INTRODUCTION

In the past twenty years since the seminal 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing, there has been a rising backlash against women’s rights across cultures, religions, and regions. Every major world religion – Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism – is witnessing the outgrowth of an extreme minority that exploits religion to justify intolerance, oppression and violence. The core of this trend is not religion. Instead, it’s a movement where extreme voices dominant society using tactics commonly found throughout the world – fear, politics, economics and the imposition of particular understandings of religious texts.

The global nature of the backlash against women’s rights is most evident at international venues such as the United Nations. Since the 2000 Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) conference at the U.N., a coalition of convenience emerged between the Vatican, Islamic States, Christian evangelicals and an increasing number of African States who joined forces to counter women’s reproductive rights at the global level and to support regressive laws at the national level. In Kenya, Christian and Muslim extremists put aside their difference to oppose the legalization of abortion.1 In Nicaragua, the government outlawed abortion in what was thought to be a tactic of securing official Catholic approval

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in an upcoming election.²

Women’s basic physical and legal rights and security are at the center of these ideological battles. In each instance, the vociferous minority has made significant strides into mainstream debate and daily life. Women are facing new challenges, ranging from limitations on reproductive health rights in the United States, to girls’ access to education as witnessed in the attacks on schoolgirls in Pakistan and Nigeria, to the accelerated spread of the hijab and niqab among Muslims who previously did not adhere to such dress codes.

This targeting of and impact on women is not accidental or ‘collateral damage.’ It is deliberate, tactical and strategic. While the dominant voices and leaders of rising conservatism and extremism are male, women are both active and passive supporters of these ideologies. It is notable that movements that espouse discriminatory attitudes towards women are making a great effort to reach out and co-opt them while secular states that claim to uphold women’s rights tend to minimize and marginalize women’s movements fighting for equality.

Women are also the most persistent voices challenging the spread of these ideologies. Despite the threats they face and closure of space, women’s activism on issues of basic rights continues locally, nationally and globally.

This paper provides a brief overview and analysis of the causes, manifestations and consequences of rising conservatism and extremism, particularly religious extremism and its implications for women. It reflects on how and why women may be drawn to the ideologies and movements that spread extremism and provides insight on the global women’s rights movement’s activism and resistance to emerging threats. The paper offers recommendations for action by the international community.

While extremism targets many regions, religions and marginalized populations - notably LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) persons - comprehensively addressing these issues is beyond the scope of this paper.

TERMINOLOGY, DEFINITIONS AND MANIFESTATIONS OF EXTREMISM AND ITS IMPACT ON WOMEN’S RIGHTS

Terminology remains challenging in this sphere. Particularly from a practical standpoint, the labeling - often with clearly negative connotations - limits prospects of engaging individuals attracted to the messaging, rationality and vision of extremism. Labels can encourage people to join these movements as a mark of rebellion against the status quo, particularly as extremism is often presented as a rejection of secularism and globalization. Labels also encourage generational, gendered, racial or religious divisions which are often the impetus for individuals to join extremist movements.

Conceptually too, there is a lack of clarity. Some use the term ‘conservatism’ to describe the regressive values being spread. But there are religious and political conservatives who have a progressive

DEFINING RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM

“Religious extremism is defined as rigid interpretations of religion that are forced upon others using social or economic coercion, laws, intolerance, or violence. It is accompanied by non-fluid definitions of culture, religion, nationalism, ethnicity or sect which move citizens into exclusionary, patriarchal and intolerant communities. Only a small percentage of religious conservatives are extremist in this sense. The use of violence justified for religious ends is a characteristic of some extremist movements, but not all.”

While not all extremism is underpinned by religious claims, many extremist movements do use religion because it is supposedly out of the realm of debate, especially when backed up by so-called religious scholars and leaders. Although religion has become a central part of the discussion on extremism, extremism is more often related to economic and political power.


approach to human rights and women’s rights. Religious fundamentalism is also often used, especially in Christian contexts. But in the Islamic context, women’s rights activists argue that fundamentalism means following the five key tenets of the religion namely: belief in God and Mohamed as his prophet (Shahadah); praying five times per day (Salat); fasting at Ramadan (Sawm), making charitable contributions (Zakat), and making a pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj). There is nothing inherently oppressive or anti-women’s rights in these fundamentals. Radicalization is also used in reference to groups or movements that espouse an extreme or radical interpretation of beliefs and identity, with an implicit link to the use of violence. The term ‘extremism’ too is challenging and can be conflated with the field of policy and practice dedicated to ‘countering violent extremism’ (CVE).

