

WOMEN AND PREVENTION OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM: DOES IT WORK – AND IF SO, HOW?

Innovative approaches in countering violent extremism are not only a question of philosophy, but also of pragmatism. We need a new dialogue to strategize how to establish a consensus/springboard from which to reinforce local, national and global security.

We don't need to analyse what has not worked, but actually focus on analysing what is working.

Since 9/11 the international community has strongly focused on hard security approaches with huge investment of resources. So far, the outcome shows a mixed picture. What is the way forward? We need to identify the gaps and the missing links. Securitized approaches without involving safeguarding mechanisms have not shown the results we hoped for. This was not an exclusive approach. However, without a determined emphasis on the role of civil society in preventing extremism and supporting deradicalization, we are not reaching the key stakeholders on the ground.



© Albert Gonzalez Farran / UNAMID

Security is a human right which requires the cooperation of governmental and nongovernmental actors. The global investment must focus on an integrated bottom-up security architecture. A wide-ranging dialogue around security should have one common goal: not only to recognise democratic and legal structures, but also to exploit the opportunities that they present.

Freedom and democracy are the cornerstones of an open society. Nevertheless, freedom can engender fear and resistance, and we must continue to fight for and defend it with the tools of critical thinking, targeted education and continuous encouragement. This is a clear mandate.

Paul Kirchhof, an expert in German constitutional law, speaks of courageous freedom. Only when we find the courage and conviction to take new approaches, undaunted by the risks, will we succeed in rooting people – young people in particular – in the place where they belong: in their families and in our society. Only then will we succeed in retrieving those who have already succumbed to extremist ideologies.

How can we achieve this? Civil society composed of women and men is key.

It is in the local contexts of the family, educational institutions, social services and leisure-time education that exclusion and discrimination first become apparent. Two significant groups are on the frontlines when it comes to these individual frustrations: those who seduce and recruit and those who protect and safeguard. It is a competition between ideologies and emotions which we must address in a timely fashion with expertise and empathy.

This challenge can only be met if we employ the right set of tools: educational opportunities, access to the job market and enforcing psychological resilience at all levels of society. The overarching aim of all extremist groups and ideologies is to undermine democracy and social cohesion. It is therefore necessary to take an approach which encompasses an all of society approach in this highly sensitive and complex arena.

Doing so requires much of us: we must strengthen our common identity; and we must reinforce a sense of belonging, bolstering solidarity across all demographics.

And so, where do we begin? We look at the foundations of the political fabric: in families and in schools moving up to the political level starting from the municipal level and finally to the top layer, the parliaments and high-level decision-making fora.

The representatives of these entities need to form a protective layer, particularly in situations of crisis and uncertainty. They have to connect with the youth and deal with their volatile economic and emotional conditions, guiding them into the right direction while they are exploring themselves and the world. The personal, after all, is political. In order to construct a 'private' security architecture, we must educate the educators and start with the mothers as the first teachers in the lives of their children as a potential first line of defence strategy. They, thanks to their emotional connection with their children and their readiness to act, are well positioned to be placed as key security allies.

We must strengthen, educate and encourage mothers so that they are capable of creating a barrier between radical influences and young people, targeted by the toxic and polarizing ideologies of religious and right-wing extremism.

However, mothers in this role are not without controversy and do encounter certain obstacles. While they may have emotional access and physical proximity to their children, radicalisation remains taboo. Like other groups working with young people, mothers need an efficient support system and network which provides a safe space in which to discuss their fears and observations regarding the many dangers faced by their children from drugs and gang violence to violent extremism, and to take decisive action. Here, a support system outside the traditional institutions plays a key role.

The tools of the ideologists and recruiters – both online and offline – are exactly the tools the mothers of adolescents and young adults must reclaim: making time, listening, building trust, showing empathy. These techniques are also crucial to preventative youth work and within the challenges of rehabilitation.

But how do we mobilize and prepare this critical group for potential frontline intervention?

Against the background of a growing frustration with male-dominated and hard power-oriented

security strategies, Women without Borders (WwB) in 2008 launched its Sisters Against Violent Extremism (SAVE) network. It is the world's first female counter-extremism platform including women from 21 countries, from Columbia to Kosovo, from Pakistan to Palestine, promoting women's voices in the international security, counter-terrorism, and peacebuilding debates.

The outcome of the ongoing SAVE consultations was the understanding that mothers, in particular, have for too long been excluded from prevention strategies. Women without Borders conducted the first in-depth applied research study centred on mothers and security, entitled "Can mothers challenge extremism?" The survey explored over one thousand concerned mothers' attitudes towards, perceptions of, and experiences with radicalisation and violent extremism in their families and communities in Pakistan, Palestine, Israel, Nigeria, and Northern Ireland. The research revealed that although mothers are well suited and situated to recognise and react to early warning signs of radicalisation due to their place at the heart of the family, often they lack the appropriate space, structures, and training to develop the necessary competence and confidence to assume their prevention role.

On the basis of these study findings, Women without Borders conceptualised and developed the pioneering "MotherSchools: Parenting for Peace Model" which has so far been piloted and implemented in 12 countries, involving around 3,000 mothers until now.

