



Challenging Gender Biases in Radicalisation and Violent Extremism



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and meso-research was conducted through interviews and focus groups, micro-research was conducted through a survey exercise. All activities were implemented in the eight countries under study, and gender considerations (gender-balance among participants, researchers, as well as context-based gender sensitivities) were a priority. The second part of the paper identifies the main challenges of incorporating a gender dimension into preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), mapping different policy recommendations and identifying areas of improvement for the critical integration of gender into P/CVE.



Gender in radicalisation and violent extremism

Women have historically participated in VE movements fulfilling a diverse range of roles and functions all across the world and across ideologies. They have participated in modern nationalist movements since the nineteenth century. As controversial as Rapoport's conceptualisation of the waves of terrorism may be, all of them – the anarchist, the anticolonial, the New Left and the religious one (Rapoport, 2004) – included women in their ranks, although their roles varied, particularly regarding public/private spaces (men dominating the public sphere and women relegated to the private one). In the anarchist and New Left wave, women were more present in militant and combat activities while in the anticolonial movements they provided more logistical and backup support (Muro and Wilson, 2022).

The dichotomy of public/private spaces is an essential axis to understand the locus of gendered biases in VE. When looking at the involvement of women in VE, policy-makers, practitioners, and academics tend to prioritise women's private lives, focusing on their marriage, family or whether they have experienced some kind of trauma in their life. Gender has an impact on why and how men and women become involved in VE, due to cultural norms and societal expectations that differ according to gender. Spaces of recruitment are a clear reflection of this public/private dichotomy, where men are more related to radicalisation happening in public spaces and recruitment of women on private or online forums, as a result of traditional gender norms that limit female access to public spaces (Traidi and Vidal, 2023). Even if a strict gender separation takes place in some of these forums, online communities also offer more opportunities for women to be part of them as active participants, for example as admins of Telegram channels (Criezis, 2021). De Leede (2018) highlights that internet has provided women with the opportunity to engage in VE groups in more varied roles.

The findings from the surveys carried out over 3,200 young people in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and the Balkans show that young females tend to feel more unsafe in their neighbourhoods or countries than males in general, and they also tend to be more concerned about radicalisation than their male counterparts, particularly in the Balkans. This perception of public spaces as potentially less secure spaces for women is identified in the MENA region, where they spend more leisure time in closed spaces such as the home, whereas more men are likely to socialise outside and outdoors. In all regions men tend to engage more in sports activities as well as participate in religious services, while volunteering and engagement with local communities is more balanced across genders, with a slight bias towards women in the Balkans (Mouna, forthcoming; Pollozhani and Bieber, forthcoming).

Nevertheless, evidence-based research on women in VE is scarce compared to the male-centred literature on the topic, as well as fragmented in terms of topics and case studies. Even though women have also assumed fighting roles, research has often centred its attention on men as more frequent perpetrators of violence. This more benign perception by researchers and governments has made women more invisible to counterterrorism policy and research. The scarce focus on gender in security studies has also resulted in a biased approach to gender in radicalisation processes and VE (Pearson and Winterbotham, 2017).

Efforts to include gender perspectives in the field of P/CVE have often dealt with the term “gender” as implying women. However, gender “is relational and encompasses social, cultural, and economic power dynamics between and among people of all genders” (Dier and Baldwin, 2022: 1). Recent scholarship has addressed how research on masculinities can contribute to a better understanding of male radicalisation (Phelan, 2023). Understanding masculinities involves recognising power structures and dynamics that subordinate both men and women. Recent research on masculinities (Pearson and Winterbotham, 2017; Kapur, 2019; Roose and Cook, 2022; Dier and Baldwin, 2022) has shown that VE groups frequently exploit violent masculinities as a way to redirect feelings of disempowerment, emasculation, marginalisation, and resentment. The idealisation of hegemonic masculinities, portraying men as protectors of their community and soldiers of war, can play a role in driving men to VE, both in Jihadist and far-right propaganda (Kapur, 2019; Dier and Baldwin, 2022; Phelan et al., 2023).

Indeed, gender shapes how and why men and women radicalise, the recruitment strategies used by VE groups, the roles men and women play, and the portrayal and perception by the wider society, because of cultural norms and societal expectations that differ from men and women (Phelan, 2023). In this sense, there is growing interest in understanding how gendered dynamics affect the participation of both women and men differently and the ways in which VE groups use different ideas about masculinities and femininities to their own advantage (Donnelly, 2021; Dier and Baldwin, 2022).

