



INTEGRATING A GENDER DIMENSION IN PREVENTING AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM (P/CVE) POLICY AND PRACTICE

BACKGROUND NOTE

Women and girls are increasingly burdened with the price of extremist violence. From Pakistan to Nigeria, Syrian and Iraq to Somalia, violent extremist groups have deliberately attacked development, educational, and socio-economic opportunities for women and girls. As such they challenge fundamental notions of citizenship, equality, and justice, and attack the universal values enshrined in the United Nations Charter. The shooting of Malala Yousafzai and others like her, the kidnapping of the Chibok girls in Nigeria and the use of female children as suicide bombers, or brutality against women and children that has become a hallmark of the so-called “Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant” (ISIL) are some appalling examples which have garnered much media attention. Their supporters from as far as North America, Europe, and Asia have underscored the transnational dimension of the challenge.

However, the violence perpetrated by violent extremist groups against women is not only physical, or in terms of creating an insecure and unstable environment. Rigid practices espoused by violent extremist groups have rolled back gains made by women, especially with regards to politics, health and education. These groups have sought to consolidate these changes through deliberate legislation and practice, often with the threat of violence hanging over those who are not compliant. Such dynamics also pose a challenge to the development of younger generations of children whose education and economic pathways are narrowed by the reduction of opportunity.

Against this background, women have played roles as both preventers and perpetrators. Despite the violence against women by many extremist groups, there is a long history of women planning, supporting, and executing terrorist attacks, from Northern Ireland to Sri Lanka. The reasons for which women join or support terrorist or violent extremist groups remain a topic of intense debate. In some instances it may be the social or economic positions in which they find themselves, as women, which prompt them to seek different new opportunities (or what they see as such) elsewhere. In other instances, it may have little to do with their gender and may be a deliberate choice shaped by their personal convictions and experiences and may be driven by many of the same motivations that drive men.

Today, there are increasing reports of Western women journeying to ISIL-controlled territory, with some reports suggesting that as many as 10-20 percent of the foreign contingent are women. Many of these women have expressed grievances similar to their male counterparts: sociopolitical marginalization, outrage at the Assad regime in Syria and the countries seen as complicit in the perpetuation of the war, a binary view of the world that pits faiths against each other, and a search for social and religious identity in an increasingly globalized world. Women combatants remain few in number worldwide, even among the most ardent ISIL supporters, but they can play key roles as ideologues and recruiters. For instance, on social media platforms like Twitter, women have played a key role in legitimizing ISIL’s narrative and seeking to persuade others – men and women – to join and if that is not possible, show support by perpetrating violent acts at home.



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However, women can also play critical roles in prevention. A number of CVE initiatives to engage mothers, family members, and professionals, among others, have been premised on the unique access and influence women can have in some communities. These powerful roles were recognized 15 years ago in UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and then in subsequent resolutions. Through this recognition and longstanding work in the field, experts and practitioners working on women, peace, and security (WPS) issues can offer valuable insights, good practices, and perspective in strengthening CVE policy and practice. Furthermore, UNSCR 2129 called for increased focus on WPS issues in all relevant work of the Council, including threats to international peace and security caused by terrorist acts. UNSCR 2178, which is also notable as it calls on member states to strengthen engagement with civil society, women and youth in CVE efforts.

For the many governments and regional and international organizations like the European Union, the question of the roles of women in terrorism and counterterrorism, and the impact of violent extremism on women and girls is an important security and development issue. It is critical not only to understand why *women* are joining foreign terrorist groups, but the roles they play in inciting and persuading others to join and fight. Moreover, the potential for such groups to negatively impact the security, rights, and freedoms of women, either in Europe or in partner countries, challenges the core values and interests of the EU. The numbers of fighters and supporters traveling to Iraq and Syria - an estimated 20,000 men and women from some 90 countries around the world and among them some 1,500-2,000 European citizens – underscores the urgent need for a more informed and targeted response.

The increased focus on women and CVE has been highlighted in a number of international fora and CVE initiatives. The [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe \(OSCE\)](#) has been working to promote gender-sensitive strategies, policies, and measures to counter violent extremism and has drafted a set of good practices on the topic which will be considered for adoption by the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) in September 2015. The importance of integrating a gender dimension into CVE and counterterrorism efforts was also recently highlighted in an important [Open Briefing](#) on this issue by UN Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC) and also as part of the 10th anniversary [commemoration of UNSCR 1624](#), which explored the roles of women in incitement and responses.

As the threat of violent extremism to women and girls escalates and the potential for women to *pose* a threat increases, it is imperative that efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism integrate a gender dimension into all phases of programming, from conflict analysis and programme design through to implementation and evaluation. Preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) efforts would also benefit significantly from better leveraging women's experiences and voices to reach vulnerable communities, including at-risk youths.

At the regional level, the European Union has taken into account women as a target audience as well as potential partners in their CVE and deradicalization efforts. In addition, the Commission has mobilised hundreds of millions of Euros in humanitarian and other economic assistance to address the crisis in Syria and in surrounding countries, in particular Lebanon and Jordan. In addition, the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) brings key experts together and works to ensure that research and analysis on this continually adapting threat is up-to-date. The Council of



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the European Union has outlined a series of steps to ensure the security of citizens by taking action against terrorism, in full compliance with human rights and the rule of law.

Numerous innovative programmes and projects have also been implemented by a variety of different actors across the development and security spectrum to address the development, economic, and sociopolitical challenges that contribute to an enabling environment for terrorism and violent extremism. These include programmes that empower mothers to identify early signs of violent behavior and enhancing their problem-solving skills. In addition, some media campaigns showcase powerful female role models as a way to promote girls' education and highlight the negative impact of extremist on development efforts.

The event hosted by the EU on 30 September will bring together senior officials, experts, and civil society practitioners to further discuss the threat posed by violent extremism and its impact on women, as well as highlight efforts being undertaken to support community-level engagement, particularly those that integrate a gender dimension, in preventing and countering violent extremism. This discussion will provide important inputs into international and multilateral P/CVE policies and programmes, and strengthen collective resolve to advance practical, contextually-tailored, and sustainable responses.

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