



Sanam Naraghi Anderlini, Statement at the High-Level International Conference on Human Rights, Civil Society and Counter-Terrorism

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Excellencies, ladies, and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to be with you here today in person after so many months of Zoom boxes. I would like to thank UNOCT and the Government of Spain for their kind invitation and for the opportunity to speak.

When I founded ICAN, my goal was to ensure that we were not only hearing but also heeding the voice and expertise of women peacebuilders in countries affected by conflict and violent extremism. In 2012 at our first annual forum, women from Libya, Afghanistan, Tunisia, Iraq and elsewhere warned us of the rising tide of violent extremism and its targeting of women and civic space.

Ten years on, our network, the Women's Alliance for Security Leadership, has over 90 member organizations spanning 40 countries from Colombia to Nigeria, Afghanistan to Indonesia – all women-led, all directly engaged in addressing violent extremism and conflict. We have captured their approaches in our research and analysis work on gender and extremisms, most recently in a [series of case studies](#) that detail how they promote positive alternatives to violent extremism grounded in Peace, Resilience, Equality and Pluralism – PREP.

When Covid-19 spread its tentacles everywhere, our partners were the first responders. Where people did not trust their governments, our partners stepped in, drawing on the wealth of trust they had in their communities to convey critical messages about hand washing, masks, and hygiene. More importantly, they were also the first to provide the masks and sanitizers, food bags when people were too poor to afford their own food, and deal with the hidden pandemic of men beating women and children in their homes.

Throughout this time, we connected on weekly virtual calls. Our partners warned us of the rise in radicalization, hate speech and extremism.

I wish I had the confidence to name some of my partners here today – but the truth is that the spaces they work in are not safe. We have had partners – men and women peacebuilders - arrested and tortured by powerful states that use counter-terror laws as an excuse. And we have partners whose families have been targeted and killed by state proxies. Why?

These people are not adversaries of the state. They are its citizens. They are its best citizens. They are stepping into the fray and doing what governments have not done – providing services, taking up the responsibilities to protect communities. They bear no weapons, and they engage in dialogue. They abhor violence. Yet they are being targeted. Why?

While we sit here comfortably in Malaga discussing violent extremism, an entire country – Afghanistan - has been overtaken by violent extremists. Afghan women are being violated and are having their rights curtailed as we speak. In the aftermath of the Afghan crisis, we as civil society took up the responsibility of protecting, supporting, evacuating, the civic actors, the police officers and others who are now

directly under threat from the Taliban. At ICAN, we are assisting over 2,000 people. Over 62% of the families we are trying to help have female principals – meaning Afghan women who dedicated their lives to fight for equality, human security, peace – who are struggling to push back against the dark forces of extremism that now seek to drown them.

So many governments claim to care about women peacebuilders, about the threat of terror – yet so few heeded the warnings of Afghan women. So few have helped us as we seek to help them.

This is not acceptable. Our states are all powerful – and as such they have the responsibility to protect us as citizens. Instead, we as citizens are taking up all the responsibility to protect communities, but without the power.

From our perspective, the failed diplomacy regarding Afghanistan and the unwillingness of the international community – led by powerful states – to understand the importance of ensuring the protection of women’s rights and the systemic exclusion of women from the talks in Doha – are directly linked to the horrific developments in Afghanistan today.

To put it simply, if Afghan women peacebuilders had been present as independent delegations at the political talks, the Taliban would never have succeeded as they did. But they did and the consequences are profound – accelerating 3 tectonic geopolitical shifts:

1. A resurgence of transnational, identity-based extremisms around the world, with the Taliban as the standard bearers. Their takeover of Afghanistan has emboldened Islamic violent extremist movements in Libya, Syria, and Pakistan.
2. On the opposite side of the coin, we see a rise in statist authoritarianism and state-led terrorism, imbued with extremist thinking. States such as China, Russia, and Turkey are asserting themselves through military might and transactional capitalism. They are curtailing human and civil rights, leading to rapidly shrinking civic space: today only 3% of the world’s population live in countries with “open” conditions for civil society. Russia’s war on Ukraine is indicative of this.
3. Finally, we see the shredding of value-based multilateralism. Universal human rights have always been universal. But Western states have always claimed to be their champions. But what is the point of inspiring rhetoric and strong declarations if the practice on the ground is absent? We as citizens have the right to live free of fear and to uphold our rights – it is both our right and responsibility to ensure strong human rights compliance. Our multilateral institutions were created to uphold these values. They are not and should not be neutral or neutered entities.

In light of these trends, we see that as women peacebuilders struggle for basic human rights and dignity, they assume great risk. Because they challenge the status quo, they are caught at the nexus of government and extremist forces who harass, attack, and detain them and their families. Women peacebuilders are particularly vulnerable to retaliation from government forces and extremist groups. They are often subject to distinctly gendered threats such as accusations of sexual promiscuity, threats to their children and family, and attempts to undermine their credibility and reputation that charge them with violating social norms of behavior.

So, what do we need to do to minimize harm to local peacebuilders and provide them with the recognition, protection, and support to lead on their vision for transforming extremisms and building more peaceful and pluralistic societies?

Five solutions:

1. We need robust and safe reporting and response mechanisms for peacebuilders unlawfully targeted, arrested, and detained by their governments. When governments retaliate against peacebuilders, the UN needs to provide protected space and representation for their cases. UNOCT can take the lead in following up on cases.
2. We need help with safe passage, and support to vulnerable civil society members in need of safe houses and protected movement.
3. We must ensure peacebuilding work is carved out of anything to do with sanctions and material support. We cannot allow counterterrorism laws and sanctions to adversely impact the very people building peace and preventing extremism.
4. We must always include and invite civil society – especially women peacebuilders - to negotiations, meetings, and decision-making platforms on peace, CT, and security. This works both to ensure they have a voice, and to demonstrate affiliation with them. The UN needs to facilitate their access.
5. Legitimizing and protecting civil society through an accreditation program at the UN or in regional organizations – in partnership with us as global networks - that lends them recognition from the government.

If we are serious about addressing terrorism, we have to foster peace, resilience, equality and pluralism. We need an ecosystem – of states, the UN, regional organizations, local and international civil society to work together – to complement each other and above all to trust and respect each other.

Business as usual has not worked. Einstein said the definition of madness is repeating the same thing expecting different results. Well internationally we are repeating the same things and getting ever worsening results. At ICAN, and among our WASL partners, we are ready and willing to consider new strategies, learn the hard lessons, and do things differently. The question is do each of you, as governments, as individual leaders, have the courage to change course?

Thank you.