CONNEKT research findings at the macro level have shown that women are almost absent from decision-making in the field of security. In the interviews conducted during the empirical research targeting state representatives, officials, and other institutional actors to analyse the drivers at the macro level, the number of male state representatives that were interviewed is significantly higher than the number of women state representatives and, on the other hand, the number of female civil society representatives is higher than the number of male civil society representatives (Kapidžić, 2021). Both in the MENA region and in the Balkans, men are overrepresented in state security institutions and decision-making bodies, while females more often represent civil society actors. This gender segregation reflects a tendency to masculinise the state and feminise the civil society, mirroring the traditional role of preventer and peace-maker attributed to women (Blancard, 2003), which will be discussed later. The overrepresentation of men as state representatives can be explained by the fact that all countries under research in CONNEKT prioritise a “hard” or securitised perspective in their national strategies against VE (CONNEKT, 2022), and security institutions are male-dominated spaces where women’s voices are almost invisible or tend to be excluded (LSE, 2017). Many authors refer to the notion of “hegemonic masculinity”, an idealised model of masculinity that has been transmitted through time that subordinates other forms of masculinity. It privileges male notions of militarism and statecraft and creates a mythicised femininity where women are passive agents of patriarchal institutional structures. Women’s agency is taken away, and women are portrayed as lacking political, nationalist or religious aspirations (Parashar, 2010).

In contrast, the overrepresentation of females as civil society representatives can be linked to the fact that civil society organizations (CSOs) tend to focus on “soft” or preventive efforts, and the role of women in P/CVE tends to be confined to prevention. The fact that opportunities for CSOs to participate in policy-making in the field of P/CVE are limited, especially in the MENA region (CONNEKT, 2022), further complicates the incorporation of women’s voices in security decision-making in relation to state approaches to P/CVE.

The micro-level research of CONNEKT focuses on the relationships and perceptions of young people regarding the drivers of radicalisation. While disaggregated data can offer us valuable findings on the similarities and differences between young men and women in the MENA and Balkan regions, the results say more about the contexts of radicalisation and VE rather than the drivers per se.

In both regions results are consistent with the overall socially-dominant gender norms where men are more exposed to physical violence, in line with “traditional gender norms that encourage men to demonstrate physical strength and domination as symbols of masculinity” (Peci, forthcoming). In her work on nationalism and masculinity, Enloe (1990) highlights how the military service has traditionally been considered a passage from boy to man and has been linked to very masculine notions of stoicism, detachment, strength, resolve, and adventure.

Gender norms and expectations are also evident at the meso/community level, where the role of women as preventers is emphasised. One of the case studies in Jordan, which analyses Syrian refugee communities, highlights the prevention role of Syrian refugee mothers by providing religious education to their children, in a context where access to education, culture, and leisure opportunities to refugees is limited. The Jordan female preachers case study (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Stikovac Clark, 2022) also focuses on the role of females as providers of religious education. As highlighted by Chirchi and Ghribi (2023), this report underscores the informal networks of education and social services facilitated by these women.

WOMEN'S AGENCY AND MOTIVATIONS

7 Traditional attempts to explain women's engagement in VE have framed them as victims, assuming that they only take part in VE because they have been groomed or coerced by men into it (Pearson and Winterbotham, 2022). Their engagement is framed in personal or emotional motivations, prioritising their private lives, and putting into question their political commitment (German and Pennington, 2019). Several scholars have denounced that there is a long-standing tendency in research and policy-making to ascribe emotional motivations to women, assuming that they join because of their relationship with a male violent extremist or for romantic relationship reasons, while rational or political motivations are related to men (Alexander and Turlington, 2018; Criezis, 2021; CTED, 2019). In this sense, De Leede (2018, cited in Phelan, 2023) states that the marital status of female suicide bombers is more likely to be known than their male counterparts.

The concept of agency, which refers to the ability of oneself to make their own decisions, plays an important role when considering women's engagement in VE. In the past decade, there has been a lot of Western academic production on the reasons why Western women joined Daesh (Perešin, 2015; Winterbotham, 2018; Phelan, 2023), as it was considered unreasonable that women would willingly desire to participate in groups that are hostile to women or hold regressive gender norms. This prompted a scholarly interest in understanding women's motivations, and questions surrounding active agency and coercion have been at the core of the analysis (Phelan, 2023). The underlying issue is the failure to recognise that radicalised actors (both men and women) are rational individuals who make choices driven by the motivations and incentives they have.

On the one side, research examining women's motivations has shown that women were motivated by many of the same factors as their male counterparts (De Leede, 2018), with their motivations encompassing a combination of ideological, religious, political, and personal reasons (Perešin, 2015). However, it has also identified gendered differences in the push/pull factors and the fact that women go through very different experiences than males

joining militant or extremist groups (Bloom, 2011). Several scholars (Pearson and Winterbotham, 2016; German and Pennington, 2019; Roose and Cook, 2022) show that Daesh exploited experiences of anti-Muslim hatred and feelings of insecurity linked to the use of hijab, as well as propaganda depicting the West as an immoral place where women are sexualised and Muslim women disrespected, and portraying Western feminism as imperialist to attract them into joining the group (De Leede, 2018; CTED, 2019). Women were appealed by the perceived freedom to practise their religion without discrimination, and the promise to live in a state under a strict interpretation of Shariah law, as opposed to the moral decadency of Western societies (Peresin, 2015).

