



A Youth Perspective on Preventing Violent Extremism



Read!

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Foreword



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This short publication is intended to amplify the voices of young men and women from Bangladesh, Mali, and Nigeria who are on the front lines of preventing violent extremism. Their testimonies have been edited slightly for clarity, but not for political or institutional purposes. Reading them can help us understand how young people experience, understand, and address violent extremism. Their testimonies demonstrate once again the pivotal role young people play in preventing violent extremism, which cannot be successful if they are left out.

Their experiences are extraordinary. They talk of getting used to "surprise attacks", of women and especially girls being chased from the street, of being afraid to go out after dark, or to talk to others for fear of retribution. One young man saw his friends physically assaulted because they chose to cohabitate.

All too often, they don't understand why this is happening. One young woman from Nigeria asks herself, *"Why was there so much evil in the world? Was there a proactive solution to prevent violent extremism?"* A young woman sees her neighbour get more and more angry, and withdrawn, as if his *"life has no value"*. A young woman can't understand why her father brought her up to believe that *"beyond Muslims, all are the devil"*.

Driven by their experience and desire to understand, these young people have begun to find solutions. They have confronted their own prejudices and those of their friends and family, sometimes at great personal cost: *"At last, my father keeps quiet, but I am still bearing a challenge from him"*. They have sought out opportunities to participate in formal training, dialogue, and community events. They have changed: *"Now I know that dress or religion can't be the issue to judge a human"*. And they are changing others: *"Gradually, I talked to him about the bad effects of extremism. I motivated him towards the right way of human life"*.

Some of the ideas expressed by these young people are a work in progress. And in this progress, we find them inspirational. Reading their testimonies makes it clear that all too often, violent extremism is the path of least resistance; and it takes great courage to challenge tradition, resist peer pressure, and find alternative opportunities – let alone to encourage others. In the words of one young woman from Bangladesh: *"To remove it, we should all work together. Then we will be able to make our country free from all violent extremism, and the country will be a developed, prosperous, and peaceful place in the world"*.

We encourage you to listen, to spread the word, and to let these young voices inspire you to take action.

Avant-Propos

Cette courte publication constitue une caisse de résonance pour les voix des jeunes femmes et hommes du Bangladesh, du Mali et du Nigéria qui se trouvent en première ligne dans la prévention de l'extrémisme violent. Leurs témoignages ont été légèrement édités sur la forme et non le fond, et ce à des fins de clarté. La lecture de leurs histoires nous permet de mieux comprendre comment les jeunes sont touchés par l'extrémisme violent, comment ils comprennent ce phénomène et comment ils le combattent. Ces témoignages démontrent une fois de plus que les jeunes jouent un rôle fondamental en matière de prévention et que la lutte contre les extrémismes ne peut se faire sans eux.

Leurs expériences sont extraordinaires. Ils parlent de la façon dont ils se sont habitués aux « attaques surprises », de femmes et de filles se faisant chasser des rues, de leur peur de sortir la nuit ou de parler avec leurs amis par crainte de représailles. Un des jeunes hommes a vu ses amis se faire attaquer physiquement car ils ont choisis de cohabiter.

Bien souvent, ils ne comprennent pas la raison de toute cette violence. Une jeune fille du Nigéria s'interroge : *« Pourquoi tant de mal existait dans le monde ? Y avait-il une solution proactive pour lutter contre l'extrémisme violent ? »* Une jeune femme voit son voisin un peu plus en colère et renfermé chaque jour, *« comme si sa vie n'avait aucune valeur »*. Une jeune femme se demande pourquoi son père l'a élevée dans la certitude qu' *« à part les musulmans, tous les autres sont le diable »*.

Poussés par leur expérience et leur désir de comprendre, ces jeunes gens ont commencé à trouver des solutions. Ils ont remis en question leurs propres préjugés et ceux de leurs amis et de leurs familles, parfois au prix d'un sacrifice : *« Au moins maintenant, mon père se tient tranquille mais son désaccord persiste »*. Ils ont cherché des opportunités pour participer à des formations, des séances de dialogue et des événements communautaires. Ils ont changé : *« Maintenant je sais qu'on ne peut juger un être humain à sa manière de s'habiller ou sa religion »*. Et ils ont changé les autres : *« Petit à petit, j'ai discuté avec lui des conséquences néfastes de l'extrémisme et je l'ai motivé à revenir sur le droit chemin »*.

Certaines des idées exprimées par ces jeunes gens doivent encore être affinées. Et dans leur quête de solutions, ils sont une vraie source d'inspiration. Leurs témoignages montrent que bien souvent l'extrémisme violent est la voie du moindre effort. Ils prouvent qu'il faut beaucoup de courage pour remettre en cause les traditions, résister à la pression sociale et trouver des solutions alternatives; et encore plus de courage pour encourager les autres à les suivre. Comme le dit cette jeune femme du Bangladesh : *« Pour le détruire, nous devons travailler tous ensemble. Alors nous pourrions libérer notre pays de tous les extrémismes et en faire une terre de paix dans le monde, développée et prospère »*.

Nous vous encourageons à les écouter, à répandre leurs messages et à laisser ces jeunes vous donner l'envie d'agir.

essays

essais



**All names with an asterisk have been changed to protect privacy/security.*

** Tous les noms avec un astérisque ont été modifiés pour des raisons de protection/sécurité.*



FARIDA*

Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

Who I am

Farida, female, age 18, secondary school student.

