

Key Considerations: Forward Thinking About Women, Gender, and Violent Extremism

Although definitive policy prescriptions may sound attractive to those tasked with countering and preventing terrorism and violent extremism, it is critical for policymakers, practitioners, and scholars to recognize how responses concerning women and gender may have varying effects on different countries, communities, and individuals. The elements shaping an individual's involvement in extremism range from ideological and organizational factors to logistical and personal considerations. The papers in this series demonstrate that gender is one of the components that transcends these forces, continually guiding the behaviors of a group and its adherents. As terrorist and violent extremist groups grapple with the roles they want men and women to assume, adherents themselves concurrently attempt to advance their movements in manners that converge, and sometimes diverge, from the roles ascribed by their organizations. In short, these dynamics suggest that intersectional and evolving security challenges require intersectional and adaptable policy solutions.

Policymakers, practitioners, and scholars tasked with assessing and countering the threats posed by extremists must consider women and gender in their analysis of existing and emerging security challenges. This is particularly important because ignoring the effects of gender dimensions like femininity and masculinity “creates blind spots that hamper the effectiveness of prevention and counterterrorism policies, undermining stability, security and human rights across the globe.”¹ Ideally, the papers presented in this series, and the following list of considerations they inform, can help relevant stakeholders identify responsible ways to ingrain women and gender in efforts to prevent and counter terrorism and violent extremism.

Discussion on Context-Specific Considerations for the Future:

Since assumptions about women, gender, and violent extremism tend to translate into official policy, the onus for creating more pragmatic and nuanced approaches to these issues rests on the national and international security community. Stakeholders ranging from political leaders, policymakers, intelligence analysts, law enforcement, court officials, academics, civil society, and news producers must stay vigilant about fostering a nuanced, evidence-based discussion about women, gender, and extremism. The discourse officials use to describe this problem-set influences how other members of the security community, and the public writ large, perceive women, men, and minors connected to extremist movements. Beyond reducing the use of sensationalized misnomers like “jihadi bride,” thought leaders should be aware of how watchwords can conflate demographics with culpability in ways that are detrimental to security, international law, and human rights.² Ultimately, a genuine course correction requires entities tasked with countering and preventing terrorism and violent extremism to (1) emphasize gender, not just women, as part of the agenda; (2) actively push back against assumption-based threat appraisals; and (3) earnestly look for just and context-specific ways to gender policy design and implementation. The following sections offer some illustrations of how these tenants could play out in practice.

The intersection of gender and terrorism does not exist in a vacuum, so officials must try to discern how changing conditions influence the actions of extremist organizations and their supporters. In some scenarios more than others, information communications technologies (ICTs), and social media especially, optimize connectivity between like-minded sympathizers. While some

policymakers and practitioners already consider counteracting the use of ICTs by extremists as a priority, it is crucial to consider how such tools can alter gender norms online. Beyond reducing the geographic barriers for supporting an organization, ICTs can make extremist groups more accessible to a range of demographics, especially women. Opportunities afforded by features like anonymity, public and private messaging, and moderated groups, for example, concurrently offer ways to either reinforce or subvert gender norms set by an extremist organization's leadership. Similarly, as discussed in this paper series, the virtual sphere may pave the way for women to garner influence online in ways their masculine-dominant organizations might not condone in their physical networks. These observations on gender, technology, and extremism may have crucial implications for the future.³ As new trends emerge, relevant stakeholders should scrutinize how such changes relate to women, gender, and extremism.

The security community should look for more opportunities to responsibly collect and share qualitative and quantitative data regarding the intersection(s) of women, gender, terrorism, and violent extremism. Since an individual's roles and experiences within extremist organizations represent a vital part of their participation, the field must continue to assess the myriad factors that guide an individual's trajectory. As a critical first step, those following these trends should "delineate all data of persons affiliated with terror and extremist groups by age and gender,"⁴ along with other demographic details when possible. Data and analyses recording all paths *to* membership in extremist groups, not just violent roles, are critical to understanding how sex and gender tie into processes of radicalization, recruitment, and mobilization. Conversely, research of this nature is also vital to examining paths *from* violent extremism. Subsequent inquiries should specifically assess these nuances in processes such as deradicalization, rehabilitation, and reintegration. By building datasets that represent extremist movements and raising questions about masculinities and femininities early and often, the security community can enhance its ability to provide pertinent responses, tailor interventions, and predict emerging trends

Though often intersecting, the needs of the women, men, and minors touched by violent extremism are varied.⁵ Whether an individual is disrupted from mobilizing or returning from a conflict zone, comprehensive assessments can help countries and communities identify pragmatic approaches to deradicalize and rehabilitate individuals, families, and groups. While gender must factor into these assessments and play a role in counter-extremism programs, the nature of that role should be context-specific. In some scenarios, tailored measures may be the most viable solution; masculinities and femininities, like other facets of identity, would factor into interventions as needed. In other conditions, there may be a greater appetite to address gender-linked drivers and experiences as a first-order priority. This approach would create a demand for initiatives that silo the demographics into different intervention programs. As another model, alternative courses of action are necessary when groups and families might benefit from a mix of tailored and cohort-centric interventions. In practice, these approaches are not mutually exclusive, so countries might blend an array of these measures to address the needs of populations affected by extremism.