Even if most research has focused on women in jihadist-inspired violent groups, far-right groups also mobilise ideas about femininities to recruit women. These groups believe that feminism and racialised populations are a threat to the survival of European societies, and they are very concerned about declining fertility rates in what they perceive is a plot to replace Europeans with immigrants. In this context, women and their role as mothers and housewives is seen as the salvation of the white race (Campion, 2020; Dier and Baldwin, 2022). The subordination of women and their confinement to their role as wives and mothers will have a two-fold result: on the one hand, the preservation of traditional gender roles and, on the other, the preservation of the “white race”.

While some of the women who voluntarily joined Daesh ended up being disillusioned by the difference between what they expected and the reality of life, “naivety and romanticism do not mean that their motivation to join ISIS is weak. A very strong determination is necessary for women, especially teenage girls, to leave their family and to move to a war-torn area” (Perešin et al., 2015: 43). When women’s agency is acknowledged it unleashes a greater demonisation from society than men. As a result of widely held gender stereotypes that perceive women as natural peace-makers, violence exercised by women is considered as “gender atypical” (Molas, 2023) or something exceptional or unnatural and, therefore, they receive increased media attention (Pérez-Sedeño, 2021).

When examining women’s participation in Islamist movements in Egypt, Mahmood (2005) identified the difficulties of recognising agency in certain behaviours. She argues that the agency of Muslim women has been denied because the notion of agency is based on a liberal conception that equates it with the presence of resistance. She demonstrates that there can be non-liberatory forms of agency, which do not coincide with the political objectives of the feminist movement. In this sense, there is increasing research that acknowledges the complexity of the concept of agency. For instance, in an analysis of female Indonesian pro-ISIS sympathisers, Nuraniyah (2018, cited in Phelan, 2023) demonstrates that these women exercised self-agency.

Therefore, both agency and coercion should be recognised since the dilemma of victims versus villains overlooks the fact that both men and women are complex actors that engage in VE in complex ways, and that they are neither entirely free nor entirely constrained in their actions and decisions. Women, like men, can be both victims and villains simultaneously (Alexander and Turkington, 2018; Ní Aoláin and Huckerby, 2018; Kapur, 2019).

SUPPORTERS OR PERPETRATORS?

Women and girls have performed different kinds of roles in VE organisations, which have varied across ideologies and time. One of the gender stereotypes surrounding women’s roles in VE groups is that they “only” have

commonly-labelled supportive roles, i.e., non-combat roles such as logistics, healthcare, education, recruitment, fundraising, etc., and that they do not engage in violence, assumptions that have been challenged by researchers such as De Leede (2018). Due to lower visibility of women's roles compared to men's masculinised combat roles, they are prone to being underestimated or relegated to a secondary status. However, women's supportive roles are as critical for the survival of VE groups as combative roles (De Leede, 2018; Donnelly, 2021).

Regarding women's engagement in violence, while many groups (jihadist and far-right groups) dislike the idea of women taking part in violence, in some cases they have exploited gender stereotypes surrounding women's radicalisation and the advantages they bring to employ women in combatant positions. For example, they have taken advantage of assumptions about women's passivity, which result in higher chances to slip under the radar to evade security detection to use women as perpetrators of attacks (De Leede, 2018), and they have also taken advantage of the increased media attention that women engaged in violence receive (Pérez-Sedeño, 2012; García-Calvo, 2016; Criezis, 2021). In addition, according to De Leede (2018), incorporating women into militant roles can have a shaming effect on men, motivating them to engage.

While propaganda romanticising the role of women as fighters in Daesh played an important role in recruiting women (Lahoud, 2018; German and Pennington), most jihadi ideologues discourage the participation of women in combative activities, and there is little evidence of women being deployed in combat by Daesh (Perešin, 2015; De Leede, 2018). Although women can have multiple roles, such as mothers, wives, propagandists, recruiters, facilitators, enablers, planners, plotters and attackers (De Leede, 2017), one of their main functions is that of mothers and wives (De Leede, 2018). When describing the roles of women within Daesh, Vale (2020a) refers to an article that was published in Dabiq, Daesh's English-language e-magazine, under the title of "To Our Sisters: A Jihād Without Fighting". According to Daesh, women's "jihad without fighting" was to be a supportive wife to their husbands and to bring into life the next generation of jihadis (Lahoud, 2018). Nonetheless, while most women were involved in non-violent, supportive roles (Brown and Mohammad, 2021), a small minority of them were part of the al-Khansa Brigade, the women's morality police, known for its brutality (Pearson and Winterbotham, 2017; Vale, 2020a).

When women are examined as perpetrators of political violence, the focus is on the flawed and corrupted nature of their actions. Their agency is ignored and they are represented as being particularly cruel and violent, as enraged killers that have been manipulated and are too emotionally driven (Victor, 2003).

Swati Parashar (2010) calls women in non-state militant actors "the other within the other." She refers to a multilayered identity of militant women that is based on the social interactions they experience and the images that romanticise and feminise them. Contrary to the idea that engagement in extremist groups should be an opportunity for women to gain public presence, they are finally shaped into a dominated image of victimhood within the realm of the private.

