Girl Ambassadors for Peace: Young Women and Girls Read and Lead to Counter Violent Extremism and Build Peace

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Introduction

For over 70 years, the United Nations has strived to work for global peace and security, strategizing, implementing and upholding human rights across the world. The rise of islamophobia, the fear or dislike of Muslim or Islamic groups and individuals has taken over our neighbourhoods, and now more than ever, our global politics.

Violent extremism has become the biggest threat of this modern age. This paper claims that violent extremism is an outcome of radicalization and that the involvement of women and girls is essential in order to counter violent extremism across the world. Throughout the paper, violent extremism and radicalization will be analyzed to further understand the importance and influence of gender mainstreaming, as well as offer a discussion regarding the importance of local grass-roots initiatives to counter violent extremism, as we can no longer rely on our political arena to keep our children safe.

The Issue

What is Violent Extremism?

Violent Extremism, like many other internationally recognized terms, is quite complex and difficult to define. The concept of terrorism has yet to be defined in the legal term, as it is situational and members of the international community have not reached an agreement as to the proper definition for this large term. Similarly with violent extremism, defining the concept has been a challenge. Schils and Pauwels (2014) offer an interpretation of the definition, as it pertains to crime and political violence; stating that crime as breaking the moral rules which have been defined by law, can also be applied to violent extremism but more so in the context of political violence (29). They also emphasize that the use of violent extremism causes confusion of the concept "since the differential interpretation of violent extremism prevents the establishment of a widely accepted definition" (Schils and Pauwels, 2014, 29).

Despite the confusion regarding the legal definition of violent extremism, Schils and Pauwels (2014) offer the definition of violent extremism as "politically and religiously motivated violence" (30) but that the focus must rely on the explanation of the moral rule, which is previously defined by law, being breached. Therefore, violent extremism, in the context of this paper, is defined as a breach of international or national law, which is motivated by religious or political belief, through the use of violence.

Borum (2011) discusses the importance of countering violent extremism (CVE). Countering violent extremism is a fairly new concept within the international community, as the growing concern for violent extremism has become a predominant international concern. This ever growing fear of extremism and violence has given birth to many United Nations conferences and strategies in hopes to counter the violence. Borum (2011) emphasizes that successful efforts for countering violent extremism must also consider and target the elimination of new extremists. The issue is not simply to end violent extremism, but to counter and squash the opportunity to foster new extremists. Borum (2011) stresses the importance of focussing on interrupting the

'radicalization' process, which refers to the process of "developing extremist ideologies and beliefs" (9).

Nevertheless, radicalization or radical ideas and violent justifications are not uncommon—Borum (2011) presses that individuals with radical ideas or violent justifications do not always engage in terrorism, in fact most do not (9). Borum (2011) adds that "ideology and action are sometimes connected, but not always" (10), hense we must be wary of the difference between terrorism and violent extremism. Terrorism which is most widely recognized as an attempt to impose fear onto another group or individual, is not violent extremism—and violent extremism is not terrorism.

Women and Girls affected by Violent Extremism

Sarah Sewall, the Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights of the United Nations, spoke in September 2016 in Washington, DC in regard to women and violent extremism. She states that "there is no greater threat to the rights of women and girls than violent extremism" (Sewall, 2016). Specifically, violent extremists have shifted their dialogue, to focus on the oppression of women and girls, by "denying girls access to education or the workplace, insisting that females dress in a particular way, encouraging gender-based violence, including child marriage and female genital mutilation and cutting" (Sewall, 2016). Although these are not surprising, as women and girls are seen as the weaker members of our societies, it is devastating to consider that millions of women and girls continue to endure these violations and that these acts of hatred continue to be propagated.

In many areas of the world, women's rights have not yet become part of the larger discourse. In countries like Nigeria, where girls are being kidnapped at school, brainwashed, and coerced into becoming suicide bombers; or in countries like Syria, where Yezidi women and girls are enslaved, abused sexually and treated as chattel that may be traded for goods (Sewall, 2016). Violent extremism, and the rise of radicalized disregard for human rights, continues to create barriers for women and girls.

The Etiology

Why Violent Extremism?

