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Women and Countering Violent Extremism

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Abstract

The paper investigates the often-ignored but crucial role of women in countering violent extremism (CVE) in terms of their dual agency in promoting and countering extremist ideologies and violence. Traditionally, counterterrorism policy has been male-dominated and heavily security-focused, but some recent evidence shows that women can strategically develop community-based opportunities for the early detection of radicalization and dissemination of counter-narratives. Their contributions to countering violent extremism become invisible as a result of gender-blind contexts, limited representation, and failure to analyze intersections. By analyzing the current literature and accompanying case studies, it becomes evident that there are pressing gaps in research and policy, including data gathering, program design, and long-term impact assessment. The study recommends the incorporation of gender into CVE programs, additional support for women-led efforts, and the inclusion of women in decision-making and policy roles. By engaging women meaningfully in CVE, effectiveness will be increased and aid in fostering an inclusive and sustainable practice of peacebuilding.

Introduction

Yet, looking into these aspects, violent extremism remains among the greatest threats to global peace, stability, and development. In some of these places-from the Middle East to Sub-Saharan Africa, from South Asia to the Western world-extremist ideologies take shape and cause damage to lives, communities, and governments, as well as to international institutions representing them (Cordesman, 2018). To deal with the ever-growing challenge of resorting to counter-terror measures, policies and strategies on counterterrorism have been developed over time, introducing military, intelligence, legal, and community-based interventions in their implementation. One significant aspect of such a national and international counter-extremism agenda has always gone unaddressed: the role of women.

Women have, by and large, been seen as passive actors in terrorism and extremism; they are mostly victims or caretakers, and once in a while, an unwilling accomplice. Such stereotypical perceptions came about through patriarchal worldviews and designs that are security-centric policies that

ended up excluding all these from developing, planning, and implementing counterterrorism strategies. Still, it could now be said that new research and case studies bring a far more complicated and dynamic picture of women's relationship with violent extremism (Peresin & Cervone, 2015). Women may be recruited and radicalized, but are known to also actively support, facilitate, and even lead extremist activities. As opposed to that, they also take up the unique stance of power as agents of peace who can intervene very early in the stages of their radicalization, point out an alternative narrative, and mobilize communities for violence.

For example, the phenomenon of female participation in extremist organizations like Boko Haram, the Islamic State (also known as ISIS), and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) puts a question mark on the stereotype of extremism as being a male-dominated space (Pearson & Winterbotham, 2017). Several studies have documented participation by women as recruiters, propagandists, intelligence operatives, and even suicide bombers. On the other hand, from Afghanistan to Nigeria and various places across Southeast Asia, women have taken part in ground grassroots peacebuilding, deradicalization campaigns, and community resilience programs, illustrating this capacity of both perpetrator and prevention. Here, women do not emerge merely at the fringe of violent extremism, but at its very center (Bigio & Vogelstein, 2019).

This evidence notwithstanding, counterterrorism policy frameworks at both the national and international levels do not give a gender perspective in their policies. Women are definitely out of public representation, either in their local security sector or in peace negotiations, or policy-formulating platforms. Gender considerations are treated more often as peripheral or symbolic than strategic and integral. UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (2000) highlighted the necessity of women's involvement in peace and security matters, but has had limited and inconsistent application as far as countering violent extremism is concerned (UN Women, 2022). Consequently, most of the CVE initiatives fail to recognize and appreciate the diverse drivers and dynamics fueling extremism, making such interventions incomplete or ineffective.

The marginalization of women in CVE policies is neither an issue of gender inequality nor just a missed strategic opportunity. Women have privileged access to families and communities, possess deep knowledge of local grievances, and can utilize all this, along with social capital, to mount challenges against extremist narratives. Furthermore, empowering women to engage meaningfully in CVE efforts creates an inclusive governance system, reinforces civil society, and enhances social cohesion of which are vital variables in long-term peacebuilding (GCTF, 2020).

This research study will reveal the multiple roles that women can and do play in countering violence, and the systematic exclusion of women from counterterrorism policy-making opens up potential for transformation through gender-inclusive strategies.

In doing so, the paper argues that counter-terrorism should include gender perspectives not merely as a question of normativity or ethics, but as a strategic necessity. The response will certainly build more comprehensive, context-sensitive, and sustainable responses to the threat of violent extremism by addressing the blindness of current frameworks and amplifying women's voices and contributions.

Thesis Statement

Longitudinal evidence signifies the multifaceted roles that women can play in the agency of perpetuating but also contesting violent extremism. Yet, most counter-terrorism policies continue to neglect the gender dimension. However, it is not only a moral imperative to integrate a gender perspective, identifying women as the unique agents toward the families, communities, and counter-narratives for more advanced strategies in counter-violent extremism, but a strategic

necessity by which countering violent extremism becomes more comprehensive, context-sensitive, and sustainable.

