UN WOMEN

GENDERED PATHWAYS TO RADICALIZATION AND DESISTANCE FROM VIOLENT EXTREMISM — LESSONS FROM EARLY-INTERVENTION PROGRAMS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

Summary

History offers plenty of examples of female involvement in political violence, but a certain fascination and disbelief continue to surround female violent extremists because women are often still viewed as homemakers and mothers, surprising society by the number of young girls and women joining the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). This policy brief explores the drivers of radicalization to and engagement in violent extremism and the factors of disengagement and desistance among women and girls by examining cases of individuals that went through the United Kingdom's Channel program. Channel cases were chosen for this analysis because it is one of the longest running (since 2007) and most documented early-intervention programs developed specifically to prevent engagement with terrorism and violent extremism. The policy brief aims to enhance understanding of the need for gender-sensitive interventions that address the specific needs of women and girls. Several key themes have emerged that should be considered when designing or revising early-intervention programs aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) to account for the needs of women and girls.

Research Findings

First, **men and women share many of the same push and pull factors that lead to engaging with violent extremism, although they differ in their extent and correlation.** Disengagement is an individual process that must account for the complexity of an individual's personality, including gendered social expectations and identity traits.

Second, neglecting gendered pathways to radicalization, engagement, desistance, and disengagement can have considerable negative impacts on the success of prevention or exit, disengagement, and reintegration programs. **Policies that neglect the importance of a more complex and nuanced gender perspective can create human rights violations and advance marginalization and discrimination.**

Third, **a larger and more diverse sample size of primary data is needed** to develop more authoritative conclusions on individual radicalization and disengagement processes beyond the specific group of girls and women in the United Kingdom's Channel program examined for this policy brief. Interviews with individuals who have joined ISIL and other groups, individuals who have disengaged, and individuals who have chosen not to leave will add valuable insights to better understand their decision-making process.

Fourth, as highlighted by the Channel cases and supporting research, joining a terrorist group can be based on **the quest for empowerment.** Violent extremist groups such as ISIL have provided a source of empowerment for women, particularly young women, **but societies have not managed to offer equal opportunities and treatment.**

Fifth, **examples of good P/CVE practices include a stronger focus on education and support of roles, including leadership and decision-making positions, for women in law enforcement and local administrations.** Other examples include facilitating alternative mechanisms for women and men to claim their rights and have their grievances heard while ensuring accountability mechanisms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Comparative studies, including data on male and female recruits from the same communities, as well as studies of different forms of violent extremism, should be conducted.** This could include relational analysis of gender as part of social identity.

- Further research **analyzing the correlation between state responses and the impact of counterterrorism policies on disengagement processes should be considered,** with due consideration of gender dynamics.

- Early-intervention programs should include an analysis not only of individual and gendered risk factors but also of **cultural and social identities** and their relationship to each other.

- **Oversimplified stereotypes can be harmful to the individual** and allow female violent extremists to navigate security measures more easily because they are not perceived to be a threat.

- Focus on mechanisms for women and men to **claim their rights** and have their grievances heard while ensuring **account-ability mechanisms are in place.**

- There is a need to more effectively **combine online and offline P/CVE actions.** Arguably, the internet has removed some barriers for women's political participation; but **particularly institutionalized social structures that promote female inequality and dependency cannot be addressed by counternarratives** and are not sufficient as a standalone approach to the prevention of violent extremism.