



**WOMEN'S COMMUNITY INTERVENTIONS
TO TRANSFORM THE APPEAL OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM:
LESSONS FROM HISTORY**

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SUMMARY

Women form the frontline defence and also the grassroots resistance to violent extremism. Newly recast as efforts to prevent or counter violent extremism, we have given our permission to think more holistically and inclusively about the same challenges. This is what women have consistently done, without an unending resource base. Confronted with the puzzle that in spite of their severity and atrocities, communities seem to support extremists — apart from the more commonly considered problem of radicalising youth — we turn to women, on the frontline and at the grassroots, to turn back this tide. But where are they to begin to intervene? That is the puzzle underlying this short paper.

The term “extremist” has been used to describe a wide variety of movements and political actors, some of whom remain extreme in hindsight and others who now seem quite mainstream. This short paper considers four of them, their popularity or community support, and finally, based on these histories, draws up a set of propositions explaining the appeal extremist ideologies and groups hold for communities. These propositions are the basis, supplemented by recent studies, for suggesting interventions by women to counter violent extremism in their communities.

The four historical cases reviewed here were chosen on the basis of whether they are commonly described as being extremist in their moment and context. The first case is that of the Jacobins who initiated the Reign of Terror after the French Revolution, the first instance of self-conscious state terrorism. The second discusses what the British labelled as ‘extremism’ within the Indian National Congress — an internal schism in which the extremists sought to transform the national movement into a mass-based struggle. The third case is that of Nazi Germany, where Hitler’s popularity seemed to grow with his military campaigns. Finally, Sri Lankan Tamils who supported the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and other militant groups in spite of the violence they too faced at militant hands. The question asked is a simple one: why did people support these actors?

Six factors are identified — a feeling of disappointment in how things had turned, real social and economic distress, a sense of decline from an earlier better time, a search for clarity, the experience of the spiral of violence and finally, kinship networks that tied people’s lives together. Each of these

also contained the seeds of possibility — if they could draw people towards extremist groups, they could also be points of departure for resistance and resilience.

Weaving some insights from those studies into the lessons from our historical discussion, four avenues whereby women can intervene were identified. The first one is to transform the many networks, especially family, to which women belong into assets for social change. The second underscores the importance of supporting the work women are already doing (instead of roping them into military or state projects) and of protecting women human rights defenders. The third is the importance of women's participation in government and in state-run projects — at every stage. Finally, women challenge extremism by simply writing and telling different stories about a society, introducing complexity into the collective consciousness. The project of involving women and women's organisations in preventing or countering violent extremism is just good common sense and strategically astute.



THE APPEAL OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Extreme ideologies are a part and parcel of human history. The General Assembly Resolution on “A world against violence and violent extremism” does not define the “extremism” explicitly, but expresses alarm over “the acts of intolerance, violent extremism, violence (including sectarian violence) and terrorism in various parts of the world, which claim innocent lives, cause destruction and displace people,” indicating that its initiatives to prevent extremism encompass all of these acts.¹ The spectrum is broad, extending from intolerance to violence on a large scale. The Oxford Dictionary defines extremism as “The holding of extreme political or religious views” and lists “fanaticism, radicalism, zealotry, zeal, fundamentalism, dogmatism, bigotry, militancy, activism; sectarianism, chauvinism, partisanship” as synonyms.²

But what is extreme? The antonym for “extremism” is “moderation.” Given that these are both relative values, the definitions leave something to be desired.

“Two new words have recently come into existence with regard to our politics, and they are *Moderates* and *Extremists*. These words have a specific relation to time, and they, therefore, will change with time. The Extremists of today will be Moderates tomorrow, just as the Moderates of today were Extremists yesterday.”³

The centre shifts from one age to another, and therefore, so do the extremes. To some extent, this means that extremism is in the eye of the beholder — especially short of violent expression. The term ‘extremist’ has been used to describe a wide variety of political organisations and perspectives.

Manus Midlarsky is quoted as defining “political extremism” as:

“the will to power by a social movement in the service of a political program typically at variance with that supported by existing state authorities, and for which individual liberties are to be curtailed in the name of collective goals, including the mass murder of those who would actually or potentially disagree with that program. Restrictions on individual freedom in the interests of the collectivity and the willingness to kill massively are central to this definition.”⁴

¹ United Nations General Assembly, “Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 10 December 2015: A world against violence and violent extremism,” A/RES/70/109, December 17, 2015, accessed at http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/109 on August 18, 2016.

² Oxford Dictionaries, “extremism,” no date 2016, accessed at <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/extremism> on August 18, 2016.

³ Bal Gangadhar Tilak, “Tenets of the New Party,” Speech in Calcutta, 2nd January, 1907, Bal Gangadhar Tilak His Writings And Speeches, Ganesh & Co., Madras, 1922, page 55, accessed at <https://archive.org/details/balgangadhartila00tilauoft> on August 27, 2016.

⁴ Manus Midlarsky, quoted in Alex P. Schmid, Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the Same Coin? ICCT Research Paper, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, May 2014, page 12, accessed at <http://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Schmid-Violent-Non-Violent-Extremism-May-2014.pdf> on August 18, 2016.

“Violent extremism” is easier to pinpoint — when extremists use violence to promote or further their ends. The General Assembly Resolution on “A world against violence and violent extremism” does not define the latter explicitly but expresses alarm over “the acts of intolerance, violent extremism, violence, including sectarian violence, and terrorism in various parts of the world, which claim innocent lives, cause destruction and displace people,” indicating that its initiatives to prevent extremism encompass all of these acts.⁵ The spectrum is broad, extending from intolerance to violence on a large scale. The twin ideas of Preventing Violent Extremism, which has been the UN’s way of approaching the problems of violence and terrorism or Countering Violent Extremism, an approach recently espoused by the US government and its agencies, seek responses that go beyond the military or even political. To this end, engaging concerned communities and enabling them to turn back the tide on radicalisation is central to these efforts.

In a paper on violent and non-violent extremism, Alex Schmid tries to define extremism itself. He quotes Uwe Backe as finding that what unites different categories of extremists are what they reject; typically, they reject pluralism, orientation towards the common good as defined by taking into account diverse worldviews; legal rules that bind everyone, and the self-determination of the people at large.⁶ He further cites Charles Kimball’s five warning signs that a group is heading towards extremism: they make absolute truth claims; they demand blind obedience; their goal is to establish an idealised vision; this end justifies their means and they see their effort as holy.⁷

As stated above, in recent centuries, the term “extremist” has been used to describe a wide variety of movements and political actors, some of whom remain extreme in hindsight and others who now seem quite mainstream. This short review will consider each of them, their popularity or community support, and finally, based on these histories, draw up a set of propositions explaining the appeal extremist ideologies and groups hold for communities. These propositions will be the basis, supplemented by a literature review, for suggesting interventions by women to counter violent extremism in their communities.