Research Questions

1. How have women been constructed and effectively involved in the histories of counterterrorism and CVE frameworks, and how far do these constructions correspond to women's realities of recruitment, radicalization, and prevention?

This question looks at how women differ between their real lives as recruiters, propagandists, mediators, or peacebuilders, and how they are written about in policy documents and programs.

2. What operational and strategic benefits will flow from integrating gender-inclusive measures in CVE strategies, and what barriers need to be removed for this to be done effectively?

This question deals with integrating gender in identifying how women's social capital and community leadership will enrich early-warning systems, counter-narrative campaigns, and grassroots resilience, along with institutional, cultural, and resource-based errors related to gender.

Literature Review

Introduction

Over the last 20 years or so, the subject of women's role in Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) has increasingly attracted scholarly and policy attention. In a world where women have conventionally been depicted as passive victims, it is rather recent that they have been acknowledged for their roles, some as active participants in extremist movements and others as important agents in counter-preventive mechanisms. However, counter-terrorism policies and CVE applications do not live up to their potential regarding effective and gender-sensitive framing in incorporating women's experience, knowledge, and influence. This literature review synthesizes recent work from academia and policy initiatives to look at how women's roles have been conceptualized, recorded, and integrated into counterterrorism policy while identifying gains and gaps.

Historical Narratives and Gendered Assumptions

Scholarly and policy discussions on terrorism and violent extremism largely featured a male-centric narrative for most of the 20th century. Women were helpless victims of violence in the majority, or were often the perpetrators when they committed violent acts. Sjoberg and Gentry (2024) severely criticized such reasoning, arguing that along the annual progression, women's political violence was belittled or sexualized, such that it publicized unhealthy gender norms. Correspondingly, (Rinehart, 2021) conspicuously pointed out that the media and policies have consistently portrayed female suicide bombers as manipulated, psychologically damaged, or driven by personal trauma-rather than by ideological commitment.

The tendency to streamline women as either "peacemakers" or "passive" actors fails to capture a more complex reality. Scholars like Eric van Um (2015) examine this binary narrative, documenting women's purposeful and politicized involvement in terrorist groups ranging from the Irish Republican Army (IRA) to the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) and the Red Army Faction. They argue that we need to go beyond stereotypical gendering to consider the structural, social, and political contexts that drive women's participation in violence.

Women as active instigators and enablers of extremes

Recent literature has shown that women are not only part of violent extremism; they are also part of their operation and sustenance. For instance, studies of Boko Haram have shown women as spies, recruiters, logistical support, and even suicide bombers. In ISIS-controlled territories,

women were also part of the Al-Khansaa Brigade, an all-female morality police. With much power, they enforced the group's version of Sharia law (Eggert, 2015)

Recently, Jacobsen (2017) investigated why women are drawn to extremist ideologies. The analysis of female ISIS recruits exposes a combination of push and pull factors, ranging from perceived injustices and marginalization to a sense of religious or political obligation. Such insights challenge conventional perspectives that cast women as either mere victims of coercion or manipulation into extremist groups. Instead, they feed into the picture that inclines toward personal agency, ideological conviction, and aspirations for status and belonging.

Despite women playing roles in extremist movements, such acts remain under-explored within security policy. Female perpetrators are often excluded from engagement in deradicalization and prosecution processes, thus reinforcing the narrative that they are not "real" extremists. Such acts lead to impunity in some instances and are characterized by over-policing in others; this inconsistency erodes successful CVE.

Women as Builders of Peace and Agents of Resilience

While women certainly can contribute to extremism, they are in a unique position to prevent it. Within the literature of peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and CVE, women indeed assume an important role in promoting community resilience. Their position in society allows them early access into families, schools, religious institutions, and organizations, where they can help in recognizing early warning signs of radicalization and presenting counter-narratives (Andersson et al., 2024).

UN Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security changed the way women were viewed in issues about peace and security, but the inclusion of this into CVE frameworks has seen unevenness. According to UN Women (2015), though it makes great commitments, it is observed that the participation of women in decision-making and implementation processes remains minimal. Much less funding and institutional support have also restricted the wider scale of women-led CVE initiatives.

(Udo-Udo Jacob, 2023) Mentions the successful documentation of informative case studies exemplifying women's involvement in community policing, interfaith dialogues, and educational initiatives as avenues to deradicalization and social cohesion. For instance, women's organizations in Kenya have partnered with law enforcement agencies to identify recruitment network systems, while female religious leaders in Indonesia have countered extremists' interpretation of Islamic texts. These case studies reveal that women should not only be included as beneficiaries but also as leaders in CVE efforts.

