



**About ICAN:** Formed in 2006, the International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) aims to strengthen women's participation and influence in conflict prevention, social justice, coexistence, and peacebuilding efforts, in situations of closed political space and conflict affected states. ICAN's MENA program seeks to elevate the voices and impact of women's civil society groups on issues of rights, security and peace in countries undergoing transitions, affected by rising militarism and extremism targeting women.

# Extremism as Mainstream: Implications for Women, Development & Security in the MENA/Asia Region

Brief 11

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## Key Findings

- Religious extremism is spreading into the mainstream throughout the Middle East and North Africa and in countries with significant Muslim populations.
- Extremist movements offer values, economic support and services, and a sense of community that are attractive— especially to the young and disenfranchised - in the face of persistent socio-economic problems, corruption and poor governance in these countries.
- Militarized and violent responses, including drone attacks, from outside actors foment greater support for these movements.
- Recent political transitions, instability, and conflict in the MENA region have created power vacuums, and highly-organized extremist groups have utilized these openings to spread their messages, often with funding from states and wealthy individuals in the Persian Gulf region.
- Women are directly and deliberately targeted by extremist movements in both subtle and overt ways. Extremist forces are exerting strong pressure to restrict women's legal rights and circumscribe women's participation in civic and political life. Women have also experienced more direct physical insecurity, sexual harassment, and assault in public settings.
- Extremists are spreading their religious teaching and directives through powerful channels of communication such as television and social media, and religious schools.
- In every country, women are mobilizing to counter the impacts of extremism. Women's organizations are directly engaging with communities, expanding awareness of religious tolerance and human rights, and advocating for gender equality. Unfortunately, these efforts are rarely recognized or supported by national or international policymakers.
- To mitigate the spread of extremism, governments and the international development community must focus attention and resources to addressing the underlying economic and social malaise, and recognize the inherent need for dignity and justice.

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Religious extremism is becoming more mainstream across Muslim majority countries in the Middle East, Asia and Africa. Extremist groups and organizations recruit in communities and operate trans-nationally, using a variety of non-violent, coercive and violent tactics. They are extremely well-funded and receive overt or covert political support from key states and private actors, notably in the Gulf. They promote a clear vision and set of values, claiming the mantle of ethics and morality in the face of corrupt or

### **Defining Religious Extremism**

For the purposes of this brief, religious extremism is defined as rigid interpretations of religion that are forced upon others using social or economic coercion, laws, intolerance, or violence. It is accompanied by non-fluid definitions of culture, religion, nationalism, ethnicity or sect which move citizens into exclusionary, patriarchal and intolerant communities. Only a small percentage of religious conservatives are extremist in this sense. Although the focus here is on Islamic extremism in the MENA/Asia region, it is important to note that religious extremism has appeared in many different regions of the world and has been associated with various religions. The use of violence justified for religious ends is a characteristic of some extremist movements, but not all.

predatory states. As purveyors of key social services in poor and disenfranchised communities, they have extensive reach and influence. The ideology they proffer has profound long-term implications for society, the economy and ultimately peace and security.

The targeting of women is a central feature of these movements. This has been evident for years in countries ranging from Indonesia to Pakistan, but the Arab revolutions revealed the depth and breadth of their reach and goals. Although women played critical roles as protesters and activists in the Arab uprisings, the political transitions that followed ushered in highly-organized, intolerant campaigns. Women in the MENA region and beyond are finding themselves struggling to save their families from war, and fighting for basic human rights and participation in civic life.

Women civil rights activists and peace-builders<sup>1</sup> who are active at local levels point out that religious extremists are appearing in

communities with no previous history of extremism and promoting extremely intolerant views of women that restrict female access to schools, the workplace, and public spaces. They frame it as a return to a previous era or history, but it is more of an imagined past than a real one. Female civil society activists say that governments are unwilling or unable to defend women's rights because extremists have accrued so much political and economic capital that states ignore women's rights violations in order to appease extremists. Even women's legal gains are being reversed in many countries, as restrictive and discriminatory laws and policies are proposed by ultra-conservatives.

But many women are taking a stand and countering extremism with different strategies. Some women's organizations are directly engaging with communities, others are challenging the monopoly of religious authorities over definitions and interpretations of Islamic text, and infusing universal human rights norms into the discourse. Many are pressing for equality under the law.

The organizations and individual leaders that collectively form women's movements in countries across the region do not have the resources, structures, or extensive outreach capabilities of the extremists. Despite shared concerns and values, there is fragmentation among them. Their capacity for strategizing for long term action is limited by the need to respond to more immediate crises and needs on the ground. They are further hindered by a lack of recognition from the international policy community, as the perspectives and experiences that women bring forward are often categorized as "women's issues" and disconnected from clear peace and security-related debates and decisions.