While the terminology and definitions remain complex and nuanced, the manifestations of rising extremism, conservatism or radicalization are similar across various contexts: rigid religious interpretations determine if a person is ‘good’ or ‘bad’; social or economic coercion, laws, intolerance or violence used with moral justification encourages or forces conformity. Existing traditions or institutions are often deemed to be corrupt or ignorant, pitting them against the ‘truth’ and the one dominant identity (religious, ethnic, gender etc.), fomenting social, political and economic rifts. Although most extremist ideology does not advocate violence per se, the divisions it creates - the ways in which non-believers or non-conformists can be

EXTREMISM IN THE MAINSTREAM: HOW ATTACKS ON WOMEN BECOME COMMONPLACE

- **Public sphere:** Using the pulpit and media, targeting of women is either condoned or encouraged. Often women are blamed - the way they dress, the places they frequent, their mannerism or fact that they are alone - for the physical attacks they endure. The mainstream and social media platforms are powerful tools for fringe actors.

- **Political sphere:** Women are accused of indecency and often face life threats for daring to speak out or enter the political sphere. They also use women strategically in politics and propaganda. In Algeria, political party quotas for women were introduced as calculated “window dressing” to gain favor with the middle class and the West. In many instances, participation in democratic processes is used to legitimate (and claim popular backing for) regressive legislation.

- **Legal Sphere:** The suspension of equal rights legislation and introduction of discriminatory laws is both a means and an end for extremist movements. The issues vary across regions, but the impetus to control women’s bodies and legal persona is common.
demeaned or rejected - creates a society where violence against ‘the other’ can be tolerated, condoned or at times supported. It is in this context of intolerance where violence emerges.

A range of actors and movements promulgate these values. From the religious-political Mungiki movement in Kenya that promotes and elevates Kikuyu identity over other tribal identities, to the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East or the Maoists in Nepal, these movements combine a call for social and economic justice together with political demands and religiosity. Some justify the use of violence or militancy to attain their goals from the outset. Others morph into more militant entities.

**DRIVERS OF REGRESSIVE NORMS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR WOMEN**

A common feature among extremist ideologies is a strong patriarchal strand. Even when they have moderate or rights-based approaches in terms of political, economic or social issues, there is often an implicit assumption that men are dominant and women subservient. Extremist approaches within and between contexts are seemingly different: in Islamic contexts, for example in comparison to Salafism and Wahabbbism, the values and ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood could be considered as moderate; extremists in the United States fixate on the abortion question while in South Asia they may be more interested in land rights. Yet on the question of women’s status and rights, the differences between them are far fewer. The ideologies clearly delineate what makes ‘good’ woman which is often as a wife, mother or daughter. Similarly, the men’s rights and responsibilities are clearly articulated, often implying that women are under the protection (and, by extension, ownership) of men. Extremist ideologies reconstruct masculinity by “offering dignity to groups of men who have failed to find it in [other] ways, at the price of subordination of women.”

In some instance, justification for these regressive norms is framed as a return to a purer, former tradition (ie a rejection of colonialism, globalization and/or ‘immoral’ western values). One inconsistency in this argument is that, in many cases, pre-colonial norms were far more egalitarian than laws introduced by colonial rulers. In Kenya and Sri Lanka, women co-owned land as part of a communal land ownership model, but the British introduced the concept of single inheritance through the eldest male. In Fiji, land rights were based on matrilineal norms

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and again the British embedded discrimination against women by changing the system.

