

Friends of PVE (Preventing Violent Extremism) Meeting
with UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres
March 1, 2019

Keynote Remarks (full statement) by
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Good morning Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for this opportunity. In anticipating today's event, two questions came to mind, so I'll share them and respond to them based on my years of work with women globally on peace and security including PVE, in war and conflict zones around the world. The first question that is often on people's minds but many are too polite to ask it out loud.

Are women really relevant to P/CVE?

Is gender really an issue we have to pay attention to?

Isn't this just political correctness but we're not sure why?

To answer them I'd like to take you briefly on the journey I've been on...

I came to the UN for the first time exactly 20 years ago as a young advocate chasing down your predecessors to advocate, cajole and get them on board with what became the 'women, peace and security agenda' – or Security Council Resolution 1325.

We came to the Security Council because we saw that wars and the nature of violence were changing and that the UN's ability to reach internal contexts and communities was limited.

We could also see conflict and violence metastasize, and that extremism was already in our midst.

We also saw and felt how fundamentalist and violent extremist movements across the spectrum have the subservience of women as a core element of their ideology and vision – like the Taliban and their violent misogyny in the 1990s. But we also saw it with other

fundamentalist movements – even here at the UN – seeking to control women’s bodies and reproductive rights.

But when we warned – the world did not listen.

Why? Because so much the violence that women experience is framed as cultural, and not as a “security” threat. In subsequent years, as we warned about rise of violent extremism, we experienced the disconnect to the international counter-terrorism/countering violent extremism (CT/ CVE) world.

More often than we as women peacebuilders and rights activists, exist in a parallel universe to the global CT/CVE world. Opportunities like today, when our worlds interact are rare. So much so that even as late as 2015, the leader of the most prominent CVE organization attended a UN meeting, saying 'we still have to research to see if/how gender matters'.

Well, through my work, empirical evidence from our WASL partners across the world, here are the facts.

Extremist movements around the world today - all tap into visceral identity – faith or ethnicity - and always gender. They elevate one identity above all else, for example 'white supremacist' above nationality or other identities.

They *also* have rigid notions and interpretations of role and status of men and women. Across the spectrum of those who claim to represent a faith or ethnicity, patriarchy and hyper masculinity dominate. Women are meant to be subservient.

In other words, GENDER identity and the status of women and men is a core tenet of the ideology of extremist movements – whatever their religious or ethnic leaning.

But there is a twist: these movements may want women to serve, but they understand the value of having women. They know women have hidden influences within the social fabric and are key conduits of conveying values and ideals into their families and communities. Women are also valuable because they are pivotal to sustaining the movements, from cooking and providing sex, to supporting logistics, acting as recruiters, financiers and protectors, and of course producing children to enable the longevity of the movements.

These movements have realized that if they tap into women's aspirations and grievances, into women's need to have purpose and belonging, to have respect, to have a livelihood, to feel empowered and be heard, they can get women, of all ages, but especially the young, to join.

In other words, they are co-opting and exploiting the women's empowerment agenda. It is an uncomfortable truth to say that while globally we are good with the rhetoric of equality and empowerment but have not delivered sufficiently, these movements are actually delivering results to many women and girls who are truly invisible in the eyes of their societies and states.

But precisely because they understand women's potential power and influence, these groups are also focused on silencing, if necessary, killing women's rights and peace activists who speak out against them.

I would like to emphasize that it is not enough to focus on women in the police force or women in politics. For effective PVE and peacebuilding, our civil society partners are essential. They are often the only people willing to reach and engage all sides, the only people to have the trust of their communities. But it is risky work, so they are often alone and targeted by all sides.

There is another aspect to consider: if we survey the world, you will notice that violent extremist movements are all locally rooted but globally connected. In other words, in each context they have their own local flavoring. They are adept at adjusting messaging and tactics to meet changes on the ground. And much of recruitment occurs through faith or kinship ties or closed community spaces.

Simultaneously, however, across the world they have a shared global mission and vision. Their intolerance of diversity, of minority groups, of women etc. are the same.

What does this have to do with women?

Well since 2012 my organization, ICAN, has been convening our partners from ever expanding number of countries. They are all locally-rooted women-led organizations. Whether from north or West Africa, the Middle East or South Asia, they too have their own unique characteristics and flavors. But when brought together they too have a common vision for the world.

Their version and vision are founded on principles of pluralism and inclusivity, equality, justice and non-violence.

In other words - from within the same cultural contexts, we see diametrically opposite visions. One is intolerant and violent, the other is celebrating pluralism and non-violent conflict resolution, and it is actually far more authentic and indigenous in form.

Both address grievances and aspirations, but while violent extremist groups legitimate violence as a pathway to attaining their vision, our partners offer positive alternative routes that reaffirm the positive values of their cultures and traditions.