GENDER NARRATIVES OF EXTREMIST GROUPS

According to Roose and Cook (2022), the predominant focus on jihadism has created a "blind spot" for recognising the role of misogyny and masculinism in the far-right. While there is a clear interface between anti-feminism and right-wing extremism, it must be noted that regressive gender norms have been identified as a

common feature among apparently very distant VE groups. In this sense, some scholars (Criezis, 2020; Hitchens and Ayad, 2023) have pointed out the growing convergence or overlap between far-right and jihadist ideologies on issues such as gender or conspiracy theories. This increasing hybridisation of different ideologies is facilitated by social media, where different groups operate in the same spaces, and use similar communications strategies and aesthetics, video games, memes, etc. (Ayad, 2021).

Moving beyond traditional ideological categories such as far-right or jihadism, and in the context of mixed and unstable ideologies, male supremacy and misogynist ideologies appear as increasingly important, with a rise in violent attacks motivated by anti-feminist narratives in recent years (Roose and Cook, 2022; Phelan et al., 2023). These groups share violent beliefs about women, reducing a women's worth to her reproductive capacity or ability to fulfil men's sexual desires (ISD, 2022a). They also emphasise men's victimhood, arguing that gender equality and feminism are a threat to how the world "should" be, and men are victims in a "war of men". Pushback against changing gender roles and feelings of emasculation and powerlessness are exploited to recruit men, emphasising the need to restore male power (Roose and Cook, 2022; Phelan et al., 2023).

CONNEKT findings at the meso level also highlight how violent extremists often leverage the idea of violent masculinities as a mean to channel feelings of disempowerment, and marginalisation. For instance, research findings in particular communities in Jordan and Tunisia have shown how violent groups tend to exploit young men's frustration with their inability to fulfil expectations around masculinity (particularly in traditional communities where adulthood is linked to marriage and the role of men as the sole family provider) to attract them into VE. These expectations around masculinity are offered by VE organisations in the form of economic incentives and heroic epic narratives. Several scholars (Pearson and Winterbotham, 2017; Kapur, 2019; Dier and Baldwin, 2022) have highlighted that, in contexts where young men due to poor socioeconomic conditions do not have the means to earn a living, get married, etc. (which are not only passages to adulthood but also markers of manhood), joining VE groups can provide an alternative path to validate their masculinity.

Anti-feminist narratives are abundant in the manosphere, the digital space where men come together and share their experiences, presenting themselves as victims (ISD, 2022b). Memes play a key role in the reproduction of misogynistic messages in digital networks. Because of their use of humour and simple language, memes are able to transmit and reproduce extremist messages in a way that generates interest (especially among youth) and feels like it is harmless or banal political content, while avoiding content removal (Crawford, Keen and Suarez-Tangil, 2020).

Here, the relevance of digital socialisation as a driver of radicalisation, as identified by CONNEKT, is apparent, as there is a progressive replacement of offline socialisation by online socialisation (Mhadeen, Bint Faisal and Štikovac-Clark, 2022) and, thus, much more exposure to extremist narratives online. The findings of the micro-level research of CONNEKT show the growing amount of time youngsters spend online, with no differences across genders. However, it is interesting to note how results point at the fact that the use of a virtual private network (VPN) is more frequent among male than female respondents, also in line with a lower level of trust

in institutions by male respondents.⁴ In a more acute way in the MENA region, males show lower levels of trust in institutions and a trend to use more channels to escape institutional and official narratives online. Even if the findings do not allow identification of a clear correlation between gender, lower trust in institutions and greater attempts to bypass censorship, this observation is relevant. It might become an avenue for extremist narratives to fill the void created online by the rising mistrust towards institutions and media offering official narratives that are challenged online (more acute in the case of young males) (Bondokji and Rawasheh, forthcoming).

There is a clear interface between anti-feminism and far-right groups. Male supremacists not only perceive they are losing power and privilege to women and gender minorities, but they also see racialised populations as a threat (Roose and Cook, 2022), invoking conspiracy theories such as the Great Replacement theory, which considers that there is a plot to substitute Western societies with Muslim immigrants. The Great Replacement theory is also linked to anti-feminism, because the decline of birth rates in Western countries – another concern of male supremacist groups – is believed to be the result of feminism, which has deviated women from their “traditional” and “appropriate societal role” as mothers (Kapur, 2019; Phelan et al., 2023).

“Feminism is alleged to have been invented to distract women from their ‘natural’ role as mothers and, consequently, blamed for decreasing birth rates in Western countries, which in turn allows immigrants – whose women supposedly have not been influenced by feministic rhetoric – to become the majority more rapidly” (Europol, 2020: 71, cited in Farinelli, 2021: 12).