There has also been a resurgence of patriarchal attitudes that validate male dominance and control over women. This is in part a backlash against the demand for equality and rights, and the misperception that these demands are driven by western states. It is also a result of the ongoing identity struggle between states and their diverse populations, and between the forces of globalization and the impulse to maintain historic identities and traditions. In India, violence against women in many forms (starting with sex based abortions) has reached epic proportions in recent years. A modern State influenced by a mix of indigenous demands for rights and the global environment is clashing with traditional institutions and norms. There have been significant legal and judicial advancement regarding the protection of women from violence, but cultural norms prevail and resist the government’s new laws. Institutionally, the state is either unwilling or unable to tackle local decision-making bodies (khap panchaya) that continue to sanction violence and limitations on women.

At a societal level too, there is a backlash against the new laws, especially among men. Says one analyst, “the demonstration of masculinity… has always problematically rested on harassing women; [it] has now also become linked to breaking the laws that protect women.” A 2011 survey by International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) on gender attitudes echoes this attitude. The survey showed that 92% of respondents knew of the laws prohibiting violence against women, yet 68% of Indian men surveyed agreed that women should tolerate violence to keep their families together, while 65% believed that sometimes a woman deserves to be beaten; 37% of men had physically assaulted their intimate partner at least once; 24% had committed an act of sexual violence against someone in society and 20% had committed sexual violence against their partners.”

**ASSERTING HUMAN RIGHTS TO COUNTER WOMEN’S RIGHTS**

Ironically, even human rights are being used as a justification for curtailing women’s rights. For example, the pro-life movement challenges women’s reproductive rights in support of the rights of the unborn child. Human rights argumentation, often manifested through cultural relativism, has also had inadvertent but profoundly negative implications for women (and by extension, society). In Iraq, the US occupation authorities introduced a draft constitution in which former civil codes related to personal status (issues related to marriage, children etc.) were placed under the authority of religious leaders. The logic was that each sect or religious community in the country should have the right to live according to the laws of their own religion. However, in practice, it meant that national laws related to issues such as minimum age of marriage and the right to divorce no longer provided equal protection, rights or status to everyone. If the Coptic clergy dictated that divorce was not permissible, Iraqi Christians were beholden to that law; if a Shia cleric claimed the age of marriage could be 9, then Shia girls could be married off at that age.

Meanwhile in Christian majority countries, especially North and South America, conservative orthodoxy has been spreading. Control over women’s reproductive health and rights are central to their ideology.

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4 Anderlini, “Idle Minds”.
6 Simate.
Here too, the advocates of this agenda draw on human rights norms and principles to make their case. This is partly due to the historic linkages between grassroots human rights activism and its links to the Church and liberation theology. But there are two competing strands, argues Ariadna Estevez. Liberation ideology was a key influence in shaping the discourse of human rights movements in the region, providing a comprehensive framework that enabled the link of social justice, the rights of the poor and the struggle against dictatorship with repression and related human rights violations, notably torture and disappearance. Organizations emerged dedicated to human rights. But in the 1990s, the trajectory shifted. In line with US policies and neoliberal economic policies in the developing world, human rights discourse became more limited to political issues such as freedom of speech and democracy, rather than the broader issues of economic justice and social welfare.

As secular human rights organizations shifted attention away from poverty in Latin America, the Catholic Church became a primary provider of social welfare and care. According to Estevez, there are two parallel universes in which civil society operates: in one, the secular organizations focus on political lobbying, data collection and indicators related to violence and human rights abuses, but they provide no direct support to victims; in the other, religious organizations support communities and victims and, through their outreach, spread the teachings of the Catholic Church. In Argentina, where a prominent woman claims that the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) is anti-human rights, the Church uses human rights discourse to advocate a pro-life agenda.

In Mexico too, the pro-life human rights agenda is gaining ground - so much so that in 2007 the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) challenged the constitutionality of a law to decriminalize abortion in Mexico City, even though the body is mandated to ensure that government policies are consistent with human rights standards. And in Chile, where former head of UN Women Michele Bachelet is again president, abortion remains illegal.

By some accounts, the United States is leading the charge. There is ample evidence that the political right wing movement is the primary driver of restrictions on women’s rights to healthcare, especially with regard to birth control, contraception and abortion. In 2011 alone, “legislators introduced over 1100 reproductive health and rights-related provisions.” In 2011, 92 new laws were adopted to restrict

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8 Estevez.
abortions in 24 states, up from 34 in 2005. The struggle is not limited to health care. The same organizations and movements are taking a stance against equal pay for women and curtailing the Violence Against Women Act.