The MotherSchools

Model creates a formalized space for mothers to deconstruct individual and social barriers to address the taboo issue of extremism while improving their knowledge of early warning signs. MotherSchools facilitate collective strategizing to effectively counter radical influences in adolescent children, families and communities at large. WwB trains local individual drawn from local professional pools including social workers, teachers, psychologists, community leaders to become MotherSchools teachers. These teachers implement the MotherSchools curriculum in regular meetings over several months. The Curriculum uses developmental psychology, self-confidence training and exercises and theoretical sessions to define radicalisation and prevention at the individual level. The Model has been designed to strengthen individual capability, emotional literacy and awareness of extremist influences to both empower and enable mothers to effectively prevent and confront the threat of violent extremism in their communities.

And that's exactly the philosophy of the prevention model "MotherSchools: Parenting for Peace". It is a space to educate the educators, to create a community of women who realize that they are key in building up their children's strength and social immune systems. The MotherSchools do not require physical buildings, but committed and trusted local partners in their communities.

Based on the programme's rigorous monitoring and evaluation process, WwB seeks to advance the knowledge of context-specific radicalisation dynamics over time; deepen the understanding of why and how mothers represent the missing link in prevention strategies in vulnerable and affected communities; and ensure that MotherSchools continue to effect positive and sustained impact.

The MotherSchools implementation has started in Tajikistan in 2012 followed by Indonesia, Pakistan, India (including Indian-Administered and Pakistan-Administered Kashmir), Bangladesh, Zanzibar, Jordan and later travelling to Europe with current roll-outs in Austria, Germany, Belgium, England and the Western Balkans.

This approach works because it is based on a methodology which provides a framework, a targeted community, a monitored call to action and support to respond to situations of urgency. This model of local leadership in action is providing constructive engagement based on critical reflection and introspection.

The insights and impact of the achievements need to arrive at the community level and need to be shared with the respective stakeholders. The MotherSchools graduation ceremony finally provides an important outreach opportunity to engage the participating family members as well as local stakeholders in the community and policy level; particularly mayors and the media. Providing the participants and teachers with this formal recognition is an important step for embedding the model into the community and mobilizing future participants and teachers. The graduation ceremony is also a point of departure for the participants enabling them to assume a public role and become authority figures.

The engagement of mothers in this arena is not unquestioned. The criticism touches upon instrumentalization of women and focuses on the stereotyped gendered roles of women as mothers and wives and potential peace makers instead of addressing the specific social and economic exclusion, injustices and inequalities in their societies.

On the contrary: the mobilisation of mothers as key witnesses and potential agents of change enhances an empowerment process that can have a ripple effect in their immediate and extended families as well as in their communities.

Gender has a symbolic significance for diversity and inclusion. It is absolutely necessary to take a nuanced approach to gender roles when it comes to the discussion and prevention of extremism. Confinement to stereotypical roles is a fixed part of an extremist world view and leaves little room for the exploration of desired and alternative life models.

The development of an effective individual immune system against all forms of violence and extremism can be best achieved in an environment which provides both physical and emotional security. This applies to both the private and public spheres, from families and schools to prisons.

Resilience-oriented

gender politics also rely on the leadership of mothers and fathers in the family, and men and women in the community. Gender politics also means that female voices must be heard in equal measure to male voices at all levels of the security build-up.

Prevention

strategies can be most punctually and effectively implemented when women's potential is promoted and encouraged systematically. Women must be recognised as part of an innovative strategy and engaged as such. Not least, it is of categorical importance that a gender sensitive approach also includes the complimentary role men have to play in their families and in public.

The inclusion of

fathers in preventing violent extremism is WwB's strategic next step towards the whole of community approach. Many fathers present challenges to family cohesion due to poor communication skills, physical and mental absence. Domestic violence as an experience of normalized violence often is an opening moment for violent extremism. The connection between domestic violence and subsequent radicalization is a challenge that needs to be targeted.

Pilot FatherSchools workshops have taken place in Austria and will be rolled out in Germany this year. FatherSchools promise to be more than just a mitigating measure. In communities at risk where notions of hyper masculinity often are linked to violence, fathers must be viewed as the missing piece of the puzzle in a family-based and whole-of community security approach.

The processes of radicalisation take hold extremely quickly. The window of opportunity for intervention closes when we do not react.

This is a clear mandate for our societies: we must act together and make collective efforts to work on alternatives in a climate of fear and political polarization. What it takes is a strategy which demands courage and optimism.

The Author

Edit Schlaffer, an internationally recognised social scientist, founded Women without Borders (WwB) in 2001 with a view to building up the competence and confidence of women to effect social change in marginalised communities across the world. Schlaffer focuses on gender-based peacebuilding strategies that harness the strength of civil society in building a new women led security architecture.

Responding to the growing threat of violent extremism, Schlaffer launched Sisters Against Violent Extremism (SAVE), the world's first female counter-extremism platform. Over the past decade, WwB has been strengthening local and global security through its pioneering MotherSchools: Parenting for Peace Model addressing three thousand concerned mothers in 15 countries across Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and East Africa. In developing and implementing this internationally recognized strategy, Schlaffer's preventing violent extremism research introduced and has since normalised the concept of mothers as the first line of defence against extremism.

Schlaffer is Ashoka Fellow and recipient of numerous awards: Reader's Digest 'European of the Year', Foreign Policy's '100 Global Thinkers', Grand Decoration of Honour in Gold for Services to the Republic of Austria, Soroptimist International Peace Prize, Aenne Burda Award for Creative Leadership, Newsweek's '150 Movers and Shakers', and Women's eNews 21 Leaders of the 21st Century.