

**THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN COUNTERING TERRORISM IN NIGERIA WRITTEN BY PASTOR ESTHER IBANGA AND PRESENTED ON SEPT 09 2015 AT THE UN.**

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you very much for the opportunity given to me to address such a distinguished group. I speak today as a Christian pastor, an interfaith peace activist, the founder of Women Without Walls initiative (WOWWI), a wife and a mother from central Nigeria. My organization works to bridge the divides between faith groups and offers women skills training in peace mediation and negotiation, preventing extremist violence, and community policing.

In the face of evolving global security challenges in which a growing number of conflicts involve insurgencies, extremist and criminal groups use violence to achieve their goals. Identifying just, effective and sustainable approaches to peace, security promoting peace and security and strengthening the rule of law is an increasingly complex and pressing endeavor. In particular, the ways in which communities and security actors—police and military—understand, manage and respond to violent extremism and other serious threats can have significant impact on long-term prospects for peace.

The nature of the relationship between these security actors and the communities they serve is critical. At all levels and in all contexts, balancing security and rights is a complex challenge, as is ensuring a standard for security provision that is fully accountable, reliable and legitimate. Where security and rights are not balanced, mutual hostility between the communities and security actors may thrive resulting in strained relationship. When these forces are not representative of the populations they are tasked with protecting ; these grievances between the civilians and security actors will only grow. Women's inclusion in the security sector is critical to addressing this.

Security policies and cordial inclusive security approaches and a strong relationship between security actors and communities can acknowledge and help these actors better respond to and mitigate the root causes of conflict and violent extremism. However, what I have seen in my experience is that a lack of platforms for civic participation in security matters or lack of respect for human rights and the rule of law by security actors, can fuel grievances that give rise to violence and crime. In particular women-led civil society organizations are typically excluded

from policies and processes aimed at combating violent extremism despite their knowledge of how to better address these grievances.

In Nigeria, the insurgency by Boko Haram, which has been running for the past five years, has led to a humanitarian crisis. The group seeks a replacement of the secular state of Nigeria with an Islamic one. Attacks by these groups have been carried out in churches, mosques, schools and crowded places. Increasing threat to security has created shocks and made communities stressed and this continues today because of the heightened insecurity. This has thus altering altered social fabric of our country affecting the livelihoods, and economic activities, creating deep resentment, hostility and mistrust. Women have been killed; widowed; raped or kidnapped by Boko Haram to become sex slaves or cooks and cleaners. A few that escaped from the Boko Haram camps returned pregnant and traumatized or even diseased with HIV. If women are the most vulnerable of this insurgency; it then means that they have earned the right to be included in security matters. It is on record that it was women groups like wowwi who held the 100000 match and the famous Bring Back our girls movement that brought the world attention to the menace of Boko Haram in Nigeria. CWEENS (Christian Women for Excellence and Empowerment in Nigerian Society) provided a safe house for victims of terrorism and helps with legal aid where necessary.

To the affected communities, government appears not to be doing enough, while to the general public and international community, the government had come under criticisms on the allegation that the military deployed to these affected communities were involved in human rights violations against civilians such as extrajudicial killings ;, rape, torture, arbitrary detention, extortion, and harassment. These abusive practices have eroded public confidence in the security sector, alienated security forces from the citizens they are charged to protect, and thwarted the effectiveness of their mission.

This situation has presented a new set of intertwined challenges and opportunities for the Nigerian government, international community, and CSOs and women in particular. We cannot continue with the same exclusive and hard security approaches to combatting the threat of violent extremism and expect a different result. Understanding alternative approaches to preventing violent extremism has never been more important than now considering the very important position Nigeria holds in the region and the spread of violent extremism in the

country and around the globe will only destroy the very fabric of our existence. An alternative and effective (cost, time and value) model that will not only uphold the tenets of human rights but also promote just and sustainable security responses to violent extremism is needed. This model must seek to take its struggle from the open battlefields of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism into communities dealing with and addressing the **root causes** motivating this violence to begin with. Any approach to counter violent extremism must also seek to form new and strengthen existing networks between security actors and civil society, and between different ethnicities, faith groups, and classes in local populations, to facilitate better communication; creative articulation and expression of issues as well as the formation of networks and discursive communities nurtured mutually by both formal and informal institutions.