Structural Barriers to Women's Participation in CVE

Despite a growing body of evidence in their case, women continue to face structural barriers to their meaningful involvement within CVE. Some of these include patriarchal domination, political marginalization, inadequate access to resources, and security threats. According to a research report by the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF, 2020), women's civil society organizations are often excluded from national discussions on security, labelled "soft" actors, and relatively underfunded compared to their male counterparts.

Another aspect is the securitization of gender. Where gender is placed in the context of CVE, it is usually done through a narrow lens of operational utility, women may participate only for the sake of deriving security gains from their involvement, not because of a social commitment to gender equality. Such objectification, as Shepherd (2016) argues, should be avoided because gender can be embedded as a core objective of a more transformed CVE.

Evolving Policy Frameworks (Success and Limitations)

In recent years, it has been international institutions that have sought to lessen the gender gap existing in CVE. The UN's plan of action for preventing violent extremism issued in 2015 went on

to mention how important gender-sensitive policies are. Likewise, the EU's strategy on CVE and radicalization has incorporated references to gender equality. Yet, implementation continues to be inconsistent.

Studies by the International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN, 2020) highlight global practices that help to promote the integration of women's organizations in national CVE strategies in countries such as Jordan, Tunisia, and Nigeria. Among these initiatives are training women in early warning systems, engaging female religious scholars in counter-narrative campaigns, and funding grassroots peace initiatives.

However, many CVE policies still treat gender as an "add-on" issue and do not consider it embedded throughout the policy cycle. (Nedera, 2023) posits that there is a need for more intersectional approaches that look at not just gender, but how gender interacts with other variables such as age, ethnicity, class, and religion in producing vulnerability to extremism.

Digital Radicalization and the Gendered Online Space

An emerging arena in literature relates to the gender dimensions of online radicalization. With the rise of viciousness being committed through the media online platform, the researcher will study how women are targeted by these networks in the same way as they are also contributing to the same propaganda. According to Colson (2021), Islamic State online recruitment strategies have romanticized life with the Caliphate under women as being empowering and fulfilling.

Women, on the other hand, are mobilizing online counter-narrative platforms. Groups such as Sisters Against Violent Extremism (SAVE) and Mothers Schools use online social means to disseminate the messages of peace, patience, and critical thinking. The effort fights for a horizontal space against the monopoly of extremist ideologies on digital without losing sight of what might arise.

Research Gap

Though interest among scholars and debates at policy levels discussions around women's role in violent extremism and counter-violent extremism, there still exist remarkable research and policy gaps. Women's recognition by the international community in peace and security efforts has found its way most noticeably through the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325). However, translating this into reality at the counter-terrorism level still appears largely failed. Most CVE policies, both national and international, still operate under a gender-blind framework by defining security as predicated on masculinity, thereby limiting the role of women in this regard to only symbolic or supplementary levels. Conceptually, this marginalization presents one of the more fundamental gaps in research and policy today.

Important in this regard is the continued view of women primarily as victims of violent extremism or, at best, passive recipients of security policy, rather than as active agents. Much of the earlier literature on terrorism and political violence completely neglected women or else depicted them as coerced participants, driven only by emotion, manipulation, or psychological instability (Peresin & Cervone, 2015). While this has begun to be challenged by more recent studies, such as those conducted by Shur and the like, it continues to do its work in the shaping of policy response. Inconsistency prevails in the treatment of women participating in extremist activities within legal and CVE systems, with some being over-policed and others completely ignored under the false notion that they pose little or no threat. Such representational patterns eliminate the multifaceted and lively roles that women play, in this context, as recruiters and fundraisers, ideological propagandists and enforcement agents, and even as suicide bombers. Their misrepresentation in research and policy is a major analytical and practical shortfall.

Moreover, there is little empirical data on women and youth involvement in CVE initiatives. Although numerous case studies exist, particularly from high-profile contexts like ISIS or Boko

Haram, there is a dearth of gender-disaggregated data to feed generic, evidence-based policies (Bigio & Vogelstein, 2019). Most government agencies and security institutions do not have systematic data collection or reporting on women's participation in violent extremism or prevention initiatives. Consequently, it is all but impossible to design, implement, or evaluate gender-responsive interventions. Moreover, where women are part of CVE initiatives, their inclusion is oftentimes predicated on instrumental use for surveillance or community intelligence-rather than for their leadership and peacebuilding capacities.

Another research gap is that the association of studies majorly represents a disconnection with intersectional analyses in the CVE discourse. The majority of the literature tends to generalize women as a broad category without elaborating on how the experiences of extremism and radicalization vastly differ in age, ethnicity, class, religion, and geographical location. Such that the reasons and conditions under which a young, educated woman from Europe may join ISIS differ fundamentally from those of a rural woman in Nigeria abducted and radicalized by Boko Haram. Without intersectional approaches, the very general policies and programs could prove incapable of addressing the various vulnerabilities or strengths that different groups of women may bring to CVE efforts.