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<sup>1</sup> ICAN convenes a MENA/Asia regional forum of female activists every year. In 2012 and 2013, the topic of extremism in the region generated significant discussion among the participants. The 2013 Forum "Building Movements, Promoting Plurality," was a gathering of 70 activists from over 13 countries across the region.

Yet these movements are critical to mitigating and turning the tide of extremism across the MENA region and beyond. They are the only socially rooted, transnational groups mobilizing to counter rising extremism, and offering an alternative vision of the future. Their efforts could have a powerful, positive impact if acknowledged and supported more effectively by national and international policy actors.

In 2013, ICAN, in partnership with the MIT Center for International Studies and the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), hosted a two-day roundtable to better understand rising religious extremism from a gendered and ground-up perspective, highlighting the essential yet often overlooked implications for women and the efforts of civil society on the ground. The meeting included civil society practitioners, scholars and journalists with expertise from Canada, Pakistan, Malaysia, Egypt, Yemen, Tunisia, the United States, and Iran<sup>2</sup>. The roundtable addressed a range of questions, including:

- Who supports and funds extremist movements and why?
- Why are women targeted? Do the sponsors of Salafi and other extremist movements condone this, or is the repression of women an unintended consequence of the extremists' geopolitical goals?
- Why are young men, and entire communities, so susceptible to regressive social messaging?
- How are women's movements responding to the threats?

The statements and perspectives included here reflect views shared during the roundtable, and related research and analysis by ICAN. While this brief cannot do justice to the depth and complexity of the discussions, it is intended as a catalyst to widen the space for discussion, research, policy and practice among international and national level scholars and practitioners.<sup>3</sup>

### ***The problem within: The causes of extremism run deeper than anti-westernism***

Since September 11, 2001, the international community has dedicated significant attention and resources to curtailing extremism. Western policy makers have generally viewed extremist movements through a national security lens, as hostile and violent reactions to the West. Consequently, the responses from Western states have been militarized and security-oriented. Moreover, much of the policy-oriented research and programs have focused on violent manifestations of extremism, while failing to recognize that non-violent religious extremism is spreading into the mainstream and playing a powerful role in re-calibrating the social fabric of entire communities in the Middle East and other countries globally with sizeable Muslim populations. The rise of extremism, including the receptivity of regressive ideology and messaging in many countries, has not been fully analyzed from a socio-economic perspective.

Many of those who join and support these movements have borne the brunt of decades of state corruption, poor governance, repressive regimes, and poor development policies. Although they come from various socio-economic classes, they have witnessed or experienced rising inequality and absence of opportunity to live dignified lives. From Pakistan to Yemen, violence has worsened this structural injustice, and military actions have fueled a sense of outrage.

These extremist movements offer values and principles, basic services, and sense of community. They use political, moral, religious, and social discourses to support their agendas. The fast-paced political transitions in the region and subsequent state of instability have provided key opportunities for movements to enter and spread their ideologies in to the vacuums left by years of corruption and collapsing dictatorships. The attraction and rationale for supporting or joining such movements are more complex than simple antagonism towards the West.

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<sup>2</sup> The roundtable was conducted under Chatham House Rules. Therefore, participants have not been cited by name in this brief.

<sup>3</sup> ICAN would like to thank those that commented on and critiqued drafts of this publication, including AWID, the Center for Women's Global Leadership (Rutgers), the International Peace Institute (IPI), Norway, and conference participants.

## **Regression Rising: A Brief Overview**

Historically, various sects, schools, and approaches to Islam that have vied for power and influence. Some are more progressive and spiritual, such as Sufism, and others more regressive and dogmatic, such as Wahabbism. Religious extremism is often associated with Salafism or Wahhabism, but these two religious groups are not naturally exclusionist or violent. For example, Salafism began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century as a Sunni movement that opposed corruption and supported economic mobility, but it was co-opted over time by conservatives for political reasons.<sup>4</sup>

In the modern era, Islamic movements have played a central role in the tide of nationalism and rise of secular states. In Pakistan for example, Islam was the driving force for state formation. In the Arab world, the notion of Pan-Arabism took root in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as an anti-imperialist force, but Islam has always been a part of the social and legal fabric of society. Even under seemingly secular governments, the legal framework was often rooted in Shari'a law. Muslim values, traditions, and practices infused daily life, although they functioned with other cultural norms and influences. When Pakistan was founded 1947, for example, Sharia based personal status laws were widely supported by women because it guaranteed fundamental rights to education and ownership of property, unlike the colonial British laws. Islam was viewed as a syncretic religion and set of values that respected diversity.