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By linking decline of birth rates concerns with feminism, the Great Replacement theory allows the subjugation of women as essential to the survival of the “White” race to be portrayed (Campion, 2020; Dier and Baldwin, 2022). Moreover, by emphasising the threat that immigrants pose, this theory also mobilises masculine violence for the protection of white women from male Muslim immigrants.

It must be noted that jihadi-inspired groups also use pejorative notions of womanhood, glorifying violence against women from other faith backgrounds (e.g., Yazidis), have used sexual violence as a means of control, and have appealed to young men by using sexual slavery as a recruitment tool, exploiting feelings of resentment and emasculation (Lahoud, 2018; Dier and Baldwin, 2022). They also mobilise conspiracy theories built upon “Us Vs Them” narratives, disseminating the theory that Western society is engaged in a plot to dismantle Islamic faith and Muslim societies. Controversies – and particularly bans – over the public use of hijab or other traditional Muslim clothing in Europe have been exploited by jihadi narratives to fuel polarisation.

Anti-feminist and extreme misogynist online communities are not exclusive to men, and women are also found in the manosphere. Eviane Leidig, who has done extensive work on the role of influencers in contemporary far-right movements, describes in the book *The Women of the Far Right: Social Media Influencers & Online Radicalization* (Eviane Leidig, 2023) female far-right influencers’ commitment to antifeminism and the

⁴ It should be noted that the sample of the surveys carried out in the eight countries studied is not representative, so correlations cannot be established. In this sense, the relationship between the variables “use of VPN” and “trust in institutions” is only a possible hypothesis. The higher use of VPN among young males could also be explained by the long-established link between sexual repression and teenage exploration, or by gender stereotypes that associate males with the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) field.

preservation of traditional gender roles. The #Tradwife movement or trend, represented by far-right female influencers that promote conservative values and the preservation of traditional gender roles by sharing their lifestyle on social media, has been gaining traction in recent years, and appears as a way to promote problematic views while avoiding content removal in digital networks. Anti-feminist women are crucial to the reproduction of the anti-feminist ideology, because their mere existence as women has the potential to legitimise men's anti-feminism.

The intertwinement between certain constructions of femininity and far-right values in female far-right influencers can be seen in their framing of the Muslim male "other" as violent, savage and misogynistic. Leidig (2021) highlights how female influencers in contemporary far-right movements propagate racism and xenophobia disguised as what they call "feminism". This is described by Farris (2017, cited in Leidig, 2021) as "femonationalism", which describes the use of women's rights rhetoric to emphasise the perceived threat posed by Muslim males to Western European societies due to their oppressive treatment of women.



Challenges to integrate the gender perspective in preventing and countering violent extremism

Even if still under-researched, the topic of gender has been increasingly considered and engaged in P/CVE discussions, and progress has been made when it comes to acknowledging the importance of adopting gender-sensitive approaches.

The gender perspective approach in P/CVE departs from the recognition that gender dynamics shape the experiences of men and women in VE, influencing their motivations to engage, and the roles they play, as well as gender narratives, ideologies and recruitment strategies of VE groups. It is not only about integrating women's experiences, but rather about ensuring that both men's and women's experiences are considered. In this sense, incorporating a gender analysis to the studies of VE is useful to fill the gaps of our understanding of political violence (Phelan, 2023).

At the policy level, there are several United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolutions that reiterate the importance of integrating a gender perspective. UNSCR 1325 (2000), focused on Women, Peace and Security (WPS), calls on actors to increase the participation of women and to incorporate the gender perspective in peace and security efforts. More specifically in the field of P/CVE, the involvement of women in Daesh had a notable impact on the UN Security Council's endorsement of the 2015 UNSCR 2242, which called member states for the integration of the WPS agenda into the P/CVE agenda, acknowledging the potential role of women's organisations in P/CVE efforts. Moreover, the UN Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate urged states to incorporate a gender perspective when analysing the factors contributing to radicalisation and when developing risk assessment tools (Phelan, 2023).

As a result of women's engagement in Daesh, the Security Council introduced a range of provisions requiring member states to contemplate the diverse roles women undertake, examine the factors contributing to their radicalisation, and create gender-sensitive measures to counter VE (CTED, 2019). For example, Resolution 2178 (2014) highlights the importance of empowering women and CSOs in CVE efforts. Finally, Resolution 2396 (2017) encourages member states and international entities to guarantee women's involvement in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of repatriation strategies for Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) (CTED, 2019).

However, gendering P/CVE has mainly focused on engaging women from a gendered-biased perspective, which treats them as subjects (victims) or as actors in the peace-making endeavours, but with limited capacity in decision-making. While at the policy level there has been an acknowledgment of the importance of gender in P/CVE, security actors' arena remains male-dominated in the regions under study (Kapidžić, 2021) and women are engaged in prevention actions in their "womanhood" capacities, i.e., as mothers, as pacifiers, as preventers or mediators (Traidi and Vidal, 2023).

