
CHALLENGE EXTREMISTS INSTEAD OF STAYING SILENT

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We're living in an area of extremist groups that dislike diversity, pluralism, human rights and equality, the head of a British commission countering extremism told DW. And it's not going to get better anytime soon.

Deutsche Welle: You were named the head of the Commission for Countering Extremism one year ago. How will the commission counter extremism in the UK?

Sara Khan: The aim of the commission is to help everyone in society to do more to counter extremism. Extremism, we feel, is a whole society problem that requires a whole societal response. Everybody has a role to play. Schools, government, civil society and faith leaders all have roles to play. I think that we don't have a whole society response, that simply we're keen to try and develop more of.

What kind of problems or challenges is the UK facing when it comes to extremism?

There are lots of different types of extremism. There are some which are much more prominent and much more of a threat. We're seeing a rise in far-right extremism. There's always been far-right extremism in the UK, but over the last couple of years it had declined and now that decline has gone into reverse. Obviously, we also look at Islamist extremism. We had five terror attacks last year in Britain four of them were Islamist extremists and one of them was from the far right.

But there are also other forms of extremism. There is hard-left extremism and we have been speaking to people about that and Sikh extremism as well. We've been speaking to Jewish groups who tell us how they experience extremism from the far-right Islamists and the hard-left. We're looking at all different types of extremism in the UK.

Often when people talk about extremism, many think only of Islamist extremism.

I think whenever someone tries to suggest that extremism only comes from Muslims, it is an inherently flawed argument, and it's deeply untrue. Extremism can come from any political ideology. It can come from any religion. It can impact any group of people in any country. Nobody's immune. Look what's happening in places like the US — we've seen neo-Nazi demonstrations in Charlottesville. Look what's happening in Germany — we've seen the rise of neo-Nazi demonstrations. In India — we're seeing a rise in Hindu nationalism. There is a rise of all the different types of extremism we're seeing.

What I do all of them have in common?

I think there are a number of different commonalities. A lot of extremist ideologies they promote an us-versus-them othering. There's always somebody that you're othering and there's hostility advocated against another group. There's a kind of us-versus-them supremacist view. Another commonality is an opposition to human rights and equality. Extremists don't believe in somebody's human rights. There is this kind of commonality of opposing people because of their differences. Extremists dislike diversity, they dislike pluralism, they dislike human rights and equality, which is why we have to always defend and protect those values.

You talked about the role of women and you also said you were working especially with women. Which role can women play in fighting extremism?

Women can play every role and they do play every role. Women can be leaders. Women can be working on the ground at a civil society level. It's important that we have representation of women at all levels of society. Because if we don't have that — if there are educational or employment or political opportunities are denied to women — it actually impacts society as a whole. It weakens our society makes countries much more prone to corruption and extremism as well. Empowering women means that society as a whole benefits.

It's also important in countering extremism. Sometimes some of the most powerful advocates against extremists are women. I've seen the bravery and courage and resilience they have, and they are prepared to challenge extremists because they see the impact it has on their children and on their families but also in their societies.

Kahn said she has been threatened because of her work but keeps at it because extremism impacts everyone

What kinds of projects have you been involved in where women counter extremism?

We worked with local authorities to deliver training programs for Muslim women by teaching them theological counternarratives to extremist ideology and teaching them about gender equality and teaching them about the importance of leadership. In some cases we actually helped set up local women's networks and organizations to help empower them to get involved in civic life.

In 2015, we after the declaration of the "Islamic State" caliphate, we launched an anti-IS campaign called Making a Stand, which was supported by the government and we went around the country engaged with hundreds of Muslim women again teaching them theological counter-narratives, and

also how to safeguard your children against extremist ideology. We know that we've had cases of 15-year-old girls leaving their country to join ISIS, so we did a lot of work with parents about how to safeguard children. There is also the important role women can play in challenging extremism. Where if you come across an imam who's preaching extremism or hatred you have an important role to challenge that person and not ignore it. You must challenge them.

What drove some 850 people to join the "Islamic State?"

There was no there's no one single reason. There'll be a lot of individual reasons. There will be wider societal issues. But I think there are issues of ideology. There are issues of identity and belonging. There's also obviously extreme propaganda and being swayed by extremist propaganda as well and not hearing counterarguments to it. It's really important that people are exposed to different ideas and to have their views challenged as well.

What would you say about the future of extremism and countering it?

I think we're living in a time of extremism, and I don't think it's going to get better anytime soon. If you look across the world, it's quite grim. It's quite worrying. I don't think it's going to go away anytime soon. We're in an era of extremism, and I think it's very important that we all do what we can to challenge it, and for countries to ensure that they try to defend and promote equality and human rights and pluralism and diversity. All of these values are really critical, and that's what extremists threaten.

Have dialogue as well □ sometimes it can be very simple things. If you know you have fear of another community, sit down have a meal together and have a dialogue have a discourse you realize that you've got there are things that you have in common. Then you will see that you have far more in common than you have in differences.

Sara Khan is a co-founder of Inspire, a non-governmental organization that aims to counter extremism and promote gender equality. She is also the author of the book "The Battle for British Islam: Reclaiming Muslim Identity from Extremism."

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