The use of Islam as a mobilizing force for shared political identity across nations is a more recent phenomenon marked by key historical events in the region. The 1967 Arab-Israeli war ended the Nasserite experiment in promoting pan-Arab nationalism, and gave impetus to Islam as the shared identity. A number of events occurred in 1979, making it a pivotal year in the region. The Shah's demise and the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini and state-sponsored Shi'ism in Iran prompted strategic shifts throughout the Middle East. Secular and military leaders, such as Anwar Sadat in Egypt, co-opted Islamists in an effort to avoid the Shah's fate. In Pakistan, Zia Al-Haq consolidated his power base by introducing the Hudood laws in 1979 and cloaking himself in the mantle of legalistic Islam. The Russians invaded Afghanistan, heralding the subsequent rise of the Mujahedeen (Afghans and other fighters from around the region who fought the Russian occupation, using Islam as a mobilizing tool). In the same year, the siege of the Grand Mosque in Mecca led to a 1,000 deaths and French intervention. To counter the spread of Iran's *Shia* revolution, the Saudis unleashed their forces throughout the world, financing mosques, religious schools, and fighters. The ideology that gradually gained a foothold was overtly regressive towards women and more implicitly discriminatory towards minorities. It was the beginning of the "Arabization" of Islamic practices in Asian cultures, said one Pakistani participant. "Not Arabization" countered Egyptians and Tunisians, "but Saudization," noting that across Arab countries coexistence with other faiths and a more moderate form of Islam was the norm.

In the past decade, the Sunni-Shia struggle has intensified and extended throughout and beyond the Arab world. It is pitting Iran -- the dominant Shia state -- against Saudi Arabia as the purveyors of Sunni-Salafism and Wahhabism, with Qatar also as a major patron of the Muslim Brotherhood. While the struggle is most evident in the Iraqi political arena and the current proxy wars being waged in Syria, these groups are also active in Asia and Africa. They proselytize and spread their influence through mosques, schools, and the provision of social services.

Various social and economic developments throughout recent decades have further contributed to these trends, including:

- The rise of Persian Gulf oil states in economic and geopolitical influence, and their support for ultra-conservative religious entities and leaders.
- The migration of young students from Muslim societies to Western countries, who have found identity and belonging in Islamist student movements.

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<sup>4</sup> For more information about the histories and ideologies of Salafism and Wahhabism, read: Khan, Hamid et al. "Practitioners Guide: Islamic Law." *International Network to Promote the Rule of Law*, July 2013. p. 53-7, "Islamic Law Reinstated: The Role of Wahhabist-Salafism."

- The migration of Muslims from Asia and the Arab world, including students, professional engineers, lawyers, teachers and doctors, to the Persian Gulf, where they have been exposed to more conservative religious norms and practices and brought those back to their home communities.
- High birth rates, urbanization, and the absence of effective social services in poor communities and where state institutions are lacking.
- Poor education systems and lack of education and knowledge about the moderate progressive elements of Islam.
- Upward mobility, including access to education, jobs, and services, from affiliation with religious movements.
- Rejection of the secular state that is associated with a history of dictatorship and corruption and the embrace of an Islamic state that is perceived to enshrine core values of justice, morality, ethics and dignity.
- Rejection of the west, rooted in anti-colonial sentiment (related to the British) but fueled by antagonism towards the United States for its support of the dictatorships, the Iraq invasion, and its alignment with Israel's occupation of Palestine.

### **Religious Authority and the New Islam\***

Religious extremists create a new version of Islam in which their religious authorities challenge the traditional 'ulama (religious scholars). Extremists actively discredit the tradition of the 'ulama and state structures, instead encouraging submission to the authority of the text (the Qur'an) based on their rigid interpretations. They practice a "selective retrieval process" of religious texts, ignoring historical religious context as well as modern social contract and law. Salafis reject the traditional retrieval process of the Hadith (sayings and actions of the Prophet), which classifies the reliability of each section.

Through so-called religious leaders, extremists gain the authority and legitimacy that they need to control entire communities. In non-Arabic speaking countries, the ability to speak Arabic and quote the Hadith is an authority itself, especially for sheikhs who have lived and studied in the Persian Gulf. These "petty mullahs" are preachers who have false authority because of their social status. Although Wahhabism and Salafism are not naturally militant or violent, many younger mullahs preach "militant religiosity" that is not necessarily physical, but enforces a specific interpretation of Islam upon the community.

Because extremists rely on lack of education to coerce populations to follow their lead, it is to their advantage to keep women at home and prevent them from learning how to read and interpret original religious texts on their own. They actively condone the push-back of women as a way of opening up space for male authorities and extremist religious interpretations.

