

Women's Contributions to Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism

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Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Keating, distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today about women's roles in countering terrorism.

Extremist groups use women to their advantage—recruiting them on the one hand as facilitators and martyrs, and on the other hand benefitting both strategically and financially from their subjugation. Yet, counterterrorism policy has not been as effective at understanding how women can improve security efforts. By convening this hearing, Congress sent a bipartisan signal that the United States can no longer afford to ignore how women's participation will improve the likelihood that counterterrorism efforts are successful.

Extremist groups benefit strategically and financially from the subjugation of women

Just last week, the Nigerian militant group Boko Haram kidnapped 110 girls from their boarding school in an attack that eerily echoed the 2014 kidnapping of nearly 300 school girls from the northern city Chibok.¹ The Chibok attack spurred a local and global campaign to Bring Back Our Girls, but over 100 of those students are still being held hostage, subjected to sexual slavery and some have even been used as suicide bombers. The Chibok girls drew the world's attention, but in reality, they represent just a fraction of the thousands of women captured by the militant group during its eight-year insurgency in northern Nigeria.²

¹ Amanda Erickson, "Nigerians are demanding answers after another Boko Haram kidnapping," *The Washington Post*, February 25, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/02/23/nigerians-are-demanding-answers-after-another-potential-boko-haram-kidnapping/?utm_term=.4723b3e6f808.

² BBC News, "Nigeria's Boko Haram crisis: Dapchi anger over missing girls," *BBC News*, February 22, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-43158216>.

Boko Haram is not the only extremist group to target women and girls. In fact, women's rights and physical integrity are often the first targets of fundamentalists – as has been documented not only in Nigeria but also with the Taliban in Afghanistan and the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. An analysis of thirty countries across the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia found that women were substantially more likely than men to be early victims of extremism.³

We also know that many extremist groups benefit both strategically and financially from the subjugation of women. In recent years, conflict-related sexual violence has emerged as a core element of the ideology and operation of extremist groups, such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Both Boko Haram and the Islamic State, as well as al-Qaeda and al-Shabab, use sexual violence to terrorize populations into compliance, displace civilians from strategic areas, and entrench an ideology of suppressing women's rights to control reproduction and provide labor.⁴

Some violent extremist groups use women and girls as a form of currency in a shadow economy, generating revenue from sex trafficking, sexual slavery, and extortion through ransom. The Islamic State provides thousands of male recruits with kidnapped women and girls as wives and traps many female recruits in dorms for indoctrination and forced marriage.⁵ The United Nations estimates that ransom payments extracted by the Islamic State from the Yazidi community amounted to between \$35 million and \$45 million in 2014 alone. And even as the Islamic State loses territory and control of physical resources, the group continues to profit from the enslavement of an estimated three thousand women and girls, many of whom are bartered and sold as commodities.⁶

This connection between gender-based violence and extremism has been found in the United States as well. According to the think tank New America's research, one-third of individuals associated with jihadist-inspired violence inside the United States had a record of domestic abuse or other sexual violence.⁷

Extremist groups recruit women to serve in a variety of roles

Extremist groups don't only benefit from subjugating women; they also recruit them to act as informants, facilitators, recruiters, and martyrs. Some join voluntarily while others are forcibly recruited. Close to twenty percent of foreign fighters from Europe who joined the Islamic State are female.⁸ In fact, many extremist groups have made a concerted effort to recruit women to their ranks. Some women are motivated by ideological commitment, similar to potential male fighters.⁹ Others join in hopes of gaining freedoms and

³ Karima Bennouna, *Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here: Untold Stories from the Fight Against Muslim Fundamentalism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013); Karima Bennouna, "Bennouna: Support Muslims Resisting Fundamentalism," speech delivered at the International Peace Institute, October 2, 2013, <http://ipinst.org/2013/10/bennouna-support-muslims-resisting-fundamentalism>; Marie O'Reilly, "Inclusive Security and Peaceful Societies: Exploring the Evidence," *Prism* 6, no. 1, March 1, 2016, pp. 21-33.

⁴ Associated Press, "UN: Sexual violence increasingly used as 'terrorism' tactic," *news24*, May 16, 2017, <https://www.news24.com/World/News/un-sexual-violence-increasingly-used-as-terrorism-tactic-20170516>;

⁵ Erin Marie Saltman and Melanie Smith, "'Till Martyrdom Do Us Part.' Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon," Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015, http://www.strategicdialogue.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Till_Martyrdom_Do_Us_Part_Gender_and_the_ISIS_Phenomenon.pdf.

