

FEATURE STORIES

The Public Statement of the Global Digital Consultation highlighted a wide range of issues and recommendations in relation to the gendered dimensions of violent extremism and counter-terrorism. UN Women conducted 11 interviews with human rights defenders and gender equality activists across five different regions (i.e. Arab States, Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, Western and Central Africa, and Eastern and Southern Africa) to illustrate how they work in contexts affected by violent extremism, the challenges they face and the efforts they make to build peace in their respective communities and countries.

In the words of Yenny Wahid: “Exposure to different perspectives, religious beliefs and backgrounds is key to foster a culture of tolerance”

Indonesian social and political activist Yenny Zannuba Wahid leads the Jakarta-based NGO Wahid Foundation, established with her late father, former Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid, in 2004. The organization has been working to support peace and foster interreligious dialogue to counter violent extremism. In 2017, the Wahid Foundation developed the Peace Village initiative jointly with UN Women, which brings together women from diverse backgrounds to create peace through dialogue in communities affected by violent extremism. Since its launch, 10 village leaders across Indonesia have committed to pilot the concept.



Yenny Wahid, head of the Wahid Foundation in Indonesia at the “Engaging communities in approaches to countering violent extremism and incitement,” Forum in Bangkok. Photo: UN Women/Stuart Mannion

“ The Peace Village initiative was born with the aim to build peace and create tolerance by empowering people at the local level, one village at a time. We believe

it is important that ideas on how to realize peace and promote social cohesion come directly from villagers and those with local knowledge and wisdom.



Elisabet Anita Wahyuningsih, Member of Jetis Village Women's business group and Peace Agent Facilitator, takes notes with her group from Klaten, Indonesia. Photo: UN Women/Eric Gourlan

Top-down approaches rarely work: when we operate on the ground, we work closely with local women and men to foster a sense of ownership towards the programmes we introduce and help them understand how these can benefit them in the long run. You must understand the local dynamics and nuances if you want to create a paradigm shift.

The Peace Village initiative also places a special focus on the role women play in creating peace within communities, especially at the grassroots level. Women are the ones who shape the dynamics within the family and, in turn, also influence the wider community. While men are usually more prominent on social and political stages, women's work happens 'behind the scenes', where they influence how things are navigated and managed. For example, they influence how money is spent, make decisions concerning children's upbringing and education as well as other household matters, and they bring the family together.

So, it is with this in mind that we've come up with a series of programmes and activities at a village level, targeting women in particular. For example, we run programmes that enable women to come in contact with others within their community from different backgrounds, so that they become exposed

to different perspectives, religious beliefs, ethnicities and nationalities. This is key to develop a culture of tolerance and social cohesion.



We do not ask women to erase all differences; rather, we encourage them to see their diversity and understand it.

This is achieved mainly through dialogue: we provide a platform for women to share their stories, and what comes out of this is usually an understanding that we are actually not that different, that there's more uniting us than dividing us. Despite my birthplace, ethnicity or religion, I too want my children to go to school and get an education, I too want to have a happy life and I too want peace.

We also encourage women and men joining our programmes to sample different social activities, both within and outside their villages. For example, we ask village heads to let women join townhall meetings, which take place regularly to discuss village issues and are usually attended by men. At first, the women in attendance are very shy, withdrawn – but soon they start to find their voice. It is amazing to see how they become empowered: these activities help women understand that they do have rights, and that they can use them to influence local policies and decisions. It's a win-win situation: by allowing women into the village forum, village heads relish the increased level of democracy in local decision-making processes and women find the courage and voice to influence processes within their communities, benefiting the wider society.

To use a metaphor, communities are like baskets: when we understand and respect each other, our social connections become interweaved and we become stronger. We can hold more things; we can lift our whole community up and create lasting peace. We need more peace-minded people to come together if we want to build a better society.



In the words of Mossarat Qadeem: “We, women peacebuilders and mediators, move communities in crisis from stagnation and paralysis to partnership”

Mossarat Qadeem is the co-founder of PAIMAN Trust, a Pakistan-based non-profit organization that works to address violent extremism through community mobilization and empowerment. It provides peace education mostly targeting marginalized Pakistani women and youth, both to reduce their risk of being recruited into violent extremist groups and to empower them to become agents of change. Since early 2020, PAIMAN is working with UN Women to implement a social cohesion programme in the Sindh province.



*Mossarat Qadeem, co-founder of Pakistan-based non-profit organization PAIMAN Trust.
Photo: courtesy of Mossarat Qadeem.*

“ In the early 2000s, suicidal attacks and explosions became a daily occurrence here in Khyber Pukhtunkhwa, north-west Pakistan. Acts of violent extremism affected everyone in my community, be it socially, economically or psychologically. Young people got recruited into violent extremist organizations (VEOs) as suicide bombers or explosive developers, and my community plunged into fear and uncertainty. The impact of conflict was colossal: it undermined social cohesion and trust within society; values of kinship and peace were replaced by dissent and division based on religious allegiance, ethnicity, class and of course gender.

I could no longer tolerate the bloodshed, destruction and trauma around me. I had studied peacebuilding and conflict resolution, and I thought it was time to put my knowledge into practice. My aim was to empower women and youth to understand how violent extremism was turning a multicultural, peaceful Pakistani society into an intolerant and violent place. My organization, the PAIMAN Trust, started a movement called ‘Let’s Live in Peace’ in 2007.

There is no one, unique path that leads to violent extremism – it is a social phenomenon. In Pakistan, it started as a movement that attracted many people,



Peace Forum commemorates 15th Anniversary of UNSC Resolution 1325. Photo: UN Women/Ryan Brown

especially youngsters, by exploiting their emotional attachment to religion. VEOs used a more radical interpretation of Islam to justify their violent acts and to recruit new followers, who often had a rigid worldview, superficial knowledge of the Quran and a desire to ‘belong’ to something bigger.

