early 2014. [Save the Children](#), a U.S.-based NGO, and [Amnesty International](#) have both pointed to economic drivers of increased early and forced marriage; desperate families receive a dowry for marrying off a girl while also reducing the number of mouths they have to feed. Reports of [domestic violence](#) have also risen as the stress of prolonged displacement and economic desperation take their toll on families and communities.

Victimization, however, only tells one piece of the story. Women's engagement with violent extremist movements is increasingly sophisticated. They have long been members of extremist groups, though the number of women and their roles vary widely. Media attention often focuses on female fighters and suicide bombers, though relatively few women perpetrate attacks. That said, Syria experts estimate that the Islamic State has over [20 percent female recruits](#), with some 550 of the 3,000 foreign fighters from Western countries [thought to be women](#). The group has developed nuanced and targeted messaging for recruiting women, including appeals that romanticize the need for devout women to help create a new society. As Islamic State members, these women are recruiting, teaching, and building communities, and they are being [married to male recruits](#) as an incentive for men to join and remain with the movement. They are also encouraged to reproduce in order to advance creation of a state committed to the cause. These women are key members of the Islamic State, an integral part of the group's plans and strategies for the future. A targeted, specific strategy is needed to stem the flow of female recruits and to de-radicalize and successfully reintegrate these women and girls.

Perhaps most underappreciated is the potential role of [women as partners](#) and allies in efforts to counter violent extremism. Around the world, women have critical traditional and contemporary roles to leverage in blunting the impact of extremism. Women often have influence within the family, giving them enormous potential to stem recruitment and radicalization. As community members frequently left behind in conflict zones to maintain the home and care for children and other family members, women and girls often have information and insights that can provide early warning of conflict or the potential for violence. Because they often maintain families under siege, women can help de-radicalize and enable successful reintegration of former extremist group members. Examples from around the world illustrate how women can stem violence and extremism. In Sudan, [Hakamat singers](#) — influential women whose songs can foster conflict by belittling other ethnic groups, decrying cowardice, and urging retribution — are promoting tolerance, coexistence, and peace. In Somalia, the cross-clan linkages women gain through marriage are used to help mediate. In Central America, women can be key voices in encouraging or discouraging young people from joining criminal gangs and committing crime. Along the Tajik and Afghan border, [Sisters Against Violent Extremism](#), an initiative of the Austrian NGO Women Without Borders, is establishing [schools for mothers](#) to educate them on how to prevent the radicalization of their sons. So far they have trained over 150 mothers, who report reconnecting with distant sons and daughters, persuading them not to attend illegal meetings or read radical material. Two groups of mothers have organized meetings with local police to increase understanding of the role women can play in countering violent extremism.

Building on this knowledge, the U.S. Agency for International Development has sought to better engage women and girls in implementing U.S. NAP. In Kenya, USAID [supports women](#) de-escalating conflict. In Niger, Chad, and Burkina Faso, USAID funds use of radio, social media, and civic education to elevate the voices of non-extremist women and men. And in many parts of the world, it seeks to [strengthen](#) the role of women and youth in political and peace processes, thereby enabling them to engage in meeting priority development and reconciliation needs and to advocate for equitable access to justice, productive resources, and peace dividends.

Yet how can we ensure that the international community more consistently and effectively protects women and girls, addresses gender dynamics in countering violent extremism, and engages women in CVE efforts? A critical first step is steadfast promotion of gender equality and women's rights. But that is just a starting point.

In July, at a forum organized by the U.S. Institute of Peace, USAID, and the State Department, experts convened to identify priorities for progress. They concluded that the focus should include redoubling efforts to protect and support those vulnerable to and victims of insurgent movements and extremist groups. Additionally, the United States should broaden its support for networks of women and youth in communities challenged by violent extremists. Third, expanded research should focus on strategies to protect and engage women as part of efforts to hinder recruitment and radicalization, to enable early warning, and to support the de-radicalization and reintegration of former extremists. Fourth, women leaders' voices must be elevated domestically and abroad with

CVE narratives structured to recognize the different needs and roles of women and men. Finally, women must be fully involved in the security sector in order to better engage women globally and to draw fully on the talents of whole societies in CVE and peacebuilding.

For the international community, the remainder of 2015 is full of opportunities to strengthen these efforts — in part through an enhanced focus on gender and women's inclusion within emerging policy and guidance. It is a moment that the world can't afford to miss.