How my community and I have been touched by violent extremism

Today violent extremism is a global problem which is prevailing in every developed, developing, and poor country of the world. Among the extremisms, religious extremism is very intense in our country. Religious extremist groups share several interlocking characteristics. Among the most important are a sense of persecution, a sense of injustice suffered at the hand of a larger force or ideological entity.

Such issues are present in our locality, one of the poorest areas of Cox's Bazar. I have a neighbour named Ahnaf*. He is an educated person but didn't get a job at his satisfactory level. For this reason, he always gets angry with his family members, as well as himself. Sometimes he becomes so angry that he can't control himself, and he breaks things, like furniture. A while ago, I began to see these major changes in his character; he seemed frustrated with every matter in society, especially related to the social and political context. I saw that he was gradually becoming ill tempered. He stopped mixing with me and his other friends; he became separated from us. He loved to keep himself aloof from us. He began associating with people who are extremist in every aspect of their lives. Whenever I talked to him, he argued that the followers of Islam are mostly victimised in the world. He said to me that Islam has always been a victim. A victim of the crusades, a victim of colonialism, a victim of imperialism. He was always irritated whenever I spoke with him. He showed me that life has no value.

Hearing Ahnaf's views of life, I understood that he was moving to the path of extremism. I easily comprehended that he was going to be an extremist. I saw in him all the signs of extremism which I learned from the skill session of the Torun Alo project¹ conducted by the organisation CODEC at our secondary school. Seeing the characteristics of extremism in him, I felt very sad for him. Then I became determined that I had to return him from the path of extremism by following the direction given by Torun Alo.

What I'm doing to prevent violent extremism

One day, I went to Ahnaf's house and told him to come with me for a walk. He agreed to come with me, and I took him to an open place. First of all, I discussed about the aims of life, and what is the right path of human life. Gradually, I talked about the bad effects of extremism. I motivated him towards the right way of human life. I elaborately discussed with him the worst impact of extremism using the light of the messages provided by Torun Alo. I subsequently met him several times and motivated him.

¹ Torun Alo ("Light of Youth") Consortium managed by the Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF).

In the end, Ahnaf agreed with me and confessed his fault that he was guided by the wrong suggestions given by the wrong “doors” of society. He admitted that I helped him to open his real eyes. Then he begged me to show him a right path, where he would not be misguided. Seeing the changes in his behavior and nature, I made suggestions to him in line with the messages of Torun Alo.

Hearing in detail from me the suggestions of Torun Alo, Ahnaf became very pleased and vowed not to mix with bad company. He admitted that he had been in the dark about the aim of life. Realising the bad impact of extremism, he promised me that he would also become a social worker to prevent violent extremism in the country.

Now my neighbour Ahnaf is a social worker and a shopkeeper too. He works to remove violent extremism from communities in our country. Whenever he notices changes, the signs of extremism in his friends’ natures, he suggests to them that they don’t follow the way of extremism. He even joins Torun Alo’s skill sessions on violent extremism at our secondary school, taking permission from our principal to learn more about the bad impact of violent extremism. Now he speaks on behalf of our society against violent extremism. The NGOs working at our locality invite him to join their programmes aiming to make his fellow villagers aware of extremisms.

By making my neighbour Ahnaf aware, I have performed my duty to society. Now Ahnaf is raising awareness about extremism by performing his duty properly. I have been successful in preventing Ahnaf from becoming an extremist by counselling him. Likewise, if we want to prevent violent extremism in our society or in our county, we should all come forward. We should arrange seminars, meetings, and so on to prevent extremism. It is very important for us to work with those organisations who work to remove violent extremism and social prejudice. We should walk hand in hand with social workers to prevent such extremism. I think it will be tough to prevent violent extremism by enforcing law and using weapons. Instead we should raise awareness among the people of the country.

Now, what is being done by Torun Alo to prevent extremism is a right and proper step. So we should all help such NGOs to carry out welfare activities. We can’t avoid such important matters. If we do neglect this issue, it will mar our society. We should be aware of religious misinterpretations. I think that religious misinterpretations are liable for increasing violent extremism. Although there are other reasons for extremism, religious extremism is a powerful one. So, we should be aware of the source of extremism.

We know that “The pen is mightier than the sword”. I think counselling is better than enforcing power to prevent violent extremism. What I can do with a pen, there is no reason to do it using an axe. So, I suggest that everybody should emphasise counselling to prevent extremism. We should change and create more “Ahnafs” in our society to remove the curse of extremism from our country. Then we can hope to make our country a peaceful place to live. Extremism is a great curse, no doubt. But it is impossible for a person to remove it from society alone. To remove it, we should all work together. Then we will be able to make our country free from all violent extremism, and the country will be a developed, prosperous, and peaceful place in the world.



BINTOU*

Mopti, Mali

Qui je suis

Je m’appelle Bintou. J’ai 25 ans et j’ai 3 enfants. J’habite dans un des villages de la commune rurale de Mopti.

Comment moi et ma communauté avons été touchées par l’extrémisme violent

Cette localité a fait l’objet de plusieurs traversées par des groupes de prêcheurs radicaux. Quelques séances de prêches ont été organisées par ces derniers en vue de gagner l’adhésion de certaines couches de la population. Quelques personnes dans le village comme moi avons été très sensibles vis-à-vis de ces prêcheurs.