In addition, violent extremism and conflict exacerbated gender inequalities and discrimination, shrinking women’s space in society.

I soon realized that, in order to identify and neutralize violent extremist views, we needed to empower women to become leaders and change-makers.

To do so, we first had to address cultural dynamics – including the internalization of traditional gender roles, which see no role for women in the public domain.

In conservative and patriarchal societies, you have to introduce change one step at a time and work with men along the way: we started off by approaching local male religious and community leaders to acclimatize them to the idea of women participating in economic activities, as referenced in the Quran. With their backing, we started offering women vocational training, using economic empowerment as a tool to address violent extremism. Little by little, we expanded our scope and established community peace structures called TOLANA (‘together’ in Pashto), which enable women from all backgrounds (i.e. teachers, politicians, religious leaders, media experts, mothers, etc.) to come together, address current problems and become positive agents of change in their families and communities. TOLANA helped women

improve their leadership and develop the confidence to speak up about sensitive issues such as violent extremism at the community level.

I believe that when a woman works alone as a peacebuilder, she brings in change in her community – but when other women join her, they transform the values, the thinking, the culture and the whole process of peacebuilding. This is what TOLANA does.

Soon, women moved their discussions from TOLANA to other community public fora, increasing their representation in local public spaces and institutions. They found the voice and confidence to oppose alleged rigged election results and human rights violations, lead negotiations with extremists, demobilize armed youth and lead the trauma healing process within the whole community.

While this cemented the role of women as peacebuilders and change-makers at the local level, at the national level women’s role in peacebuilding remains largely unrecognized. This year we celebrate the 20th anniversary of UNSCR 1325, but we are still behind when it comes to women’s inclusion in security structures and processes. Some countries don’t even have a National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 yet, which leaves the onus of implementing the Women, Peace and Security agenda on women activists and grass-roots organizations.

There’s an urgent need to recognize the role of women as peacebuilders and leaders – and this recognition must come both from national governments and the United Nations.

We, women peacebuilders and mediators, move communities in crisis from stagnation and paralysis to partnership. We must be given the opportunity to participate in peace processes, as well as in national and international fora as experts. Only then will the purpose of UNSCR 1325 be realized.



In the words of Fatima Pir Allian: “Community dialogue is an effective tool for enabling those most vulnerable in our communities to find their voice”

Fatima Pir Allian is a young leader and women’s human rights activist from the Bangsamoro – the newly established political entity in southern Philippines.² She is the Programme Manager of Nisa Ul Haqq fi Bangsamoro (Women for Justice in the Bangsamoro, a UN Women partner in 2016), an organization that provides a venue for Bangsamoro women to progressively interpret Islamic teachings on gender, women’s rights and peace and development issues.



Fatima Pir Allian, Programme Manager of Nisa Ul Haqq fi Bangsamoro (Women for Justice in the Bangsamoro). Photo: courtesy of Fatima Pir Allian.

“ Everywhere in the world, women are seen as the nurturers and carers. They are the ones who take care of the children and other immediate relatives, protect them and heal them when they are hurt. But what if they, too, are hurt?

In contexts affected by violent extremism, women are regularly exposed to emotional and physical violence, including sexual violence. Still, they are expected to continue performing their roles as healers and as the

foundation of communities while carrying the burden of trauma and suffering.

The structural violence typical of conflict and post-conflict settings puts women’s well-being at risk and has a huge impact on the community as a whole, including on men and children. For example, in the Bangsamoro, we are all still scarred by the memory of the 1974 ‘Burning of Jolo’, a seven-day confrontation between State forces and secessionist groups on the island of Jolo. The massacre left our community deeply devastated. I was only five months’ old when this happened and, throughout my childhood and adolescence, I used to listen to community elders tell stories

² The Bangsamoro was established as a political entity/region in February 2019 after years of negotiations between the Philippine Government and secessionist groups, including the Moro Islamic Liberation Front.



Photo: UN Women/Louie Pacardo

of the massacre. I still remember how struck I was by the vividness of their tales: the dead bodies lying on the streets; the smell of burning houses; the screams and the hunger; the sobbing and wailing of those who had lost a loved one – a partner, a child, a parent or the whole family. One might think that, almost 50 years on, people would have recovered from this violence. Yet, the trauma lives on to this day.

In the region, extremist violence is still present: terrorist groups kidnap people for ransom, behead and rape their victims. To keep the situation at bay, the Government has turned to militarization and hard security, which have alienated civilians even more and unintentionally pushed some to sympathize with – and sometimes embrace – the terrorist cause.

If we want to eliminate violence and prevent conflict from happening again, it's important that communities look at their past and learn how to process post-conflict and post-terrorism trauma, including through mental health structures and resources. This includes specifically exploring ways for women to deal with the past, as this is an important step towards collective healing at the community level.



Photo: UN Women/Staton Winter

At *Nisa Ul Haqq Fi Bangsamoro*, we invite Bangsamoro women and men over for a cup of 'kahawa', which means coffee in the local language, and we provide a safe space to discuss their history and deal with shared trauma. We also listen to the stories of women who lived through the period of Martial Law in the 1960s and 80s – how they took care of their families and communities while the men were fighting, and the emotional toll that this has taken on them.

Community dialogue is an effective tool for enabling those most vulnerable in our communities, including women, to find their voice, share their stories and acknowledge that our journeys may be more similar than different.

Still, healing and overcoming post-conflict trauma is a complex and lengthy process and cannot be achieved only through civil society work on the ground.

We need the support of state institutions, which must address pervasive lawlessness in society by ensuring justice and introducing change at the policy level.

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