Strategies aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism will be most effective if they prioritize consultations with women-led civil society groups in their development and implementation and women's inclusion in the security sector. There is no other group as qualified as Women to develop strategies aimed at countering terrorism. Even though in Nigeria, as well as most African nations; the involvement of women in Security issues is not only seen as an alien culture but also a taboo. ; and sometimes quite offensive to the men. Women civil society groups tap into the needs of communities, where women and children are disproportionately impacted by terrorism. They can facilitate better communication between the security sector and communities to address grievances with the state and can be tremendous advocates for needed changes with the way governments approach these issues to ensure they are effective and sustainable. When women are included in the security sector, they also help to present a softer face of security forces and reduce human rights abuses that anger communities.

Support for civil society organizations that work to bridge divides between women in different religions must be supported. Religion has always been used as a powerful weapon for terrorism and violent extremism so the first strategy WOWWI adopted was in its formation and constitution to include both Christian and Muslim women who have refused to allow religion to be used as a tool for hate and divide. And through its constitution, wowwi has had access (through its members) to both Christian and Muslim communities in the warring state and advocacy campaigns were facilitated among traditional; religious and women leaders . Youth groups were also not left out from both sides of the divide as their inclusion was essential in

these conversations. In this process, wowwi acted as an intermediary between these communities and the state government as these religious and community leaders worked to identify the grievances with the state that were creating conditions for violence. However, in the absence of a positive response from the State, wowwi decided to embark on working to address some of these grievances identified by the groups ourselves.

It is however becoming evident to key stakeholders – including government and civil society – that the status quo is untenable and that there is an urgent need to reframe the relationship between the security sector and the communities they serve from that of hostility to that of partnership for preventing violent extremism. In view of this, the United States Institute of Peace Women Preventing Extremist Violence (WPEV) program supported WOWWI to improve its strategy on preventing extremist violence at the local level by leading trainings on Human rights and facilitating security dialogues (HRSD) in local communities.

The trainings were designed to strengthen WOWWI's capacity to counter violent extremism at the community level, and help link the local-level initiatives to national and international security policies and programs. At the end of the trainings, WOWWI organized pilot community forums in four local government areas of Plateau State specifically in Ryom, Barkin Ladi, Wase and Jos North Local Government Area of Plateau State well known for violent extremism even up to now as I speak. Other trained women groups carried out the same project in Kaduna State. The forum allowed for a platform for regular community engagement with security agencies. It also provided a safe space for dialogue between CSOs, security actors and community members on just and sustainable responses to preventing violent extremism in their communities. It also became a first step towards repairing the relationship between these groups and building a new one based on communication and collaboration. The forum also provided opportunities for community members to discuss other issues affecting the communities. It was a huge success!

Wowwi also in collaboration with Women Without Borders, developed and introduced the pilot project of “Mothers School” in Jos; Nigeria and 147 women, ordinary housewives and mothers, were trained to be the first line of security for their homes, families, and communities. This was carried out in five volatile communities and the impact was tremendous as the confidence of women, who were originally kept out of what someone would say is, “a men's' world” of addressing security issues, was built up.; and the women suddenly realized that they also were

major stakeholders in this crisis and should be allowed to be involved in the solution.

Again in my experience, most violent extremism stems out of either an ideological belief or grievances against existing or perceived injustice by the State. To address this, WOWWI also undertook developmental projects in those aggrieved communities in Jos; Nigeria such as the digging of a borehole for drinkable water in a Christian community named Peace Well, which became a meeting point for both Christians and Moslems ; An old dilapidated classroom was renovated in a Muslim community; , prostheses were locally fabricated and given to victims of bomb blast and tricycles donated to disabled persons ;all across religious lines. Visits and help was also undertaken to Internally Displaced Camps (IDP ) camps. While these actions may not be much in themselves;, they send a strong message that people of all religions and tribes can come together to help victims of terrorism and address the needs of these communities if the government will not..

In spite of all the initiatives undertaken by wowwi, there is still a major challenge of exclusion of women in decision- making processes of countering terrorism or violent extremism by state and local actors. This must change and be prioritized domestically and at the United Nations. Women civil society groups must also be a part of the development and implementation of Nigeria's national counterterrorism strategy and all of the approaches being used by the international community to combat this threat in their own communities.

Again; groups such as WOWWI cannot continue to do their work to combat this threat without resources to support them. Funding is another major challenge as much more could be done with adequate funding that we are currently unable to do.

Internal conflicts are also a challenge but which actually give us an avenue to practice conflict resolution from within and without.

In spite of these challenges we are however not giving up ; as the struggle continues but I urge you, your excellences, to make this a priority.

Thank you very much for providing me with this opportunity and attention to these important matters. God bless you all.