\*Taken from comments by Dr. Abdulaziz Sachedina, Professor and IIIT Chair in Islamic Studies at George Mason University, Sep 2013.

### ***Who supports modern day extremism and why?***

The new wave of political religious extremism in MENA/Asia and Africa is financed by Arab regional States and also by wealthy individuals in the Persian Gulf. This is less about religion than political calculation; such support bolsters regional power and protects economic and political interests in Persian Gulf countries. For example, Qatar has a history of supporting various Islamic groups in the region, in such countries as Egypt and Libya. As Islamists have gained momentum in the wake of the Arab Spring in the region, "Qatari military and monetary support for those groups translates into political influence."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Khatib, Lina. "Qatar's Foreign Policy: The Limits of Pragmatism" *International Affairs* 89: 2 (2013) 417-431.

Wealthy supporters, including dissenting members of ruling families in the Gulf, send funds to various religious groups through diaspora communities, through the “Hawala” system<sup>6</sup>, or through various illegal enterprises such as opium sales, kidnapping and smuggling.<sup>7</sup> Illegal organizations engaged in money laundering and drug and weapons trafficking are also taking advantage of extremist rhetoric to support their interests.

In transitioning countries such as Libya and Tunisia, power vacuums provide new openings for previously-repressed Islamic groups. In Syria, donors contribute to certain rebel groups to project their own power under the guise of revolutionary support. Rebel fighters have a clear incentive to radicalize;

If States use extremism to their benefit or fail to respond critically to hateful rhetoric, they are complicit in violating the human rights of their citizens. For example, governments pit religious extremist groups against one another to prevent the consolidation of power by any one group against the State.

they may not believe in all the extremist ideologies, but such an agenda yields more weapons, ammunition, and other aid.<sup>8</sup> These external actors weaken the government and civil society, consolidating power for the religious groups of their choice.

Furthermore, governments throughout the region tolerate and even exploit religious extremist groups in their countries. Often, governments pit these groups against one another to prevent the

consolidation of power by any one group against the state. Therefore, political actors have used religious extremism for their benefit. Some governments are more progressive at home, but support the spread of extremism abroad in order to keep it out of their own backyard.

The appearance of extremist trends in many communities has been a surprising development. Many activists in transitioning countries were shocked by the flood of monetary and human resources, media and political clout of new conservative religious groups and political entities. Tunisia, for example, is historically one of the most liberal societies of the MENA region. Political and financial capital, and religious scholars and texts promoting extremist ideologies, are increasingly imported into local communities. For example, women activists have noticed the increasing popularity of religious bookstores and the appearance of guest speakers from the Persian Gulf at mosques.

### **Manifestations of Extremism**

Regardless of religion, extremism manifests certain common traits, including rigid interpretations of religious texts and interpretations of what it means to be a good or bad Muslim, a good wife, or a good woman.<sup>9</sup> In the case of Islam, extremists label other interpretations, scholars, and institutions as fake, corrupt, and ignorant, pitting them against what they call “true” Islam.<sup>10</sup> Islamic extremism creates clear boundaries between Muslim and non-Muslim. Religious identity is pitted against other identities (culture, language, gender, race, for example), fomenting social divisions, and creating political and economic rifts.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The Hawala system is a cheap, unrecorded way of transferring money across borders. “Cheap and Trusted.” *The Economist*, 22 Nov 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Eric Lichtblau. “Cash Flow to Terrorists Evades U.S. Efforts.” *New York Times*, 5 Dec 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Dickinson, Elizabeth. “Playing with Fire: Why Private Gulf Financing for Syria’s Extremist Rebels Risks Igniting Sectarian Conflict at Home.” *Brookings*, 6 Dec 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Malaysian women’s rights activist, Sep 2013.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Islamic Religious Scholar, Sep 2013.

## ***Direct and deliberate targeting of women: Misogyny as ideology***

Patriarchy and the subservience of women are common elements of extremist ideologies and practices. These ideologies create boundaries between women and men, manifested through legal and physical means.

In contemporary contexts, the subservience of women is tinged heavily with misogyny. This counters many of the traditional values and customs in Middle Eastern societies where women - mothers in particular - are held in high esteem. Today, women are direct targets of ideologues who seek to assert masculine power. In the current context, extremists play upon growing anti-Western feelings, portraying women's rights as a "western invention to spoil Muslim society."<sup>12</sup> "Feminism is portrayed as an extension of colonialist politics," according to a Malaysian expert on women and Islam.