Challenge 1: Treating gender as synonym of women

Efforts to integrate a gender perspective in P/CVE have predominately focused on increasing women's participation in these programmes (Ní Aoláin and Huckerby, 2018; Dier and Baldwin, 2022), treating gender as a synonym of women and ignoring that integrating a gender perspective means much more than engaging women, and involves recognising power structures and dynamics that subordinate both men and women.

Superficial efforts to integrate a gender perspective commonly assume that "gender" predominantly concerns women, whereas it refers to a socio-culturally constructed concept that shapes the roles and experiences of both men and women, and therefore it is about masculinity as much as it is about femininity (Cohn, 2013). Gender refers to all individuals, as there are gendered expectations of every individual, and masculinities and femininities are constructed in relation to one another. Focusing only on women provides an incomplete understanding of how inequalities relate to gender and produce violence. The attention should be put on gender as a relational concept describing the interactions and power dynamics between men and women (Ní Aoláin and Huckerby, 2018; Donnelly, 2021; Dier and Baldwin, 2022).

Addressing gender also entails analysis of the gender dynamics of male engagement in terrorism and counter-terrorism and requires an understanding of the power structures between the sexes and their gendered role expectations. CONNEKT's results concerning "toxic masculinities" shed some light on the importance of gendered roles in the drivers, motivations, functions and narratives of VE groups.

Challenge 2: The burden of finding a women's specific role in preventing and countering violent extremism

While there is a growing interest in incorporating women's perspectives into the P/CVE field, efforts to engage women have focused on the role of women as preventers, and women remain absent from the security decision-making environments. Moreover, efforts to incorporate women in prevention often rely on essentialist ideas or gender stereotypes or assumptions, reinforcing them, which contradicts the women's empowerment aim of the WPS agenda (LSE, 2017; Winterbotham, 2018; Donnelly, 2021; Dier and Baldwin, 2022, Phelan, 2023).

Efforts to incorporate women as actors of prevention tend to be rooted in heteronormative thinking, which assumes that women and men have innate roles in life. Women are portrayed as innately peaceful, peace-builders or positive community actors, and therefore they are believed to be better positioned than men to prevent radicalisation. Moreover, women tend to be considered only in relation to their male relatives and as powerful forces on the domestic sphere (Donnelly, 2021). As a result, there is an overemphasis on mother-based interventions whose aim is to build mother's capacities to recognise signs of radicalisation, guided by the assumption that mothers, and especially Muslim mothers, are more present at home than fathers and in a unique position to detect signs of radicalisation in their children (Brown, 2013, cited in Winterbotham, 2018; Dier and Baldwin, 2022). As stated by the LSE report (2017), "women who are involved in P/CVE activities are praised for their personal involvement rather than their political agency, for being mothers rather than leaders, thereby confirming rather than challenging prevailing gender norms."

- These approaches have been criticised by several researchers (Giscard d'Estaing, 2017; Ni Aoláin and Huckerby, 2018; Winterbotham, 2018). According to Winterbotham (2018), there is no conclusive empirical evidence showing the specific advantage of women to detect and mitigate signs of radicalisation. Not only is this assumption unevidenced, but the overemphasis on mother-based approaches has several limitations or adverse outcomes:
- They allocate a disproportionate responsibility to women, shifting the state responsibility to prevent VE onto mother's shoulders, who are blamed if their children are radicalised, which shows a poor understanding of the drivers of radicalisation. The idea is that "good mothers" do not produce radicals (Giscard d'Estaing, 2017; Winterbotham, 2020, Donnelly, 2021).
- They over-estimate their influencing power, assuming that all women are able to take decisions on their household, and have access to tools, mechanisms and spaces to revert radicalisation (LSE, 2018).
- By situating women and mothers as community police and encouraging them to report their relatives to the authorities, women and mothers are put at risk of exclusion in their communities or violent reprisals from VE groups (Giscard d'Estaing, 2017). These approaches are often perceived as promoting spying in certain communities and women are reluctant to take part in them.
- They negate women's roles as perpetrators of violent extremism, assuming that women are inherently peaceful and failing to recognise those cases where women themselves are the ones that are radicalised and encourage engagement in VE in their households.
- By overemphasising the role of women as mothers, these approaches can undermine gender equality efforts, that advocate for the empowerment of women across their diverse roles in society (Ni Aoláin, 2013).

UNSCR 2245 recognition of the potential role of women's organisations in P/CVE efforts has raised concerns about the instrumentalisation of the women's rights agenda as a tool to strengthen P/CVE efforts, without increasing women's agency (LSE, 2017).

The recognition that women's rights matter for P/CVE raises the risk of subordinating gender empowerment efforts to the counter-terrorism agenda, seeing gender empowerment merely as a tool for P/CVE and national security. This approach often believes that the main purpose of engaging women and girls in P/CVE is to make policies smarter, rather than because it is their human right to be part of policy decision-making (Ni Aoláin and Huckerby, 2018).

As previously said, there is no definitive evidence showing the specific advantage of women for PVE (Winterbotham, 2018), and even if they possessed better qualities to deal with VE, the inclusion of women in P/CVE should not be based on the desire to make these policies better, but rather should be framed under women's right to participate in all decision-making processes.