**ECONOMICS, “EXTREME” CAPITALISM, AND FUNDAMENTALISM: A DEADLY COMBINATION FOR WOMEN**

The growing influence of religious institutions and ideology that promote and condone the suppression of women is also intertwined with the rise of neoliberalism or ‘extreme’ capitalism. The neoliberal mantra of limiting government expenditure destroyed the basic social safety nets that provided services to poor and rural communities. Therefore, the absence of the state not only contributed to growing inequality between the rich and poor, but also created a vacuum filled by non-state service providers - typically religious institutions providing education, health and welfare services. In Muslim majority contexts, educational institutions and curricula have been a critical means by which extremist and intolerant views and values have spread.

In each instance, the service they provide is accompanied by proselytizing and the spread of their values. It is not surprising that where the Catholic Church is dominant, family planning and women's reproductive health rights are often targeted. Similarly, the past 30 years has been marked by the rise of Islamist movements. The Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas and Hizbollah combine political ambitions with the promise of social justice, an end to corruption and provision of social services. But their ideology promotes a particular brand of rights when it comes to women: they claim respect but proffer ‘equity’ and difference rather than equality under the law, claiming that rights such as the age of marriage and access to contraception is a western-led attack on indigenous family values.

Global economic considerations have also catered to religious extremists' needs while hindering human rights. The United States, for example, does not publically criticize extremism in Arab Gulf countries due to economic and political concerns, leaving states unaccountable for their inability or unwillingness to protect human rights. Cooperation between politicians and the

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religious fringe is a dangerous combination of economic, political and religious forces. In India, companies partner with Hindu extremists to hire cheaper Hindu labor instead of more expensive Muslim labor, a practice sanctioned by local Hindu governments.\(^{10}\) After the election of a right-wing political party in 2014 elections in India, one human rights activist noted that “the deadly combination of the fundamentalists and the capitalists is something we are all dreading. The destruction and sale of natural resources is inevitable.”\(^{11}\)

### GEO-POLITICS AND THE SEARCH FOR ALTERNATIVE IDENTITIES

Geo-politics also has a role in the spread of regressive (and new forms of oppressive) norms. In South Asia and the Arab region, conservative and extremist religious ideology has been imported as part of a wider strategy of states such as Saudi Arabia.\(^{12}\) But local political institutions and organizations drew on the framing of ‘true’ religion to counter colonial - or so-called ‘western’ - values and norms. The spread of modern Wahabbism, a sub-sect of Sunni Islam, has been ongoing for nearly three decades in many parts of the world. Its initial impetus was to challenge Iran's export of Shi'a ideology in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution, but Wahabbism has since become entrenched in educational and political institutions in Malaysia, Indonesia and across countless Muslim-majority countries and minority Muslim communities. Its impact is evident not only in the teachings in mosques, but also legislative changes and social practices.

In many cases, religious extremists warped religious identity, mixing religious and non-indigenous cultural practices in an attempt to control women's bodies and status. In 2011, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported a significant rise in cases of female genital mutilation (FGM) among South Asian Muslims. However, the practice is rooted in African traditions and is widely refuted as being Islamic. The practice is arguably against the teachings of the Quran, which advocates that no harm should be done to the body and says nothing about female circumcision.

Yet Malaysia's Islamic Council issued a fatwa in 2009 claiming that female circumcision was a religious obligation. A 2010 Population Council study of six Indonesian provinces indicated that between 86% and 100% of teenage girls had undergone the procedure. 90% of Muslim women surveyed in Indonesia and Malaysia supported the practice, claiming female circumcision was a religious rite and fosters purity in women by controlling their sexual desire.\(^{13}\) South Asian human rights activists see the rise of FGM as an indicator of the spreading influence of highly conservative, imported versions of Islam in the region. “Muslims”, says Malaysian human rights activist Azrul Mohd Khalib, “are using women's bodies to assert a certain moral authority and credibility in their interactions with other religions and ethnicities.”\(^{14}\)

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\(^{10}\) AWID, p.4.

\(^{11}\) Zubiri, Saira. “Activists reflect on the rights implications of India's new government.” AWID, 7 April 2014.


