

Why We Need to Work With Women to Prevent Violent Extremism



Posted: 25/04/2016 10:57 BST Updated: 25/04/2016 10:58 BST

Last week the international community marked the second anniversary of the terrible abduction of 276 Nigerian girls from their school in Chibok. Despite the efforts of the Nigerian armed forces, supported by international partners, including the UK, 219 girls are still missing. For the girls' families, their continued disappearance is a source of great pain and sorrow, as I saw first-hand when I met members of the Bring Back our Girls group in Nigeria in February. Last week's sombre anniversary gave me cause to remember that meeting and to reflect on wider questions about women and violent extremism.

For a long time, women and girls were simply seen as the victims of extremism. They were the raped, the enslaved, the grieving widows and mothers. Policy makers saw women's rights as something distinct from security, to be dealt with as a separate issue. That has now changed. Yes, women and girls are often the victims of extremism. But we now understand that their experience, and their role, can extend much further, because they are not a homogenous group. They can also be enablers, sympathisers or perpetrators of extremism - as we have seen in Daesh's brutal female police force, the Al Khanssaa Brigade. Most importantly for those of us working to prevent extremism, we have also realised that they can do that too: they can be agents of change, both within the family and in the wider community.

The meaning of Boko Haram "Western education is forbidden", gives the clearest possible signal of their intentions. But it also speaks loudly of their fears. They recognise that education - particularly of girls - poses a real risk to their warped ambitions, because it gives girls the ability to think independently and to know that they have a voice. Of course, the issue is complex - well-educated young men and women also fall prey to extremism, including in the UK. But fear of empowerment through education is why Boko Haram doesn't want girls to go to school.

It is also why the UK, the UN and others have placed the empowerment and protection of women and girls at the heart of our counter extremism strategies. Women and girls play a vital role in all successful societies. A country cannot expect to fulfil its potential if half the population is excluded. In the same way, we cannot expect our counter-extremism strategies to work if they are based on a purely security and military response, and do not harness the power of women as agents of change. We need women and

girls all over the world to play their part in protecting their communities against extremism.

I am proud of the United Kingdom's work in this area. We are taking a truly cross-government approach. In our High Level Review on Women, Peace and Security in October 2015, we committed to ensuring that our overseas work includes activity delivered by and targeted specifically at women and girls, not only as victims - for example through our Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative - but also as influencers and perpetrators. We will do so in partnership with the newly established Commonwealth Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Unit and the Hedayah Center of Excellence on CVE in Abu Dhabi, and through sharing with overseas partners our domestic experience of promoting female voices in strategic communications campaigns. We also support the International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) to help women in seven countries in the Middle East and Africa to tackle the drivers and consequences of extremism in their communities.

The rights and wellbeing of women and girls is at the heart of the UK's development work. It is a strong focus of our work in Nigeria, with a particular emphasis on the poorest regions in the North, which are also those most affected by Boko Haram. The UK is also supporting the Government of Nigeria's Safe Schools Initiative, which aims to restore safe access to learning for children affected by conflict. On my visit in February, I saw how UK projects are providing education for girls and young women, helping them to achieve their potential and giving them the skills they need to set up their own businesses.

This was the simple aspiration of the Chibok schoolgirls - to be free to make their own way in the world. Malala, the world's most famous schoolgirl, has said she hopes that "one day they will come home, finish their education and choose their futures for themselves". I share that dream. In the meantime, we will continue to make it a reality for as many girls as we can all over the world, and we will continue to work to end violent extremism. Because we now know that the two things go hand in hand. To defeat extremism, we need women and girls to be empowered. And for women and girls to be empowered, we need to defeat extremism.

Follow Baroness Anelay on Twitter: www.twitter.com/JoyceAnelay

- [Facebook](#)
- [Twitter](#)
- [Google Plus](#)
- [RSS](#)
- [Phone](#)