

## **Muslim grassroots activism: Importance of working with women and schools**

I would like to thank the Committee on Culture and Education in giving me the opportunity to share with you my thoughts on the prevention of radicalisation. I very much agree with the suggestions given in the Opinion by the Committee for the Committee on Civil liberties, Justice and Home Affairs in September of this year. I am pleased to see that suggestion 1 reaffirms Member States to promote freedom, human rights, equal opportunities, the respect for human dignity and that it is the EU's responsibility to respect the fundamental freedoms, rights and security of its citizens while respecting linguistic, cultural and religious diversity.

What I would like to focus on today is on point 12 of the Opinion where the Committee "stresses the importance of the role of women in the prevention of radicalisation within family units." I noticed it was a small sentence but I would like to talk about why women matter in this regard, but not solely within the family unit. I want to also demonstrate how the empowerment and full participation of women in society are crucial in strengthening our society against extremism. Yet the role of women is often overlooked or not fully appreciated.

I also want to look at the role of schools in how they can build students resilience to radicalisation by teaching critical thinking, encouraging open discussion of ideas and views and the importance of imparting fundamental values as listed in Suggestion 1. Education is critical and schools are critical in this regard.

But before I do that I would like to briefly talk about the work of my organisation Inspire. The UK Government has 4 strands as part of its counter-terrorism strategy: protect, pursue, prepare and prevent. Prevent is the work

which aims to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism and extremism. My organisation Inspire focuses on this specific area: preventing radicalisation and challenging extremist narratives which may lead people on a path towards radicalisation. Our work takes a bottom up approach rather than top down where as a civil society organisation we engage directly with Muslim communities and statutory agencies.

The role and voice of Muslim organisations I believe is crucial: particularly in challenging extremist ideologies which try to claim legitimacy from Islam as ISIS and AQ do or in challenging far right extreme groups who fail to distinguish between Islam and Islamist extremism and as a result denigrate and instigate violence against Muslims. Muslim voices like ours matter in challenging both.

Part of our work is promoting counter-narratives to Daesh's ideology: but in particular promoting theological counter-narratives to ISIS and Al Qaida ideologies. Muslim civil society organisations and faith institutions are crucial in this regard; police, government and other agencies will not be able to lead on this particular area where Islam's religious texts and intellectual tradition are used to delegitimise Islamist extremism - which is why partnership work is so crucial. What we have often found however is women are not often taught theological CNT, and as they tell us not enough is being done to teach their children them either for a number of reasons which include weak leadership, ill-equipped faith institutions and faith curriculums not responding to pressing issues of our time. So much more work needs to be done in this regard.

Inspire was founded in 2008 and is a counter-extremism and women's rights organisation. Since then we have been working with schools, teachers, the police, local and central government and Muslim communities. One of the campaigns we launched back in 2011 was "Jihad Against Violence" – which had

two aims. Firstly as Muslims we wanted to reclaim the word jihad back from Muslim extremists who we felt had hijacked not only the meaning of the word which means struggling for a just and wholesome cause but who had also hijacked our faith to justify such violence. Our struggle was against violence and in particular VAWG and terrorism. Our JAV declaration was signed by participants from over 32 countries across the world and was featured in the New York Times, The Guardian, the National UAE and other countries. This was a campaign led by Muslim women.

We are very active on social media as we recognise how Daesh and far right extremists both use the internet and social media to radicalise people online. So for example a letter I wrote to young girls explaining why they should not join ISIS, was read 45'000 times in 72 hours in countries across the world. Point by point the letter exposed the hypocrisy and lies of Daesh. We had very positive feedback. Some schools now use that letter as a resource with pupils to explain the difference between Islam and Islamist extremism.

Our most recent campaign MAS, was in response to ISIS's declaration of a so-called caliphate and their call on Muslims to pledge allegiance to al Baghdadi. As Muslim women we were tired of waiting for men to take the lead, as women we recognised the threat ISIS posed to our children, families and communities and believed it was imperative that we showed our rejection of Daesh, to make a stand against them, to challenge their religious and political worldview and to speak out loud and clear.