Ce que je fais pour me prémunir contre l’extrémisme violent

Le pays dogon est composé en majorité de Dogons et est reconnu pour sa culture conservatrice et de respect des traditions, où le mari ne fournit pas l’argent pour acheter les condiments mais est chargé de remplir le grenier après chaque récolte, avant de partir à l’exode.

Toutes ces actions ne sécurisent pas le ménage puisque bon an, mal an la production agricole n’arrive pas à couvrir les besoins alimentaires et autres de la famille. Cela est dû à l’insuffisance des terres cultivables et des moyens de production. C’est dans ce contexte que mon mari chaque année laisse sur moi toute la responsabilité familiale. C’est avec peine (moins de 200 francs CFA par jour), que j’essaie de subvenir aux besoins de santé, d’éducation et d’alimentation du ménage. Je suis parfois obligée de prélever sur le stock du grenier et de vendre certains de mes biens privés afin de joindre les deux bouts durant toute l’absence de mon mari d’octobre à juin.

Grâce à l’intervention d’un projet de renforcement des capacités de résilience des régions de Mopti, face à l’extrémisme violent, j’ai pu intégrer un groupement d’épargne et de prêt en juin 2017 avec 18 femmes du village. Cette action vise à appuyer l’insertion socioprofessionnelle de 240 jeunes garçons et 300 filles.

Ma participation à ce projet m’a permis d’évaluer mes besoins, notamment comment avoir de l’argent pour payer mon épargne hebdomadaire et comment mener d’autres activités génératrices de revenus pour améliorer mes conditions de vie. Aujourd’hui, je m’intéresse à un projet d’embouche ovine.

Pour moi, mon rêve a commencé à se réaliser dans la mesure où le groupement d'épargne et de prêt va me permettre de développer à partir des prêts réguliers contractés (variant de 5000 à 10000 francs CFA) des activités génératrices de revenus (petit commerce de condiment, filature d'étoffe et embouche ovine) pour subvenir aux besoins de mon ménage en coupe et couture.

Les formations que je reçois (épargne, filières porteuses, gestion administrative et financière, alphabétisation...) à travers le projet m'ont permis de prendre conscience des opportunités existantes et de m'orienter vers la couture. C'est en effet une filière porteuse et rentable dans mon village, où il n'y avait qu'un seul tailleur. Le choix de la couture m'a aussi fourni une alternative aux ressources proposées par des personnes étrangères et des prêcheurs. Le projet a également identifié un maître tailleur, qui a accepté de m'encadrer et je commence à m'installer à mon propre compte dans le village après m'être équipée d'une machine à coudre.

Aujourd'hui j'ai un atelier dans la concession de mon mari et je rends des services à ma communauté en travaillant à la réparation des habits, l'assemblage des étoffes traditionnelles et la couture des modèles simples pour enfants.

Avec GCERF, j'affirme être comblée d'espoir car aujourd'hui je me débrouille bien par rapport aux besoins familiaux. Ma recette a évolué de moins de 200 francs CFA par jour il y a 4 mois à entre 1500 et 3000 francs CFA (jours de foire et fêtes).

Actuellement je partage régulièrement mon expérience avec les femmes du groupement d'épargne et de prêt et je les encourage à être plus entrepreneur. Je souhaiterais me perfectionner et renforcer mon atelier par la vente de tissus et autres articles de mercerie. Un appui à la recherche de clientèle et de débouchés pour les futurs articles que je vais confectionner font partie de mes perspectives.



EMMANUEL*
Kogi State, Nigeria

Who I am

Emmanuel, male, age 23, student.

It would be better we didn't exist than exist with the fear of death, people dying in negligible ways, with mothers and children who have become victims of slayings, and preys of predators (rapists), wailers, and major burden bearers of the unspeakable horrible tales of the dark ages of violent extremism.

How my community and I have been touched by violent extremism

So growing up was full of fears, the frequent rumouring of religious/ethnic plans to invade an area and kill the people. This was more frequent on Fridays, which carried the tales that after the Muslim traditional worship day, there would be a surprise attack. This actually happened on a few occasions, perhaps coincidentally; but people in their numbers died, women were displaced, and the rights of children were violated. We saw the killings and destruction happening right before us. So childhood was already a tale of a schooled sentiment of hate for a religious sect and people. Perhaps this would have been nurtured in the hearts and minds of many young boys and girls of the same age. It was a tale of an enraged young man who wanted revenge for the friends he lost during these crises, for the laughs he exchanged for tears; it was a tale of an enraged Jos boy.

A remote town of North Central Nigeria was known for peace until the breeding of violence with frequent bad gang clashes and other vices. It was now a paradigm shift from the concept of violence I was used to. It was no longer about an ethnic/religious group against another: Here I saw people of the same religious beliefs, ethnic/ancestral connection killing each other; it was now about a gang clash, it happened repeatedly in just one season. Girls were raped/abused at night, sophisticated armed robbery was becoming rampant, and these turned busy and commercial nights into a den of fear and a ghost town from the hour of 8pm.