Approach and method

This short paper simulates the comparative historical method to generate the practical answers it seeks to find on women’s interventions to counter violent extremism.

Given that a good part of the discussion on extremism now focuses on “Islamic extremism,” this paper serves as a reminder that extremism is not new, and that as a label, it is relative and mutable. Historical cases across two and a half centuries are narrated briefly, and compared. The cases were chosen on the basis of whether they are commonly described as being extremist in their moment and context. The first case is that of the Jacobins who initiated the Reign of Terror after the French Revolution, the first instance of self-conscious state terrorism. The second discusses what the British

⁵ United Nations General Assembly, “Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 10 December 2015: A world against violence and violent extremism,” A/RES/70/109, December 17, 2015, accessed at http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/109 on August 18, 2016.

⁶ Uwe Backe, quoted in Alex P. Schmid, *op cit*, page 12.

⁷ Charles Kimball, quoted in Alex P. Schmid, *op cit*, page 13.

labelled as 'extremism' within the Indian National Congress—an internal schism in which the extremists sought to transform the national movement into a mass-based struggle. The third case is that of Nazi Germany, where Hitler's popularity seemed to grow with his military campaigns. Finally, Sri Lankan Tamils who supported the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and other militant groups in spite of the violence they too faced at militant hands. The question asked is a simple one: why did people support these actors?

This is a different question from the more commonly posed one on radicalisation, it is important to note. Much attention is now paid to why young people around the world are being drawn into extremist groups. With the accent on countering or preventing violent extremism through the work of women and youth, there are also discussions on how this is possible. The simple question posed by this short paper to these four historical cases — why did people support these extremist groups? — is the link between the fact of radicalisation and the potential of women's agency to turn around extremism. By understanding why communities come to support what, on the outside, seem insupportable political options, we hope to find points of entry for women's peace activism.

The scope of the present project is limited and its inferences are therefore, indicative rather than conclusive. The cases bear further exploration and the findings more rigorous testing.

A historical review

The Jacobins

In 1789, a group of members of the National Constituent Assembly created during the French Revolution got together to preserve the ideals of the French Revolution, liberty, equality and fraternity.⁸ Between 1789 and 1791, its membership grew to include members and affiliates from all parts of France. As Revolutionary France reached out to spread its ideas across Europe, there was a growing schism in the Assembly between those who wanted to consolidate the power of the bourgeoisie in the new republic and groups like the Jacobins who wanted a greater share of that power for the working classes.

In 1791-92, military reverses faced by the French army enabled Jacobin club members to seize power in the National Assembly, whereupon they functioned like an arm of the government and came to replace government officials in this period. Insecurity, food scarcity and inflation led to political polarisation. A protest by the working class assured the political ascendancy of the Jacobins, and the government came under pressure to ensure food security and deal with counter-revolutionaries, even if it took a reign of terror. They embarked upon a radical programme of social and economic change in which the rich were taxed heavily, the property of émigrés was confiscated and sold, schemes were created to help the needy and education was made free and compulsory. Austerity and morality were watchwords. Peacetime rights were suspended. Opposition to this programme was crushed through the Reign of Terror which was mostly implemented by the Jacobin Clubs around France. Linton writes:

⁸ The reconstruction of events draws from relevant entries of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed at <https://www.britannica.com> on August 25, 2016.

“For the first time in history terror became an official government policy, with the stated aim to use violence in order to achieve a higher political goal. Unlike the later meaning of ‘terrorists’ as people who use violence against a government, the terrorists of the French Revolution were the government. The Terror was legal, having been voted for by the Convention.”⁹

Robespierre, a Jacobin leader with a position on the Committee of Public Safety set up by the National Assembly to deal with the defence and external relations of the republic oversaw the expansion of its mandate to include eliminating internal threats to it as well.¹⁰ To Robespierre and his colleagues, the terror had a purpose — to establish a ‘republic of virtue.’ The moral overtones of the violence are familiar to us. Linton quotes a 1794 speech by Robespierre:

“If the basis of popular government in peacetime is virtue, the basis of popular government during a revolution is both virtue and terror; virtue, without which terror is baneful; terror, without which virtue is powerless. Terror is nothing more than speedy, severe and inflexible justice; it is thus an emanation of virtue; it is less a principle in itself, than a consequence of the general principle of democracy, applied to the most pressing needs of the *patrie*.”¹¹

Once the symbol of revolutionary idealism, the Jacobins came to be associated with tyranny. The absolute morality and violence of this period led inevitably to the overthrow of Robespierre, the Committee on Public Safety and the Jacobins. They were arrested and executed.

From this account, three factors emerge as explanations for the rise to power of the Jacobins. First, the soft-peddling of the ideals of a revolution, and the prioritising of one class’s interests over other citizens created a vanguard of those who stood up for those ideals. Second, economic distress, partially engineered by those who wished to undermine the new order, enabled the mobilisation of workers and artisans, who then became the political base of the Jacobins. Third, counter-revolutionary activities were seen to justify a coercive response on the part of the state. The very violent Reign of Terror barely lasted a year, however, because the purge that followed did not resolve the economic crisis which had in a way rationalised it. Moreover, what must have seemed like overwhelming support enjoyed by the Jacobins was in fact, the support of one incensed, vocal and proactive section of society.

Extremists and the Indian National Congress (1907)

⁹ “The number of death sentences in Paris was 2,639, while the total number during the Terror in the whole of France (including Paris) was 16,594.” Marisa Linton, “Robespierre and the Terror,” *History Today*, Volume 56, Issue 8, August 2006, accessed at <http://www.historytoday.com/marisa-linton/robespierre-and-terror> on August 25, 2016.

¹⁰ History books portray Robespierre as an austere, self-righteous, unbending leader; but he was also very popular to start with and one of the staunchest defenders for the liberal values of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, and the policies that were its corollary. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. “Maximilien de Robespierre”, accessed at <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Maximilien-de-Robespierre> on August 25, 2016.

¹¹ Marisa Linton, “Robespierre and the Terror,” *op.cit.*

The Indian National Congress was founded in 1885 by an Englishman, Allan Octavian Hume. Its first members were members of the Indian English-educated elite, from the Presidency towns of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. “The nucleus of Indian leadership in the early Congress was drawn from a group of nine men from Bombay and Calcutta who had formed interregional friendships while in London studying for the bar and the Indian Civil Service.”¹² They went on to have successful careers, and some had English mentors in their chosen professions. They were often upper-caste and certainly many were well-to-do, wearing their affluence publicly in their travel and leisure choices. This generation of Congress leaders worked closely with the British, held great faith in their sense of fair play and optimistically, relied on petitions and resolutions to further their goal of greater Indian representation.