As one of our colleagues involved in deradicalization of young men in her community says 'I don't denigrate their faith or need to do God's work or Jihad. Rather I have helped them understand that they can fulfill this religious duty better by giving blood in the hospitals, not spilling it in the streets.'

This is a profound threat to the violent extremist movements because they have sought to co-opt culture, and religion, claiming that anything that speaks of diversity or equality or human rights is 'foreign'/illegitimate. Our local partners challenge them. That is why violent extremist groups often seek to silence and threaten these women.

At ICAN we imagined that if our local partners were globally connected, they would be a very powerful counterweight to the violent extremist movements. After many years of consultations, we finally spearheaded the Women's Alliance for Security Leadership (WASL) to foster and strengthen this alternative universe of voices and lessons that women bring. We do so through two core strategies:

First, we support their direct and immediate impact, reach and credibility at the community level. We do this by providing financial and technical support through ICAN's Innovative Peace Fund, small grants program. Some examples of the impact include:

- In 2015 we provided \$8,000 to our partners in South Asia to disburse to their volunteer youth and women's groups to conduct cultural activities to raise awareness about the spread of violent extremist ideologies in their local communities. So far it has resulted in 200 warnings of early radicalization, 13 attacks prevented and 100s of young people joining the volunteer groups.
- A grant of \$30,000 led to rehabilitating women who were sewing suicide jackets into doing other income generating work.
- Currently \$33,000 is helping to rehabilitate 60 women who were former wives of Boko Haram commanders. Some had been abducted and brain washed as children and were still wishing to fulfill suicide missions.
- \$30,000 to a partner in West Asia has enabled her to establish a local men's network including Imams and village leaders. They are resolving local disputes nonviolently, preventing violence against women and children and countering the rise of violent extremism in their communities.

What we see is that funds into the right hands at the right time can go a long way.

Simultaneously we are addressing key pillars of national PVE plans of action from a gender lens. For example, in 2017 we drew on empirical analysis of security issues and identified the need for strong community policing – with human rights at its core – as a critical and efficient means of enabling prevention and building community trust in the state.

On economic issues, despite some concern from our donors, we unpacked how neoliberalism, including the shrinking of state education and welfare and our slide into extreme capitalism – has sowed the ground for rising extremism and related violent extremism.

We have also tackled the thorny issues related to the return and rehabilitation of women and girls associated with violent extremism. In January we produced the *Invisible Women* report with UNDP, offering practical guidance to governments to take a holistic approach and fill existing gaps in our policies, laws, justice, psychosocial and other services.

We have also analyzed what's missing in our education systems and curricula and documented good practice that are instilling important values and skills to enable our children to feel belonging and ensure that instead of being vulnerable to bigotry/intolerance they are resilient against and even 'allergic' to any such behavior and messaging.

In every case we have provided practical solutions for government and UN action. This brings me to the 2nd question and recommendations:

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen: Preventing or countering violent extremism - these are negatives. They tell us what we are against. But 18 years on since the War on Terror and 5.9 Trillion dollars: *What we are for?*

We need to reframe our vision.

At the UN we live with an alphabet soup of WPS, PVE CVE, sustainable peace, conflict prevention. We need a conceptual shift to define that to which we aspire. We as women involved in this work offer PREP as the overarching frame:

P for Peace – and a commitment to truly limiting use of violence – in our communities, societies by states – No need to silence or imprison human rights or women's rights activists – they are not a threat.

R – for *Resilience*. Our children and youth need to be equipped with different skills to cope and earn livings in this changing world. They also need to have the mental health skills to cope with stresses and crises and knowledge to push back the rhetoric of bigotry.

E – is for *equality*. We have to treat each other with respect and dignity across our ethnic, gender, religious or other divisions. It's nothing new. We have the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and so many other policy frameworks. It's high time we practiced them.

And the final P is for *Pluralism*. We are living in the age of Extreme Pluralism. If visceral identities of faith, gender, familial, ethnic or national ties are being exploited to foster exclusion and division, then our multiple identities that bind us across the divisions needs to be recognized and celebrated. It sounds easy but many governments are reluctant to acknowledge this plurality. We must do it. Our children must see themselves reflected in society, in arts and history and schoolbooks.

Finally, I end with this message. CSOs are not your adversaries. Each sector has its own comparative strengths. We are your allies. Civil society at the local level is important because they have the trust and access that we don't. They are the bridge to communities who no longer trust institutions. We need you to value, respect, and above all ensure protection for women peacebuilders. My partners on the frontlines – are putting their lives on the line- yet they face threats from violent extremist groups and their own governments. They are committed because their own families and communities are affected and they have no exit strategy. So work with us.

Imagine a Persian carpet as a metaphor for our social fabric. Each thread of colour is needed to complete the design. It needs to be tightly woven together, but at the moment, each colour is being pulled in a different direct. We need to reweave and value each thread.

Thank you