



5th Annual *What the Women Say* Forum
Preventing Extremism by Promoting Rights, Peace and Pluralism
November 12-14, 2016 in Colombo, Sri Lanka

Concept Note

Context

We live in the age of rising extremism. Extreme capitalism is breeding deep inequalities across all our societies—thwarting the aspirations of young people—from the middle classes to the poor. It has contributed to the rise of identity-based extremisms that use religion and ethno-nationalism to tap into people's grievances and aspirations but instead sew mistrust, bigotry and violence in our midst. We also see the extreme militarism of states closing down moderate civil society spaces, and spending vast sums on military actions that have fueled even more violence. Yet it is also the age of extreme pluralism. Everywhere a diversity of ethnicities, religions, genders and generations demonstrates how we can and do live together peacefully. The challenge remains: how do we value and safeguard this diversity while ensuring social cohesion, acceptance and inclusion.

For women, particularly those with the courage to stand up and speak out for peace, pluralism and rights, the implications of these developments are profound. They risk their lives as both state and non-state entities are targeting them for daring to criticize policies, and for offering alternative visions for their societies. They also face immense difficulty due to the lack of resources and economic hardships that impact their families and communities. But neither the threat of open warfare and constricting civil society space nor regressive legislation limiting rights have prevented women's activism and commitment to providing services, speaking up for marginalized populations, and articulating clear alternatives to the spread of extremist ideologies. While the world is still trying to articulate the problems of extremism and define their acronyms, CVE or PVE—Countering or Preventing Violent Extremism—women's organizations are working for solutions on the ground.

As women, we realized long ago that to challenge extremism and militarism effectively, we cannot simply focus on what we are 'countering' or against. Rather it is essential to determine what we are for and offer positive alternatives.

Program of the 2016 ICAN *What the Women Say Forum*

ICAN's 5th Annual *What the Women Say Forum* on women, peace and security will celebrate the formation of the Women's Alliance for Security Leadership (WASL) that participants in the 2015 Forum helped establish. The 2016 forum theme of ***Preventing Extremism by Promoting Rights, Peace and Pluralism*** will explore how women and women-led organizations are developing tools and methods to tackle the rise of intolerance, extremist ideology and violence through formal and informal education and training processes, using media, communal dialogue and other means. The information and analysis will be collated to develop a report to inform the WASL Global Solutions Exchange (GSX) Working Group on Education.

The Forum program will include the following sessions:

1. A review of the **developments and achievements of WASL** in the past year with attention to partners' in-country programming, participation in international policy processes and cross-country interactions;
2. **Inoculating against extremism through civic/peace education:** Across many of the countries affected by extremism and militarism, our partners have developed and implemented a range of civic and peace education curricula for schools and for adults in communities to challenge bigotry and intolerance. This session will enable an exchange of ideas and approaches, as well as strategies for engaging state authorities to develop and include curricula that are more reflective of the diversity of their societies (including diversity based on gender, ethnicity, religion, etc.);
3. **Sharing alternative religious narratives:** Women's civil society groups have been promoting rights, pluralism and non-violence rooted in religion and culture for decades. At the same time, extremist movements are promoting hate, sectarianism and bigotry while attributing their messages to religious teachings. This session will provide participants with the opportunity to share the materials they have developed to demonstrate that rights, pluralism and non-violence are integral to religious teachings and will share effective tactics and strategies for engaging with different stakeholders—notably local religious and traditional leaders;
4. **Rehabilitation and Reconciliation:** How can societies and communities accept and help reintegrate/rehabilitate former fighters when the fear, anger and mistrust against them may be intense? How can communities that have been affiliated with armed groups reconcile with the state when they have experienced injustice and violence at the hands of the state? These are critical questions of our time. This session will enable participants to share their practical approaches to the rehabilitation of individuals and communities that are stigmatized as a result of their association with militias and extremist movements;

5. **Acceptance and care for victims of conflict-related sexual and gender based violence (SGBV):** This session will examine how participants are working innovatively to reduce the stigma associated with victims of SGBV within their own families and communities, as well as efforts to promote greater state accountability for health and psycho-social services and justice;
6. **Monitoring and Evaluation training:** This session will be offered to participants and integrated into the forum agenda in line with ICAN's commitment to building professional and institutional capacities;
7. **WASL forward looking priorities and strategies:** This session will enable participants to share analysis regarding forthcoming concerns and opportunities, and ideas on how WASL should adapt/adjust its efforts in 2017;
8. Given the unique nature of the gathering, we will host a **reception with senior Sri Lankan state officials** and members of the diplomatic community in Colombo;
9. We will be holding video interviews with a number of participants to capture their experiences; and
10. We will have a brief site-seeing visit in Colombo.

Participant Profile and Countries Represented:

Participants at the ICAN Forum are innovative practitioners, thinkers and activists working to promote women's rights, peace and security in their respective countries. They enjoy strong links and relations inside their countries with other social movements, are trusted in their communities and are able to bring about change. While most participants represent civil society organizations, movements and groups, advocating for peace, rights and plurality, a select few will be journalists, researchers, scholars and political activists. ICAN intends to invite two to three participants from countries across the Middle East, North, West and East Africa, and Asia, as well as regional NGOs, INGO, UN and governmental partners from Europe and North America.

Sponsorship:

As the organizer of the event, ICAN with support from a number of donors intends to cover the travel and lodging costs of all women activists coming from the region, as well as costs related to the Forum (meeting costs, interpreters and equipment, trainers, etc.). International participants will be asked to cover their own travel, food and lodging costs.