It would take a second generation of leaders to challenge and change this orientation. The triumvirate of Lala Lajpat Rai, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Bipin Chandra Pal (“Lal-Bal-Pal”) led this movement within the Congress, causing the Congress to split for the first time in 1907. Aurobindo Ghosh’s writings were also influential in this moment. The British labelled this new thinking as “extremist.”

There were three main departures from Congress practice represented by the “extremist” thinking. First, they wanted an end to what they termed “political mendicancy,” believing that exerting great political pressure on the British would definitely bring about self-government. This was the second departure — that the goal was self-government rather than increased representation at the pleasure of the ruling dispensation. Tilak famously told the court during his sedition trial, “Swaraj (self-government) is my birth-right and I will have it.” The final departure lay in their vision of mass mobilisation. Where the first phase of the Congress was elite-led, the extremists would pave the way for India’s anti-colonial movement to take root in the masses.

Tilak’s invention of the public observance and ten-day celebration of *Ganesh Chaturti* drew thousands in Maharashtra to the nationalist cause. He is also associated with the celebration of the birth anniversary of Shivaji, whose heroism lay in his defiance of another empire with nothing more than his wits, courage and local support. Bringing people together around these local and religious celebrations was a short-cut to the kind of popular mobilisation that extremists thought would create political pressure for the empire. The extremists also promoted political strategies that would be re-used in the future like the boycott of foreign goods. Bengal was partitioned in 1906 in the name of administrative rationalisation, but in fact as a counter to rising anti-colonial activism, and Swadeshi was central to the anti-partition movement around the country.

Between 1907 and 1915, enough had shifted in Indian and global politics that the reunion of extremists and moderates in an overall more radical Congress was possible. Tilak was right; within a decade, extremist had become mainstream for the Congress. From demanding greater

¹² John McLane, *Indian Nationalism and the Early Congress*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1977, page 52, accessed at <https://books.google.co.in/books?id=efp9BgAAQBAJ> on August 27, 2016.

representation in the Legislative Councils, it was a short journey toward demanding complete independence.

'Extremism,' such as it was, was for the Congress a first step in its transformation into a mass movement. To mobilise community support through activities that could engage people across all sections of society, extremists re-cast private celebrations in public formats and created new methods of political expression that went beyond fiery rhetoric steeped in law and literature. The methods of boycott and strike and the use of public processions have since become commonplace political activities. Community support was actively sought and it became the bedrock for the next, Gandhian phase of the anti-colonial, freedom movement.

The Nazis in Germany

The rise of the Nazis in Germany after the First World War was not an isolated instance; extreme right-wing ideologies were gaining ground simultaneously across the continent. Franco's Spain, Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Germany came to form the 'Axis' powers — an axis of extreme nationalist governments.

The origins of National Socialism (Nazism) in Germany lie in the humiliation that followed German defeat in the First World War. The Treaty of Versailles, which was drafted without German participation, opened its discussion with a statement on 'war guilt' whereby the Allies affirmed and unilaterally stated that Germany accepted responsibility for starting the war. A huge reparations bill was then imposed on Germany which also had to cede territory and colonies to all its neighbours. The German army was cut to size for fear of a military resurgence. Damages during the war were estimated to be worth USD 33 billion, and against the advice of economists, the Allies insisted that Germany pay this amount. The Dawes Plan devised a payment plan for this reparation amount, in increasing instalments from 1924-28. The Plan provided Germany with a loan to pay the reparations. The Young Plan that followed in 1929 fixed the reparations and annual payable amounts, but before the payment could be arranged, the Depression set in and economies around the world collapsed. The war defeat and reparations created enormous economic hardship for the German people.

The Nazis came to power in 1933 and stayed in power till their defeat at the end of the Second World War. In this time, they ran a military effort directed both externally at Germany's neighbours as well as internally. In this time, their popular support grew with each success.

"Enormous enthusiasm on March 17. All of Munich was out on the streets. You can force a people to sing, but you can't force them to sing with that kind of enthusiasm. I experienced the days of 1914 and I can only say, that the declaration of war didn't make the same impression on me as the reception for Hitler on March 17. The trust in Hitler's political talent and honest will is becoming greater, as Hitler has increasingly gained ground amongst the people. He is loved by many."¹³

¹³ Ian Kershaw, "The Führer Myth: How Hitler Won Over the German People," *Spiegel Online*, January 30, 2008, accessed at <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/the-fuehrer-myth-how-hitler-won-over-the-german-people-a-531909.html> on August 28, 2016.

Explanations abound. First, Hitler's own charisma appeared magnetic and the Nazi propaganda machinery is now legendary.

"In his public portrayal, he was a man of the people, his humble origins emphasising the rejection of privilege and the sterile old order in favour of a new, vigorous, upwardly mobile society built upon strength, merit, and achievement. He was seen as strong, uncompromising, ruthless. He embodied the triumph of true Germanic virtues – courage, manliness, integrity, loyalty, devotion to the cause – over the effete decadence, corruption, and effeminate weakness of Weimar society."¹⁴

In 1933 however, his support base was still relatively small. Kershaw explains his growing appeal in terms of three factors: his image as decisive and dynamic in contrast to the leaders of the Weimar Republic; his early dismissal as a rabble-rouser which meant his opponents underestimated him; and a cohesive ideology that was clearly anti-Marxist, anti-democratic and nurtured bitterness about Germany's decimation after the War. The spectacular growth in Hitler's popularity is correlated by Kershaw to how he began to come across to the beleaguered German population.¹⁵

First, he was ruthless in his elimination of rivals, and when he purged fringe, disruptive elements within his own movement, Hitler was seen as decisive and able to uphold and enforce the law. Second, people perceived Hitler to be nationalist above all else, unswayed by personal ambition or corruption, qualities associated with his party colleagues. He was presumed to now know about the misdemeanours of his colleagues. Third, Hitler received credit for improvements in the German economy, including the construction of roads and getting rid of unemployment. Fourth, Kershaw says that Hitler seemed to present the moderate face of the Nazi party; he continued to be seen as a devout Christian. Hitler's commitment to ridding Germany of its enemies internally and externally won him supporters, and his anti-Semitic utterances (as opposed to the actions of his regime) resonated with passive elements in German society. Finally, surprisingly, he was seen both as a man of peace and a brilliant military strategist, winning territory (back) for Germany. Kershaw considers this popularity, only marginally diminished by military reverses, as vital to the survival of Nazi rule.

