

## **Hope versus Extremism – How Women are Using Peacebuilding in the Covid-19 Crisis**

*By Kendahl Tyburski*

The pandemic continues to spread with cases rising globally and new countries experiencing its detriment daily. As Canadian Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Rob Oliphant, stated to members of the Women's Alliance for Security Leadership (WASL), "As long as Covid-19 exists in one country, in one state of the world, it exists everywhere." This far reaching threat, though intimidating to most, continues to motivate women peacebuilders. From handing out personal protection equipment and delivering them to the most vulnerable communities to creating mobile clinics, women peacebuilders adapt daily to the changing needs of their communities, pivoting peacebuilding efforts where needed to ensure the health and safety of all. In Yemen and Libya, already fragile health systems have collapsed, leaving a void for those experiencing Covid-19 symptoms who find themselves with nowhere to go. ICAN Founder and CEO Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini MBE identified WASL members as "...first responders, [who are taking] on the burden of responsibility," recognizing that they unfailingly step in when and where their communities need them.

Women peacebuilders anticipated exacerbated security challenges in the early days of 2020, and these have materialized as the disease spreads further into vulnerable spaces. As Oliphant noted, "Covid-19 is an opportunity for bullies to gain a comparative advantage." Violent extremist groups use their platforms to establish power within communities, reaching out to offer support where the national and international systems have failed, preying on those in need to join their efforts in exchange for a sense of safety. Within Nigeria, Boko Haram has exploited the vulnerabilities of those marginalized by sexual violence and youth who, without the daily structure of school, lack purpose and direction. Though communities were finding success at eradicating violent extremism prior to the pandemic, it is becoming a much more complicated challenge in 2020. But Ahlam Almilaji of Syria recognizes that "women can control against the return of terrorism," in these difficult times. The Allamin Foundation, a WASL member in Nigeria, teaches women in settlement camps self-care techniques and reaches others through radio programs to share knowledge on the pandemic and the situation throughout their state. The Women's Center for Development and Culture in Albania are incorporating youth programs into their work to encourage them to join peacebuilding efforts instead of falling into the hands of violent extremist groups. While this work is necessary, without the support of international actors, these local actors are placing themselves in grave danger when attempting to prevent violent extremism on their own.

While violent extremist groups take advantage of the vulnerable and national governments continue to fail their citizens, women peacebuilders embrace hope, foster interconnectedness, and uphold values of peace and justice. Oliphant observed the hope that the WASL partners put forth, recognizing that "hope and extremism are on a teeter-totter. You can't fight extremism with military or violence; you can

only fight extremism with hope.” For women peacebuilders to continue to take on the responsibility of providing hope and care to their communities, they need sustainable support, funding, and protection by the international community – but in times of global and domestic crises this proves difficult. When the international community is faced with the choice, it appears easier to look internally and solve problems within their own borders. This leads the crisis to not only be defined by a widespread virus or economic turmoil. “We have a choice about whether this is a moral crisis,” Oliphant noted. Governments and non-governmental organizations are needed as interlocutors to work with local actors around the world.

Canada has repeatedly taken on a role as an interlocuter, showing profound global leadership through its feminist foreign policy and women centered approach to funding peacebuilding and development. As the international community, we need to ensure that any policy commitments are not simply for decoration but are implemented to further recognize and fund women peacebuilders. As Oliphant stated “the strength of the women’s communities and networks [WASL partners] represent must be fostered... If they are not, no one in the world is safe.”