Experts continue to identify the large variety of causes of radicalization, which can lead to violent extremism. Although authorities have determined a number of different possible causes to this escalated violence, the fact remains that violent extremism and radicalization has yet to be explained—we cannot understand or propose probable causes for every situation which will or has led to violent extremism. Firstly, radical ideology is evidently a predominant cause of violent extremism, however, researchers have concluded that many of those subscribing to radical ideological views have limited understanding of their own positions; thus, individuals have limited understanding of their own beliefs (Angus, 2016, 4).

The second causes of radicalization are relationships and influence. In 2012, the United Kingdom Youth Justice Board conducted a review of religious violent extremism and radicalization (Angus, 2016, 5). With this study, they identified possible benefits that individuals obtain by joining radical groups or movements—benefits like rewards for members, close social ties, and developing relationships with individuals whom experience similar issues through their families or other associates (Angus, 2016, 5).

The third probable cause of radicalization and violent extremism lies within identity and social exclusion. Many studies have shown that issues of marginalization, racism, and social exclusion have the tendency to act as catalysts for radicalization of individuals and further emphasizes the potential of violent extremism (Angus, 2016, 5). Marginalized individuals have the tendency to seek understanding from their peers or to defy the social norms. Those whom are most vulnerable in our societies, are most likely to be radicalized or find the ideologies of radicalization appealing.

The fourth potential cause of radicalization and violent extremism is the perception of injustice towards an individual's community (Angus, 2016, 6). Victoria University conducted a research which showed that the Israel-Palestine, as well as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were central in the overall discussion of radicalization and the ability for groups to attract and maintain support for their radical ideologies (Angus,

2016, 6). Additionally, the Youth Justice Board found similar outcomes, claiming that the global war against Muslim victims could "predispose a person to Islamic extremism" (Angus, 2016, 6).

The fifth possible causes of radicalization and violent extremism are the models of the radicalization process. Therefore, researchers believe that the accumulation of all the previous factors lead to the radicalization of individuals and that these causes are all enmeshed (Angus, 2016, 7). Furthermore, the European Parliament in 2014 noted that the key to understand the processes of radicalization lies in the "analysis of the socio-political sequences of action and contexts, of interrelationships between social structures, political contexts and biographical exposure in which violence is embedded" (Angus, 2016, 7).

Lastly, the normality of extremists is noted as the sixth most likely cause of radicalization and violent extremism. Although there are a myriad of probable causes for radicalization, one of the most common characteristics of radicalized individuals lies with their normality. Angus (2016) argues that "there is no such thing as a single or even prevalent set of motivations, driving radicalization at the individual level" (9), which perhaps is the most terrifying aspect of radicalization; any individual can become radicalized, there are not specific attributes required to become an extremist.

Violent Extremism in the Media

Violent extremism leaves no stone unturned, no person untouched. Not only are millions direct victims of violent extremism, but those whom are not directly affected by the violence suffer through the new era of the Global War on Terror—the fight between the Global North and the Muslim communities. Islamophobia has taken over the media like wildfire. The new rhetoric of fear and hatred of Islam and Muslims, unfounded yet true, creates the ideal conditions for eventual violence and potential genocide of these people. Islamics and Muslims—although they are not the same, as you can practice the Muslim faith without being of Muslim decent, or the other way around—suffer from the racism which has been rising in regard to the fear of violent

extremism in the last decades.

Newly elected President Donald Trump, now the highest elected official of the world's superpower, was elected on the promise that he would limit immigration and refugee resettlements into the United States, to eliminate the threat of terrorism. Now, not only does President Trump disregard the difference between violent extremism and terrorism, Trump also emphasizes the fear and hatred the United States citizens'— among many other world citizens—have towards the Islamic people. Islamophobia affects all individuals as approximately 23% of the world's population is of Muslim origin or practices the Muslim faith (The Guardian, 2009).

Some have gone so far as to call President Trump the 'Islamophobia President' claiming that Trump has risen to power by exploiting the rise of islamophobia through his campaigns which will now become official policy in the United States and the world (Beydoun, 2016). This not only demonstrates the fear the American people have towards Muslim individuals, but the complete lack of regard for human rights and equality before the law of their fellow Muslim Americans. By running a campaign based on fear and hatred, Trump has opened the American doors to a large influx of hatred and bigotry.

