

Open briefing of the Counter-Terrorism Committee on “The Role of Women in Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism”

Civil Society Intervention/Statement

For decades, violent groups have been advancing their agendas by exploiting existing social inequalities and injustices, particularly those caused by conflict and violent authoritarian regimes. Extremism feeds on discrimination, racism, and intolerance. It gains strength from acts that amplify differences and isolation and push people to embrace the darkest most divisive part of their identities. It will not be possible to address violent extremism without addressing these very causes.

Combating extremism requires addressing pre-existing discrimination, which is often embedded in laws and social norms. Member States should engage with women and women’s organization in order to address these barriers. For example, WILPF and partners have supported calls on the Government of Iraq to amend the legal prohibitions that require government approval to set up and operate shelters. This would allow Iraqi organisations to open a greater number of shelters in order to provide adequate services for women fleeing gender-based violence. Even before the expansion of Daesh, Iraqi NGOs and women’s rights defenders that seek to assist women and girls have encountered regular harassment, arbitrary surveillance, and warrantless searches. WILPF also urged fellow international organisations to adopt long-term support programmes for local Syrian organisations, as well as to provide those women-run initiatives working to contain the pre-emptive danger posed by extremist groups such as Daesh, and invoke local ceasefire agreements between different violent factions.

Women peace leaders at a MENA Consultation for the WPS High Level Review concluded that violent extremism in their region is fueled by access to small arms and increased militarization. There is an influx of weapons to the whole region as well as an extensive use of indiscriminate weapons against civilians. With that in mind, combating violent extremism must be seen in relation to the ongoing arms trade, economic and political incentives for military support and militarization in the region. A woman peace advocate from Libya called for a more holistic approach to be based on a human security framework. Extremism is also fueled by a history of impunity for crimes deliberately targeting women and girls. Women and girls will continue to be targeted if the Council fails to take action and hold perpetrators of sexual violence and gender based crimes accountable.

To counter terrorism and violent extremism, ideological root causes and power dynamics must be addressed from a gender perspective, and that takes effect by meaningfully including women's voices and participation in prevention efforts. The foundation of extremism is closely linked to the understanding of peacetime gender relations as patriarchal, whereby extremism uses such unbalanced gendered dynamics to corrupt, convert and control. In this sense, violence against women in contexts where extremism prevails can also be emanating from pre-existing patriarchal, violent and discriminatory settings that foster the occurrence of such atrocities.

Women are dealing specifically with the impact of violent extremism, not only as victims but also importantly as responders. There needs to be a flexible support to women civil society organisations that are working under extreme conditions countering and preventing more violence and extremism in their community, including prevention of recruitment of children. Recognizing the capability, experience and access of women to respond is also an indispensable component that is often lacking. Currently, as seen in Iraq and Syria, anti-terrorist laws and policies are preventing access to funding and necessary support to these organisations, and shrinking already limited space for women to operate and effectively participate. WILPF believes that it is imperative for Member States and international funding agencies to support local women's rights organisations in Iraq and Syria and not to politicize the aid or put in place restrictive funding conditions – thus the necessity of enforcing apolitical funding agendas.

All actions taken to prevent and respond to terrorist threats can no longer be gender blind. The present Council has stated this and called for the mainstreaming of the women, peace and security agenda throughout discussions on countering violent extremism and in any policy outcomes. We unite here as women's groups to remind this body to fulfill these commitments. All policy and actions must ensure local women have been consulted and have space to participate in a meaningful way so that the impact on women is carefully addressed and analyzed. The CTED must ensure that the technical assistance on countering terrorism to Member States, regional and sub-regional organizations should emphasize and promote the meaningful participation of women in these efforts. In addition, there is a need for greater recruitment of women in leadership positions of decision-making within Member States and UN institutions involved in supporting counterterrorism efforts.

Discussions on counterterrorism should specifically address how counterterrorism measures by UN bodies and Member States comply with international human rights, refugee, and humanitarian law, particularly regarding gender considerations, as per SCR 2122 (OP 3). The Task Force should ask what steps are being

taken to ensure that counterterrorism measures do not hinder gender equality, and urge Member States to include human rights components in their relevant reporting.

The CTED should establish an ongoing consultative mechanism with WPS-related civil society groups at the UN prior to each biennial review of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. The Task Force should request, and act on, information, analysis and recommendations addressing the challenges facing women in political processes; highlighting advances in ensuring participation of women in national reconciliation and countering violent extremism efforts; and detailing any progress made to enhance women's access to justice. It is essential that discriminatory policies and practices are rescinded, and institutions are inclusive of all, especially women, in order to ensure a solid foundation for future sustainable peace. Moreover, the Task Force should call for consultation with women leaders in civil society in order to integrate a gender lens that promotes the women, peace and security concerns reflective of the realities for women. Finally, Member States should ensure women are fully incorporated into national security strategies.