

Supporting Local Peacebuilders and Promoting Human Rights to Help Counter Violent Extremism

For more than a decade now, Peace Direct has worked to help end violence and build peace around the world. Central to our mission are local people and local groups. We emphasize that local people in conflict situations know their context more intimately than any other party, and therefore are the experts in knowing what policies and practices work for their situations, what has failed, and what they need in order to progress. This idea being foundational to our work, we provide financial and organizational support to local peacebuilding communities and raise their voices to call attention to their work. Through our support to organizations in over 20 conflict-affected countries to date, we have worked with several local groups whose goal is to counter and prevent violent extremism through peacebuilding and promotion of human rights.

Our experience leads us to recommend to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights that efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism must be guided at first and foremost by the communities most affected by and at risk of extremist violence. Increasingly, militarized interventions by foreign actors have been failing, and there is growing evidence that they are actually fueling further extremist recruitment and a growth of extremist and radical ideology. In studies conducted by [Saferworld](#) in Afghanistan, Yemen, and Somalia, it was a common theme: militarized and aggressive approaches from foreign troops have instilled resentment among local populations, deepened divides, and created backlash.

Instead, OHCHR should more directly support local peacebuilding and human rights groups that are actively working to prevent and counter extremist recruitment, advance human rights and better governance, and address the underlying drivers of extremist ideology. This support should allow local groups to design and implement the appropriate approaches for their societies, incorporating external knowledge and strategies as they desire and see most useful.

As one example of good practices of countering and preventing violent extremism, we would like to highlight the work of our partner, Aware Girls, in Pakistan.

In Pakistan, Aware Girls promotes women's rights as human rights, and champions these human rights among young people. By using a peer-to-peer approach, Aware Girls members focus on strengthening democracy and governance and promoting the role of women within these male-dominated spheres, promoting peaceful conflict resolution, standing against gender-based violence, and standing for women's economic empowerment and sexual and reproductive health rights. These goals are pursued through several programs, including the Young Women Political Leadership Program. This program has addressed the challenges facing women in their fight for political rights by training young women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in civic engagement, holding community meetings for discussion among men and women, and establishing both a male and a female "Citizen Committee" in each of the province's districts. Outside of their

programs, Aware Girls members also send peace educators to schools and communities to dissuade young people from turning to extremist groups. This is done through one-on-one counseling sessions or larger workshops on conflict resolution and tolerance. Through their efforts, Aware Girls has reached over 4,000 young people in steering them away from radicalization and unrest.

Anthropologist Prof. Scott Atran praised Aware Girls in his [testimony](#) before the UNSC last year and emphasized the importance of local initiatives in reducing violence. He asserts that radical extremism often searches for personal circumstances that can be turned into anger and violence, and so we must tend to those personal, local circumstances in order to provide alternate, peaceful paths. Professor Atran uses Aware Girls as his example of such a local initiative, and hopes for a global movement of such peacebuilders. He stated, “If you can find concrete ways to help and empower them, without trying too hard to control them, they can well win the future.”

Indeed, championing local people in conflict areas is the best practice in countering violent extremism and protecting human rights. Only they know so intimately the human rights that are being violated in their contexts and how best to remedy it. When discussing how to promote human rights in countering violent extremism, it is crucial to remember: “Nothing about them, without them”.