

**Briefing of the Counter-Terrorism Committee on
'Comprehensive approaches to countering terrorism and violent extremism conducive to
terrorism and the role of civil society and other non-governmental actors'**

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As a member of the Civil Society Coalition on Human Rights and Counter-Terrorism, I am here tonight to implore the United Nations Security Council's Counter-Terrorism Committee to identify ways to further strengthen the existing cooperation with civil society organisations, with practical interventions that include identifying challenges, gaps, vulnerabilities and good practices concerning the role of civil society and other non-governmental actors in comprehensive approaches to countering terrorism and violent extremism conducive to terrorism. I appreciate the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy for recognising the roles of civil society as 'critical partners for the United Nations in global efforts to counter/prevent violent extremism', and in 2018, the Secretary-General's desire to 'ensure that the views of civil society are fully reflected in counter-terrorism policies and programs'. I also appreciate the 2020 Secretary-General's Call to Action for Human Rights for 'broad and sustained engagement with civil society and other stakeholders and a system-wide strategy on civic space, offering a roadmap for the GCTS', but I believe action must meet these words and commitments.

Fighting extremism and countering and preventing terrorism must prioritise the promotion of state and global responsibilities to uphold international standards, not just military-led counter-terrorism policy as the world has predominantly witnessed since the US and its allies' response to 9/11, without letting the voices, needs, concerns, skills and expertise of those living through the very real consequences take precedence.

Driving these conflicts has been the idea that military responses are needed to address the chaos in these 'fragile states' and 'ungoverned' spaces, which become the incubation laboratories of extremist ideologies, indoctrination, recruitments into violent groups and extremism.

This assumption has been used to lose sight of innovative initiatives and overrule the rights and desires of millions of civil society actors and organisations across these contexts who are playing critical roles 'in empowering communities, enhancing resilience, supporting accountability and transparency, advancing the rule of law, and achieving the purposes and principles of the United Nations'.

Civil society's full and meaningful participation must be prioritised in all efforts aimed at addressing the underlying root causes of violent extremism and conditions conducive to terrorism.

In Nigeria, organisations such as my own are working inclusively with all actors at the grassroots level – including those people who are most impacted by atrocities of both sides of the conflict, particularly by mismanagement of the situation by counter-terrorism

operatives. These atrocities have led to broken trust, erosion of social cohesion, and loss of lives and livelihoods, including loss of dignity as humans, with consequent frustrations, anger, grievances and hatred. These are factors that drive and fuel violent extremism.

We have worked to challenge the narratives and the ideology espoused from 'Boko Haram' to 'Boko Halal', to catch children young with messages of tolerance, peace and peaceful coexistence in peace club settings across Islamic schools. We have created eight social networks of vulnerable groups of women, girls and youths, including those of the survivors of 'sexual slavery' and the 'invisible children' of both sides of the conflict. We have brought women and youth faith-based organisations together and built their capacity to effectively respond to any mistrust between Christians and Muslims, thus supporting a movement of women and youth peacemakers as 'bridge builders' to close the gaps widened in the Boko Haram insurgency in Northern Nigeria.

Some international strategies have begun to integrate gender considerations into counter-terror responses, yet the norm remains ignorance of gender dynamics and failure to integrate gender into responses in a way that protects and supports men, women, girls and boys and effectively transforms harmful gender norms. Terror groups understand and use gender identity to their advantage and in many cases have a gender strategy to attract or retain members.

As a member of the Women Alliance for Security Leadership (WASL), an International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) initiative, some of us were challenged and resourced to demonstrate how women could lead in mainstreaming countering and preventing violent extremism in five countries – Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria, Syria and Pakistan, in 2016. That was when we implemented our efforts to support the realignment of social norms and reintegration in communities where extremists and violent groups had heavily recruited. For the first time in our culture we brought men, women and youths together in a mosque to brainstorm on solutions.

We also run a series of life radio phone-in programmes to help demystify the historic deep-rooted misconception and apathy to Western education (a key intolerance of Boko Haram). The entire community participated, contributed and asked questions, at the end of the first 15 weeks. People were enlightened by seeing that what they were told are Western concepts and termed 'Haram' were not only compatible, but are in consonance, with Islamic principles. The trainings led to over 35 per cent more enrolment of children, particularly girls, in public schools. We do not lose sight of gender considerations in all our local interventions, having seen the extremists assigning roles. We empower boys and girls equally with responsibilities and recognitions, winning their hearts and minds, and endearing them away from extremists' beliefs.

In many of our programmes, we operate in a way that the state unfortunately cannot. The reality is that there is deep distrust of the state from many of those we work with – given many historical grievances. And if we – and civil society organisations like ourselves – were not doing the work that we do, then many of these communities would be overwhelmed by violent terror groups. This would represent a failure of efforts to counter terrorism and shows clearly the role that civil society organisations have. Unfortunately civil society

activities are often poorly supported and we face distrust from the same state actors that should be supportive of our work.

When state actors use counter-terrorism laws and justifications to target civil society organisations and actors that are working to build peace and protect human rights, it is one of the most counter-productive actions the state can take if they are truly committed to ending and preventing violent terror attacks. Civil society needs to be supported, resourced and given the space to operate, rather than disrupted and attacked. Support to local civil society is – as I'm sure my colleague Jordan Street from Saferworld will further tell you – one of the most important ways in which a counter-terrorism effort can build legitimacy and lead to lasting change.

In Nigeria, as in many other contexts, we still have the tendency to be selective about the international policies we integrate into our counter-terrorism approach. This often means that commitments to human rights and protecting civic space, including a gender perspective and meaningfully involving civil society, are not taken seriously. We need greater awareness and support to integrate all elements of United Nations Security Council Resolutions and the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy into our various domestic policies and legislation on countering and preventing all conditions that lead to terrorism and violent extremism. Member States should ensure that development assistance to any country helps increase opportunities for roles of CSOs [civil society organisations], and specifically combats gender and other forms of discrimination against women-led CSOs, ensures protection of women-led CSOs and keeps them safe, and builds the capacity of women leaders in countering and preventing violent extremism.

A more holistic and intersectional approach is needed to address the relationship between gender equality, women's rights, peace, security and counter-terrorism, and this must be centred on advancing women's human rights, addressing structural inequality, and tackling gendered drivers of armed conflict – including the role of patriarchal power structures and violent masculinities in fuelling the production of both violent movements and heavy-handed, counter-productive responses to them.

I thank you all for the opportunity to talk with you today. I hope one day we can invite you to see the good things we are doing in Nigeria, and maybe show you the areas we need to improve too. I am encouraged to see that the UN Security Council is inviting civil society actors like myself to brief you and it fills me with confidence that with more inclusion of civil society in the work of the Counter-Terrorism Committee, hopefully we can begin to make progress in our collective efforts to make the world a safer place for all.