In this whole experience, though with a different form of actor and perhaps different reasons for violent extremism, something was prevalent and constant: women and girls were the major burden bearers and victims. So beyond my need to vex my resentment, I began to see that perception mattered, that every actor in violence had his own story to tell and was more convinced of the correctness of the story. I was still clueless as to what to do; I really wanted to do something to change the narrative. I talked to friends frequently about this, but then, people were scared of talking about it out in the open for fear of being attacked later.

What I'm doing to prevent violent extremism

I soon found a platform of youth activists, who advocated for peace on campus and for the rights of students. The platform was Activista Nigeria, which is an active partner of ActionAid Nigeria. Their ideals lured me to become a member, and so I joined them in campaigning about violence against women under the Safe Cities for Women Campaign. In 2015, we began to have round table discussions with security men, then with the school management. But the story was never impressive, as there was reluctance from the school to implement some of the solutions we gave. However, our persistence led to the involvement of the Students' Union, and the agitations for street lights along road paths on campus were successful, and a security patrol on campus was ensured so girls could move freely without any form of molestation. But the biggest worries kept lingering; the gang clash continued, with the murder of a student or more at each clash; rape, and other forms of violence outside the campus, continued.

We could not have just stood by and watched; we pressed with campaigns that ranged from the Safe Cities for Women Campaign to "Say No to Violent Extremism", but things remained the same. In fact, we had become victims ourselves, but we were resolved not to give up. So as a team we decided to develop a platform tagged "Tell Your Story". This platform had victims as well as actors of violence tell their stories, the challenges, and how they have fared after encountering it.

The platform was launched, starting with a campus tour on a "Life Not Death" campaign, going from hostel to hostel; and we had our first Tell Your Story campaign with five rape victims courageously telling the entire student community their story and how they have fared since. The launch also featured handwritten stories of some seven notable gang members who were not courageous enough to publicly tell the stories themselves. These written stories included advice and a pledge to say no to gang clashes. The platform had over 250 letters from gang members telling their stories, with over 154 stories from rape victims around the campus environment since then.

Though the platform has, since its inception, been adopted by (and been in partnership with) the student union, it has also received periodic support from ActionAid Nigeria through another local partner, the Participation Initiative for Behavioural Change in Development (PIBCID). The platform is yet to reach its zenith, as there are pockets of gang clashes still going on – although student observers have said, and argued positively, that there is a 60% reduction in bad gang clashes (which is an indicator of success).

The Tell Your Story platform is relevant and key to prevention of violent extremism, as it carries the story of victims; and for actors, it gives them a platform to take pledges not to continue gang clashes. It is clear that the most common type of violent extremism in our area is bad gang clashes. While the Tell Your Story platform is currently working on root causes of gang clashes, it has also begun a drug abuse prevention campaign.

The journey to ensuring peace has been one of pain and frustration, but we must all get involved – and it has to be now. If not now, then when? The journey has only begun.





BARSHA*

Chapai-Nawabganj, Bangladesh

Who I am

Barsha, female, age 19, secondary school student.

First I want to talk about my family's values. It is strictly maintained that as a girl I have to wear the veil (burkha); and as for choosing friends, I should select those who wear burkha like me and pray their namaz regularly. I have grown up in such a context where the level of my thinking was squeezed. I could only think that my life is only for the well-being of Islam. I believed that Islam is the best religion, and all other religions are false. So I hated the believers of other religions and thought that they are my enemy and would never be my friends. I even extremely disliked the Muslim girls who didn't wear burkha and pray salat regularly. All of my friends also had a very similar attitude. A lot of people surrounding us in our community or educational institutions have similar types of mentality. For this kind of attitude, I was always appreciated by my family, friends, and even by some of my teachers. But I had no idea whether I was radicalised or not. Also I didn't know about the current trend or threat of youth being radicalised or becoming violent extremists.

How my community and I have been touched by violent extremism

But now I think I was vulnerable of being trapped at any time, as my thinking and attitude was almost wrong. On the invitation of one of my teachers, I joined a training initiated by the PEACE Consortium¹. That was the first time that my belief and attitude was shaken. I was bound to rethink my philosophy. I especially have to mention the speech and facilitation of the facilitator of that workshop. I discovered that I had been in a very vulnerable situation. Some of the examples in the workshop hit at my attitude; I felt guilty, and I started to realise how wrong my attitude was! One example where I learnt that one particular object can be seen in various ways from different angles is how the 6 or 9 is the same sign but has a different meaning from different sides, where none of the sides are wrong! After participating in the workshop, I felt interested to know much more about others, and the issue of peace and tolerance. I started to read more about this issue and participated in some other events of the PEACE Consortium. The reading materials of the PEACE Consortium (especially a booklet named "Pagla Ghora"² – a Bangla word meaning "Stop the Mad Horse") helped me a lot to better my understanding. The biggest change in myself is that "now I have learnt to respect the diversity". Now I know that dress or religion can't be the issue to judge a human. We should respect the opinion of others; maybe we can't obey them, but we should not criticise them.

1 The Consortium managed by Rupantar.

2 An inexpensive, readily available popular booklet produced by the PEACE Consortium as a counternarrative to violent extremist publications.