Before concluding, it is essential to discuss where this series places the role of women in counter-terrorism and P/CVE. While "it depends" serves as a satisfyingly short answer, the longer response is far more important. Ultimately, the integration of women in efforts to prevent and counter terrorism and violent extremism is absolutely necessary, but for several reasons, this step alone is an insufficient way to gender such measures.⁶ Although there is not agreement on which approach to take, debates on the subject can be productive. Since gender, terrorism, and violent extremism are relatively dynamic and context-specific problems, responses could benefit from mirroring

these qualities. It is vital to see the challenge of integrating gender into counter-terrorism and P/CVE strategies as an ongoing process that prioritizes efficacy, security, and human rights.

Political responses to contemporary issues, particularly concerning how to cope with the returnees from the conflict in Iraq and Syria, highlight the timeliness of the topics discussed in this paper series. By understanding how gender dynamics are ingrained in violent extremist organizations, those tasked with confronting these threats can more comprehensively address networks in their entirety. Piqued interest in this issue provides policymakers, practitioners, and scholars a chance to draw from qualitative and quantitative assessments of present challenges to enhance policy responses. In addition to understanding women's links to violent extremism, it is useful to examine how other aspects of gender affect individuals, organizations, and movements. Calls to better integrate gender dimensions into counter-terrorism and P/CVE strategies demand further consideration of how masculinities and femininities guide paths to and from extremism.⁷ Simply stated, "a more productive way forward requires a comprehensive understanding of how gender affects recruitment, radicalization processes, operational roles, sentencing, and rehabilitation—for both men and women."⁸ By recognizing the ways in which violent extremist groups are more than the sum of their parts, those tasked with preventing and countering violent extremism can begin to develop synergistic, gender-aware, and just solutions to current and evolving threats.

References

¹Powell, Catherine, and Rebecca Turkington. 2019. "Gender, Masculinities, and Counterterrorism." Council on Foreign Relations. January 23, 2019. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/gender-masculinities-and-counterterrorism>.

²Powell, Catherine, and Rebecca Turkington. 2019. "Gender, Masculinities, and Counterterrorism." Council on Foreign Relations. January 23, 2019. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/gender-masculinities-and-counterterrorism>; Ní

Aoláin, Fionnuala, and Jayne Huckerby. 2018. "Gendering Counterterrorism: How to, and How Not to – Part I." Just Security. May 1, 2018. <https://www.justsecurity.org/55522/gendering-counterterrorism-to/>; For more on how this fits into the broader literature, see: Carpenter, Charli. 2005. "'Women, Children and Other Vulnerable Groups': Gender, Strategic Frames and the Protection of Civilians as a Transnational Issue." *International Studies Quarterly*.

³For an example concerning women and the longevity of extreme networks, see: Manrique, Pedro, et al. 2018.

"Women's connectivity in extreme networks," *Science Advances*, 2:6.

<http://advances.sciencemag.org/content/2/6/e1501742/tab-pdf>

⁴Cook, Joana and Gina Vale. 2018. "From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State." International Centre for the Study and Radicalization (ICSR), *Department of War Studies, King's College*, 5.

<https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICSR-Report-From-Daesh-to-%E2%80%98Diaspora%E2%80%99-Tracing-the-Women-and-Minors-of-Islamic-State.pdf>

⁵Cook, Joana and Gina Vale. 2018. "From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State." International Centre for the Study and Radicalization (ICSR), *Department of War Studies, King's College*, 5.

<https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICSR-Report-From-Daesh-to-%E2%80%98Diaspora%E2%80%99-Tracing-the-Women-and-Minors-of-Islamic-State.pdf>

⁶Ní Aoláin, Fionnuala, and Jayne Huckerby. 2018. "Gendering Counterterrorism: How to, and How Not to – Part II." Just Security. May 3, 2018. <https://www.justsecurity.org/55670/gendering-counterterrorism-to-part-ii/>; Powell, Catherine, and Rebecca Turkington. 2019. "Gender, Masculinities, and Counterterrorism." Council on Foreign Relations. January 23, 2019. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/gender-masculinities-and-counterterrorism>;

⁷Pearson, Elizabeth. "Why Men Fight and Women Don't: Masculinity and Extremist Violence." Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. 2018. <https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/why-men-fight-and-women-dont-masculinity-and-extremist-violence>; Powell, Catherine, and Rebecca Turkington. 2019. "Gender, Masculinities, and Counterterrorism." Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/gender-masculinities-and-counterterrorism>;

⁸Powell, Catherine, and Rebecca Turkington. 2019. "Gender, Masculinities, and Counterterrorism." Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/gender-masculinities-and-counterterrorism>.