⁶ Nima Elbagir, Ghazi Balkiz, and Tamara Qiblaw, "ISIS' power is waning, but its child slave trade is still booming," *CNN*, October 18, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/10/18/middleeast/isis-yazidi-slavery-child-slaves/index.html>; *Saudi Gazette*, "Yazidi survivor won't return to Iraq for fear of new 'genocide,'" *Saudi Gazette*, February 26, 2018, <http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/article/529214/World/Mena/Yazidi-survivor-wont-return-to-Iraq-for-fear-of-new-genocide>.

⁷ Peter Bergen et al., "Terrorism in America After 9/11," *New America*, <https://www.newamerica.org/in-depth/terrorism-in-america/>.

⁸ Bibi van Ginkel and Eva Entenmann, eds., "The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union. Profiles, Threats & Policies," *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 2, 2016, https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ICCT-Report_Foreign-Fighters-Phenomenon-in-the-EU_1-April-2016_including-AnnexesLinks.pdf.

⁹ Beverley Milton-Edwards and Sumaya Attia, "Female terrorists and their role in jihadi groups," op-ed, Brookings Institution, May 9, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/female-terrorists-and-their-role-in-jihadi-groups/>.

access to resources.¹⁰ In her recent book, Hilary Matfess observes that some Nigerian girls choose to marry into Boko Haram to receive Quranic education, in a region where only 4 percent of girls finish secondary school.¹¹ The Islamic State makes false promises that women will be honored as wives and mothers, exploiting a fear that Western societies do not respect Muslim women.¹² As a counterpoint, a Mercy Corps study found that the most common reason Jordanian men cited for joining the war in Syria was to protect Sunni women and children – another targeted use of women in extremist groups’ radicalization efforts.¹³

And women have proven effective in all roles assigned to them by extremist groups, including as suicide bombers. In fact, in Nigeria, they have been so effective in this role—killing more than 1,200 people in the past four years—that in the last year, women have comprised close to two-thirds of the group’s suicide attackers—many of whom were coerced but some whom volunteered, according to a recent report by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point.¹⁴

When groups use female suicide bombers, they are taking strategic advantage of the relative absence of women in police and military forces. Female fighters can hide suicide devices under their clothing knowing that there is a good chance they will not encounter a female security official and therefore will not be searched. Extremist groups count on this limitation and the likelihood that women will move without suspicion or inspection.

As demonstrated in their attacks against women and girls, and in their recruitment and use of women as suicide bombers, extremist groups are strategically using women to their advantage. Meanwhile, the United States government is still grappling to understand the importance of women’s inclusion in security efforts. It is time to catch up.

Women are on the front lines of countering extremist violence, as we witness female police officers engaging with local communities to prevent violent extremism, female imams and other religious leaders preaching religious tolerance, and women countering efforts to radicalize their husbands, children, and communities. In particular, women’s inclusion in counterterrorism efforts offers three distinct advantages:

Women are well-positioned to detect early signs of radicalization, because their rights and physical integrity are often the first targets of fundamentalists. From harassment in public spaces to barriers sending their daughters to school and other challenges as communities become more segregated—women are substantially more likely than men to be early victims of extremism.¹⁵

Women's central roles in many families and communities also afford them a unique vantage point from which to recognize unusual patterns of behavior and signs of impending conflict. In Afghanistan, for example,

¹⁰ International Crisis Group, “Nigeria: Women and the Boko Haram Insurgency,” Report 242, December 2016, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/nigeria-women-and-boko-haram-insurgency>.

¹¹ The Economist, “More than meets the eye: Women and Boko Haram,” book review, *The Economist*, November 13, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/news/books-and-arts/21731805-outrages-islamist-group-obscure-ineptitude-nigerian-state-rotten>.

¹² Erin Marie Saltman and Melanie Smith, “‘Till Martyrdom Do Us Part.’ Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon.”

¹³ MercyCorps, “From Jordan to jihad: the lure of Syria’s violent extremism groups,” MercyCorps, Policy Brief, 2015, https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/From%20Jordan%20to%20Jihad_0.pdf.

¹⁴ Conor Gaffey, “ISIS just started using female suicide bombers, but Boko Haram has been doing it for years—and shows no sign of stopping,” *Newsweek*, August 12, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/isis-boko-haram-nigeria-suicide-bomber-649790>; Vladimir Hernandez & Stephanie Hegarty, “Made-up to look beautiful. Sent out to die. The young women sent into crowds to blow themselves up,” *BBC News*, 2018, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/made_up_to_look_beautiful_sent_out_to_die; Jason Warner and Hilary Matfess, “Exploding Stereotypes: The Unexpected Operational and Demographic Characteristics of Boko Haram’s Suicide Bombers,” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, United States Military Academy, August 2017, <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2017/08/Exploding-Stereotypes-1.pdf>.

