

**WAYS IN WHICH WOMEN CAN RESPOND TO AND PREVENT EXTREMIST
VIOLENCE, INCLUDING EARLY WARNING SIGNS**

BY

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INTRODUCTION

The notion of early warning has been used to predict a wide range of phenomena, from natural disasters, to stock market crashes, famines, refugee flows, genocide, violent conflict and extremist violence. Consequently an early warning sign is a fundamental tool in preventing extremist violence. Tackling extremism has challenged strategists, security experts, intelligence analysts and political leaders for centuries, Nigeria is at a crucial juncture as it struggles to contain rising extremism and Boko Haram insurgency. The Northern region is plagued by geopolitical, ethnic, and sectarian-driven violence; citizens continue to experience volatile insecurity and devastating loss of life. Terrorism has taken a lot of lives including that of security personnel, and cost the entire country a lot in terms of material and financial losses. Women have a lot to offer in the prevention of violent extremism, however their contributions are usually not acknowledged. Rising extremism has only compounded women's marginalization.

CONCEPTUALISATION OF CONCEPTS

To gain a better understanding of ways through which women can respond to and prevent extremist violence, including early warning signs, it is imperative to conceptualise basic concepts.

Extremism

The definition of extremism varies broadly, its causes are many, and its consequences are devastating to a society's moral fabric and overall stability. According to focus group discussions held with Pakistani citizens in 2011, "extremism" ranges from the absence of tolerance and rejection of others' beliefs to the oppression of different religious groups in the name of religion to the use of terrorist violence to force a mind-set, ideology, or worldview on others.

Early warning signs

Based on the UN women report on 'Gender-Responsive Early Warning: Overview and How to Guide', early warning is perceived as the collection and analysis of open source information to enhance prevention or early response, mainly before violence has erupted or,

in the conflict and post-conflict phases, to contain the outbreak, mitigate its effects, and prevent its recurrence.

According to Eric Brahm, "Effective preventive strategies rest on three principles: early detection and reaction to signs of trouble; a comprehensive, balanced approach to alleviate the pressures, or risk factors, that trigger violent conflict; and an extended effort to resolve the underlying root causes of violence."

In essence, the goal of early warning is born from a hope to head off violent conflict before it becomes costly. A number of factors have been identified as potential early warning signs.

They include but not limited to:

- sudden demographic changes and population displacement;
- rising unemployment rates;
- destruction or desecration of religious sites;
- discrimination or legislation favouring one group over another;
- destabilizing referenda or elections;
- a rise in "societal" intolerance and prejudice;
- an increase in numbers of demonstrations or rallies;
- An influx of refugees.

ROLE OF WOMEN IN PREVENTING EXTREMIST VIOLENCE

As noted earlier women have a lot to offer in countering extremist violence, below are some contributions that can be made by women to address extremism.

- Like in most parts of the world, women in Nigeria hold enormous sway over decision making within the home. As mothers and teachers, they play a predominant role in raising children and instilling them with values. Women are typically “the first to recognize signs of resignation and anger in children” or “when their sons, daughters, or husbands exhibit tell-tale signs of violent ideologies.” Because of their role both within the family and civil society, women are strategically placed to serve as a voice of reason and temper radical beliefs before they take root, as well as to bridge the social divides that contribute to violence. They are also more often attuned to the needs of their communities and have a large stake in promoting peace for their personal and family’s wellbeing. Similarly, because they are frequently targets of radical ideologies and violence, women are all too aware of extremism’s dangerous effects and are best positioned to do something about it. Subsequently, women are

often the first to propose creative, nonviolent solutions to prevent and resolve conflict—and to act in the face of disaster or rebuild after it strikes.

