



CONNEKT POLICY BRIEF

N.6 April/2024

Challenging Gender Biases in Radicalisation and Violent Extremism

01 INTRODUCTION

CONNEKT, an EU-funded Horizon 2020 research initiative, scrutinises radicalisation and violent extremism (VE) drivers among youth in eight Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Balkan countries. Employing qualitative, quantitative, and empirical methods, the project investigates seven drivers at macro (national), meso (community), and micro (individual) levels, aiming for a nuanced understanding to shape community-based preventive measures. With a dedicated gender analysis, CONNEKT ensures the active participation of young women and girls, fostering a holistic grasp of radicalisation and VE drivers. This paper, integrating empirical findings and insights from the Women's Forum, navigates gender's role in VE, spotlighting gaps, challenges, and policy recommendations for a more inclusive and effective preventive approach.



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 870772

02 GENDER IN RADICALISATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Throughout history, women's diverse roles in VE movements often go unnoticed, shaped by societal expectations, cultural norms, and the public-private dichotomy. The study underscores the gendered perceptions of public spaces' security in the MENA and Balkan regions, revealing heightened concerns among young females and emphasising the need for nuanced gender considerations in preventing VE. The glorification of hegemonic masculinities of protectors and soldiers contributes to male engagement in VE across ideologies. Gender dynamics play a crucial role in shaping radicalisation, recruitment strategies, and societal perceptions. The macro-level research findings expose a gender disparity in decision-making within the security sector, attributing men's overrepresentation to a focus on "hard" security strategies and women's concentration in civil society to 'soft' preventive efforts, limiting women's roles primarily to prevention.

CONNEKT's meso- and micro-level research offers insights into contextual aspects of radicalisation in both regions, emphasising prevailing gender norms and roles. The study highlights traditional expectations associating masculinity with physical strength, reflected in men's exposure to physical violence. Gender norms persist at the meso/community level, emphasising women's roles as preventers, with a case study in Jordan illustrating Syrian refugee mothers' preventive role through religious education in the absence of formal education and a case study on female preachers emphasising the alternative informal networks of education and social services. The findings underscore the importance of understanding and addressing gender dynamics in preventing and countering violent extremist (P/CVE) policy and research.

WOMEN'S AGENCY AND MOTIVATIONS

Conventional narratives framing women's involvement in VE as victims of coercion or emotional motivations are criticised by scholars, emphasising the importance of recognising women's agency and nuanced motivations, including shared factors with men including ideological, religious, political, and personal reasons, as well as gendered differences in push/pull factors. Far-right groups recruit women based on preserving traditional gender roles as mothers for racial preservation. Acknowledging women's agency in extremist movements is crucial for effective counterterrorism strategies.

Women's roles in VE organisations challenge stereotypes, encompassing diverse functions such as logistics, healthcare, education, recruitment, and fundraising, highlighting the importance of recognising their varied contributions beyond combat roles as equally crucial for extremist group survival. The role of women in nationalist movements varies, with some symbolising liberation

and modernisation, while others represent traditional values. The multifaceted identity of militant women is shaped by social interactions and romanticised images, reinforcing the stereotypes of women as victims rather than complex actors.

GENDER NARRATIVES OF EXTREMIST GROUPS

The predominant focus on jihadism has created a blind spot in recognising the role of misogyny and masculinism in the far-right, with scholars noting a growing convergence between far-right and jihadist ideologies on issues such as gender and conspiracy theories. Their manosphere, the digital space where they share experiences, emphasises men's victimhood and frames gender equality and feminism as threats to the perceived natural order. Common conspiracy theories include the great replacement theory of white supremist that view immigration as a racial replacement plan to be countered by "tradwife" ideologies that frame the subjugation of women as crucial for racial survival while jihadi-inspired groups exploit controversies over the public use of hijab in Europe, for example, to fuel polarisation. Women harbouring these ideologies perpetuate racism and xenophobia under the guise of "feminism", described as "femonationalism", that employs women's rights rhetoric to perceive Muslim males as threat due to their "oppressive" treatment of women.

Additionally, CONNEKT's meso-level findings emphasise the exploitation of violent masculinities to attract young men into extremism by offering economic incentives and heroic narratives, particularly in contexts of limited opportunities, revealing the complex interplay of societal expectations of "manhood" and radicalisation. This is facilitated by extended daily internet usage hours and an increasing lack of trust in institutional narratives that might be leading to the rising use of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs).