\(^{13}\) Segran, Elizabeth. “Female genital mutilation on the rise among Southeast Asian Muslims.” Global Post, Dec 2014. Available at www.globalpost.com

\(^{14}\) ICAN's “Extremism in the Mainstream”
WOMEN’S INVOLVEMENT IN EXTREMISM

Women are not immune to the attractions of extremism. Some join independently, seeking an outlet for economic or social grievances. Others consider it an act of rebellion against the status quo, or a means by which they can assert themselves, seek vengeance on the people or institutions that wronged them, or force change on the community. Similar to social and liberation movements, some – including women – are also attracted to the extremist movement because it is an opportunity to be part of something bigger than themselves.

The movements are adept at exploiting women. Many are directly involved in extremism by participating in social campaigns, spreading extremist ideologies in their communities, physically or socially rejecting neighbors who are different than themselves, materially supporting extremist groups or militias, or directly participating in those groups or militias. They are valuable because they can contribute significantly to the spread of the ideologies by convincing their husbands or sons to join the cause. Women also often play trusted behind-the-door roles in communities where they can share information with other women, spreading the word.

The effect of the rhetoric and means by which they spread their messages cannot be underestimated. They suggest that the movement is a force of good against evil, a claim bolstered by seemingly undeniable religious rhetoric. In addition to co-opting human rights and social justice rhetoric, extremists co-opt and redefine women’s empowerment by claiming that submission is a form of power. They undermine existing women’s rights and feminist discourse by “portray[ing] them as an extension of colonial politics,” says a Malaysian expert on women and Islam.15 The mentality they have developed is one that sees women’s bodies as the only battlefield between Islam and the West.”16

Extremists also coerce women by exploiting ignorance of religious texts and history. Through so-called religious leaders, extremists gain the authority and legitimacy they need to control entire communities, particularly the illiterate and non-educated. In the Muslim world, these religious leaders may be trained in religious texts, but only relay information that supports the extremist ideology. For example, they leave out the democratic roots of Islam and the essential governance role that women had in Islamic history. In non-Arabic speaking countries in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, the ability speak Arabic (the language of the Qur’an) is an authority itself.17 Therefore, no one in the community can refute what an Arabic speaker says, regardless of whether or not it contradicts culture or tradition.

In addition, extremists tap into traditional cultural values and practices which encourage women to believe that the repression of women is part of their own culture. As noted previously, extremist sheikhs have supported female genital mutilation (FGM) as Islamic practice while historically it is rooted in African contexts and practiced by Christians, Muslims and others.

Finally, women may be more easily physically and psychologically coerced into joining groups if their husbands or sons are radicalized. Especially if they are economically dependent on male relatives and have no recourse to seek protection from the state or outside their communities, their choices are

15 ICAN’s “Extremism in the Mainstream”
17 Sachedina, Abdulaziz. Professor and IIT Chair in Islamic Studies at George Mason University. From ICAN’s “Extremism in the Mainstream,” p5.
limited. For many, supporting extremism may mean protection and economic security, albeit in limited and repressive ways.  

**WOMEN’S RESISTANCE TO EXTREMISM AND THEIR STRUGGLE FOR RIGHTS, PEACE AND PLURALITY**

International media and the policy community are often intrigued and drawn to the stories of women who join extremist movements, but these women represent a small minority. There is a far greater number of women who engage at the other end of the spectrum to fight for rights and plurality as individuals, organizations and social movements. They are not focused solely on countering extremism; rather, they are driven by the need to create alternative visions and paradigms for their societies so that all forms of intolerance and violence are eliminated. While they may be strident in their own ideologies as feminists and human rights activists, women’s collective movements have always rejected the use of violence and adhered to principles of non-violence and civil resistance. Women’s movements have struggled with the issues of exclusion as well, but globally they are more likely to become standard-setters for tolerance, inclusion and respect by including other minorities and marginalized populations in their battle for universal human rights.

In recent years, however, speaking out for women’s and human rights has become more dangerous than ever before. In Latin America, gangs assassinate women who speak out against corruption and collusion between criminals, businessmen and politicians. For example, a Mexican human rights defender and ecologist was assassinated for speaking up about illegal logging and drug production, both of which fund organized crime in Mexico.  