On the other hand, the overemphasis on the role of women and women's organisations, pressuring them to integrate a gender perspective in P/CVE, assuming that gender is a women's issue and that they are the ones who are supposed to lead the efforts, has prevented more engagement of men in prevention, particularly in primary intervention PVE. Women's inclusion in the P/CVE agenda is thus reinforcing the understanding of prevention as a "women's issue" and security as a "men's issue".

Challenge 3: Limited gender-specific research on P/CVE and restricted access to funding for women's organisations

The linking of the P/CVE and WPS agendas has had a negative impact on the funding of women's organisations, because gender empowerment is perceived merely as a tool for P/CVE and national security, and donors prioritise funding to CSOs and women's organisations implementing P/CVE programmes. As a result, some women's organisations might be inclined to frame their peace-building efforts as P/CVE, leaving behind their agendas to adopt those of policy-makers in order to get funding (CTED, 2019).

The fact that women's organisations are forced to justify or frame their activities under the P/CVE agenda in order to get funding is problematic, because it leads to the idea that women's rights and organisations are only valuable if they support the wider P/CVE efforts. Moreover, grassroots women's organisations are wary of the inclusion of the P/CVE agenda, because of its association with national security agendas and institutions, which conflicts with the de-militarisation objectives of the WPS agenda, and could create a backlash with local populations (LSE, 2017; Ní Aoláin and Huckerby, 2018).

Finally, one of the reasons that could explain the reliance on gender stereotypes in P/CVE programmes, which is also a challenge that was highlighted by the LSE report (2017), is the lack of evidence-based understanding and research on the relationship between gender, agency and P/CVE. In this sense, projects such as CONNEKT tend to mainstream gender as a cross-cutting element of their research on P/CVE, but findings on gender specific issues remain very limited. Therefore, more evidence-based research is needed with an exclusive focus on gender dynamics in P/CVE.



Recommendations to reset the course for a more gender-wise preventing and countering violent extremism policy-making

INCLUDING WOMEN IN SECURITY POLICY-MAKING

Increasing the participation of women and gender minorities in policy-making is essential in order to guarantee the consistent integration of a gender perspective in policy processes and decisions. Including women in security domains should be premised on their right to participate in all decision-making processes, rather than on the belief that they have a particular women's role to fill in. The reasoning for including women in the security space should not be based on their supposed inherent peacefulness but based on their right to be part of these conversations. Women's inclusion requires addressing gender barriers as well as integrating a gender perspective in security discussions within institutions, a rather male-dominated space, as CONNEKT evidenced in the case of the Balkans and the MENA region.

Law enforcement institutions should also encourage a greater women's role, in all levels, from the judiciary to the police forces, contributing to mainstream a gender perspective defying existing biases.

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As seen in CONNEKT, there is a general gap between the perception of safety among young men and women, the latter expressing more frequently insecurity than their male counterparts. Therefore, women's inclusion needs to be hand in hand with the creation of safe spaces for both genders to participate in the conversation. Safety linked to public spaces is essential to break the locus gender stereotypes of public/private domains.

MAINSTREAMING GENDER-SPECIFIC APPROACHES IN PREVENTING AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Including women in policy design requires taking into account their lived experiences and engaging them in the whole process of P/CVE programming and in the full scope of activities involved, beyond the traditional female niche of prevention or "women's affairs". This means recognising women as political actors, and not only their role in their families as wives or mothers. While it can be true that in certain contexts resorting to the role of women as mothers can be an effective way to guarantee women's participation in PVE efforts, women should be seen beyond these stereotyped roles. By promoting women-led networks intervening in P/CVE policy-design at the community level, a much more gender-sensitive P/CVE programming could be achieved.

In terms of women as targets of P/CVE strategies, specific P/CVE policies and strategies need to be implemented to respond to gender specific recruitment efforts of VE groups, as well as to tackle the gender-specific experiences that women undergo inside violent organisations. There is a wide consensus on the need to work on tailor-made prevention policies, and in the same way they should be customised to men and women differently. For example, reintegration programmes for women should address the specific challenges they face, such as greater socioeconomic discrimination and more stigmatisation from their involvement in violence. Positive and negative prejudices regarding women returnees from VE organisations have to be challenged in order to ensure equality and prevent gender-based discrimination.

Acknowledging women's agency implies considering women as active political agents, complex actors with the ability of upholding political motivations and taking informed decisions on their life. On the other hand, P/CVE stakeholders should take strongly into account the contexts of potential coercion and the local gender norms that might have an impact on the radicalisation processes. In this sense, the dual role of women and men as victims and perpetrators need to be considered even if they might eventually overlap. Integrating a gender perspective and recognising the agency of women will facilitate identifying and discerning those situations where women willingly join violent extremist organizations (VEOs) from those where women have been coerced into; and thus determine the levels of criminal responsibility.