What I'm doing to prevent violent extremism

I don't know whether I am a change agent or not. But at present, I have a lot of friends who are not Muslim or don't wear burkha. Now I think that my life is not for the well-being of any religion, but for the well-being of humanity. I have shared my experience with my families and friends. Sometimes some of them have protested against me, but I have provided arguments and tried to make them realise the necessity of respecting diversity. But my parents, especially my father and other senior acquaintances, show arrogance, and they don't want to listen to any arguments. They think I am going in the wrong direction!

But I get very positive responses from my friends. After discussing with my friends about the necessity of diversity, they have shown interest and joined various events of the PEACE Consortium. They read the booklet named "Pagla Ghora" and other articles online. Lots of my friends (who had a similar mentality to me) now also feel guilty and have started to think like me, to respect diversity for promoting peace and tolerance. I think it's very important for the girls like me to break out of the shackles of this stereotype attitude. Otherwise two things can happen. First, these girls can be trapped easily any time by anybody, and second, over generations, this narrow mindset would continue to provoke the non-Muslim community, leading to continuous envy and intolerance.

I think, regarding this issue, educational institutes can play a vital role, as after the home that is where youth generally spend a big portion of their daily routine. Moreover, usually students obey and respect their teachers very much, so teachers can play a role in educating students about the basic principles of humanity and respecting diversity. Teachers can also support the students by counseling parents on this issue. I think, to develop a peaceful and tolerant society, there is no other alternative than to respect diversity.



IBRAHIM*

Bamako, Mali

Qui je suis

Je m'appelle Ibrahim et j'ai 29 ans, marié père de deux enfants vivant dans une grande famille. Je réside dans un des quartiers populaires de Bamako. Ce quartier regorge des groupes de prêcheurs radicaux et des grands bandits du district de Bamako.

Comment j'ai été touché par l'extrémisme violent

J'ai fait plusieurs tentatives infructueuses d'aller en Europe pour échapper au chômage et à la pauvreté. Mais j'ai été refoulé et j'ai commencé à développer un sentiment de haine à l'endroit des décideurs de notre pays. J'étais vraiment prêt à tout pour améliorer ma situation, même voler, tuer et pourquoi pas m'engager avec les extrémistes, que j'avais souvent rencontrés de loin dans ma tentative de migration. Je me suis engagé dans la consommation de drogue et d'alcool, choses que je n'avais jamais embrassées dans ma vie. Heureusement, le comité de vigilance mis en place dans le cadre du projet GCERF m'a repéré et m'a sensibilisé de manière très respectueuse et responsable pour échanger avec moi et pour comprendre mon problème. Ce groupe m'a permis de me réintégrer au sein de la société et de poser de nouvelles bases pour ma vie, ce qui m'a amené à initier un projet de ramassage des ordures dans le quartier.

Ce que je fais contre l'extrémisme violent

Dieu merci, mon projet marche bien aujourd'hui et m'a même permis d'employer trois jeunes que j'ai moi aussi éloignés des risques de basculement dans la radicalisation et l'extrémisme violent. Il faut reconnaître qu'entre temps, des individus suspects venus du nord du Mali se sont mis à séjourner dans notre quartier et leur comportement laissait croire qu'ils cherchaient à redynamiser une cellule dormante des extrémistes à Bamako. C'était des hommes qui s'habillaient en tenue de femmes et qui parlaient de religion aux groupes de jeunes qu'ils rencontraient. J'ai informé notre comité de veille, qui à son tour en a informé le chef de quartier. Celui-ci s'est rendu au domicile occupé par ces individus suspects, qui ont prétendu être venus pour des funérailles dans notre quartier et qu'en pareilles circonstances, leurs coutumes exigeaient le port d'habit de femmes par des hommes. La police ayant été alertée par le chef de quartier, le lendemain les suspects ont disparu du quartier. Je n'aurais jamais averti le comité de veille si le projet ne m'avait pas sorti de ma situation d'ignorance et d'oisiveté.



ABIGAIL*

Kogi State, Nigeria

Who I am

Abigail, female, age 25, journalist.

How my community and I have been touched by violent extremism

It is said that we do not relive all the memories from our childhood, but there are some memories that never go away. Those memories shape the people that we become. One such memory is the one I have from when I was nine. On September 11th in the year 2001, I remember watching the television with the rest of my family; we watched the devastating news unfold of the bombing of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre in the United States, orchestrated by Al-Qaeda.

In the weeks that followed the bombing of the World Trade Centre, a lot of questions puzzled my nine-year-old mind. Why was there so much evil in the world? Why would anyone see violence as the preferred option to achieving the objectives of their ideology? Was there a proactive solution to prevent violent extremism?

In April 2014, 276 school girls from Chibok Local Government Area in Borno State were abducted by members of the Boko Haram sect with intentions by the group to marry the girls off. The abduction of the Chibok Girls was a defining moment in my life: I realised that I was not any different from the girls who had been kidnapped because of their quest for an education.

What I'm doing to prevent violent extremism

With this realisation, I set off with the sole objective of creating media awareness through my role as a journalist against youth radicalisation, marginalisation, weak political structures, poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy – which I identified to be the causes of violent extremism in Nigeria. However, I felt that there was more that I could do in preventing violent extremism, but I lacked the skills and tools needed to embark on this project.

My leadership role in the Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI) in Kogi State provided a platform for me to promote youth engagement in civic leadership and youth-led community development programmes in civic responsibility, curbing illiteracy, and promoting peace in Kogi State.