In July 2014, two prominent Libyan women’s rights defenders were placed on blacklists and assassinated, causing many of their colleagues to flee the country. This problem affects human rights defenders all over the world and is only worsening as security situations degrade. Administrators of emergency funds for human rights defenders have noted a significant increase in the number of requests for urgent help. Instead of fleeing constant harassment, defenders are now fleeing threats on their lives.

Like rape victims, local communities - and even international actors - tend to place the blame on the rights defender. The defender crossed that invisible red line of what is or is not appropriate, and so they ’deserve what they get.” An Iranian women’s rights defender says, “for some, the price is high - at times, even their lives.”

States also harass or imprison human rights defenders for seemingly arbitrary reasons in an effort to silence critical voices and remove people most likely to start social movements.

Civil society organizations also face an invisible constraining ‘red line.’ Extremists purposefully prevent the ability of feminist organizations to mobilize through direct targeting of individuals as well as strategic, international plans. In Egypt, new registration and funding laws stifle civil society organizations to the point where they are unable to function. But international laws are sometimes also

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20 Carlsen.

an obstacle. Laws against contact with and material support of terrorists make it near impossible for organizations to engage with the target populations of their countering extremism programs. Policies like ATF (anti-terrorist financing) make it hard for women's groups to do their work, especially if they interact with former or current radicals, or their families, leaving groups pressured by both extremists and anti-terrorist policies.\textsuperscript{22}

Women's abilities to resist and counteract extremism depend upon the physical and social environment. In an unstable security environment, women's organizations are unable to function in a systematic way due to physical and financial constraints. Particularly when militias or gangs have control of entire towns such as in Libya and Colombia, women human right's defenders are at great risk because armed extremists can act with impunity. When the physical and legal environment allows human rights defenders to build the capacity of their own organizations or social movements, resistance is more widespread. National unity is an essential building block to countering religious extremism. Countries that value the rights and status of the citizen regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion or income encourage pluralism both in politics and on-the-ground.

Women's activism in resisting and countering religious extremism is a game changer in the fight against extremism in all its forms. Wherever there is a trend of repressive, intolerant and rigid interpretations of religion and gender roles, women are active in small and large ways. Some women simply question the suspicious activities and attitudes of their children. Others speak out as journalists, politicians or community leaders. Yet others found organizations to systematically tackle a particular manifestation of extremism such as sexual harassment, conservative curricula, or community militarization.

**Women's counter-extremism tactics fall into five main categories:**

- **Challenging the monopoly of religious authorities over definitions and interpretations.** Activists are expanding awareness of religion and its multiple interpretations, particularly through innovative curricula and positive role models and religious authorities. Women as educators and communicators in the community can play a critical role in filling the information gap on religion, preventing the spread of misinformation in religious institutions, schools, and on the streets. Extremist groups like Boko Haram (Nigeria) understand the power of education and forcefully remove girls from school in order to maintain control over women and information sharing. The Malaysian-based network Musawah uses religious texts and women's life experiences to deconstruct the idea of male authority and start a new discourse on gender. “Musawah believes that religious authorities and governments do not have the monopoly to define what Islam is and how it should regulate citizens' lives, in private or in public. In a society where Islam is used as a source of law and public policy, everyone has the right to speak out on Islam.”\textsuperscript{23}

- **Infusing rights-based approaches to religious discourse and text.** Women's organizations partner with religious authorities to dispel the notion that human rights is an outsider invention and not based in Islamic text or history. In addition, they use universal human rights norms such as the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) to educate women on

\textsuperscript{22} Fink p5.

\textsuperscript{23} See musawah.org for more information.
their rights and to advocate for adherence to such conventions at the national and international levels. While extremists also attempt to co-opt human rights rhetoric, women’s organizations’ analysis of the differential impact of extremist policies on women “unmask[s] the overall political direction of these movements.”