MAS launched last year and was supported by the UK Home Secretary Theresa May who recognised the importance of empowering women to take the lead and who spoke at our event. The Sun Newspaper, Britain's biggest selling newspaper backed our campaign and used our campaign image on the front

cover of their paper. The image was of a Muslim woman wearing a hijab of the Union Jack, a symbol highlighting how as British Muslims we are comfortable with our identity and do not see any conflict in being British and Muslim. Such an image not only sends a message to Islamist extremists who say you can't be British and Muslim, it also sends out a message to FR extremists who equally say the same too.

The Sun championed this image and wrote in their editorial the importance of not only challenging extremism but also Islamophobia. This year when the Tunisian massacre happened the Sun asked Inspire to write its Manifesto Against Hate, which talked about how together as Britons, whether Muslims or non-Muslims we all subscribe to democracy, rule of law, tolerance and how together we must challenge hate preachers and report extremist content online. This had excellent feedback among both Muslim and non-Muslim Britons where everyone fully supported the ideals and values that were spoken about.

The Sun is a right wing newspaper yet it demonstrated, through the right use of language, the importance of not finger pointing or alienating Muslims or viewing them as a suspect community or fifth column - but showing how together we all stand for the values of our country and together we will defeat extremism. But they did this by working with a Muslim organisation, and not only that but a Muslim women's organisation. And they also sent out a message to Britons who are not Muslim – that Muslims are part and parcel of our country. When so many newspapers love to sensationalise Muslim and Islam and to view them as a problem community, I think many newspapers can learn from the actions of the Sun. The media must recognise the role they play in not only challenging extremism but creating a culture which promotes

respect for human dignity, equality and non-discrimination. Only by working together – rather than alienating communities – will we be able to prevent radicalisation.

As part of our Making A Stand campaign, we toured 8 cities in England and Wales engaging directly with hundreds of Muslim women with 4 aims:

- To teach women theological counter-narratives to extremist ideology
- Help them to recognise early signs of radicalisation they may see develop in their children and family members
- Signpost them to agencies who can provide assistance and support. To build a relationship of trust and partnership between agencies and communities
- Mobilise and inspire women to lead in this work and to become community champions, challenging extremism in their city.

One of the reasons why I do this work is because I have seen how women make a difference in the prevention of radicalisation.

I have seen how women are prepared to challenge hate preachers or challenge men in their families who may be promoting extreme views. I have seen how women, perhaps more than men, will work with authorities in order to protect their families. How women are prepared to lead in this area in their communities, working with other women outside of formal structures to safeguard their communities. They are an untapped source of help, yet too often we ignore them and their capability. Yet

- As mothers they will be able to identify and refer vulnerable individuals by being able to detect early signs of radicalisation if women are invested and educated to recognise what those early signs are
- They can help nurture a strong British Muslim or European Muslim identity from birth and resolve issues around identity and belonging. This is fundamental as the issue of identity and lack of belonging is something extremists are very good at exploiting.
- Women can help support young people's resilience to the extremist narrative by providing a contextualised understanding of Islam in a European context fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This education if invested in and done correctly could help severely dent the appeal of extremist interpretations of Islam in future generations
- Women can help safeguard their communities by actively challenging extremists/preachers operating in local areas

Through my experience of working within Muslim communities for over 20 years, I have seen when you empower women, it is women who are far more likely to speak out against extremism. They fear extremists will prey on their children and want to protect them so are more likely to take action. Historically however in the UK, many statutory agencies never really engaged directly with women. They used to work with self-appointed community leaders who often acted as gatekeepers rather than gateways to women. This is now beginning to change but many agencies are beginning to realise that in order to work with women, they must directly reach women and not rely on community leaders who are often unelected and, unaccountable.

Member states need to ask themselves what strategies are they using to directly reach women, to hear women's voices and to empower them to prevent radicalisation in their homes and communities?

But women are also more likely to speak out because they see how their own rights are directly threatened by extremists. In fact often one of the first things religious extremists do when they gain positions of power - is to curtail women's rights where they seek to control them and marginalise them from public life. Women recognise this and know that preventing radicalisation is also about protecting their rights.

Women are vital to conflict resolution and sustainable peace building which is why in 2000, the U.N. Security Council enshrined this principle when it passed Resolution 1325, highlighting how women are pivotal in helping to bring peace and to help resolve conflicts.