"Without this mass base of support, the high level of plebiscitary acclamation, which the regime could repeatedly call upon to legitimise its actions and to take the wind out of the sails of the opposition, is unthinkable. It also enabled the specifically Nazi elite to free itself from dependence upon the support of traditional conservative ruling groups, thereby boosting the autonomy of the 'wild men' in the Movement. Without the degree of popular backing which Hitler was able to command, the drive, dynamism, and momentum of Nazi rule could hardly have been sustained."¹⁶

Conversely, by the time the Second World War began in 1939, Germany's fate was tied with Hitler and the Nazis'. The Nazis could not have done without this level of support, but Germans too could not retract support in a time of war.

¹⁴ Ian Kershaw, "The Hitler Myth," *History Today*, Volume 35 Issue 11 November 1985, accessed at <http://www.historytoday.com/ian-kershaw/hitler-myth> on August 28, 2016.

¹⁵ Ian Kershaw, "The Hitler Myth," *ibid.*

¹⁶ Ian Kershaw, "The Hitler Myth," *ibid.*

The appeal that Hitler and the Nazi regime held out to Germans rested then on three factors. First, when Hitler began his political ascent, Germany was at a historical low after the war, having lost territory and suffering great economic losses thanks to the demand for reparations. The situation presented a contrast to the confidence generated by Bismarck's unification of Germany just decades earlier. Hitler and the Nazis presented a coherent, strong and decisive alternative of a government that will unflinchingly deal with its opponents — Germany's opponents. Part of this ideological cohesion was nationalism. Finally, a sense of being embattled together assured Hitler of a lack of opposition no matter how horrible the atrocities were that his regime perpetrated.

Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

A Sri Lankan government military campaign killed the founder and chief of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on May 19, 2009, and brought to a close the last campaign in over three decades of ethno-nationalist civil wars.

The rise of the LTTE in the 1970s followed decades in which Tamil representatives repeatedly negotiated equal representation in Parliament, citizenship and language rights with representatives from the majority community who dominated government.¹⁷ On each occasion, the Sri Lankan Government reneged on agreements signed, creating a climate where it was easy for young Tamils to believe that the politics of talks and elections could do them no good. The last straw perhaps was the move to level the educational playing field (where Tamils had held a historical advantage) by weighting admissions first by medium of education and then by district. As Deepa Ollapally puts it in her study on cases of extremism in South Asia, "Minority confidence in the state as a neutral arbiter was no longer secure, replaced by feelings of intense vulnerability despite the formal machinery."¹⁸

She goes on to write:

"The eclipse of moderate Tamil parties did not occur overnight; their credibility was eroded over time as success in negotiating with the government on Tamil rights became more and more elusive. Tamil support for an armed solution came reluctantly and cannot be separated from egregious violations perpetrated by the state."¹⁹

Velupillai Pirabakaran's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam were, at the time of their founding in 1976, one of five major Tamil militant groups. All the groups demanded a separate Tamil Eelam carved out of Sri Lanka, but they differed, sometimes by vision and sometimes by their support base. All of them shared the view that peaceful means had failed and that violence was the only option. After the July 1983 riots, there was no looking back as levels of violence simply escalated for the next two decades. Over time, other Tamil groups either surrendered and entered mainstream politics, or

¹⁷ Swarna Rajagopalan, "An Anatomy of the Sri Lankan Conflict," unpublished paper written for the conference *Sri Lankan Conflict at the Crossroads*, Fundação Oriente, Lisbon, Portugal, June 2002, accessed at <http://www.swarnar.com/anatomyslconf.pdf> on August 29, 2016. See also Swarna Rajagopalan, *State and Nation in South Asia*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, 2001.

¹⁸ Deepa Ollapally, "Sri Lanka's violent spiral," *The Politics of Extremism in South Asia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008, page 158.

¹⁹ Deepa Ollapally, "Sri Lanka's violent spiral," *ibid.*, page 158.

merged into the LTTE, or were defeated in clashes with the Tigers. Assassinations by the Tigers did not just target Sri Lankan government leaders (and Indian ones) but also Tamil leaders from mainstream parties, Tamil professionals and other Tamil militant leaders. The result was that within a decade or so, they were the only group still seriously fighting the Sri Lankan government.

In the beginning, as is well-documented now, the LTTE and other Tamil groups received financial and military support, including weapons, training and shelter, from India. As thousands of Sri Lankan Tamils fled after 1983, the Tamil diaspora became the main source of support for the Tigers.²⁰ To some extent this was genuine support for the cause, but it is also widely acknowledged that the Tigers had a well-planned system of fundraising and extortion wherever the diaspora settled. There were also accounts of businesses set up as revenue streams for their efforts. The depth of this material and moral support is clear from the fact that the Tigers were able to support an army and a navy, regroup time and again after major reverses and hold out for almost twenty-five years against not just the Sri Lankan Army but also the Indian Army.

It is harder to find accounts of why Tamils in Sri Lanka continued to support the LTTE. In this researcher's experience, this was because it was hard to place one's support for them on the record in a conversation.²¹ During fieldwork in 1996, there were explanations that were repeated. First, and most pervasive, a sense of insecurity after the 1983 riots (which were not the first attack on ordinary Tamils) which led people to say, "Only the Tigers stand between us and the Sri Lankan government." The threat of Tiger reprisals was viewed as a guarantee of Tamil security in Colombo and other parts of the South. "Only the Tigers" came about because so many Tamil moderate leaders and other militants had been killed in the course of the conflict. There was no one else left to speak for Tamil interests, people said time and again. The resignation and fear in this explanation could still be stated openly, if off the record.

The other explanation was shared in confidence. Who were the Tigers, some asked, but the children of our family and friends? It was not possible to turn them away when they showed up at the door for shelter or food. Mobilisation and recruitment had been so extensive over the decades (to say nothing of abductions and conscription) that everyone was connected to the militant group. Even if you had reservations about them, you could hardly look in the face of a child you knew and turn them away.

Sri Lankan Tamil support for extremist methods stemmed first of all from a sense that other methods had failed. Negotiated accords were repeatedly repudiated and Tamil concerns disregarded in policy-making. Second, with generational change, alienation intensified as well as despair. It was Tamil youth that made the decision to take up arms — not a call by seasoned community elders who then recruited young men as cannon fodder. Third, escalating levels of violence within the

²⁰ Human Rights Watch, *Funding the "Final War" LTTE Intimidation and Extortion in the Tamil Diaspora*, Volume 18, No. 1(C), 2006, accessed at <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2006/ltte0306/ltte0306webwcover.pdf> on August 30, 2016.