- **Protecting gender equality under the law.** Many women’s organizations focus on advocating for changes to regressive laws or implementation of new laws that adhere to universal human rights norms. The organizations must simultaneously engage international actors, legislators and law enforcement in order to make sure that inclusive human rights laws are passed, communicated to the public, and implemented. In Argentina, as in many other countries, the right to choose abortion and other reproductive rights are legalized, but women are unable to access these resources because of social blockades such as family pressures and conscientious objections of health workers. One Mexican women’s rights defender says that the “bottleneck for women’s struggles is the justice system.” Recognizing this in their own context, the Center for Egyptian Women’s Legal Assistance (CEWLA) advocates for inclusive human rights protections, including constitutional provisions, and provides direct legal aid to women.

- **Providing alternative activities and engaging with the community.** Women’s organizations provide alternative social, educational and economic activities for at-risk youth. Organizations that provide skills and confidence building for youth, non-violent outlets for youth to express their anger, or access to education for children in conflict zones are also critical partners in the battle against extremism. Better than national government or foreign initiatives, women have on-the-ground access to communities and can tailor their strategies. “The Pakistani non-profit PAIMAN Trust is based on the theory that “peace begins at home” - that the prevention of radicalization needs to focus on women and their families and communities. The organization creates peace groups of youth and mothers that work to identify early warning signs of extremism, and even de-radicalize youth using alternative religious and cultural messaging.”

- **Providing alternative messaging and counter-narratives.** Extremists promote a narrative that “provides explanations for the entire range of human experience,” catering to the human need for certainty in our dynamic and unpredictable world. Women have an equally compelling narrative and vision to relay, but organizations are still learning how to effectively provide alternative religious and cultural messaging. They tap into their own inclusive history and culture in order to show that women’s rights are not a new phenomenon from the West. For example, women’s rights to land ownership in Eastern Africa and South Asia was a commonly excepted right prior to colonialism. But in Bangladesh in 2009, extremists protest a new national inheritance law because it was “anti-Islamic.” In Mexico, the organization Catholics for the Right to Decide has launched an animated television series that depicts a Catholic women questioning and challenging a conservative priest by

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24 AWID p62.


27 See cewla.org for more information.

28 See paimantrust.org for more information.

29 AWID p9.

highlighting inconsistencies in conservative messaging and providing rights-based alternatives. The program has already reached millions of people and seeks to challenge extreme Catholic opposition to women’s autonomy.\textsuperscript{31}

The strategy of counter-narratives is a young but growing field. One review of civil society and government initiatives concludes that successful campaigns attempt to “plant seeds of doubt” rather than promote another extreme which can perpetuate dangerous black-and-white thinking. Successful counter-narratives also pay close attention to the target audience, historical and cultural context, and the credibility and authority of the messenger.\textsuperscript{32}

CONCLUSIONS: PROGRAMMING IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The challenges posed by rising conservatism and extremism require a fundamental shift in how national governments and international institutions understand and address the issues. The spread of intolerant ideologies, closure of public space and attacks on women are key indicators of extremism spreading into the mainstream. They are often precursors to the emergence of violence and terrorism. To address this, a holistic approach is needed. This includes revisiting and reforming existing approaches.

First, a disproportionate amount of resources is currently allocated for securitized and politicized responses - anti-terrorism campaigns. Response to extremism has been largely militarized or faith-based, but a holistic approach would address the social, economic, legal, political and cultural environments that allow non-violent extremism to take root - including the culture of impunity at the societal, national and international levels. Initiatives must tackle grievances, address the societal aspirations, and provide positive alternative activities for at-risk youth - not just stamp out individuals who have already become violent.

Second, strategies must be inclusive. Innovative solutions reach out to all actors in the social fabric that supports and tolerates extremism, including educators, the media, community leaders, and private sector and security forces, not just religious leaders. Initiatives must particularly reach out to those natural allies such as human rights organizations, mothers and women policy makers who may have already developed individual and collective countering extremism strategies.

Finally, countering extremism strategies must focus on alternative narratives to reclaim human rights. Extremists gain a foothold in their communities by co-opting information-sharing pathways and insert their own strategic messaging. Resisting extremism is not enough. Countering this messaging means providing an equally well-thought out cultural, religious and historical narrative that promotes pluralism and human rights for all.

\textsuperscript{31} “Catolicadas: A Cartoon series animating thought and debate.” AWID, Jan 2014.