Women In International Security

POLICYbrief

Women, Gender, and Terrorism: Understanding Cultural and Organizational Differences

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As the idea that women can and should play pivotal roles in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) gains greater traction, decision makers and scholars must keep striving toward a more nuanced understanding of the historical, cultural, and gendered contexts that enable extremist movements and organizations to grow. Without study, research, discussion, and stronger links with local actors and scholars to gain contextual understanding, U.S. analysts and policymakers risk creating a catalog of programs and policies internationally that include and empower women but fail to stem the tide of extremism and violence. Increasing women's empowerment and strengthening their roles in community life, peace, and security are important steps, but even these can fail or backfire without deep cultural understanding.

In June 2016, Women In International Security (WIIS) facilitated a round-table event that explored how national gender-based P/CVE policies and programs have developed. Panelists discussed flaws, missteps, and successes in program development and implementation. In October 2016, a subsequent panel built on this earlier discussion by exploring the role of gender and gender considerations among extremist organizations and regions. By developing a stronger understanding of how gender roles and norms can differ between and even within extremist groups over time, scholars and policymakers can build more effective P/CVE programs that are tailored to local cultural and social gender norms.

As observed in our earlier policy brief, "Women, Gender, and Terrorism: Policies and Programming," programs that optimistically target gender or women specifically as agents and actors have suffered from four main problems.[1]

First, prioritizing female roles in P/CVE programs potentially has both risks and benefits, but without an established understanding of historical research and practice, scholars and practitioners might fail to understand the scale and magnitude of either. Focusing on one gender—women or men—creates or reinforces the expectation that all members of a gender share a set of abilities or characteristics while ignoring the possibility that members of the other gender(s) could possess those same characteristics or abilities. If program designers build the expectation that simply including women in P/CVE programs will increase program effectiveness, they risk reinforcing gender stereotypes, recruiting women who are ill suited to the task, and alienating or neglecting men who may be uniquely suited to the work in question.

Second, program responses often do not differentiate between acts of radicalization and terrorism. Without a stronger understanding of what separates these concepts and how to address the overlaps and differences, programs can exacerbate existing tensions, as they have in some U.S. domestic programs designed to address extremism in regions that host higher numbers of Muslim immigrants. If a vulnerable individual (or community) is treated harshly or as a criminal but has not actually committed a terrorist act, treating him or her as a terrorist may harden any budding resolve. Vulnerable or radicalizing individuals and groups require a more nuanced approach than current counterterror capabilities allow.[2]

Third, programs often fail to recognize that including women is not a one-time silver bullet but a comprehensive policy shift that should be incorporated at every level, potentially alongside efforts to change the normalization of violence and social culture. Simply teaching a woman how to recognize the signs of growing extremism in her family or community does little if the security forces she reaches out to do not recognize her value as a human being or display respect for unconventional or more holistic means of addressing potential radicalization.

Finally, programs should seek out local actors and incorporate local programs for maximum benefit, since local practitioners will have the best contextual understanding and strongest local knowledge. Local community-based programs in Pakistan, for example, are often critically underfunded, and even those that find success are consistently at risk of folding due to lack of funding or management capacity.[3]

Program developers can alleviate some of these problems by learning more about the very specific contexts in which extremist organizations operate.

First, they must ask how and whether the organization uses the construct of gender to achieve its goals. Does it recruit men and women under different pretexts? Does its vision prioritize specific masculine or feminine roles? Does its vision involve a change in these roles over time or with successes toward its goals? For example, Boko Haram initially grew alongside Al Qaeda, training with Al Qaeda members before splitting from Al Qaeda around 2009. Al Qaeda does not use many female suicide bombers, since doing so would violate its precepts, but Boko Haram actively trains and employs women as suicide bombers.[4] The Islamic State offers an example of the way gender roles can shift over time and as priorities and the security situation develops: until recently, Islamic State women were very active but primarily as traditional figures—fighters' wives, for instance. However, in recent months, IS has employed women as fighters and suicide attackers in Libya, potentially an alteration of policy in the face of mounting losses.[5]

Second, scholars must ask how the society affected by or radicalized by an extremist organization constructs gender. Are roles traditional in nature? How do these roles differ from the gender norms of extremist organizations? How are women versus men affected similarly and differently by the conflict and violence? When norms already exist to subordinate women, as they did in Pakistan and Afghanistan, it could be easier for extremist groups to capitalize on those norms. However, in countries like Norway, right-wing extremist groups use gender equality as a norm under attack by immigrants who espouse more patriarchal norms. Groups that develop within more equal societies might also use gender norms as a recruitment tool. In sum, such groups will have to be approached differently.