The Institute of Development Studies has shown how women and girls have a tendency to form groups and coalitions to deal with problems and how they get on with resolving conflicts, building peace and creating change.

However research has shown how the skills of women as mediators and decision-makers within the home and their experiences building trust and dialogue in their families and communities are frequently dismissed as irrelevant or are not sufficiently valued by national governments, the international community or by women themselves, studies have shown.

Yet how can we dismiss women in Nigeria who after the abduction of almost 300 girls by Boko Haram, and as the government were still deciding what to do, it was women who came out first to demonstrate, to campaign, to call for action. Thousands of Christian and Muslim women have come together in

Nigeria to form the group Women Without Walls to stand against Boko Haram and extremism. Can we afford to dismiss a women's coalition against extremism like in Pakistan Aman O Nisa, who challenge terrorist propaganda by presenting alternative narratives? There are similar groups operating here in Europe. Yet how many Member States are aware of women's groups in their countries who are tackling extremism and whether they are supported to do so?

Despite the international community's assumed commitments to the inclusion of women in negotiations and peace building, women however account for only 4% of participants in peace talks. Too often counter violent extremism strategies ignore the powerful role women do and can make. Frequently relegated to the side-lines as observers in a situation, yet it is women who know it is they who have the most to lose and whose rights and freedoms will be the first to go whenever extremism thrives.

Extremists recognise that women play a civilising effect on society hence their continual attempts of suppressing not only women's rights but women activists themselves. They have a particular disdain for women's rights activists and at Inspire we have seen how extremists and pro-Isil sympathisers directly threaten and abuse us in our endeavour to empower women to challenge extremism. Which is why member states need to invest in women civil society organisations who make so many personal sacrifices to prevent radicalisation.

Governments need to invest in women, recognise the key and central role they play and educate and empower them. No preventing radicalisation strategy will work if you ignore women i.e. half of the community and do not take significant strides to invest in them as a solution in this work. The



overwhelming number of women civil society organisations who do this work are not well funded, do not have enough resources or manpower. The ability to access funding, in particular European funding is often inaccessible to women who do not have the experience to fill out complicated funding applications but equally cannot afford to pay a consultant to write them either. These are long standing issues and we need to find ways of overcoming these barriers which disempower women.

I would like to now focus on the important role schools can play in preventing radicalisation.

The British government recently brought in legislation placing a statutory requirement on schools to have “due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism.” This duty is known as the Prevent duty and it applies to a wide range of public-facing bodies.

Recent data has shown that almost half of referrals to Channel, are to people under the age of 18. And we have seen how extremists are deliberately preying on children in particular both in society and online.

Channel is a government programme which provides support at an early stage to people who are identified as being vulnerable to being drawn into terrorism. We know that referrals to Channel have included children who hold far right extremist views and Islamist extremist views. Channel uses a multi-agency approach to protect vulnerable people by:

- a. identifying individuals at risk;
- b. assessing the nature and extent of that risk; and
- c. developing the most appropriate support plan for the individuals concerned.

An example of how Channel is used to provide support to pupils at risk of radicalisation is the case of Laila. A 17 year old girl, Laila was a high achieving 6th form student who wished to become an engineer. However within short space of time she began to veil and disengage from her lessons. Started to distance herself from her friends. Grades started to fall too

Upon noticing change in behaviour her tutor spoke to her friends who informed him that Laila felt that that “a western secular education would not guarantee her a place in heaven” and that an Islamic education was all she was obligated to achieve. Well what happened to Laila?

School shared concerns with parents. Parents were relieved to be able to share their concerns as they too were concerned. Laila was referred to Channel and with the parents support a local female Islamic theologian mentored Laila which helped unpick extreme interpretations of Islam she had been exposed via internet. The Police were NOT and didn't need to be called but the school recognised Laila needed support. Laila went onto continue with her studies and if the school did not intervene, Laila could have been further drawn into extremism.

It is important to note however, that a whole picture needs to be painted to assess the likelihood of being radicalised. Many children maybe expressing legitimate religious practices and beliefs. However the school saw how Laila's grades were falling, her friends were concerned about her as were her parents – and Channel assess what support and intervention would benefit Laila. This is how schools can directly intervene and help protect pupils.

