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## **“Engaging and Educating Women and Girls in the Prevention of Violent Conflict and Violent Extremism”**

**Testimony before the  
House Committee on Foreign Affairs**

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Good morning and thank you to the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Chairman Edward Royce and Ranking Member Eliot Engel, and other members of the committee for this opportunity to testify before you today. This is an important hearing on the need to improve girls' and women's access to education, particularly in countries struggling to combat terrorism. What is at stake here is ensuring that a "whole of society" approach is applied in an effort to both prevent and counter violent extremism.

My name is Dr. Kathleen Kuehnast. I direct the Center for Gender and Peacebuilding at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP). The U.S. Congress created the Institute 30 years ago with a mandate to prevent, mitigate and resolve violent conflicts around the world. The Institute does so by engaging directly in conflict zones and by providing analysis, education and resources to those working for peace. USIP experts work on the ground in some of the world's most volatile regions, collaborating with U.S. government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and local communities to foster peace and stability. Please note that the views presented today are my own and do not necessarily represent those of the U.S. Institute of Peace, which does not take positions on policy and is prohibited from taking positions on legislation.

I am trained as a socio-cultural anthropologist with expertise on societies in transition, and the political, economic, and social impacts of such changes on men and women. In societies undergoing great upheaval or violent conflict, the roles of women often become a flashpoint, as seen for example in Afghanistan, Egypt, Iran or Pakistan.

This morning I want to make three points related to women and their roles in preventing extremist violence. I will discuss: (1) what policies are in place; (2) what we are currently learning from ongoing efforts; and (3) what we need to do to shape responsive and effective policies for the future.

### **What policies support women and their roles in preventing extremist violence?**

The U.S. National Intelligence Council (NIC) in its Global Trends 2025 report highlighted women as agents of geopolitical change and predicted that the "economic and political empowerment of women could transform the global landscape."

In 2011, President Barak Obama issued an Executive Order that directed the U.S. Government to establish the United States National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security. Over the last three years, this plan has served as a road map. It mobilizes the different government branches to accelerate the integration of women in the shaping, making and implementing of security policy and practice.

One of the four pillars of the National Action Plan is promoting women's roles in conflict prevention and improving conflict early-warning and response systems through the integration of gender perspectives. It also focuses on women and girls' health, education and economic opportunity to create the conditions for stable societies and lasting peace.

The Executive Order on Women, Peace and Security, and the ensuing government and civil society activities surrounding this agenda provide the impetus and framework for supporting the roles that women play in the prevention of violent conflict, and more specifically to the theme of today's hearing, in the prevention of violent extremism.

## **What are we currently learning from ongoing efforts?**

Education provides critical thinking, problem solving, and communication skills that are essential to understanding how individuals are radicalized and how to counter such extremist messages. Moreover, education instills the self-confidence that is needed for both men and women to contribute to the creation of healthy, resilient and peaceful communities.

The U.S. Institute of Peace is focusing on the broad range of roles women play in the prevention of violent extremism. USIP is piloting a project in Nigeria that emphasizes the importance of women's roles in their communities and home, and the need to build upon local level practices in order to counter trends toward extremism. Specifically in Jos-Plateau, Nigerian women religious leaders, both Christian and Muslim, work as mentors in their communities. As the result of this training, they have expanded their roles to both monitor and provide counseling and guidance to vulnerable youth. From its work in Nigeria, USIP has learned that training in critical thinking and problem solving enables women to combat violent extremism at home, in the community, at the national level, and at the global level.

At home, mothers are often the first to observe the early warning signs of radicalization in their families. While the observation of changing or changed behavior of their children may be intuitive for many, the awareness and understanding of the process of radicalization is not. Even if mothers recognize radicalization in their children they often lack the skills needed to intervene. Women need to be equipped and supported in their efforts to prevent their children from joining extremist groups, and also to build their own capacity to reject the influence of extremism and violence. USIP is working with Sisters Against Violent Extremism (SAVE) in Austria, which focuses on building capacity and parenting skills among mothers whose sons are at risk of radicalization. The women meet in what is called, "mothers' schools" where they gain increased awareness and confidence in recognizing the early warning signs of radicalization among their sons. In addition, they learn specific ways to communicate and to use their influence as parents to prevent violent extremism.

Innovative programs to bolster mothers' awareness and skills in this capacity have been underway for several years in Pakistan. For example, the civil society organization PAIMAN Alumni Trust, a grantee of the U.S. Institute of Peace in partnership with Inclusive Security, is doing leading work in this area. It is made up of a network of women leaders who coordinate a community youth and mothers group, training them to identify signs of extremism, and providing support services and economic alternatives for radicalized young men and boys who return to their rural villages to begin a new life.

At the community level, outside the home, women can be voices of tolerance and can provide a strong counter message to extremism in their communities. Women in Nigeria do this through their work in interfaith organizations, hosting local community events to promote tolerance, and counter radicalized interpretations of religious teachings. They work as religious leaders in their communities, pro-actively providing counsel and guidance to vulnerable youth. At the national and global levels, the empowerment of women in media outlets is critical for countering the appeal of extremist messaging. Their very presence in this most public of spheres, including social media, provides a powerful mitigating influence to extremist messaging.

One should not lose sight of the fact that women are also vulnerable to recruitment and extremist messaging, as well as passive enablers of terrorism. In most traditional households, women pass on the ideals and expectations of their society, and in some parts of the Middle East, mothers take comfort in glorifying their son being a suicide bomber. One needs only to look at the war widows of Iraq or the “black widows” of Chechnya for reminders that empowerment can take a negative form.

Although the role of women is vital to countering extremist violence, the important role that fathers also play in being change agents and in supporting their daughters’ education should be recognized. In the case of Malala Yousafzai, her education was strongly encouraged by a father who understood that girls should be educated for the good of the girl and her country – even in a very conservative society.

It is clear that there is a high demand by women for knowledge and skills to prevent violent extremism. Women’s active participation in society, as educated and empowered individuals, as teachers, journalists, faith leaders, healers, and community leaders builds resilience to the influence and spread of violent extremism.

### **What is needed is to shape responsive and effective policies for the future?**

- Improved access for women and girls to education so that they may develop the skills, knowledge and self-confidence necessary to be active, productive participants in their society;
- Develop inclusive policy and practices that focus on the role that women play in preventing violence and violent extremism;
- Ensure that men are involved in advancing the agenda of education for girls and women. Fathers can play a pivotal role in supporting their daughters education and empowerment; and
- Develop collaborative partnerships among researchers, practitioners and policymakers to bridge divides and develop more innovative approaches to engage women in the prevention of violent extremism.

I want to re-emphasize the vision of the U.S. National Action Plan which states, “The goal is as simple as it is profound: to empower half the world’s population as equal partners in preventing conflict and building peace in countries threatened and affected by war, violence and insecurity. Achieving this goal is critical to our national and global security.”

It is in the interest of the United States to continue to support expanded international opportunities of women and girls as an investment in national and international security, and to envisage this as a long-term preventative strategy in the global effort to end violent extremism.

Thank you for your time. I am happy to answer questions.

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