



Perspectives on Gender and Violent Extremist Organizations

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Gender identity and gendered political narratives are fundamental in understanding the root causes and grievances associated with violent extremism (VE). It provides a holistic view into the differences in social relations as well as communal obligations, as it informs motives and structures the relationships among men and between men and women in conflict-affected societies.

Without a comprehensive gender analysis, the result is a conceptual and operational vagueness that undermine analysis, policy, cooperation, and programming for rehabilitation and reintegration of individuals involved in VE. Ample evidence supports this assertion. For instance, Mazurana and Proctor suggest that efforts to counter violent extremism (CVE) are bound to fail if they are not anchored in the social experiences and gender dynamics that give acts to violence a significant meaning.

In this short commentary, I intend to focus on one specific driver of violent extremism, considering questions of masculinity and femininity to better understand how violent extremist organizations attract, recruit and maintain their male and female members. It is worth mentioning that our understanding of the drivers of VE is that this phenomenon is highly variable and context-specific. We also suggest that universal explanations and one-size fits all solutions to VE should be treated with skepticism.

Hierarchies, Social Relations and Communal Obligations: Violent Extremist Organizations Tactics

As noted in much of the literature on VE, fundamentalist violent extremist organizations' recruitment tactics are deeply rooted in gender identities and gender political narratives. Groups such as the Taliban, Al Shabaab, Boko Haram, the regional franchises of Al-Qaeda, manipulate masculinity and femininity to facilitate recruitment and gain traction in communities¹, especially those affected by conflict.

In marginalized communities, for instance, socially constructed expectations around masculinity can be a push factor for male youth recruitment by these various organizations. In this sense, those who join violent extremist organizations in these highly patriarchal communities are often seeking to assert and fulfill their gender expectations, to become the 'idealized men and women'. In Jordan and Lebanon, for example, young men who pledged themselves to fundamentalist organization such as AL-Qaeda and ISIS were celebrated by their communities as 'real men'. In interviews conducted by Keith Proctor, the 'real men' narrative was echoed by almost all members of the family and community leaders of those who joined extremism organizations in Syria and Iraq².

¹ Mazurana, Dyan and Keith Proctor. 2014. 'Gender and humanitarian action'. In Roger Mac Ginty and Jenny H. Peterson (eds) *Handbook on Humanitarian Action* (pp.49-61). New York: Routledge.

² Proctor, Keith. 2015. *From Jordan to Jihad: The Lure of Syria's Violent Extremist Groups*. Washington, DC: Mercy Corps.

Extremist organizations very often follow a hypermasculine ideal and using social values such as honor, while taking on the role of the `protector` to recruit male individuals from specific ethnic or clan groups, recent religious converts, school drops-out, those involved with crime, unmarried individuals, etc. Of course these traits vary from context to context, from individual to individual and should not be automatically associated with VE. The point is, by relating the ideal concept of how to be a `real man` with violence, these fundamentalist violent extremist organizations are able to add a social value to their recruitment process. Men are viewed as the `protector` to their communities, home, and social spaces. Therefore, a key driver for most of them to join these organizations and justify their violence is to preserve their role as the `protectors of the nation`. As reported by Proctor on his research in Jordan,

`After seeing reports of Syrian women and children killed by Syrian Government forces, they said they were compelled to defend their Sunni sisters against the Assad regime and its Shiite Iranian backers`³

While men are cast as the protector, the symbolic role that women receive is the flip-side: the `protected`. But of course, one should consider that women are not simply victims or subjugated, they rather play multiple roles when it comes to VE⁴.

Where are the Women?

Following the narrowed logic of the `subjugated being`, female recruits might seek an opportunity to escape from patriarchal environments or gender-based violence, perpetrated most of the time within their homes. In addition, like their male peers, women might also seek adventure, power and admiration from their communities. For instance, ISIS often offered a hyper-feminized ideal in which they would have the opportunity to join the Islamic `sisterhood` and become jihadi brides⁵

According to De Bode, devotion to the movement, a feeling of `sisterhood` and `brotherhood` and idealized domestic and community commitments can offer an important remedy for those who feel

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⁴ Check BIC's series on Women and Violent Extremism. Available at: <https://www.bic-rhr.com/projects/chapter-1-womens-roles-terrorism-and-violent-extremism>

⁵ USIP. 2015. *Women Preventing Violent Extremism: Charting a New Course, Thought for Action Kit*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace. Available at www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Women-preventing-violent-extremism-charting-a-new-course.pdf

marginalized, powerless and uprooted in their own community⁶. Because IS was interested in building a state, the way in which they portrayed women was that of the `mothers of the nation`, which in itself is an empowering role.

