

Engaging Civil Society to Build Security and Cohesion in Europe

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July 2016



Since the recent terror attacks here in Brussels and in Paris, the theme of this conference, Engaging Civil Society to Build Security and Cohesion in Europe, has become more relevant than ever. We called this meeting today in this august institution to provide a platform for the sharing of some extraordinary efforts occurring on the international, governmental and local level toward understanding and finding the vaccine for this epidemic of the radicalization of young people. In order to solve it, we cannot avoid self-criticism. In order to heal it, we have to understand the sickness at hand and the model of health.

That this is not the first time in European history that we find ourselves in this situation is important to remember. The failure of policy and practice in social, economic and cultural integration is clearly an important backdrop to this "revolutionary pull" on young people that has been compared to that at the time of the French Revolution and even to the

youth element of the rise of Nazism in Germany. Recently, the director of research in anthropology at the Center National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris, Mr. Scott Altran, reported to the UN Security Council's Counter Terrorism Committee.

He explained that a worrying number of IS [Islamic State] recruits in the West actually come from Christian families. Some had had no history of violence; friends had radicalized them. Perhaps most significant, he went on to say, was that the "mindless" terrorist leaders that we thought we were dealing with may actually understand the desires of our young people better than the governments and institutions trying to stop this do.

Family as a safety net

This brings us to a fundamental element in the theme of today's session. Who knows the minds of the young people best? Peers, yes, but even more profoundly, their parents -- more specifically, their mothers.

Not only do they know them but they are in a position to monitor them and influence them like no other can.

We have seven children and I can see when there is a cloud around one of them. When one of my younger girls became detached, started to not feel "at home" around our table and easily became angry with us, my husband and I had sleepless nights. No one can force a change of heart, but her breakthrough came when she arrived home one evening in tears, saying, "You are the only ones who really care about me." That realization changed her.

Through twenty years of WFWP projects and peace conferences for women in the Middle East, I have heard stories from woman leaders of how their children, relatives or friends have been radicalized at universities, but I have also heard dramatic testimonies that due to brothers or sisters and friends reporting to parents about their fears, some could be turned around. Some of these women learned from these experiences and on their own initiative went on to create prevention networks among themselves.

The threat is real

The stereotype of a "terrorist" as a foreigner from a disadvantaged, distant country that has no connection to my life has faded. Current statistics show that well over five thousand Western young people have made the dramatic decision to join the ranks of IS fighters. The breaking news stories of the three teenage girls (Shamima Begum, then fifteen years old, Kadiza Sultana, sixteen, and Amira Abase, fifteen) from Bethnal Green, east London, who dropped out of high school to fill positions as brides of IS fighters shocked us.

According to Oxford University, social networks rank high in the process of radicalization but friends or peers play the primary role in the recruitment of three-quarters of foreign fighters to IS. Family members

account for a fifth, mosques for just one in twenty. It is nearly impossible for social institutions to protect young people from their friends. Families are in a much better position to do that.



Poison and its antidote

Decisions to adopt and adhere to such an ideology were not made quickly, but began with disappointment, insecurity and confusion which then came into contact with the wrong elements and grew like a bacteria. How many more young men and women may be in the process of coming to such conclusions? There is no single cause and there is no simple solution.

The same places that may have contributed to the problems can also be the birthplace of solutions -- home, school, work, media, culture, religion, government. That is why we, who are all concerned elements, have to talk. That is why we are here today.

Deceiving our children

How are the promises of ISIS leaders able to take root in the minds of our European boys and girls on the cusp of adulthood? Natural qualities of youth are hope, passion, expectation and vulnerability. Some of our young people have become frustrated in their attempts to lead meaningful, exciting lives. If we really do consider ourselves a European "family... committed to working together for peace and prosperity" -- as stated on the EU homepage -- we can find solutions.

Families do that; they do not give up and do not "leave anyone behind." That telling quotation from a Disney animated film has taken on a new dimension since it was recently quoted in the Preamble for the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's).

The UN's vision

WFWPI has been involved in the discussions leading up to the Declaration on "Transforming Our World-- the 2030 Development Agenda." There is so much hope and there are so many possibilities for young people to contribute to a brighter future.

They do not want to be mediocre. They want to dream big and find realistic ways to make those dreams come true -- as those jihadi leaders seem to know well.

I just came back from a UN NGO conference in Korea entitled, "Educating for Global Citizenship: Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals Together."