In many countries, the increasing levels of education and participation of women in the workforce contradicts the strict gender roles propagated by the religious rhetoric.<sup>13</sup> In response to this threat on "rujula" (manliness), men have asserted their social and economic dominance through social restrictions and discriminatory laws.<sup>14</sup> Yet they are facing a dual challenge of fulfilling their own socially circumscribed roles. On the one hand many lack the skills or education needed to compete in a competitive and often service-oriented work place. On the other hand, they find themselves in competition with women for the few scarce jobs that do exist.

"I can understand why men want an Islamic state and shari'a law because it privileges them."

-Malaysian women's rights activist, Sep 2013

As Islamic scholars note, there are two paradigms operating in the Muslim world. On the one hand, *islah* or reformation by making indigenous cultural cognitive paradigm the source of stability in the human relationships. On the other hand, 'Nahda' the paradigm that seeks copying the West and its Darwinian, materialist agenda to perpetuate dependency on the West. Given the disillusionment with the western model and its association with moral depravity, corruption and violence, the 'revival' of Islamic values or 'islah' is attractive to many. But the paradigms are not mutually exclusive. For many of those who seek 'islah' embrace much of the technology and scientific progress that arises from western ideology. It is in the realm of social and cultural norms and values that the division is most acute.<sup>15</sup>

Although the battle over traditional gender roles is not new, the rise of religious extremism is appearing in very concrete ways across the region, halting and sometimes reversing the recent progress made on women's rights and pushing women out of the public sphere. In post-revolutionary Tunisia, police have harassed women at cafes, accusing them of prostitution.<sup>16</sup> In Yemen, traditionally an agriculture-based society where women worked in the fields, women's presence is decreasing in public and women are keeping their faces covered.<sup>17</sup> In Egypt, some women's rights activists felt compelled to don the hijab for their own security.<sup>18</sup> During the protests in Tahrir Square in 2013, women were sexually harassed and assaulted in order to create fear.

Religious parties are also using women "à la carte"<sup>19</sup> at crucial moments for political advantage. For example, in Yemen, the *Islah* party's "two-faced policy" encouraged women to vote, which endeared the

<sup>12</sup> Yemeni scholar and journalist, Sep 2013.

<sup>13</sup> In the majority of countries in the Middle East today, women account for the majority of university students, although women still lag behind in participation in the workforce. Davies, Catriona. "Mid-East Women Beat Men in Education, Lose Out at Work" *CNN*, 6 Jun 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Shareen Gokal, Strategic Initiative Manager of the Resisting and Challenging Religious Fundamentalisms program at the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID). Sep 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Islamic religious scholar, March 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Tunisian activist and scholar, Sep 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Yemeni woman scholar and journalist, Sep 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Egyptian women's rights lawyer, 15 Jan 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Egyptian woman scholar and politician, Sep 2013.

party to Western observers and liberal Yemenis. Yet, the party never put forward a female candidate, effectively constraining the political space for women.<sup>20</sup> In Algeria, political party quotas for women were also introduced as calculated “window dressing” to gain favor with the middle class and the West.<sup>21</sup>

Even in relatively small numbers, extremist groups have influenced social norms, laws, and national constitutions through political parties and religious authorities. Across the Middle East, countries have experienced a regression to more conservative laws in such areas as marriage, personal status, and voting rights. In many other cases, a number of proposed laws and amendments have been put forward by political and religious leaders that would curtail women’s legal gains. These proposed legal changes and new laws are a direct challenge to progress made on women’s rights throughout the last century, particularly since the 1970’s. The debates that have ensued in these countries demonstrate how divisive basic women’s rights have become in societies where extremist views are gaining influence. Political leaders in these countries often defend their own regressive laws by pointing to other countries in the region with even more regressive laws – creating what one roundtable participant termed as “a race to the bottom” on women’s rights.

Examples include:

- **Egypt:** the 2012 constitution included provisions that concerned women’s rights activists. Legislation was introduced to reduce the minimum age for girls to marry from 18 to 14 or younger.<sup>22</sup> Parliamentarians also discussed limitations on divorce rights, freedom of movement, and permission of female genital cutting (FGC), which some religious leaders in the country have openly supported.<sup>23</sup>
- **Libya:** an equality provision was removed from the 2011 constitution.<sup>24</sup> The head of the National Transitional Council – Libya’s interim government -- also announced in October, 2011 plans to lift the ban on polygamy.<sup>25</sup>
- **Tunisia:** The ruling Islamic party tried to insert gender “complementarity” into the new constitution.<sup>26</sup> After a public outcry, the National Assembly approved a provision guaranteeing gender equality and non-discrimination.<sup>27</sup>

“It’s easy to target women to show-off and to present themselves as committed religious people... [in Yemen], Salafi and Huthi tried to build their legitimacy on the basis of enmity against the West... they always claim that women’s rights are a western invention to spoil Muslim society.”

