

How Women Peacebuilders Are Balancing Work on COVID-19 and Violent Extremism

By Stacey Chamber

“We know that you have the analysis, the practical know-how; you’re the ones out there doing the job and I’m here to listen to you. I and Norway stand with women peacebuilders. We need to be connected with you and establish new working methods for inclusive, sustainable peace.” remarked State Secretary Marianne Hagen from Norway who joined the 9th weekly call with the [Women’s Alliance for Security Leadership](#) (WASL).

In [previous discussions](#) women peacebuilders reported an increase in xenophobia and extremist messaging during the pandemic of COVID-19. Weakness in state infrastructure and response has left a vacuum which extremist actors have exploited for their own interests. For example, in Pakistan extremists are now taking an indirect approach to the community; without revealing themselves as extremists they act under the guise of humanitarian actors. While meeting the humanitarian needs of the community, they say that COVID-19 is a curse and use their own interpretations of religious texts to recruit new members. Women peacebuilders are meeting this challenge by [building a counter-narrative](#) that is also grounded in the local culture, religion, and traditions.

In Yemen, women peacebuilders have been responding to one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises while advocating for a ceasefire. Parts of Aden have suffered through torrential floods and six types of viral diseases. With 24 million people in need of protection and assistance, including access to clean water, the international community continues to sell weapons which support warring parties on the ground. In the words of one peacebuilder, “Time is running out... We need to bring the parties together because those who feel excluded pick up arms which contributes to violence.”

Likewise, a woman peacebuilder from Libya empathized with her experience. She asked the State Secretary, “How can your government and others influence the warring parties in Libya to give civil society space to move?” In the absence of the state and the midst of rampant insecurity, she describes that “women are being abducted and no one has addressed this seriously.” Women peacebuilders in Yemen, Sudan, and Iraq also described sexual assault and extensive violence against women, now exacerbated by COVID-19. Many extremist groups use specific gendered narratives to recruit members, propagate their message, and instill a culture of misogyny and violence against women. The rise in domestic violence and focus on the pandemic makes it an opportune time for this approach.

Women peacebuilders have long been at the forefront of preventing violent extremism. Often the first ones to detect the early warning signs, they have mediated local conflicts and reached out to youth and others vulnerable to recruitment. In Afghanistan a WASL member established a men’s network which started with 20 men and now has over 300 members. This volunteer group has shared information about COVID-19 with local communities, and worked to prevent extremism, discourage early marriage



and promote girls' education and women's participation in local councils. They recognize the increased role of women in society and don't want to lose this progress in Afghanistan.

In Cameroon, the government has struggled to address COVID-19 and extremism, fueling marginalization and inequality, and providing justification for non-state armed groups to recruit members. Women peacebuilders integrate community dialogues and psychosocial support into their humanitarian response to COVID-19, which enables them to detect early warning signs for radicalization among youth. In response they have created a virtual community interfaith and inter-ethnic platform to promote peaceful cohabitation among 150 youth and coach parents and teachers to recognize the early warning signs. They also advocate with key stakeholders at local and national levels of government for inclusive dialogue with the meaningful participation of youth and women.

Governments like Norway recognize and understand the growth of extremism and its long-term impacts if left unaddressed. The State Secretary indicated her participation in a donor conference on Yemen and that the Nordic Mediators' Network has established a resource group on Libya. She also shared a goal that at least 50% of bilateral financing should have a gender focus, highlighting the importance of gendered programming and support to women-led civil society organizations. Women peacebuilders represent the voices of their communities and should be recognized as actors who can mitigate the impact of extremism and offer an alternative vision for peace and security.