The United States, now more than ever, are in need of a reality check. To understand that their words and actions, on the international stage have a direct impact on the response the extremist groups and movements, and the treatment of those groups towards the country for the next four years, and perhaps longer. Furthermore, President Trump has painted a target on the backs of all the American Muslim citizens, creating internal grievances and fear within its borders. This rising lack of understanding, fueled by dehumanization, further perpetuates the divisions with the United States and will eventually lead to far greater atrocities, than are already occurring between the Muslim-identifying individuals and the 'others.'

The Approach

Why Women?

Gender is a social construct which many across the world have fallen victim to. Although gender is socially constructed, many have dedicated their lives and practices to belittling one gender over the other; seeking to maintain the social inequalities of gender barriers. It is important, and essential, for world peace that gender mainstreaming be considered within the work of those whom seek to change this world. Gender mainstreaming must be implemented within grass-roots programming as well as by international actors—as we all have a role to play. We must be wary of our commitment to ending violence and negative peace, for many of our approaches do not consider adequate intersectional characteristics of individuals and groups.

Gender mainstreaming according to Sandole-Staroste (2011) "recognizes that gender relations are an essential aspect of any (conflict) situation, and that conflict, particularly violent conflict, changes gender relations in profound ways" (227). Therefore, gender mainstreaming recognizes the impacts of conflicts on women and men, and how both live experiences differently (Sandole-Straroste, 2011, 227). It is important to consider gender mainstreaming in all instances related to international humanitarian work, human rights, and conflict resolution. The essence of gender mainstreaming and feminism is not only about women; it is an issue about gender. This is important to consider in all walks of life.

Snyder (2011) emphasizes the importance of empowerment as a bottom-up approach, where women and girls are agents of change (50). Snyder highlights that "women must be significant actors in the process, not simply recipients of improved outcomes" (Snyder, 2011, 50). This is a valid argument, and continues to be a struggle especially within the international community. Many of the international communities' strategies for gender equality and empowerment do not lie in the hands of the local people, but rather are imposed or brought onto the local community members.

Gallant (2011) offers an analysis and exploration of international laws and programs to uphold human rights and conflict resolution. By highlighting the doctrines

like the Responsibility to Protect—which is fairly new—of the United Nations and its stakeholders, she identifies key issues related to humanitarian and conflict resolution work (403). However, it is essential to understand and discuss the need for inclusion of gender and gender mainstreaming in international programs and laws, which is often lacking within the international dialogue. The acknowledgement that both genders experience conflicts differently is quite universal, however, conflict prevention and reactions must truly take that into account, to uphold human rights of all civilians—whether they be a man or a woman.

It is essential for global peace and security, that all actors and agents of change consider gender within their frameworks and peace work. Gender mainstreaming provides the critical approach, which connects grass-roots initiatives to international actors. We must work with the local people in order to empower their voices, and not further silence them.

Women and Peace and Security

Gender in conflicts has always been an underlying issue which has long gone unaddressed. Women and girls have always been victims of conflicts, regardless of the geographical location of the issue. Societal pressures and realities unable women and girls during such times—violent or structurally violent conflicts—which makes them the most vulnerable individuals within wars. Not only are there societal expectations for women and girls, but sexual violence is prevalent in conflicts, arguably since the beginning of time. Leatherman and Griffin (2009) argue that sexual violence is used as a strategy of war within violent conflicts (362). This is one of the many unjust violations against women within violent situations.

The international community has adopted a landmark resolution to address issues of women and girls within conflicts. In October 2000, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 to work on women and peace and security (Leatherman and Griffin, 2009, 363). The Resolution addresses key discriminations faced by women and girls within conflicts, and outlines rights which must be upheld

internationally in regard to women's rights. Following this Resolution, the United Nations adopted subsequent resolutions addressing specific women's rights issues—such as UNSCR 1820 on sexual violence during conflict.

Leatherman and Griffin (2009) also argue that gender plays a key role in "defining people's entitlements and access to resources in society in general, and affects their social mobility, the effects of displacement and disintegration of communities may affect women more than men" (363). This demonstrates the importance of addressing discriminatory behaviour against women and girls within conflicts, as they are often primary victims of these situations. Not only are they victims, but they are further victimized during the post-conflict stages. Women and girls are silenced and need to bear the traumas that they have been subjected to, which is a problem related to our justice and conflict resolution practices.