-Yemeni woman scholar and journalist, Sep 2013

Even when equality provisions are in place, women face an uphill battle with ensuring their rights are protected in practice. In the region today, religious interpretations are often enforced in cases of conflict between secular and religious law, and existing laws are often not upheld. One Pakistani activist noted that laws such as the Equal Citizenship Act in Pakistan are not implemented in practice in the country. This “normalization of [an] intolerant social environment” bolsters the agenda of religious extremists in these countries.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Yemeni woman scholar and journalist, Sep 2013.

<sup>21</sup> American expert of MENA history, Sep 2013.

<sup>22</sup> McVeigh, Tracy. “How Egypt’s Radical Rulers Crush the Lives and Hopes of Women.” *The Guardian*. 30 Mar 2013.

<sup>23</sup> Mohamed, Reem. “Women and the Arab Spring: Tough Choices to Make.” *OpenDemocracy*, 25 Oct 2013. See also “Egypt Girls Death Puts Spotlight on Genital Mutilation.” *BBC News*, 19 Jun 2013.

<sup>24</sup> McVeigh.

<sup>25</sup> “Libya Lifts Ban on Polygamy as Fears Grow of an Islamic State.” *International Business Times*, 28 Oct 2011.

<sup>26</sup> Daraghi, Borzou. “Term used for women in Tunisia’s draft constitution ignites debate, protests.” *The Washington Post*, 6 Aug 2012.

<sup>27</sup> “Tunisia Assembly Passes New Constitution.” *BBC News*, 27 Jan 2014.

<sup>28</sup> Pakistan woman activist, Sep 2013.

### ***The medium and the message: technology and regression***

Extremists play upon the hopes and fears of their target populations, using the rhetoric of anti-imperialism and Islam versus the West. Often they start by simply taking advantage of people's lack of religious education. Much of this rhetoric is transferred through accessible media, such as television, the Internet, and text messages. In Egypt, the rise of religious channels began in the early 2000's and became an effective way for the Muslim Brotherhood to reach the population. Today, 70 percent of Egyptians watch religious television channels regularly, and 30 percent watch them occasionally.<sup>29</sup> Television producers have greater incentives to produce more conservative material because advertising companies are often Saudi-owned, and conservative programs are more likely to generate funding from wealthy donors.

According to an Egyptian women's rights activist and journalist, younger generations are "completely subdued by televangelists" who wear Western clothes to appeal to youth. In Egypt, religious programming has become more politicized. During the elections and constitutional referenda religious authorities on these channels gave directives about how viewers should vote.<sup>30</sup> While protesters filled Tahrir Square, self-proclaimed sheikhs on television defended the sexual attacks that women were facing.<sup>31</sup> In at least one case, a Salafi preacher said it was "halal" (permissible) to rape female protestors (he was later arrested and charged with defamation of religion).<sup>32</sup>

Internet and social media have also become influential channels of communication.<sup>33</sup> SMS messaging are used to circulate messages. In Pakistan, extremists have co-opted the identities and phone numbers of respected foreign sheikhs and sent out mass SMS messages.<sup>34</sup>

### ***Filling the education vacuum***

Extremists have also used gaps in education to influence youth and communities. For example, 40 percent of the population in Egypt is illiterate, and academic curricula is lacking in many areas (even at the university level). Religious education is taught in mosques and emphasizes prayer and rituals, with little awareness of religious values.

In Yemen, religious schools took on political agendas after 1974. Various sects such as the Huthis (Shi'ite), Salafis and Sunnis have established religious schools – funded by Saudis, Iranians and others – as a form of outreach from mosques.<sup>35</sup> Private Salafi schools funded and managed by Saudis inject regressive views and one-sided religious teachings directly into the education system.<sup>36</sup> Saudis also fund mosques, madrassas and visiting religious scholars.

In Pakistan, radical Islamists use all-female madrassahs as a mechanism to spread extremist ideology. The curricula are designed by men with three key goals: to educate girls to be ideal mothers, train them to perform their domestic chores, and ensure women preserve and transmit conservative Islamic traditions and beliefs to their children. The number of women attending these madrassahs in Pakistan is increasing as more facilities and financial incentives are offered. In the 1970's such schools were rare. By 2009 for example, there were 1,900 registered all-female madrassahs, 15 percent of madrassahs in

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<sup>29</sup> Egyptian journalist and women's rights activist referring to findings from a study by Zainab Hamed at Cairo University. See Sarah L Masry, "A Polarised Media: Religious Satellite TV Channels." *Daily News Egypt*, 3 Apr 2012.

<sup>30</sup> Egyptian journalist and women's rights activist, Sep 2013.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> "Detained: Egyptian sheikh who said it is 'halal' to rape female protesters." *Al Arabiya English*, 17 Feb 2013.