Schools can build pupils' resilience to radicalisation by teaching universal human values and opposing intolerance, hatred and extreme ideologies. Schools in the UK are now expected to promote fundamental British values which have been defined by the government as democracy, rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs.

Protecting children from the risk of radicalisation is seen by many schools as part of their wider safeguarding duties, and is similar in nature to protecting children from other harms (e.g. drugs, gangs, neglect, sexual exploitation, FGM, FM), whether these come from within their family or are the product of outside influences such as social media or in society.

Schools are expected to be able to assess the risk to vulnerable children and the support they may need. They must also have a good understanding of the risks and how to identify those children who are vulnerable. Schools are expected to have clear procedures and policies in place for protecting children from the risk of radicalisation which include information on referral pathways and when to refer to Channel. Staff, senior leaders and governors are all expected to have had training to help understand their role in safeguarding children and school are required to have strong IT policies too.

I believe it is a positive step by the UK Government in giving the Prevent Duty a statutory footing. Inspire has delivered training to more than 600 head teachers across the UK in the last 4 months alone, as well as training to pupils and parents about the risk of radicalisation. In some schools we have delivered training to pupils where far right extremism is a greater threat, in others where Islamist extremism poses a bigger threat. But in our experience, despite often the negative media portrayal and the misinformation about what

schools are required to do, teachers overwhelmingly have supported the Prevent Duty and understand that their role is one of safeguarding.

There has been opposition by some who suggest that the Prevent Duty is about spying on pupils or policing them, it is an attempt to close down discussion in the classroom or that it is Islamophobic. All of these suggestions are factually incorrect and are false. It is about safeguarding not spying and in fact schools are encouraged to have discussion and debate; for some pupils schools maybe the only place where their views get challenged especially if extremist ideas are coming from one's family. One school told us how they had one pupil whose father was a member of the far right British National Party and how he was influencing his son's intolerant view about Muslims – another father held extreme Islamist views and how he was influencing his daughter's view about non-Muslims. Challenging intolerance, hatred and dehumanisation of others – which can make some vulnerable to radicalisation – is something schools can do and do well. Schools can and must have curriculums which prepare children for life in modern Britain, or modern Europe.

We speak to schools about both the threat of far right and Islamist extremism. In some cities in the UK almost 40% of referrals are for far right extremism.

There are cases in the UK for eg of white boys who were inspired by Andres Breivik and attempted to commit terrorism in the UK. After the murder of soldier Lee Rigby over 60 mosques were attacked including bombs placed outside them. Some far right groups operating in the UK state that in order to join their organisation and to have their picture put up on their website, they must have first killed a Muslim. So what we are seeing are new extreme right

wing groups emerging – and just like Isis – they are targeting and radicalising children. And schools can challenge this effectively.

As it is early days with the Prevent Duty, it is going to take time to roll out effective training to staff in schools, and that includes teaching staff that there is a difference between extreme views and ordinary Muslim practice - but as a long term goal, I believe the Prevent Duty will help safeguard pupils from all forms of extremism, while teaching values of tolerance, respect, equality and importance of human rights – as an effective means of preventing radicalisation. Schools are also expected to teach pupils critical thinking; which is essential in helping young people recognise that information they maybe reading online is in fact propaganda by extremist groups. All of this together can help act as an important buffer to prevent radicalisation by building resilience in young people, instilling values that oppose extremist ideas and giving them the tools to critically analyse and assess what they are reading.

Schools can also work directly with parents and organise seminars teaching them early signs of radicalisation and what they can do help protect their children. We have delivered such training with schools for parents – as schools can directly reach out and engage with parents.

I just wanted to end on suggestion 27 of the Committee’s Opinion on the important role of NGOs and civil society organisations. From my own experience many of these groups who while do important work are not given enough support. They often lack infrastructure, resources and manpower and nor do they necessarily want to take government funding. I would like to see a greater contribution being played by the private sector in supporting these groups who do work on the ground. NGOs and civil society organisations are the backbone to so much of this work, but too many of these organisations

backs are literally breaking because they are not well-resourced. Healthy civil society groups tackling extremism are vital; we must therefore invest in them.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to present to you today and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.