Countering Violence Extremism

When the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 2178 condemning violent extremism on September 24, 2014, then Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon expressed grave concern over the "dramatic evolution in the nature of the terrorist threat" (Ban-Ki Moon, 2014). This threat, the resolution stresses, is increasingly "diffuse" (UN Security Council, 2014). Indeed, terrorist acts carried out by entities such as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) have only increased in number and reach since the adoption of Resolution 2178, demonstrating that violent extremism transcends national borders as well as cultural, religious, political, and socio-economic categories. Meanwhile, the number of civilians killed, displaced and sexually abused as a result of terrorist activities continues to grow each day, from Syria to Afghanistan to the United States, from Lebanon to France to Mali. Violent extremism remains one of the principal threats to international peace and security.

Similar to peace and security discussions in general, policy discourse and news media on violent extremism tend to posit men as radical aggressors, and women, as passive victims. The focus on violence against women and girls, whether it is ISIL's sexual

abuses or Boko Haram's mass kidnapping, has obstructed the fact that women are—and have been—active peacebuilders as well as perpetrators of violence.

With the paradigm shift brought about by UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on women, and peace and security, the recent adoption of UNSCR 2242 on women, peace and security of October 2015 and of UNSCR 2250 on youth, peace and security of December 2015, the international community now recognizes the indispensable role of women and girls in promoting peace and countering violent extremism. Without minimizing the differential impact of terrorism and violent extremism on the human rights of women and girls, UNSCR 2242 urges Member States and the UN system to: "ensure the participation and leadership of women and women's organizations in developing strategies to counter terrorism and violent extremism which can be conducive to terrorism, including through countering incitement to commit terrorist acts, creating counter narratives and other appropriate interventions, and building their capacity to do so effectively, and further to address, including by the empowerment of women, youth, religious and cultural leaders, the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism and violent extremism" (UN Security Council, 2015).

The recognition of women's agency in preventing violence and building peace also necessitates coming to terms with women's agency in adhering to violent extremism and in perpetrating acts of terror. For instance, women and men, most of them under 35, have been joining the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) at unprecedented rates. It is estimated that there are 600 Western women recruits, with much higher numbers of non-Western women (Jayne Huckerby, 2015). In spite of stereotypes regarding women's domesticity and passivity, women are "drawn to groups like the Islamic State by many of the same forces as men: adventure, inequality, alienation" (Greg Downey, 2015) and the "search of a meaningful path in life" (Greg Downey, 2015).

Given that gender-equal societies are "more resilient to conflict and less at risk of violent extremism" (Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2015), it is imperative to invest in

women empowerment, participation, education and leadership. This would not only counter the radicalization of young women and girls, but also better allow them to curb violent tendencies around them. Gendered, inclusive, multilateral, multifaceted strategies rooted in local efforts must be developed in order to counter violent extremism. In the words of Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, "the biggest threat to terrorists is not the power of missiles — it is the politics of inclusion" (Ban-Ki Moon, 2015).

The Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP) is an international coalition of women's organizations and civil society groups that bridges the gap between policy discussions and implementation and action on the ground on women and peace and security issues. With a broad membership base and partners in over 30 countries, GNWP has a proven track record in implementing UNSCR 1325 and the supporting resolutions in remote, rural communities as well as in strategic urban centers. GNWP members are at the forefront of civil society mobilization to build peace and prevent violent conflicts. They are actively lobbying governments and the UN to ensure women's participation in decision-making and to guarantee civilian protection.

Cognizant that small-scale, local initiatives are more successful than national and large-scale programs in reducing violence, and in line with recommendations in UNSCR 2242 and UNSCR 2250, GNWP has developed three programs that directly engage local actors in developing community initiatives that empower local authorities, youth, families, women's groups and other civil society organizations, religious, cultural and education leaders, as part of a gendered, community-based strategy to counter violent extremism (Berman, et al. 2013). These programs are: the Localization of UNSCR 1325 and 1820, the Girl Ambassadors for Peace, and the Community Social Dialogues.