¹⁵ Karima Bennouna, *Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here: Untold Stories from the Fight Against Muslim Fundamentalism*; Karima Bennouna, “Bennouna: Support Muslims Resisting Fundamentalism;” Marie O’Reilly, “Inclusive Security and Peaceful Societies: Exploring the Evidence.”

women reported that young men were being recruited at weddings. Their concerns went unheeded, and the young men they had observed went on to kill 32 civilians on a bus.¹⁶ In Libya too, women warned of rising radicalism: Analysts observed a flow of Western female recruits, consistent with a need for wives as the Islamic State established a headquarters there.¹⁷ At the same time, local women reported increasing infringements on their rights, including being harassed for driving alone.¹⁸ And again, these warnings went unheeded, providing the Islamic State additional time to establish itself before counterterrorism efforts ramped up.

Women are well-positioned to mitigate radicalization. Recent research shows that anti-terrorism messages are disseminated quite effectively throughout families and communities by women, who can challenge extremist narratives in homes, schools and social environments. They have particular influence among youth populations, and are strategically placed to serve as a buffer between radical influences and those who are next to be targeted.

Despite this, traditional efforts by governments and nongovernmental organizations to combat radicalization rarely include women—they typically focus on reaching out to political or religious leaders, who are predominantly male. Slowly, countries are learning. Morocco, for example, recognizing women’s influence in their families and communities, educates women to become religious scholars and sends them out to where radical Islamists target disenfranchised youth for recruitment.¹⁹

As security officials, women provide distinct insights and information that can be mission-critical in keeping the peace. Female security officials help ensure that female fighters cannot move freely by conducting searches in culturally appropriate ways. They may have access to populations and sites that men do not, allowing them to gather critical intelligence about potential security threats.²⁰ Furthermore, women’s participation in the military and police has been shown to improve how a local community perceives law enforcement—which, in turn, improves the ability to provide security.²¹

Former U.S. Special Operations Command Commander Admiral William McRaven observed that “including women allows tailored, culturally sensitive engagement, opening up possibilities for interactions with local populations that would otherwise be closed to all-male teams. These contributions increase the effectiveness of the overall mission as women positively shape the wartime environment and, in some instances, prevent conflict from occurring in the first place.”²²

¹⁶ Wazhma Frogh, “Imagine If the Minister Had Listened to Us,” speech delivered at Inclusive Security, October 15, 2015, <https://www.inclusivesecurity.org/2016/04/14/imagine-minister-listened-us/>.

¹⁷ Anne-Marie Slaughter and Elizabeth Weingarten, “A national security blind spot,” *The Straits Times*, October 28, 2016, <http://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/a-national-security-blind-spot>.

¹⁸ Swanee Hunt, Esther Ibanga, and Alaa Murabit, “On GPS: Women waging peace,” video interview at CNN, January 4, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/videos/tv/2016/01/04/exp-gps-0103-hunt-ibanga-murabit.cnn>.

¹⁹ Dina Temple-Raston, “The Female Quran Experts Fighting Radical Islam in Morocco: ‘The women scholars here are even more important than men,’” *The Atlantic*, February 12, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/02/the-female-quran-experts-fighting-radical-islam-in-morocco/551996/?utm_source=twb.

²⁰ Louise Olsson and Johan Tejpar, eds., *Operational Effectiveness and UN Resolution 1325 – Practices and Lessons from Afghanistan*, (FOI, 2009), pg. 117; pp. 126-127; Tobie Whitman and Jacqueline O’Neill, “Attention to gender increases security in operations: Examples from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO),” *The Institute for Inclusive Security*, April 2012, pp. 7-13.

²¹ Kim Lonsway et al.; “Policy Briefing Paper: Gender Sensitive Police Reform in Post Conflict Societies,” United Nations Development Fund for Women and United Nations Development Program, October 2007, <http://unwomen.org/~media/Headquarters/Media/Publications/UNIFEM/GenderSensitivePoliceReformPolicyBrief2007eng.pdf>; Tara Denham, “Police Reform and Gender,” Geneva Center for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF), 2008, p. 5.

²² William H. McRaven, “Women in Special Operations Forces: Advancing Peace and Security through Broader Cultural Knowledge,” in *Women on the frontlines of peace and security*, (NDU Press, 2014), pg. 127.

Despite the evidence of women’s contributions to preventing and mitigating violent extremism, U.S. government policy and programs pay little attention to the role of women. Some critics will suggest that expending money and time to advance women’s roles in countering violent extremism would be an unnecessary distraction. This is false, misleading, and ultimately dangerous. Engaging women from the outset is necessary for long-term success. The Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017 requires the U.S. government to increase women’s participation in peace and security efforts—and that includes in efforts to counterterrorism. I’ve outlined here a few suggestions based on the gaps I observed while serving on the National Security Council staff and at the U.S. departments of state and of defense.