Third, policymakers must assess whether the extremist organization wields influence over the surrounding or affected population, and if so, analyze the degree of that influence so that they can develop policies appropriately positioned to contest extremist influence. Have local gender norms and roles changed significantly with the advent of the extremist group? For example, IS radically changed the gender roles in local areas in a relatively short period, as did the Taliban in Afghanistan. In contrast, as Catholic men in Northern Ireland were incarcerated or otherwise removed from their homes during the Troubles, women stepped into traditionally male roles, and the Irish Republican Army and its offshoots did not specifically challenge the changing gender narrative (although the Catholic Church often did).[6] Understanding this kind of influence and the depth of local impacts is critical to effective policy development.

Fourth, program staff must search for and enable local actors for peace and equality. Do such actors observe specific gender norms? What implications for local actors should be considered in any P/CVE programming? How can the international community assist local actors if they exist? If the international community can empower them in useful ways, local citizens who breach stereotypes and push back at extremism can provide deep and broad knowledge and can also be the critical means to fight extremism. These actors are also most likely to regularly face dangers and threats. Organizations like Take Back the Tech and the Ajoka Theatre Company in Pakistan are small endeavors with limited means that work quietly to counter extremist messages, but they often have limited means and operate at great personal risk.[7] The need to gain contextual understanding is arguably even greater where no or few local actors exist. The international community must tread carefully to effect change in such a situation.

As the development of P/CVE programming and research about extremist organizations and their manipulation of gender norms moves forward, it will be important for gender to be operationalized and considered systematically and completely. Simply adding a female actor or gender advisor will be insufficient. Instead, successful policies and programs will be built on specific, actionable, and nuanced research on extremism and gender, will support local actors to the greatest extent possible, and will deeply reflect on what gender means in a given context, how it is constructed, and how it is and could be used to counter extremist narratives and actions in widely varied regions and cultures.

References

1   Jeanette Gaudry Haynie and Chantal de Jonge Oudraat, Women, *Gender and Terrorism: Policies and Programming*, WIIS Policybrief, January 2017.

2   Robert L. Mackenzie, *Countering Violent Extremism in America: Policy Recommendations for the Next President,* Brookings Report, 2016. https://www.brookings.edu/research/countering-violent-extremism-in-america-policy-recommendations-for-the-next-president/.

3   Hedieh Mirahmadi, Waleed Ziad, Mehreen Farooq, and Robert Lamb, "Empowering Pakistan's Civil Society to Counter Violent Extremism," *Contemporary Readings in Law and Social Justice* 8, no. 1 (2016): 192.

4   Andrew Walker, *What is Boko Haram?* U.S. Institute of Peace, Special Report, 2012.

5   See also Hamoon Khelgast-Doost, *Women in Jihadist Movements*, WIIS Policybrief, May 2017.

6   Begona Arextaga, *Shattering Silence: Women, Nationalism, and Political Subjectivity in Northern Ireland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

7   Karima Bennoune, *Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2015).

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Women In International Security (WIIS) launched a round-table series on Women, Terrorism, and Violent Extremism in March 2016. The goal of the series is to bring together experts from the Women, Peace, and Security and the counterterrorism communities to share insights and perspectives on these critical national and international security issues.

This Policy Brief draws on the fourth round-table discussion, held on October 12, 2016. This round table featured four noted experts: Mr. Robert L. McKenzie, Visiting Fellow at the Project on US Relations with the Islamic World at Brookings Institute; Ms. Julia McQuaid, Principal Research Scientist in the Center for Stability and Development at the Center for Naval Analyses; Mr. Jacob Zenn, Senior Consultant at Valens Global, Adjunct Professor at Georgetown University, and Fellow at the Jamestown Foundation; and Ms. Katherine Zimmerman, Research Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. For more on this event, see wiisglobal.org/events

See also: Chantal de Jonge Oudraat and Michael E. Brown, Women, Gender and Terrorism: The Missing Links, WIIS Policybrief August 2016; Jeannette Gaudry Haynie, Women, Gender and Terrorism: Radicalization and Recruitment, WIIS Policybrief, September 2016; and Jeanette Gaudry Haynie and Chantal de Jonge Oudraat, Women, Gender and Terrorism: Policies and Programming, WIIS Policybrief January 2017.

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