

Women's Education: Promoting Development, Countering Radicalism

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Articles & Testimony

Increasing access to quality secular education can create better jobs for women and reduce some of the economic drivers of radicalization; educated women can in turn play a pivotal role in inoculating their children and communities against the radical narratives used to recruit followers.

Below are Dr. Mirahmadi's concluding recommendations; download the PDF to read her full testimony, or watch video of the entire hearing (<http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearing/hearing-women-s-education-promoting-development-countering-radicalism>).

The following is a list of recommendations from activists in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but they are important principles for any development and education initiatives focused on countering violent extremism (CVE).

Consistently Involve Women in Peace Processes. To date, civil society activists, particularly women, are only marginally included in major peacebuilding and national reconciliation conferences. Greater efforts should be made to invite female regional activists, especially those outside of urban centers. These community leaders are an essential part of creating local buy-in for any peacebuilding efforts especially in countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan, where the central government's reach is either limited or considered corrupt.

Prioritize Funding for Training and Skills-building Programs for Female Activists. The US should prioritize funding for building the capacity of women-led civil society organizations (CSOs) that work in the field of education, peacebuilding, and nonviolence. Training in skills such as non-profit management, fiscal responsibility, civic engagement, coalition building, communications training, and social media skills are consistently requested by activists on the ground. Special effort should be made to make the training available for women-led grassroots and/or un-registered organizations outside of main city centers.

Improving Grant Allocation Processes to Include Women's Groups. It is important to expand the base of grant recipients from US funding sources so more organizations are empowered to effect change in their communities. The current grant amount for many of the requests for proposals at USAID or the State Department is larger than most CSOs can absorb, so they lose out on funding opportunities. This can be resolved by requiring the larger grant recipients to provide at least several smaller grants to local organizations.

Fund Exchanges of Women Activists Who Have Experience in CVE. The US government can use its power as a facilitator and convener to host regular exchanges of female activists from countries facing political instability and violent extremism so they can share experiences and learn from one another's best practices. For example, the women in Kandahar who organized a peace rally can empower women in Yemen with real life examples of how to do the same in their country. It is important to take the local successes and give them a global reach.

Empower the Next Generation of Female Leaders. Although young female activists may have the passion and determination to lead counter-extremism programs, they need substantial training in social mobilization, civic engagement, and leadership development to reach their full potential.

Cultivate Relationships with Women in the Diaspora. Women activists in the US who come from countries facing violent extremism have an immense potential to enhance the strength and growth of civil society abroad. The USG should engage these activists in frequent roundtables to inform policy and development initiatives that are targeted at these countries. The State Department's US-Pakistan Women's Council and the US-Afghanistan Women's Council are excellent forums that should be replicated with other diaspora communities.

Establish Consistent Benchmarks for Identifying Local Partners. More refined screening processes will be required to properly vet local partners. Several international organizations, for example, noted that due to logistical limitations they are not able to perform background checks on partners to verify that they are not associated with violent extremism. As we engage more partners for peacebuilding initiatives, it is vital that we develop a set of benchmarks for collaboration. Specifically, we should expect local partners to share our values in promoting social cohesion and pluralism, respecting religious freedom, and advocating non-violent solutions to conflict. ❖

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