<sup>33</sup> In 2013, the Egyptian Ministry of Communication and Information Technology reported that the number of Internet users in Egypt had reached 36 million, an increase of 15 percent from the year before.

<sup>34</sup> Pakistani civil society activist, Sep 2013.

<sup>35</sup> Pakistani civil society activist, Sep 2013.

<sup>36</sup> Yemeni scholar and journalist, Sep 2013. See also Mouzahem, Haytham. "Sunni-Shi'a strife inspires Houthi-Salafist conflict in Yemen." *The Atlantic Post*, 20 Dec 2013.

the country.<sup>37</sup> These religious schools rely on memorization of select religious texts. It is a tried and tested means of transferring specific information and quashing critical thinking. The texts selected include passages that convey the overt rejection of women's presence in the workforce and in other public spaces. In such a conservative society, this targeting of women is interpreted as commitment to religion.<sup>38</sup>

### **Standing Their Ground: How Women Counter Extremism**

Women's movements are the only transnational voice taking a stand and speaking out against the mainstreaming of extreme ideologies. They have been working to bring attention to and prevent the spread of extremism since the late 1980's. Women's activists and women's organizations are using a variety of strategies to counter the extremist discourse and address the root causes of radicalization. Examples of ongoing efforts include:

- **Challenging the monopoly of religious authorities over definitions and interpretations of Islamic text:** Activists are expanding awareness of Islam and its many interpretations. Recognizing that it is very difficult to de-radicalize youth, these initiatives focus on prevention through education.<sup>39</sup> They aim to disentangle patriarchy and culturally-specific practices that condone violence or the subservience of women from religion. They also attempt to separate fiqh (human constructed texts and interpretations) from the statements of the Qur'an. For example, the Malaysian-based network Musawah uses religious texts and women's life experiences to deconstruct the idea of male authority and start a new discourse on gender. "Musawah believes that religious authorities and governments do not have the monopoly to define what Islam is and how it should regulate citizens' lives, in private or in public. In a society where Islam is used as a source of law and public policy, everyone has the right to speak out on Islam."<sup>40</sup>
- **Infusing rights-based approaches to religious discourse and texts:** There are also many ongoing efforts to identify the commonalities between Islamic teachings and values and universal human rights frameworks. Women's initiatives engage religious scholars and clerics in such discussions to raise awareness of universal human rights norms and dispel notions that human rights are Western and therefore an anathema to Islam. These programs share the roots of plurality and democracy in Islam.<sup>41</sup>
- **Protecting gender equality under the law:** Many women's organizations are focused on ensuring the implementation of laws based on gender equality principles, advocating against potential regressive legislation, or campaigning to change discriminatory laws. Advocates draw upon universal human rights norms and international conventions, notably the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). For example, the One Million Signature Campaign in Iran used multiple strategies, including recruiting volunteers, public outreach, and social and mainstream media to make the case that Shari'a law can reflect international human rights standards.<sup>42</sup>

In many countries in transition, women are leading efforts to prevent a regression in legal rights by extremist forces. Activism among women has visibly increased in the MENA region since the Arab Spring.<sup>43</sup> In Tunisia and Egypt, for example, conservative political parties have mobilized to roll back women's legal protections. In reaction, women have pressed for guarantees for equal rights and non-discrimination. In Egypt, the Center for Egypt Women's Legal Assistance (CEWLA) advocates for inclusive human rights protections, including constitutional provisions, and provides direct legal

<sup>37</sup> Butt, Riazat. "All-Female Madrasas Expanding Rapidly in Pakistan." *One World South Asia*, 15 Mar, 2009.

<sup>38</sup> "Religious Schools in Yemen," by a Yemeni woman scholar and journalist. 27 Sep 2013.

<sup>39</sup> See box "Preventing Radicalization in Pakistan."

<sup>40</sup> More information about Musawah can be found at [www.musawah.org](http://www.musawah.org).

<sup>41</sup> Sachedina, Abdulaziz. *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism*. Oxford University Press, 2011.

<sup>42</sup> Tahmasebi, Sussan. "The One Million Signatures Campaign: An Effort Born on the Streets." *Amnesty International*, September 2013.

<sup>43</sup> "Arab Spring or Arab Autumn?" *CARE International Policy Report*, Sept 2013.

aid to women.<sup>44</sup> In Tunisia, the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women has been active in raising awareness about women’s rights and pressing for gender equality in the country. Civil society organizations and activists have been a bulwark against a tide of ultra-conservative attempts to curb participation and protections for women.