I received a much-needed opportunity to build my capacity for preventing violent extremism through peacebuilding during a four-day training organised by ActionAid Nigeria and the Participation Initiative for Behavioural Change in Development (PIBCID). The training focused on Participatory Vulnerability Analysis (PVA) for Community, Women, and Youth Networks in Kogi State. We were also trained on conflict, gender sensitivity, and peacebuilding.

The training, through practical group discussions and presentations, provided in-depth understanding of how resilience for preventing violent extremism can be built through a well-informed process for peacebuilding.

Equipped with the skills and tools gained over the course of the training programme, I, and other members of the YALI Network at the training, presented an Action Plan to ActionAid and PIBCID, for a step-down training on preventing violent extremism in a community in Kogi State.

The community is known for agriculture; but for more than a decade, it has been mapped as a red zone due to recurrent cases of violent extremism. According to media reports, dozens of people have been killed in cases of violent extremism in the community. Illiteracy, youth restiveness, cultism, and thuggery leading to political violence in the community were identified as the root causes of violent extremism.

Knowledge of the conflict cycle and the conflict tree provided the tools I needed for my baseline analysis; the community was identified to be at the conflict stage of de-escalation. This meant that it was a safe time to embark on the project with the rest of my team, without fear for our lives.

Since the first recorded case of violent extremism in 2003, the high death rate of male youths attributed to cases of violent extremism showed that the youths in the community were most vulnerable. Illiteracy and poverty created the enabling environment for youths to get recruited as foot soldiers for shadow actors to propagate political violence, especially during elections.

With the major objective of building resilience in the community through sensitisation, 11 members of the YALI Network, who volunteered for the peacebuilding project, and I set out to the community. There, we identified key stakeholders including traditional, women, and youth leaders.

Engaging with these stakeholders provided much needed goodwill for a one-day sensitisation programme on peacebuilding in the community. Over a three-hour period, 63 people comprising key stakeholders were sensitised on violence and its repercussions on the individual, the family unit, the community, and the society.

Following the sensitisation programme, the community pledged to prevent violent extremism by introducing a peace football tournament, as a tool for fostering peace in the community. The community took their dedication to preventing violent extremism a notch further and made the unanimous decision to stop shielding suspects – a sign of their commitment to ending the violence.

The four-day training programme organised by ActionAid Nigeria has changed my life in no small measure. I am now aware of what results can be achieved when resilience against violent extremism is built. Now I have the answers that once puzzled my nine-year-old mind. I believe that, with these answers, there is so much that I can do in preventing violent extremism in Kogi State.





SALIHA*

Chapai-Nawabganj, Bangladesh

Who I am

Saliha, female, age 18, secondary school student.

I grew up in a family which is very conservative and religiously orthodox. In our family, women have no accessibility beyond the home, and sometimes they don't even know what colors are playing in the nature and the sky. My father, a teacher who has a primitive mentality, believes that beyond Muslims, all are the devil. So from early childhood, we had a radical mindset which did not support any type of solidarity and harmony.

How my community and I have been touched by violent extremism

Initially, it was actually a big challenge for me to join the PEACE Consortium¹ activities against radicalisation. In early 2017, I joined an intergenerational dialogue through one of my classmates who motivated me to participate; but with my mindset at the time, it was difficult to agree with this dialogue, which challenged my existing attitude and behaviour.

But my friend (working with the PEACE Consortium as a change agent) started mentoring me to help overcome my existing attitude and behavioural pattern. My friend also created diversions from violent extremism through discussing the process and signs of radicalisation. But soon I was facing a challenge from my father. He commented that I was becoming a devil who is going against religion.

In this situation, the head of my institution, who was also part of the PEACE Consortium as a change agent, sat with my father and convinced him that this work is not against religion, but is against the violent extremism which is existing in the name of religion. He added that educational institutes are building opinions and developing critical thinking among the students. At last, my father keeps quiet, but I am still bearing a challenge from him.

After joining the dialogue and getting the narratives from the PEACE Consortium, including through booklets, brochures, festoons, and radio programmes, my brothers, sisters, and I have learnt a lot through discussion and practice. But, still we face challenges from radicalised people in our family and the community.

We also believe that our community is not used to a situation in which solidarity among the youth and the senior citizens is encouraged. This problem plays a role in the lack of free exchange of views and opinions among the generations. This is due to theological teachings.

¹ The Consortium managed by Rupantar.

Defeating violent extremism is a shared responsibility of society. The government can and should take the countering role; and NGOs, local services, voluntary organisations, and individuals have a key role. Local government will contribute to this by developing mechanisms to identify communities and individuals to mobilise against violent extremism.

What I'm doing to prevent violent extremism

A more focused effort on specific vulnerable groups, for example youth at risk of radicalisation, is needed. The idea is to prevent the radicalisation process through, for example, role model visits, parents' networks, educational theatre, and dialogue workshops.

Dialogue workshops teach youth in vulnerable areas about the phenomenon of radicalisation and extremism, how they should behave towards each other, and generalisations and preconceptions about minorities. After the workshop, participants are surveyed to capture their thinking about the event and whether it has changed their behavior or attitude in a lasting way. The PEACE Consortium could provide effective local campaigns using their narratives. They should identify and engage more influential religious leaders, and motivate them to carry the flag of peace and harmony building.