²¹ This paragraph and the next draw on conversations during the researcher's fieldwork in 1996 when the conflict was very intense. During long interviews, interlocutors would either switch off the tape-recorder or wait until the end of the formal interview to share these perspectives. They were never documented as a result.

community and vis-à-vis both the majority community and the state, left Tamils feeling like they needed an armed guarantor, someone who could be counted on to act in protection and revenge. Finally, the close-knit but extended network of family relationships across all sections of Sri Lankan Tamil society meant virtually everyone was connected in some way to militants and their families. Kinship and other ties naturally served as a foundation for support to extremist groups.

Insights into community support and intervention gateways

The brief reviews of the four historical cases suggest an array of reasons why communities are drawn to and support extremists, regardless of their ideas and actions.

Some observations to note from the juxtaposition of the cases: First, in all four instances, extremism is defined by the choice of violent action more than the goals of the organisation per se. Second, the choice of method is extreme only in context — the Congress extremists, for instance, are hardly extreme by any historical standards. In other words, ‘extremist’ is as much a label as an objective phenomenon. Third, support for violent extremists is not a constant. There is a high tide of support and then it does ebb, perhaps to rise again. Fourth, all sections of society do not support extremists in any of these instances. A critical number obviously support them out of conviction. However, in each instance, the extremists do face both criticism and opposition — and not just from their stated antagonists. In all instances, the flow and ebb of support suggests that among those who are tacit supporters, there are some who feel obliged to support the extremists and some who do so out of fear. The idea that ‘people support extremism’ is therefore fallacious. Finally, a mix of personal, communal (as in pertaining to sections of the community) and structural external factors seem to influence the appeal of extremism.

It is important to flag two shortcomings of this analysis. First, none of these accounts is gendered, because gender-inclusive histories are still being written. Second, in all these instances, the extremists were largely local, and given that their causes were mostly nationalist, being local was important to both the fight and mobilisation for it. How far this applies to today’s global-local networks of violent extremism is debatable. Notwithstanding these caveats, the preceding discussion on reasons why communities support extremist groups pointed to several factors: disappointment, distress, decline, the promise of clarity, the fact of violence and kinship. Each of these also offers entry points for counter-extremist intervention.

One thread in understanding the appeal of extremism is *disappointment*. The Jacobins came together to reinforce the ideals of the French Revolution at a time when it looked like its bourgeois leadership would backtrack on promises made to the working classes and women. For Indian nationalists who came to be labelled extremist, it was clear that twenty years of annual meetings and resolutions and petitions had not substantially shifted Indians towards self-governance, and that other methods needed to be tried. That Germany was not allowed to be part of the negotiations at the Paris Peace Conference but still was expected to abide by the Treaty of Versailles certainly contributed to the circumstances in which the Nazis became a symbol of German resurgence. Tamil militancy in Sri Lanka was a product of decades of negotiated promises that were routinely reneged upon. This political failure destroyed the credibility of the mainstream Tamil political elite.

Disappointment in these four contexts relates to broken accords, exclusion and failed efforts to get political access. Entry points for intervention should be found in:

Participatory processes that are more representative.

Mechanisms for accountability with every accord or arrangement.

Communication systems for consultation and feedback.

The second thread is *distress*, especially socio-economic distress. In the case of the Jacobins, food scarcities and inflation, as well as the setbacks caused by Revolutionary France's military campaigns, pushed them into political prominence. Dire need legitimised the Reign of Terror in their eyes. For war-ravaged Germany, the cost of reparations, escalating debt and the impact of the Depression combined to delegitimise the Weimar Republic and enhance the appeal of a government (Hitler's) that seemed to be improving economic conditions. In both cases, economic distress helped mobilise workers and youth to join extremist groups. In Sri Lanka, Tamil youth began to see opportunities disappear in the name of an equal playing field. Given that political negotiations had failed time and again, they resorted to arms as a way of securing their future.

Acute socio-economic distress can follow from extraordinary circumstances such as conflict or disaster, both of which are facilitated by structural inequities and governance failure. As much as distress offers extremist recruiters rich pickings, it is also full of entry points for intervention, for instance

Relief, livelihood, human services, community development and infrastructure projects

Transparency and accountability in administration

Anti-corruption measures.

Human rights and civil rights protections

Both social change and governance reform however, need to be inclusive and informed by community needs in order to make a real impact.

In both the Sri Lankan Tamil case and German case, distress combined with a sense of *decline*. Sri Lankan Tamils had been the first community on the island to benefit from colonial education and employment opportunities, a lead that they were losing. Germany had gone from the nationalist high of Bismarck's unification campaign to an unprecedented post World War I low.

A narrative of decline from a happier moment appears harder to transform but discursive interventions are necessary and possible. Taking the form of consultations, of reportage and of creative projects, these might highlight:

That survival is as real as decline.

That people do have and can have agency no matter what their situation.

That there are multiple stories in any situation and they all deserve to be heard.

Discursive interventions also need to reflect on those factors in the community that facilitate this decline. This may take the form of grassroots dialogues or academic research projects, but these are as essential. Alternative imaginings of the world can shape choices *en route* to recovery.

The *clarity* of extremist positions holds great appeal in confounded moments. The Jacobins sense of what was right and wrong, and their confidence that they could clearly identify and eliminate the enemies of the revolution, made it possible to think that one fix would solve the problems the French people were facing. Hitler's ability to purge dissident elements in his party, identify a series of enemies of the state and to carry out military campaigns to regain lost territory inspired confidence in the German people. The survival of the Tamil Tigers amid the internecine rivalries of Sri Lankan Tamil groups shows how ruthlessness comes to be seen as clarity in these circumstances. Nationalism and (other) us-them formulations that allow extremists to target and attack others— individuals, organisations, communities, governments — are also read as evidence of clear, unsullied vision.

Reflexivity also contributes to seeing complexity rather than simplification, as clarity. In times of great distress, the voice that sounds most confident about the simplest and clearest solution is the voice that prevails. The appeal of “strong leadership” — individual or organisational — is greatest in bad times. Nationalism, which is one of the simplest narratives about a community, therefore carries great appeal. Multiple stories from multiple perspectives, critical analyses of problems and challenges and participatory planning however, create the true clarity that leads to good policy decisions.