Girl Ambassadors for Peace

The Girl Ambassadors for Peace (GA4P) program was first piloted in the Democratic Republic of Congo in August 2014, where girls from communities in Bukavu were

gathered for the initial training. With the Girl Ambassadors for Peace, the girls—aged 15 to 25—undergo a series of trainings from the local organizations, to then go back into their communities and replicate their knowledge.

The GA4P program is based on three pillars, literacy training, leadership, and capacity building. As many have noted, education is the key to success, education is a tool and a key for empowerment—and also a tool for developing strong and independent members of a community. With literacy, leadership, peacebuilding and technological skills, the GA4P and the young women and girls they train in local communities are able to hold their local leaders, national government and other institutions accountable to finding peaceful solutions to violent conflicts, while at the same time promoting, protecting and fulfilling women and girls' rights.

The literacy and leadership training of young women and girls in local communities by the GA4P also promotes responsibility and generates support among families and community members, who are able to see the program's positive impact on their daughters, girlfriends or wives—many young women in local communities are married off or have intimate partners. The program holds families and communities accountable: it prompts them to do their part in supporting and investing in women and girls' education so they can realize their full potential and contribute to countering violent extremism, long lasting peace, and sustainable development in their communities.

The project also makes critical connection to the private sector and entrepreneurs to solicit support that leads to the creation of economic empowerment opportunities for young women.

Through the training modules, toolkits and media materials produced, this project makes important contributions to existing literature that investigates the role of women in preventing and countering violent extremism. In addition, the knowledge production from this project contributes to the evidence-based research on women's role in countering violent extremism, by drawing on unique examples from the work of the GA4P with the young women and girls who learn from them, and the local

communities with whom they engage in dialogues.

GA4P Countering Violent Extremism

From an early age, girls in many parts of the world are told: 'You are *only* girls.' They are brought up to believe they should do as they are told, accept what they have and not ask too many questions. Women and girls are generally excluded from decision-making and peacebuilding processes. The plight of women and girls worsens in conflict-affected settings such as Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan and Bangladesh, where lack of access to education and information bars girls from leading and succeeding, making them more susceptible to both sexual violence and radicalization.

The Girl Ambassadors for Peace Program was developed by GNWP with the overarching goal to empower young women and girls in conflict situations to be positive role models in peacebuilding and countering violent extremism in their communities.

The program objectives are:

1. To raise awareness and promote the necessity for women's participation in countering violent extremism and peacebuilding among local communities in countries primarily affected by violent extremism;

2. To train young women and girls to become literacy instructors and trainers on UNSCRs on women and peace and security; and youth and peace and security;

3. To raise literacy rates in communities affected by conflict and violent extremism;

4. To develop leadership skills among young women and girls in communities affected by conflict and violent extremism;

5. To enhance the capacities of young women and girls to use information and communication technologies (ICT) and the media to propagate counter-narratives to those affected by violent extremism;

6. To contribute to a decrease in violent extremism in local communities using UNSCR 1325, 1820 and the supporting resolutions on WPS as well as UNSCR 2250 on youth, peace and security; and,

7. To promote the economic empowerment of young women and girls through skills development and entrepreneurship training.

The program goals and specific objectives of the Girl Ambassadors for Peace are attained through three complementary intervention strategies:

1. Capacity building of young women and girls to use literacy education, leadership skills, media, ICT and participatory theatre for awareness-raising on peacebuilding and CVE;

2. Literacy training among young women and girls in local communities affected by conflict and violent extremism; and,

3. Awareness-raising of young women and girls' leadership and participation in peacebuilding and countering violent extremism (CVE) in local communities.

Conclusion

Although there is a lack of comprehension and common understanding in regard to the definitions of radicalization and violent extremism, all can affirm that these are serious and dangerous threats to the overall global peace and security agenda. As some of the world's governments and their designated representatives are not fit to serve, and certainly do not hold the moral attributes of inclusive human rights advocates, change is left in the hands of civil society. Non-governmental organizations now face the burden of upholding and maintaining peace in our time. Gender mainstreaming and women's involvement is critical to attaining this just and equal world. Women and girls are essential to countering violent extremism, we must channel their abilities and foster an environment of possibilities for them to thrive as they become the next world leaders.

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