In overcoming the aforementioned challenges, the community has taken positive steps – that I am sure of. But there are still “sleeping drivers” who are now silent because of the government countering their action. The consortium is carrying out prevention activities, but still there are threats to destroy the resilience built among the community. It is quite clear that resilience needs to be developed from the perspective of the community's perception and mindset..

The PEACE Consortium published the narrative “Stop the Mad Horse”², which seems very popular in the community. But I think that because there are very limited copies, they are not reaching and covering the whole community. So we will take a role to disseminate and share the information with the greater community. My recommendations are that the PEACE Consortium could publish another series of narratives focusing on particular groups, to build the capacity of the community through sharing alternative information against radical narratives.

Extremist ideology now seems to be a doctrine within our community, so it is not an issue to be defeated overnight; we need to keep by the community's side to ensure deradicalisation. So this is the time to go with prior experience through intervention, and to enhance the capacity of the community to bring awareness and enlightenment against the process of radicalisation and violent extremism.

² An inexpensive, readily available popular booklet produced by the PEACE Consortium as a counternarrative to violent extremist publications.



Qui je suis

Je m'appelle Fatima. J'ai 28 ans et je suis originaire d'un village dans la région de Ségou. Je suis membre du relais communautaire depuis mai 2017.

Ce que je fais contre l'extrémisme violent

J'ai une parfaite connaissance du projet GCERF. En ma qualité de membre du relais, j'ai participé à toutes les formations sur la paix organisées par le projet, ainsi qu'à plusieurs rencontres de sensibilisation pour véhiculer des messages sur la paix, le pardon et la réconciliation et renforcer la résilience des communautés face à l'extrémisme violent. C'est grâce à nos efforts en tant que relais et avec le concours d'autres personnes influentes de la commune que les jeunes sont restés au niveau des villages et sont aujourd'hui hostiles à toute idée d'intégrer les groupes extrémistes présents dans les villages.

Au cours de cette année 2018, nous avons mené plusieurs activités liées à la prévention de l'extrémisme violent et à la gestion des conflits entre agriculteurs et éleveurs au niveau de la commune. Les messages qui ont été diffusés lors de ces séances ont porté sur la paix, la réconciliation et la lutte contre l'enrôlement des jeunes dans les conflits armés. Dans ma commune, grâce à nos efforts, nous sentons une plus grande confiance entre les différentes communautés qui étaient méfiantes les unes vis-à-vis des autres au début de l'année 2017.

Aujourd'hui, avec les appuis financiers du projet GCERF, nous avons effectué et organisé des séances d'information et de sensibilisation au niveau de l'ensemble des villages de la commune.



Who I am

Michael, male, age 30, Geographic Information System (GIS) analyst.

How my community and I have been touched by violent extremism

I've never seen someone so upset; Hasan's* face was in flames. Deep wrinkles spread gloriously across his face, and he aged in that instant. I asked why he wasn't as cheerful as he used to be whenever he delivered water to the Corper's¹ Lodge. I wondered how it was possible for someone to crease his face into a crooked scowl. I deduced Hasan found the budding relationship between a male and female Corper repulsive. His obvious disdain lay in the fact that they shared an apartment. Cohabitation was an alien ideology to him, and that fascinated me. I brushed his tense shoulders slightly and went into my apartment; a mistake I still regret.

One evening, the sun had burned harshly during the day, and we were glad for the fresh breeze that filtered in through the window. We all left the windows open to usher in the auspicious presence of the late September wind. Everything was perfect until a shrill cry of a woman rang in the air, slicing through the silence that had settled on the Lodge. Instinctively, I darted to the door, dragging along an object for defence. Other Corpers in the Lodge were up too, all woken by the uproar. We dashed to the room where the sound had come from. Sprawled on the floor were the lovebirds that were cohabiting; wriggling in excruciating pain. I stared aghast at the horrid sight before me, alarm etched across my face. Blood gushed from their hands and painted the floor deep crimson.

"Hasan and some boys", the lady half explained amidst tears. There was no time to further question them; they were rushed to medical treatment. Later, we were told that Hasan had brought his fellow Muslims who considered cohabitation an unpardonable sin to mete justice on the "sinners" by chopping off their fingers.

What I'm doing to prevent violent extremism

This incident in 2017 spurred me into committing time and resources into a movement organised by the Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI) in collaboration with ActionAid Nigeria to educate many young people like Hasan, who have misguided religious, cultural, and political ideologies. This was something I should have done the day Hasan flared up. The YALI Network members

¹ The word "Corper" is used to describe a Nigerian youth doing mandatory, one-year National Youth Service Corps (NYSC).

burdened by this tale have enlightened and sensitised communities on the need for youths to channel their energy into nation building, rather than acts of violence. One of the most recent sensitisation initiatives, a one-day event, emphasised the need to shun “violent extremism”; the message had a resounding effect coming from the mouth of a traditional leader.