- Women can contribute to extremist prevention by holding conversations with religious leaders and scholars to promote better understandings of peaceful Islamic values and dispel misinterpreted ideologies;
- Facilitating dialogues with women's and youth groups, teachers, political parties, and religious leaders to encourage dialogue about extremism and brainstorm solutions for how to address it in their communities will go a long way in preventing extremist violence.
- Creating student peace clubs in primary and secondary schools, who serve as role-models and mediators in classrooms is also another tool that can be used as a preventive mechanism
- Hosting television and radio talk shows with people affected by conflict to draw attention to extremism's negative, and increasingly deadly, consequences;
- Forming youth peacekeeping groups and training them in conflict resolution skills to mediate local disputes and prevent violence;
- Working with mothers of militants to de-radicalize and reintegrate extremist youth in society; and
- Helping youth recruited by violent extremists' access psychosocial support, alternative job skills training, and employment opportunities.
- The involvement of women as policy shapers, educators, community members and activists is essential to address the conditions conducive to terrorism and effectively prevent terrorism. Women can provide crucial feedback on the current counter-terrorism efforts of the international community and can point out when preventive policies and practices are having counterproductive impacts on their communities. Removing the factors that hamper women's active participation in countering terrorism is necessary to facilitate the involvement of women's organizations in identifying and addressing specific political, social, economic, cultural, or educational concerns that may lead to violent extremism and terrorist radicalization. Women are effective undertakers of initiatives and shapers of narratives to counter violent

extremist and terrorist propaganda and may carry special weight with women audiences

- Women offer dynamic contributions in their communities which need to be recognized and encouraged. Police experience has for instance shown that the engagement of women's groups and informal networks in preventing extremist can have a deeper and more genuine effect on communities. Women can play an important role as mediators as well as authors and disseminators of counter-narratives challenging violent extremism and terrorism within their communities. By becoming role models, they can influence their personal and social surroundings in a positive manner.
- In order to effectively engage with women in their communities, government should strive to better interact with small women's organizations at grassroots level rather than partner with often self-proclaimed community leaders or large, well-established organizations only. Grassroots movements have better access to vulnerable individuals. Also, community leaders that governments usually engage with tend to be men and to provide fairly homogeneous and conciliatory advice. Their viewpoint does not always represent the entire community and they may prioritize good relations with the police over bringing up serious concerns. Public authorities could identify key women activists and organizations, with their capabilities and needs, to reach out to various groups and diversify their interaction with communities. It is essential that they critically assess which state agency – police, social services, education services – is best placed to engage with women in a specific situation and that they engage with women from all backgrounds. Transparency on why and how they co-operate with specific organizations or individuals is also key for the credibility of their engagement in the eyes of the broader communities and public. Obstacles to this increased co-operation need however to be considered and overcome.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The support of both state authorities and non-governmental organizations is fundamental to empower women to challenge violent extremist narratives within their communities. Women's organizations and women advocates need to be inspired to take action and provided with the technical skills and capacity to effectively tailor their messages to specific audiences,

both in terms of content, form and delivery. Women should be encouraged to develop and share their own resources on women empowerment stories, women in history and women role models, including through community information centres and Internet databases.

Similarly, the organization of activities and trainings designed to facilitate women's access to cultural, religious and political education might enable them to better challenge violent extremist narratives. An atmosphere has to be fostered in which different opinions and critical views can be expressed and alternative narratives put forward, challenging terrorist and violent extremist ideologies from different angles. Specific trainings could also be designed and delivered to facilitate women's participation in the public sphere and increase their interaction with public authorities. Although such activities may lift a barrier to women's engagement, there also needs to be a change in authorities' perception of women and willingness to cooperate with them.

Empowering women to share their stories in the public sphere might encourage them to provide personal testimonies that other community members will relate to more easily. Testimonies from victims of terrorism can for instance serve as effective counter narratives, by challenging the dehumanization of victims in terrorist propaganda and insisting on the criminal nature of the acts committed by terrorists. A victim's personal testimony might, in that sense, have a greater impact on the audience than counter narratives produced by authorities.

Similarly, a gender dimension should be included in efforts to promote inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogues. This would facilitate women's engagement in promoting tolerance and living together and preventing conflicts across ethnic, cultural and religious lines, thus also helping to prevent and mitigate tensions that can potentially lead to violent extremism. Women may be able to engage more effectively and constructively in dialogue, and dialogue among women may be possible where it has otherwise failed.

RESOURCES

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