It is important to note, however, that the empowered domestic narrative that these extremist organizations proposed often does not reflect the reality. While these organizations offer an upgraded life-style in the domestic sphere for both women and men, the reality is more likely to be one of impoverishment, fear and insecurity.

Applying a Gender Analytical Lens to CVE

By including an analytical gender perspective throughout CVE policies and programmes, one is able to understand the local social dynamics and social relations, an essential capacity for providing alternative narratives to violence. As I have argued above, if gender roles can be manipulated by violent extremist organizations to recruit and maintain their male and female comrades, gender as a source of analysis could also provide insights of resilience.

For instance, community-based actions, empowerment, collaborative and leadership programmes have the potential to transform rigid social norms both in the public and private spheres. It is not a coincidence that in contexts where social isolation, marginalization and gender inequality predominate, violent extremist organizations profit from greater efficacy in their recruitment, without resistance from the population. In other words, CVE initiatives can have higher chances of succeeding in these contexts if empowerment and inclusive programmes assist men and women in creating a new status marker within their communities and tangible opportunities for participation in the community life, rather than resorting to violent extremism.

An illustrative case took place in Nigeria, where a capacity-building and leadership programme promoted by Women without Walls Initiative (WOWWI), provided women from a variety of backgrounds with knowledge and resources to counsel `at risk` youth⁷. In addition, the Women Preventing Extremist Violence (WPEV) initiative, also in Nigeria, trained women-led civil society organizations on issues related to preventing radicalization. It also focused on improving their

⁶ De Bode, Lusa. 2015. `From Belgium to Syria and back: How an altar boy became an ISIL admirer` Aljazeera America, 5 March. Available at : <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/3/5/how-one-belgian-went-from-altar-boy-to-isil-fan.html>

⁷ For more information about this initiative, please access: <https://www.womenwithoutwalls.org/>

relations with local law enforcement actors. The impacts of these actions were observed within a few months after their implementation. Both offered templates for collaborative, community-based actions, and improved cooperation between women's groups and formal authorities on CVE.

In the Occupied Palestine Territory (OPT), the hardships related with the Israeli occupation affect all aspects of life, especially women and girls, and create obstacles to their access to justice, security and politics. Systematic abuses, including restrictions on movement and demolition of homes, impose a range of burdens. In addition, internal restrictions on women's rights – political, economic, social, sexual, and reproductive – are plentiful across the OPT, in ways both implicit and explicit.

It is evident that the prevailing patriarchal culture strongly entrenched in institutional structures constitute a major impediment to women holding leadership positions in society. Another impediment to policy implementation is the geographical fragmentation of the Palestinian society as a result of the occupation. These events have been the driving force in activating violent extremist organizations' activities and recruitment of female members in the OPT. The ability of these groups to project the message of a society protracted by conflict due to the occupation and discrimination empowers sentiments of grievances and enhances their capacity to recruit.

In this sense, paying attention to the significance of gendered identities in these social experiences can help bridge gaps, and above all provide a framework in which to address radicalization leading to violent extremism. As noted by experts, more gender-sensitive societies tend to be less violent and less-prone to be involved in VE activities⁸. Violent extremism is part of a social process that combines personal and communal meanings. These meanings, as have been detailed above are deeply gendered. We from the BIC strongly believe that attention given to these gendered social dynamics and experiences can help with the creation of more peaceful approaches, and therefore, challenge extremist organizations.

⁸ Caprioli, Mary. 2005. 'Primed for violence: The role of gender inequality in predicting internal conflict'. *International Studies Quarterly* 49 (2): 161-178. ; Enloe, Cynthia. 2007. *Globalization and Militarism: Feminists Make the Link*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

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