- **De-radicalizing youth, and providing livelihood alternatives:** Women leaders and women-led organizations are also engaging directly with communities and young men that have been radicalized. In Pakistan, the Paiman Trust draws on social networks to reach out to Talib youth, and offers them holistic programs to address psycho-social, economic needs, as well as conveying peaceful and moderate interpretations of Islam and peacebuilding concepts.

However, the women’s movement does not have the resources, structures or extensive outreach capabilities of the extremist movements they are countering. They face political constraints, and despite shared concerns and values, there is fragmentation among the women’s groups. Their capacity for strategizing for long term action and sustainability are limited by the need to respond to more immediate crises and needs on the ground. They are further hindered by a lack of acknowledgement and recognition from the international policy community. The information, perspectives, and experiences that women bring forward are often minimized or categorized as “women’s issues” and disconnected from clear peace and security-related debates and decisions. Yet these movements are critical to mitigating and turning the tide of extremism across the MENA region and beyond.

### **The Way Forward: Moderating the Mainstream, Stemming the Tide of Extremism**

Extremist movements, including the spread of non-violent extremist ideologies, have clear geopolitical peace and security implications. Turning the tide of rising extremism will require a fundamental realignment and re-prioritization of development policies and programming. Programs must be multi-faceted and integrated into each stage of radicalization. At a basic level, tackling this problem will not be possible without a better understanding about the socio-economic factors that create fertile ground for these movements to flourish. Much more attention needs to be directed to the basic needs and grievances of those who are most vulnerable to recruitment into extremist movements, and to address the growing gap between rich and poor. Women-led initiatives need to be supported throughout the region as a bulwark against future radicalization of youth and communities, regression in laws and policies, and general societal intolerance towards diversity and pluralism.

#### **Preventing Radicalization in Pakistan\***

The Pakistani non-profit PAIMAN Trust is based on the theory that “peace begins at home” – that the prevention of radicalization needs to focus on women and their families and communities. According to two leaders of the organization, even uneducated women are amazingly effective as early warners. PAIMAN Trust creates peace groups of youth and mothers that work within communities to identify early warnings signs of extremism. Local trainers and mentors de-radicalize youth using the exact same Qur’anic verses used to radicalize youth, but presented within their context and the youth’s own environment. Unlike the few government de-radicalization centers, PAIMAN Trust works on reintegration and trust within communities, especially for youth who have ruined relationships and done harm in their own hometowns.

\*Find out more at [www.paimantrust.org](http://www.paimantrust.org).

<sup>44</sup> See [cewla.org](http://cewla.org) for more information.

Expanding the space for dialogue among policymakers, scholars and practitioners working nationally and internationally is one step in the process of improving research, analysis, and approaches. Participants in the ICAN roundtable highlighted a number of recommendations for stakeholders who are working in this area of policy and practice:

### **Media & Dialogue**

- Raise awareness about religious interpretations and beliefs, and open space for further discussion about Islam and faith. Explore traditional Muslim networks to combat extremism.
- Work with the media to promote respectful and pluralistic freedom of speech and religion, and hold the media accountable for perpetuating hate speech and extremism.
- Use a variety of communications channels to expand public debate and engagement, especially among youth. Develop and apply counter-narratives in support of women's rights.
- Coordinate across national borders to share tactics and create a cohesive regional media strategy.

### **Development & Security**

- Recognize the effects of religious extremism on development and security. Move beyond a sole focus on anti-terrorism and military solutions and incorporate development goals and initiatives into de-radicalization and counter-terrorism efforts.
- Initiate a reform of current development policies and practices to ensure outreach and impact in the most vulnerable areas and communities, especially among young men who are most prone to recruitment by extremist groups.

### **Education & Society**

- Integrate peace education, including civics, and the importance of human rights and democratic laws into curricula. Implement programs, and mobilize resources to support community engagement for peace.
- Understand the modalities and strategies used to spread extremism, including the social and value-based drivers of extremism, through additional research and policy dialogue.
- Engage indigenous women's movements to develop new strategies to support their efforts in promoting women's rights.
- Ensure that policies and programs address social cohesion and plurality.
- Recognize the impact of extremism on women and children, and highlight the role of mothers and families in countering extremist attitudes and encouraging reconciliation in communities.

Perhaps most importantly, direct engagement is needed with the communities and sectors of society most affected. Extremist movements take advantage of basic human needs, including the desire for dignity, respect, and economic, political and social inclusivity. These motivations need to be understood and addressed in domestic and international efforts, particularly in terms of comprehensive social and development policy and programmatic alternatives. Fostering and reinvigorating the culture of tolerance, plurality and diversity in these countries is central and urgent to curbing the rise of extremism, and promoting sustainable and just peace and security.

All *What the Women Say* publications are available at:

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