03 CHALLENGES TO INTEGRATE THE GENDER PERSPECTIVE IN PREVENTING/COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

The gender perspective in preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE) recognises that gender dynamics shape motivations, roles, recruitment and narratives within extremist groups, as highlighted by United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolutions, such as UNSCR 1325 (2000) and 2242 (2015). However, despite progress, P/CVE efforts often limit women's roles, portraying them as victims or restrict their involvement in decision-making, reflecting challenges in translating gender principles into inclusive practices within security structures.

Challenge 1: Treating gender as synonym of women

Efforts to integrate a gender perspective in P/CVE by focusing primarily on increasing women's participation oversimplifies gender as synonymous with women. It overlooks the broader socio-cultural concept of gender and the power dynamics affecting both men and women. Recognising gender as a relational concept, CONNEKT's findings on "toxic masculinities" highlight the importance of considering interactions and power structures between genders.

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

Efforts to involve women in P/CVE often depict them as preventers, relying on gender stereotypes and mother-based interventions, which critics argue place disproportionate responsibility on women, overlook their potential as extremists, and risk community exclusion or reprisals. Concerns include the instrumentalisation of women's rights, potentially subordinating gender empowerment to counterterrorism goals, and hindering meaningful engagement of men in P/CVE due to persistent stereotypes.

Challenge 3: Limited gender-specific research on preventing/countering violent extremism and restricted access to funding for women's organisations

The linking of P/CVE and Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agendas has negatively impacted the funding of women's organisations, forcing them to frame activities under the P/CVE agenda to secure funding, undermining the autonomy of grassroots efforts and perpetuating the idea that women's rights are valuable only when aligned with broader security goals, leading to potential backlash and conflicts with local populations. Additionally, the reliance on gender stereotypes in P/CVE programmes stems from a lack of evidence-based understanding of the relationship between gender, agency, and P/CVE, highlighting the need for more research with an exclusive focus on gender dynamics in P/CVE.

Including women in security policy-making

Enhancing women and gender minorities' involvement in policy-making is vital, emphasising their right to participate rather than stereotypical roles, addressing biases in male-dominated security institutions, while encouraging their increased roles in law enforcement, the judiciary and police and fostering safe spaces is essential to challenge gender stereotypes and ensure equal participation.

Mainstreaming gender-specific approaches in P/CVE

Promoting women's inclusion in P/CVE policy design entails recognising their political agency, fostering women-led networks, and advocating for tailor-made prevention policies that challenge biases, ensure gender equity, and consider local gender norms to help discern voluntary participation from coercion for a comprehensive and effective approach.

Challenging gender stereotypes and biases in P/CVE

P/CVE programmes should broaden their perspective on women's identity beyond motherhood, such as by involving "former" radicalised women to enhance the relevance and efficiency of de-radicalisation efforts. Creative approaches like storytelling and arts, especially among young audiences, should be utilised to challenge gender stereotypes.

Fostering gender-specific research on radicalisation and violent extremism

Research on gender in VE, particularly beyond jihadi organisations, must address gaps in understanding drivers, motivations, and roles. Prioritising focused gender research and creating analytical frameworks to explore women's agency and emotions is essential for a comprehensive understanding of radicalisation, extending beyond traditional stereotypes and contexts, including far-right extremism.

Focusing on the impact of toxic masculinities and anti-feminist narratives

Addressing toxic masculinities as potential drivers of radicalisation requires nuanced P/CVE policies. Involving men in gender mainstreaming, promoting positive male role models, and creating safe spaces for both genders to discuss emotions can help design strategies against anti-feminist online content, while studying online female radicalisation and its links to traditional gender norms is crucial to navigate the landscape surrounding freedom of expression and hate speech.

CONNEKT's findings inform tailored prevention strategies for diverse local contexts, emphasising the need for further data collection and empirical research to address gender dynamics in extremist groups. Approaching gender as a wider concept and taking both genders into account to study how its dynamics affect each individual's relation with extremist groups is a necessary step while delving into the complexity of agency and inclusion. To challenge mainstream biases and promoting women's inclusion and decision-making capacity within security institutions is crucial for a more inclusive and effective approach to gender in VE.



D8.6

Policy Brief on Gender Perspective of Violent Extremism

This publication is part of the WP8 of the project, led by Universitat Rovira i Virgili (URV)