Violence begets violence, Martin Luther King, Jr. said. The Indian case is again an outlier, because although the ‘extremists’ departed from existing political practices, their campaigns were still non-violent. Moreover, the colonial state's response was also non-violent; they were charged with sedition and tried with due process. In all the other cases, we see levels of violence rise. The Reign of Terror ended in violence, with Jacobin leaders captured and executed. The Nazi campaigns outside set off a World War and their genocidal campaigns within Germany and Poland define a historical low for humanity. The Tamil Tigers deployed every violent means imaginable in their war against a state that responded in kind. It took thirty years and a final military campaign whose human rights violations by either are yet to be documented to bring this exchange of fire to a close.

Violence marks extremism; what it also does is to lock groups, and not just their antagonists but also their supporters into a dynamic that is hard to transform, easier to destroy. The observation that during the Second World War, Germans felt that they had to go along with the Nazis given the war situation illustrates this. Similarly, as the Sri Lankan conflict grew protracted, Tamils came to see the Tigers as a protector from state reprisals.

The experience of violence creates its solidarities. The use of force on either side complicates the relationship between the community and the extremist group. It places them squarely in the cross-fire. It silences them and breaks down trust within the community, because each reversal of fortunes causes a section to switch sides and it is hard to know anybody's true affiliation.²² The community is

²² Nazish Brohi and Saba Gul Khattak, Exploring Women's Voices: Women in Conflict Zones The Pakistan Study, Women's Regional Network, 2013, Pages 30-32, accessed at http://www.womensregionalnetwork.org/images/uploads/CC_Pakistan.pdf on September 1, 2016.

acquiescent because it has no real choice. Where the community has supported the extremists, it is locked into that relationship because it faces the consequences of that support.²³

In retrospect, violence seems inevitable in most places where it is used. But arguably, it is not. There are three opportunities for intervention, two to prevent violence and one to prevent its escalation.

Early warning, where a good grassroots-to-administration communication can help forecast tension.

Responsive administration, where demands get a hearing soon after they are made.²⁴

Proportionate response to the use of violence and keeping channels of communication open.

There is scope for intervention in affected communities through:

Security sector reform which builds bridges between security forces and the community.

Scrupulous protection of human rights, which include the right to freedom of expression—even when it means providing security for those who speak out, such as human rights defenders.

Confidence-building within the community, opening and sustaining new platforms for dialogue.

In many places experiencing extremist violence, *kinship* ties are another reason for solidarity. In this paper, the Sri Lankan Tamil support for the Tigers offers one illustration. However, insofar, as the extremists are local, this could be true anywhere.

Family networks are a source of strength in most societies and in conflict situations created or exacerbated by extremism, their breakdown causes the greatest hardship. Family and clan networks that drag people into the maelstrom of conflict and that are marshalled to pull people into safe havens, can also form core networks for peace-building. Especially when we talk about the role of women, and women from societies so deeply patriarchal that they are seen as belonging mainly to the private sphere, family networks are a point of departure for creating intervention strategies. These strategies may use their gendered roles within the family, or activate the network of sisters and cousins, or present opportunities for inter-generational dialogue and teaching.

²³ Anand Gopal's account of living with decades of war and extremism illustrates this 'locking in' in more than one instance. *No Good Men among the Living*, Picador, New York, 2014.

²⁴ Swarna Rajagopalan, *State and Nation in South Asia*, op.cit., pages 175-188.

“WOMEN HOLD UP HALF THE SKY.”

SO WHAT CAN THEY DO TO PREVENT IT FROM FALLING DOWN ON US ALL?

Since 2014, there have been a plethora of conferences and projects on Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism, some of them focusing on women’s experiences and women’s potential role in this effort. Most begin by pointing out that women are usually the first targets of extremists, but then acknowledge that women and girls are also radicalised and participate in extremist violence and that they are on the frontlines of efforts to counter extremism through their human rights and social development work.

In March 2016, a report by the Women’s Alliance for Security Leadership (WASL) said:

“... across the Americas, Asia, Africa and the Middle East world, women’s rights groups have been warning against the rise of extremism for nearly three decades. They were first to notice, and often bear the brunt of, these regressive forces that represent the antithesis of basic principles of human rights, democracy and pluralism.”²⁵

Marking 15 years since the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, a global review pointed out to research that shows a correlation between women’s rights and a decrease in violent extremism.²⁶ The experts said there are broadly two ways in which this finding is sought to be used. The first is to include more women in military planning and intelligence (which puts women at risk) and the other is the “the nation building approach which aims at a comprehensive policy, where many strategies, including development, human rights and women’s rights, are included in a top down model imposed from above and which essentially supplements a military or securitised counter-terrorism strategy.”²⁷ Key recommendations in this landmark review include removing women’s rights from counter-terrorism strategies and agendas so long-term gender equality gains are not war casualties; building the capacity of women to engage in peace work and supporting women’s organisations and women human rights defenders.²⁸

Every conference and study points to examples of women’s work across the world to prevent radicalisation and extremism. There are examples everywhere of women’s initiative, individually and collectively, in this area.

²⁵ Women’s Alliance for Security Leadership, *Uncomfortable Truths, Unconventional Wisdoms: Women’s Perspectives on Violent Extremism & Security Interventions*, March 2016, page 7, accessed at <http://static1.squarespace.com/static/56706b861c121098acf6e2e8/t/56f1c3a786db43ca1c9b6cb1/1458684919130/WASL+Brief+No.1+Full.pdf> on September 2, 2016.

²⁶ UN Women, *Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace: A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council resolution 1325*, 2015, page 227, accessed at <http://wps.unwomen.org/~media/files/un%20women/wps/highlights/unw-global-study-1325-2015.pdf> on September 2, 2016.

²⁷ UN Women, *Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace*, *ibid*, page 228.

²⁸ UN Women, *Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace*, *ibid*, page 231.

“It is not only normal people who are visiting my clinics. I also treat insurgents and their family members. I invite and encourage them to join the peace process.”²⁹

“I had many meetings with one of the insurgents named Commander Hassan and after many face-to-face meetings and much persuasion, managed to convince him to join the peace process. Now he is working as commander of the local police in Said District and is a good mediator for drawing others into the peace process.”³⁰

“Two young boys were brainwashed by the Taleban to carry out a suicide attack on 80 women working collaboratively in Naqelin village of Daman district. The boys had been working in the police forces but had been terminated from service for family reasons. We requested the security commander of Kandahar to review their cases and help the young men redirect their energy to the police force.”³¹

Women have been engaged with resisting and building resilience in the face of violent extremism before the subject entered the global political agenda. If their efforts are to be supported, the question is: where should those interventions be located and what forms of support are required so that we share the costs of their work and reduce its risks? The concluding part of this paper uses the intervention gateways drawn from the four historical cases to answer this question.