Surely, almost half of the four hundred participants were under thirty-five years old. WFWP brought over forty young women to participate. What creative and brilliant ideas they have, especially as they stimulate one another in positive directions. How transformed are their lives when they find themselves involved in platforms and negotiations that hope to chart a brighter future for our planet. One could not imagine a better dream!

For months in advance and still now, the e-mail and links being sent around among them were focused on the five keywords words of the 2030 Agenda -- people, planet, peace, prosperity, partnership. Discussion groups focus on ending poverty and hunger, reducing inequalities, promoting decent work, ensuring quality education, making inclusive and safe communities, empowering young people.

Engage their hearts

Our failures in these areas (the five Ps) are part of the reason for the radicalized element in our societies.

How can we mobilize and build communities around these shared values? Young people in most nations are already offering their ideas to this campaign through Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. Can we not find a way to guide our searching young people to those web sites? Can we not engage our young people to help us find more creative, constructive programs that are more attractive to young minds than a suicide ideology?

This is just what young Ahmed (fifteen years old) said to me when I interviewed him at the Human Rights Council in Geneva last week. We had invited Ahmed, who was born in England to Iraqi parents, and his cousin Yarah as panelists in a debate on "The dangers of ISIS in Iraq" because of their Twitter-based project, "#No2ISIS." Both are convinced that if young people have been forewarned about the lies of the radicalizing indoctrination and provided alternatives lifestyles, the ISIS' promises will not be alluring, even to disenfranchised young people.



Family is central

At the end of the interview, I asked Ahmed why he was not attracted to ISIS personally. He said that he was raised in a family where his parents stayed involved in his life, providing a good education. He saw an example of authority and leadership in his parents, and he would compare that to other authority alternatives. "But, not everyone has those opportunities," he said, and "that is why I am doing what I am doing."



We have to look at our education systems, formal and informal. The UN and governments speak of "quality" education, but we may not all agree on their definition of "quality." WFWP is convinced that education must bring out the goodness in people, must lead them to ever deepening commitment to seeing the other as our own family members. Many here today would probably agree that realizing that is much easier when we understand a common Creator. Education at home should naturally lead to public education, which then reinforces what informal education has instilled.

We need to agree not only on academic choices but also on the core values we hope our young people adhere to. The professionals who guide our young

people during school hours should also be extensions of the primary nurturers and experts in "local knowledge," the parents. Both parents and teachers should strive to be models, not just imparters of knowledge. If not, it is confusing for young people.

As we see here today, the UN, governments, NGOs, religious leaders, academics, educators and others are trying. We want to include the voices of women, especially mothers in this discussion because they have proven their commitment and their effectiveness. If under-appreciated for their local expertise in

such a forum, they may benefit from training. One of our tenets at WFWP is that "the role of women in public leadership is crucial, not just because we are over 50 percent of the population, but because of the primordial role of women as leaders and mothers in the natural family, the microcosm of the human family."

Europe is at a crossroad

We seek to balance our individual and collective needs, our need for interdependence without losing our sense of independence. The Brexit debates in this building yesterday highlighted that. We are being confronted with demands to open wide our doors and share our home and our privileges.

The founding principles of our union, as well as our personal convictions, make us want to respond generously, but we find our capacities and patience overwhelmed. Looming are the serious concerns related to the successful integration of our increasingly multicultural societies. If done well, the benefits all around are great, but if not, the sense of exclusion and dissatisfaction can be a breeding ground for much more serious concerns. No matter how protective we try to be of our children, we have to send them out every day among looming dangers.



Redirect youthful energy

Governments alone cannot solve these issues. Our concern and our engagement has to begin in civil society and within each family. Radicalization or any disengagement from social and civic participation happens over time and is preventable at early stages. But are we looking outside our small immediate concerns?

We can only imagine what positive impact a now-radicalized individual might have had in society if someone had funneled his or her energies constructively. The underlying desire of our young people is to be relevant, to make a difference. We have tremendous minds and hearts working on these issues, but there are gaping holes in the

solutions being proposed.

One of those gaps is between the critical role of the natural family in preventing (or encouraging) the radicalization of our young people and the vision of the extended "human family" as the network to provide real security. In both cases, the required matrix is empathy and love, which governments also have trouble providing.

Our religious and cultural influences and the authorities representing us have an important responsibility to provide a vision and model for peaceful, cohesive communities. Similarly, our educational institutions, and the curricula that frame them will play a significant role in providing incentives for good citizenship and wise governance. Yet the seeds for that accomplishment are rooted in the family. Can we decide together and work together toward a vision of healthy, inclusive families and communities where "no one will be left behind"?

Some of the quotations in this article are allusions to the announcement by the UN of their 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.