It was necessary to take this timely message to an area prone to violence. As a locality populated by youths with ideologies as diverse as they are conflicting, disputes have escalated into communal conflicts with casualties in the recent past. It has been one of the most violence-prone areas, where a lot of youths have been used by politicians to perpetrate violence and disruption of peace. Hence the need for our visit to sensitise the youths against being used as objects in the hands of politicians, and to avoid any act capable of plunging them into becoming violent extremists, as recorded in the past. As a member of YALI Network, I delivered a speech, and I encouraged them to be “useful youths” by engaging in productive and sustainable ventures that can stand the test of time, such as: (1) forming a youth association that can take part in football competitions; and (2) forming a cultural display group, where they can showcase their rich cultural heritage, and it can be their passport to the world. As these initiatives come together, our own part as “YALIANS” will be to come, from time to time, to teach them entrepreneurial skills that can empower them for the future. Now, the above points are the various steps which, when properly harnessed, would emancipate the youths (not just in this locality, but in our rural areas) from being used as agents of violence – which, over time, have been their source of livelihood.

There is a saying that “*an idle mind is the devil’s workshop*”. I couldn’t agree more. A lot of them don’t know what they can do to better their society. As such, they take on “easier but dangerous” ventures, including thuggery, impregnating underage girls, and giving birth to children they cannot even care for – children who would then recycle their fathers’ lifestyle. On our part, we try to discourage them, and expose them to the better part of life, to make them responsible citizens of the society. Through my experience in the North, I have seen how a lot of youths have been so confined to one lifestyle, to the point that they cannot think on their own to do what is right. As a result, you see them so bitter when eventually they see any lifestyle contradicting what they have been taught and grown to believe, and hence they resort to violence as a means of showing their grievance. The reason for my being part of an advocacy group, such as YALI and Youth Decide, is to make Nigerian youths see the future that lies ahead of them – and to shun any act capable of destroying the future.

Why Youth Leadership in Preventing Violent Extremism Matters



Bjørn Ihler
Extremely Together
Young Leader

The stories from Farida, Bintou, Emmanuel, Barsha, Ibrahim, Abigail, Saliha, Fatima, and Michael presented in this publication reflect the many different ways young people take action against violent extremism across the world. They also demonstrate how instrumental youth are in detecting signs of radicalisation among their friends and in taking them out of their radical path.

Seven years ago, I embarked on a journey to understand how people become extremists and how some get deradicalised. Throughout my work I’ve met leading experts in countering violent extremism from across the world. A staggering percentage of those at the forefront of countering extremism are like me, in their twenties. However, despite this overwhelming evidence of the crucial role of youth in this struggle, our participation in policy discussions and in the design of programmes aimed at fighting violent extremism remains marginal. Our efforts lack the support of donors because we often don’t tick all the boxes of donor requirements: our CVs may not be long enough, and we may be operating in informal, yet effective ways – ways that rely on networks and on the building of social connections rather than on an established organisation. And yet, this more informal approach based on dialogue, relationships of trust, and proximity has proved successful.

What triggered my journey into understanding violent extremism seven years ago was Anders Breivik’s attempt to kill me. I was at a summer camp on an island outside of Oslo. The bullet missed my head by centimetres. But Breivik massacred 69 of my friends on that day as we were trapped on the island. Breivik was not your stereotypical terrorist. He grew up in Oslo, under circumstances not so different from mine. But unlike me and my 69 late friends, he did not see diversity as social enrichment but as a threat. He embraced far-right ideology because he felt threatened by those who had a different political viewpoint, religion or way of life.

With this experience, and with my work in the years to follow, I learned that violent extremism is the violent denial of diversity. I strongly believe that if we are to prevent such violence from happening again, we need to encourage conversations between people and groups who don’t share the same worldviews. We need to develop critical thinking and embrace complexity as realities cannot be explained by simplistic, black-and-white narratives that “they” will end “our” way of life.

In this endeavour, we – young people, in less formal networks – are best placed to have such conversations with other young people,

to show to them that they are being listened to when they have grievances, and that they are being valued as worthy human beings. As contemporaries of those who are at the greatest risk of getting radicalised, young people can find acceptance and credibility where older people cannot. This places us uniquely as examples, and as interventionists, in a position where we can demonstrate that solutions to grievances are always more complex than what is suggested by extremist ideologies, that there is more to life than hate and violence.

Social engagement, political activism, and the mobilisation of others are all very powerful ways to bring about the changes that are needed to address these grievances. Showing how much we can achieve when we are "extremely together" against violent extremism is what I do with nine other young activists through the Kofi Annan Foundation's Extremely Together initiative. This is one example of a youth-led effort against violent extremism which has gained prominence on the international level, but we need many more.

As the founder of Extremely Together, and former Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr. Kofi Annan always reminded us, *"You are never too young to lead, and you are never too old to learn."*

I am convinced that once we, young people, are taken seriously in policy development, and are considered to be key players, this will be game-changing in the fight against violent extremism and for sustainable peace.

SELECTED RESOURCES FOR YOUTH AND PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

- <http://www.extremelytogether-theguide.org>
- <https://www.gcerf.org/wp-content/uploads/PCVE-Resources-Reading.pdf>
- <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/YouthCAN-UN-PVE-Survey.pdf>
- <https://www.oneyoungworld.com/thought-leadership/extremism>
- <https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/inclusion/inclusionpublications/youngpeopleandextremism>
- <https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/FINAL-Youth-Action-Agenda-1.pdf>
- <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0026/002605/260547e.pdf>
- <http://unoy.org/en/2250-toolkit/>
- <https://www.youth4peace.info/>
- <http://youthcan.net/>



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