Women’s avenues of intervention

Women are, and have proven themselves to be, effective peace-builders at every level of social and political life. The six factors that generate community support for extremists may actually be re-organised into five intervention areas for women seeking to mitigate and transform community support for extremism.

Family, clan and community

From resisting essentialist ideas that women must be inherently pacifist because they are mothers to documenting the peace work done by Mothers’ Fronts and Mothers’ Associations worldwide, we now see the importance patriarchy assigns to motherhood as a source of political authority. In the context of radicalisation, the role of mothers in encouraging or endorsing the choice of their children to join extremist organisations has been important, they must also be able to play a part in dissuading their children.³²

“Women, particularly mothers, are strategically located at the heart of the family. They are often the first to recognize fear, resignation, frustration, and anger in their adolescent children. When women are informed and empowered, equipped with the right attitudes, self-confidence and skills, they can meet global challenges at the local level. A mother who is able to read early warning signs of

²⁹ Dr. Anisgul Akhgar in “Peacemakers’ Tales from Afghanistan,” Women & Peace Studies Organization, Kabul, 2015, page 4.

³⁰ Haji Mahbooba in “Peacemakers’ Tales from Afghanistan,” *ibid*, page 7.

³¹ Jamila Yousufi in “Peacemakers’ Tales from Afghanistan,” *ibid*, page 11.

³² Mia Bloom writes about an Al Qaeda leader who said of his mother, “She never asked for my return, rather she prepared and urged me to Jihad.” Bloom, “When Women are the Problem,” in *Women preventing violent extremism: Charting a New Course, Thought for Action Kit*, United States Institute of Peace, Washington DC, 2015, page 20.

radicalization can counter recruitment efforts and hence becomes a major asset in advancing prevention efforts.”³³

Women are more than mothers; they are part of networks of other relationships as sisters, friends, daughters, cousins, wives and in-laws. These networks are ready-made sites for three categories of activities:

Information networks as violent conflict shuts down access to news, and consequently also sharing of ideas.

Discussion circles that serve as places to share and train as also to explore and expound what can be done.

Documentation sites to share and record women’s experiences that can then be amplified to inform public debate.

The mobility of women and their access to the public sphere is an important feature of liberty, but even in places where those are restricted, women are already well-enough networked within their communities to play a political role. As civil liberties are restricted, these private sphere circles can play a part in both resistance and resilience by the communities.

The importance of these private, familial circles is reinforced by the ideas of hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity that are associated with contemporary extremism.³⁴ That is, for men, a violent, misogynistic masculinity is heroic within the extremist framework and for women, to submit to the service of this masculinity defines their womanhood. This is merely an extreme expression of patriarchy, and given that the first lessons in patriarchal thinking, gendered roles and spaces as well as expectations come from the home and family, it is critical that the resistance to extremism be rooted there. Gender sensitisation for organisations and men apart, it is important to support the sensitisation of women, so that they have the vocabulary and tools to socialise their families for equal gender relationships.

Working in private circles of kinship and friendship is also a way to push back the tide of sexual and gender-based violence which surely rises with the rise of extremist violence in society. To be aware of the relationship between patriarchy, inequality and violence; to understand the protections and resources that are available; to end silence about violence within the home and establish solidarities and to encourage bystander intervention, goes a long way towards building resistance to the first line of attack by extremist groups — the autonomy, freedom and individuality of women and girls.

Supporting women’s work

This is the work women’s rights groups around the world have been doing. Aware, networked and vocal women upset the apple-cart by asking questions, making demands and taking action. They are

³³ Edit Schlaffer, “Charting New Ways with New Partners,” in *Women preventing violent extremism: Charting a New Course, Thought for Action Kit*, United States Institute of Peace, Washington DC, 2015, page 30. This view is reinforced in an interview with a police officer quoted by Mia Bloom in the same publication, page 20.

³⁴ See Edit Shlaffer and Mia Bloom’s articles in *Women preventing violent extremism: Charting a New Course*, *ibid.*

empowered by their knowledge, their solidarities and their confidence. The restrictions extremists impose on women's personal freedoms and access to public sphere opportunities are made in the name of religion or discipline or subordination to the national cause, but the intended consequence is to disable the power of networks of women, whether those are private sphere or public sphere networks.

The most common piece of P/CVE advice that is dispensed with regard to engaging women is that local women's organisations and movements should be supported, given any training they seek and consulted in all planning and project implementation. The 1325 High-Level Review recommends "an increase in predictable, accessible and flexible funding for women's civil society organizations working on peace and security at all levels..."³⁵ (page 16) Such help should include operational support, training and well-being support, documentation support and programme support.

It is not merely that women's groups, particularly smaller groups at the grassroots, struggle for funding. It is also that with global networks of support to extremist groups, governments find a reason to curb civil liberties (including the right to association) and start creating rigid regimes of financial restrictions for civil society organisations. Compliance becomes a challenge also because organisations sometimes lack that capacity. Such restrictions also create an antagonistic environment between state and civil society and to accept state funding could compromise their credibility vis-à-vis the community and the extremist groups in their area. As the WASL report says, "They often have to navigate a narrow path of maintaining independence and legitimacy in the face of immense pressure from governments to co-opt their agenda."³⁶

The second theme that runs through much of this work is to "listen to women." Because women are the first to suffer the impact of rising conservatism, misogyny and violence in society, their testimonies offer the basis of excellent early warning systems. Moreover, given that women activists and professionals are intensively and extensively involved with the private and the public sphere. They work despite constraints and so they have to be creative and strategic in their work. The WASL report describes the work that women's organisations have done in this area, mainly with reference to young people entering Islamic militant groups.³⁷ The first step is to humanise radicalised youth and engage with them as community members. The second is engaging one-on-one, devising individual journeys away from extremism. The third is to offer alternative interpretations of the same texts and references. Finally, women's groups invest time in building relationships with other local leaders. This is an investment that state and military-led counter-extremism operations cannot make.

The final theme relates to the vulnerability of women human rights defenders in the face of extremism. They offend the state by question its actions and inaction. They offend extremists by

³⁵ UN Women, Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace, op.cit., page 16.

³⁶ Women's Alliance for Security Leadership, Uncomfortable Truths, Unconventional Wisdoms, op.cit., page 16.

³⁷ Women's Alliance for Security Leadership, Uncomfortable Truths, Unconventional Wisdoms, ibid, pages 32-34.

acting independently. In a highly militarised environment, women human rights defenders are especially vulnerable. Punishment for their political activism can take the form of stigma, abuse and sexual and gender-based violence, and with them, their families are also at risk. Extremists are not accountable for human rights violations and state forces enjoy a high degree of impunity. The point is that if women are to engage with extremism and if they are to be the vanguard in defending communities from the influence of extremism, they need to be protected in any way necessary.