To strengthen counterterrorism efforts, the U.S. government should pursue the following steps:

First, the forthcoming U.S. national strategy for countering violent extremist groups should include attention to and investment in women’s roles. As the evidence shows, women are influential in whatever capacity they serve—whether as moderating and peaceful forces in a community or as extremist fighters. The new countering violent extremism strategy—required by the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act—should outline how the U.S. government will involve women leaders and women’s groups, as well as identify necessary steps to deradicalize and reintegrate female fighters. Current State Department and USAID efforts to lay out a policy on including women in countering violent extremism should not remain isolated from the forthcoming broader strategy. This has been the challenge to date: Most efforts to address these issues have remained detached from broader security-sector policy and initiatives, resulting in many missed opportunities where women’s contributions could have improved the effectiveness of U.S. operations. Shifting this trend requires a new level of commitment by the United States and holds the potential to significantly improve efforts to counter terrorism and violent extremism around the world.

Second, to maximize the return on defense investments, the U.S. government should increase resources to facilitate women’s involvement in efforts to counter terrorism and violent extremism. Investment by the United States in this area has been limited to small grants or stand-alone programs. The United States also has not leveraged its leadership position to encourage other governments to make security-sector commitments on this issue. DOD, the State Department, and USAID should invest in women’s roles to counter terrorism and violent extremism. This includes through prevention-related funds, but also security funds, such as antiterrorism and law enforcement programs. With the significant cuts to diplomacy and development efforts proposed in the current budget process, there is a risk that funding for women’s contributions to security will be decreased, which will in turn decrease the effectiveness of U.S. security investments.

It is also important to make it easier for proponents of women’s involvement in deradicalization efforts to access funding—whether in militaries, police, government, or civil society. Retired General John Allen, former commander of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan and former special presidential envoy to the global coalition to counter the self-proclaimed Islamic State, has advocated increasing funding to help women fight radicalization, including by making Defense Department money available for State Department–run programs. As Allen reflected, by “empowering [women], we can make them a force to reduce the reality of radicalization,” calling it an “investment [that] pays off in virtually every occasion where I’ve had the opportunity to see it.”²³

Third, the U.S. government should address the specific needs and experiences of women, whether as victims, mitigators, or perpetrators. U.S. efforts to reintegrate returning fighters into communities should address their motivations and grievances—whether in Colombia, Europe, or elsewhere. United States support for political, religious, and security leaders should prioritize female leaders, who are well-placed to challenge extremist narratives. The United States should encourage governments to classify survivors of sexual

²³ John Allen, “Countering Violent Extremism by Engaging Women,” roundtable event at the Council on Foreign Relations, December 7, 2016, <https://www.cfr.org/event/countering-violent-extremism-engaging-women>.

violence by terrorist or extremist groups as victims of terrorism, and thereby ensure a greater level of support. Extremist groups employ sexual violence as a tool to denigrate the enemy, create stigma, and unravel protective kinship networks. Counterterrorism efforts should undermine these efforts to isolate victims and weaken communities.

Finally, in light of evidence that terrorist and violent extremist groups are including women and exploiting their absence in security sectors, U.S. security cooperation efforts should provide technical assistance to increase the recruitment, retention, and advancement of women in security sectors. Such efforts should target women in uniformed roles and in leadership positions, in order to ensure they can both shape engagement with communities and influence policy decisions with their unique perspectives on communities' experiences. Effective measures to promote women's participation in security roles include quotas, fast-track promotion plans, legal prohibitions on discrimination against women, and support for networking and professional development. In addition, the U.S. government should require all countries participating in U.S.-provided security and justice programs—from the International Military Education and Training program to courses offered at the Department of Defense's regional centers—to send delegations that are at least 30 percent female, a threshold that research suggests affords a critical mass to enable women's influence.²⁴

Both to strengthen the U.S. military and to lead by example, the United States should take steps to increase the proportion of women in the U.S. military and across law enforcement by doubling recruitment, promotion, and retention efforts and maintaining rigorous implementation of antidiscrimination laws.

Congress and this Committee can work to hold the administration accountable for ensuring that its efforts to counter terrorism and violent extremism invest in an important but overlooked strategy: the inclusion of women. Preventing and countering violent extremism and terrorism in the 21st century requires unleashing the potential of 50 percent of the world's population. It is not just the right thing to do—it is a strategic imperative to advance national security.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for this opportunity to testify.

²⁴ Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Men and Women of the Corporation* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), pp. 381–395.