

A Human Approach

TO COUNTERING EXTREMISM

By per Concordiam Staff

When hundreds of her fellow Nigerian Christians were massacred with machetes in 2010 near the town of Jos, Pastor Esther Ibanga protested the violence with a “100,000 Women March” across the dusty plateau of central Nigeria. One person she shunned was Khadija Hawaja, a locally revered female Muslim leader from across the religious divide who was planning a similar march for her own co-religionists. That Ibanga and Hawaja now travel the world as partners expounding on the need for reconciliation is a tribute to the success of Vienna-based Sisters Against Violent Extremism (SAVE), founded in 2008 by Austrian professor Edit Schlaffer.

Schlaffer calls her organization the first women’s counterterrorism platform, a security network that considers mothers and wives, with their direct access to danger zones, the world’s “new security guardians.” Few deny the role women can play in fomenting violent extremism – a phenomenon abetted by online recruitment – but Schlaffer insists that behind many a mother ready to acclaim her son a martyr is a scared parent horrified at the bloodletting. “Women are the new front lines to combat violent extremism,” Schlaffer says of a network that has grown to include chapters in places such as Pakistan’s Swat Valley, the West Bank and Northern Ireland.

SAVE advocates “human development” as a means to counter violent extremism, a strategy encapsulated in a 2009 article by Dr. Ömer Taşpinar, a Turkish-born professor at the U.S. National War College and Johns Hopkins University. Taşpinar argues for the need to fight radicalism before it blossoms into terrorism and offers human development, a mixture of social reform and economic growth, as a strategic necessity. In Taşpinar’s view – and by extension that of Schlaffer – human development bridges the divide between the “security first” and “development first” models of counterterrorism.

“All terrorists, by definition, are radicals. Yet all radicals do not end up as terrorists. In fact, only a few radicals venture into terrorism,” Taşpinar noted. “At the same time, it is clear that most terrorists start their individual journey towards extremist violence first by becoming radicalized militants. Since radicalism is often a precursor to terrorism, focusing on radicalism amounts to preventing terrorism at an earlier stage, before it is too late for non-coercive measures.”



SAVE’s goal is to enlist mothers to stop their sons and neighbors, many suffering from unemployment and feelings of injustice, from “jumping into the abyss,” said Schlaffer, who also runs the nongovernmental organization Women Without Borders. Using written and recorded eyewitness accounts, SAVE has compiled a bank of anti-extremist anecdotes. For example, the organization conducted 70 interviews with Palestinian mothers aimed at dispelling the “myth of martyrdom.” Death and incarceration were common fates of many of their sons.

Happy accidents have also played a role. Schlaffer met Ibanga at a conference in Rwanda and inquired about the 100,000 Women March. The professor was surprised to learn that only Christian women had been invited to the protest. She encouraged Ibanga to put out feelers to Hawaja, a prominent Muslim leader from the same part of Nigeria. After initial resistance, the two women, former adversaries, became friends. When the pair are not touring the world, much of their activity is focused on reducing support for Nigeria’s Boko Haram terrorist movement.

Schlaffer considers human development a supplement rather than a replacement for more aggressive responses to violent extremism. She called for a strategic campaign to shift more of the security focus away from coercion and violence. “This is a new tool we need to use in our counterterrorism strategy,” she said. □

Pastor Esther Ibanga, left, joins thousands of women in a 2010 march to protest violent attacks on women and children near the city of Jos, Nigeria. Ibanga is a leading figure in Sisters Against Violent Extremism. She has partnered with her Nigerian Muslim counterpart to preach an end to sectarian terror.