Engendering the work of the state and aid agencies

The concerns about disappointment, distress and decline are fundamentally about failures of the state to deliver on its mandate of a good life for all. It is therefore to have a discussion about engaging with community support for extremism without talking about redressing several layers of governance failure. A failure to provide security to citizens on a day-to-day basis is the most vital of these; without security, no other achievements matter. The second is the delivery of everyday services—from sanitation to schooling to health-care to postal services. The facilitation of daily needs is an important function of modern administrations. Third, the cost of infrastructure and development projects today place them squarely in the purview of the state exchequer, especially in contexts where the project has also to be secured against attack. Fourth, when states fail to prevent outside players from making either physical or virtual incursions into territories and populations in their jurisdiction — in other words, for instance, to prevent foreign extremist influences, that is an enormous failure. Finally, a system pervaded by corruption constitutes a failure not just of the administration and of democratic values like accountability; it is also a failure of social values.

In the long road to rebuilding from these failures, the four pillars of UN Security Council 1325 are relevant beyond conflict resolution and peace processes, especially participation. If women are to play a role in marginalising extremism, they need to be an active, vocal part of needs assessments, community consultations, participatory planning, project design, budgetary discussions and the implementation and evaluation processes. Women need to participate in meaningful ways and equal numbers in truly representative governments. They need to be involved in administration, peace-making and policy decisions at every level of government. Women who work at the grassroots need to be able to aspire realistically to the highest levels of government. Where needed, women in government need to receive technical training in administrative processes and in gender equality tools like the gender audit.

What women know needs to be factored into social decision-making. Women are not just composites of needs — food and shelter, protection, care — but repositories of formal and experiential learning. Every woman is part of a large social network of family, clan, community and friends, and brings individual and collective insights to what she does. Connectedness and vulnerability together make women's lives a good weathervane for social breakdown, with rising levels of violence and insecurity.

A field-based research study across several conflict zones found women reluctant to talk about corruption, not because it was insignificant but because it was pervasive.³⁸ What was clear was that

³⁸ Women's Regional Network, *Surviving War and Transition: Perspectives from Afghanistan*, 2013, accessed at http://www.womensregionalnetwork.org/images/uploads/CC_Afghanistan.pdf on September 2, 2016. See

corruption disproportionately affected women, and potentially, in any genuine effort to eliminate corruption and institute accountability, they would be the most invested stakeholders. Accountability and transparency are also important to women because they are inimical to impunity and silence — meaning better access to justice, across the board.

Finally, gender sensitisation across government offices and agencies is critical. This pertains to both men and women, in separate and in mixed groups. The objective of gender sensitisation should not just be to change outward behaviour but create better workplaces and genuinely safe, egalitarian work cultures. This will find expression in external interactions and in programmatic orientation in due course. As a way of making gender issues visible, gender audits and the habit of gender disaggregation of data may be adopted by organisations.

Changing the story

What are the roles women can play in changing the stories that create a fertile ground for extremism?

Simply by asking women what they think, writing down and sharing it, we change the larger narrative because their perspectives are so rarely heard. “Amplifying women’s voices” has become a mantra for this reason. What are women’s experiences and perspectives? Their stories of survival and coping in crisis situations are testimonials not just to their agency but the resilience of a community. By writing down women’s stories and experiences, we also document their accomplishments and leadership and therefore, make visible a leadership pool that would otherwise be outside our consideration.

Even in an age like this one where we think of education in terms of employability and training in terms of technical skills, teaching women to interview, record, document and broadcast the gendered experience of women and others in a particular situation can create an invaluable resource. Women historians and reporters are likely to ask different questions and tell different stories.

Changing the story is also about alternative narratives and imaginations for the future. One form of resistance to extremism might be creative projects — writing, art or even embroidery, for instance — where either individually or in groups that re-cast existing narratives. These might also be in dialogue with each other, to establish through creativity that multiple perspectives and standpoints exist on every single experience. In societies where women have little access to the public sphere or might feel they lack the tools for formal engagement or are hesitant because of the stigma attached to politics, creative projects, crafts and informal performance are a better way to draw them out, literally and figuratively.

Teaching women skills such as photography, videography and editing also empower them politically without seeming that way. Setting up community radio stations run by women for the community is likely to ensure that local issues get attention that corporate broadcasters cannot spare. The training

also, Women’s Regional Network, *From Conflict to Security: A Regional Overview*, 2014, accessed at http://www.womensregionalnetwork.org/images/uploads/CCs_RegionalReport.pdf on September 2, 2016.

and experience can then be leveraged to seek more professional opportunities when circumstances permit.

Women form the frontline defence and also the grassroots resistance to violent extremism. Investing in their existing efforts, increasing the numbers of educated women in a society, sensitising them to their potential as change agents and listening to what they have to say has been the missing piece in earlier efforts to combat terrorism. Newly recast as efforts to prevent or counter violent extremism, we have given our permission to think more holistically and inclusively about the same challenges. This is what women have consistently done, without an unending resource base. Confronted with the puzzle that in spite of their severity and atrocities, communities seem to support extremists — apart from the more commonly considered problem of radicalising youth — we turn to women, on the frontline and at the grassroots, to turn back this tide. But where are they to begin to intervene?

Drawing on four historical cases, each considered extremist in its context, we tried to understand their support bases. Six factors were identified — a feeling of disappointment in how things had turned, real social and economic distress, a sense of decline from an earlier better time, a search for clarity, the experience of the spiral of violence and finally, kinship networks that tied people's lives together. Each of these also contained the seeds of possibility — if they could draw people towards extremist groups, they could also be points of departure for resistance and resilience.

There has already been some discussion on the role women can and do play in preventing or countering violent extremism. Weaving some insights from those studies into the lessons from our historical discussion, four avenues whereby women can intervene were identified. The first one is to transform the many networks, especially family, to which women belong into assets for social change. The second underscores the importance of supporting the work women are already doing (instead of roping them into military or state projects) and of protecting women human rights defenders. The third is the importance of women's participation in government and in state-run projects — at every stage. Finally, women challenge extremism by simply writing and telling different stories about a society, introducing complexity into the collective consciousness.

Women have shown the courage to resist extremism and to call the state on its failures and culture of impunity. They are targeted by both because they are effective. The project of involving women and women's organisations in preventing or countering violent extremism requires common sense on the part of the state and international organisations; it also requires great courage, because when women stand up to extremism, they will also be standing up to patriarchy on all sides.