Dominant gender biases in P/CVE make women responsible for their motherhood in regard to their children being subject to VE while men tend to be exonerated from their fatherhood liabilities regarding education and wellbeing. In the context of the family setting, mitigating circumstances as well as the impact on family members of those who engage in VE should be addressed. A comprehensive P/CVE strategy should be aware of both the positive role family can play in prevention as well as of the legal, social, reputational and emotional repercussions families suffer when associated to VE. Therefore, all efforts need to be devoted to mainstream a gender approach within security-related personnel as key to enhance P/CVE efficiency and gender equity.

CHALLENGING GENDER STEREOTYPES AND BIASES IN PREVENTING AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

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Very much connected with the previous recommendation, P/CVE programmes should avoid narrowing the identity of women to a single identity of motherhood. For example, instead of conducting a workshop with the mothers of radicalised individuals, conduct a workshop providing a space for the experiences of women who were supporters of VE in the past. In this sense, including the experience of 'former' radicalised women will enhance the relevance and efficiency of de-radicalisation programmes targeting women.

Besides, creative approaches to challenge gendered stereotypes should be promoted, such as storytelling and arts, particularly among young audiences.

FOSTERING GENDER-SPECIFIC RESEARCH ON RADICALISATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

As previously argued, research in VE from a gender perspective is a relatively new field, loaded with deeply-rooted stereotypes regarding both masculinities and femininities. As seen, the more recent emphasis within research has analysed the recruitment of women by Daesh, particularly from Western contexts. Research on gender in VE should move beyond the scope of jihadi organisations and deal with other types of extremism, such as far-right. In this respect, particular attention needs to be taken into account to the challenges women researchers face when studying violent organisations and contexts with regressive gender norms.

There are several gaps in research regarding not only drivers, motivations and perceptions, but on the roles and narratives around gender within VEOs. Integrating a gender perspective throughout all phases of research as a cross-cutting element of analysis will be paramount, as well as the systematic collection of gender-disaggregated data. However, this has proved to be insufficient as in the case of CONNEKT to delve deeper

into gender dynamics and narratives of VE. Specifically focused gender research needs to be promoted as a necessary step towards a more thorough comprehension of the radicalisation phenomenon.

One of the issues that needs wider research is the issue of women's agency. Research should create a theoretical and analytical framework capable of addressing the levels of agency of women in VE in order to analyse agency in non-liberatory behaviours or the relationship between agency and resistance.

Finally, emotions should be an explanatory factor of VE both for men and women. Emotions are not an exclusive female domain and they also help explain both male and female radicalisation. More research should be conducted on the rise of the so-called manosphere. In this context, emotionally-driven motivations should be prioritised in the analysis on the drivers of radicalisation.

FOCUSING ON THE IMPACT OF TOXIC MASCULINITIES AND ANTI-FEMINIST NARRATIVES

Considering toxic masculinities as a potential driver of radicalisation will provide important nuances to the work in designing P/CVE policies and measures. Such toxic masculinities are present in various forms of extremism, so it is necessary not to essentialise certain communities or stigmatise specific groups of men, such as for example Muslim men.

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Such P/CVE measures should aim to tackle feelings of emasculation or powerlessness, as well as deal with the "crisis of masculinity" by promoting the construction of alternative notions of masculinity, for example through positive male role models that distance themselves from dominant hegemonic masculinities. Therefore, it will be paramount to involve men in gender mainstreaming. The burden of encouraging a focus on gender should not rest solely on women's efforts. Acknowledging the role of fathers in parenting within PVE efforts is crucial as well as providing safe spaces for young males to voice out their concerns and feelings of emasculation and tackle them from a positive and healthy approach.

Therefore, creating settings in which both women and men can share emotions in a safe environment will help design specific strategies to target these feelings as well as developing methodologies to deal with the anti-women and anti-feminist content online. Connected to the digital environment, online female radicalisation as well as online female extremist activity should be studied, along with the impact of traditional gender norms that limit female access to public spaces and the consequences that has on their digital socialisation processes.

Finally, more attention should be paid to the increasing anti-feminist narratives within a complex regulatory context in which freedom of expression and hate speech are confronted



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What drives youth to violent extremism? How can they turn from being “the problem” into “the key” for a solution? By engaging youth in the research, CONNEKT will raise young voices to become stakeholders in the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism.

CONNEKT is a research and action project which analyses seven potential radicalisation factors among youth aged between 12 and 30: religion, digitalisation, economic deprivation, territorial inequalities, transnational dynamics, socio-political demands, and educational, cultural and leisure opportunities and evaluates them on three levels: transnational/state, community and individual.

Its aim is to establish a multi-dimensional map of drivers of extremism among youth in Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Bulgaria, and to identify the interplay between them. Based on the empirical research findings, the project will end up recommending tools and measures for the prevention of violent extremism from a social and community perspective both for the regions of study and the European Union.

Under the coordination of the European Institute of the Mediterranean, (IEMed), the project gathers a multidisciplinary Consortium involving 14 partners from MENA, the EU and the Balkans.



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