Moreover, studies on women's involvement in CVE are scarce, and long-term outcomes of women's involvement in the CVE field remain largely unexplored. Most current research includes women's role documentation or evaluation of specific program impact, not longitudinal studies of women's impact on sustainability and broader community attributions regarding their participation in CVE. This is particularly relevant for assessing whether women's inclusion in such initiatives will induce more significant shifts in community resilience and gender relations or even undermine radicalization. Again, research is very limited on cross-ideology and geography analysis. Most literature concentrates on Islamist extremism and leaves a considerable vacuum in the understanding of women in far-right, nationalist, or separatist movements (Ndung'u & Shadung, 2017).

The radicalization process has a digital aspect that brings in another rather less explored area. The examination of how extremist groups use online platforms for radicalization and recruitment is starting to receive some scholarly attention. Still, a focus on particular gendered aspects of online radicalization is exceedingly rare. Not only are women the targets of online propaganda, but they are also active promoters of extremist messages. The other side of the coin sees more and more counter-narrative online campaigns and peace efforts organized by women; however, the analysis of the effects, scope, and integration into the policy arena remains to be done and to be achieved.

Finally, one significant research gap revolves around the depth of women's involvement in CVE initiatives. Several international organizations and governments now declare to incorporate women into dialogues on security. Yet more often than not, this inclusion is superficial and rarely entails any capacity of transformative potential. Instead, women are co-opted at best, with little power or resources to influence the decision-making. As pointedly articulated by scholars like Shepherd (2016), real meaning for gender in CVE comes when that gender begins to challenge power structures and assumptions inherent in the security sector itself. Therefore, there is a need for research to critically examine whether the incorporation of women is going to change the design, implementation, and outcomes of CVE strategies or simply reinforce the existing paradigm.

Recommendations

The evolving nature of violent extremism and women's increasingly recognized roles both in contributing to and countering extremist ideology have serious implications for counterterrorism and CVE strategy design and implementation. Above and beyond the literature and research gap

identified, the following recommendations offer practicality and policy-oriented steps into building a counter-terrorism framework that is operationally much more inclusive and efficient.

Make Gender an Explicit Inclusion in the National and International CVE Policies

Integrate gender across all aspects into counter-terrorism and CVE frameworks as an agenda-main issue rather than an ancillary one. This is also so that gender analysis is carried out throughout the planning, implementation, and evaluation phases of policy and program designs (GCTF, 2020). Countries will adopt, operationalize, and implement gender-sensitive national action plans based on UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and related frameworks so that women's perspectives and needs are systematically able to addressed in CVE strategies.

Support and Fund Women-Led CVE Initiatives

Many women-led organizations and grassroots movements are very effective in building community resilience, promoting tolerance, and preventing radicalization. These initiatives, however, mostly remain underfunded and without institutional support. Local women's groups engaged in the CVE should be the focus of funding and capacity-building efforts conducted by international donors, governments, and NGOs, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected contexts (UN Women, 2015). This support should be transformed from goodwill gestures to serious consideration and include actual resources for action, training, or platforms for influence.

Generate Gender-Disaggregated and Intersectional Data

One of the most critical gaps in current CVE efforts is the absence of accurate and comprehensive data related to the conditions of women in extremism. Data for CVE efforts must, therefore, be disaggregated according to gender and analyzed sensitively through an intersectional lens to assess how clustering variables like age, class, religion, and ethnicity will have a bearing on women's experience vis-a-vis extremism (UN Women, 2015). This strengthened data collection will enhance targeted programming efforts and help build a strong evidence base for eventual policy reform.

Promote Meaningful Participation, Not Just Representation

Moving forward, the participation of women in CVE will have to move past just token representation to meaningful participation. This entails promoting women's presence in leading roles in decision-making bodies in CVE, making equal training and capacity development access available to women, and creating safe spaces for women to express their views without fear of marginalization or retaliation. Policies should actively counter the socio-cultural barriers, such as gender stereotypes and restrictions on mobility, limiting women's engagement in the security domain (Emma, 2021).

Combat Online Radicalization through Gendered Strategies

Because these violent extremists have access to the digital channels to communicate and coordinate their actions, it becomes necessary to create women-led initiatives that pen in the countering of extremist discourse in cyberspace. Such programs could teach women digital literacy, online advocacy, and cyber-safety skills, which can further empower them to lead online peacebuilding efforts. Governments and technology platforms should also invest in evidence-based actions regarding women-targeting processes in online radicalization for mobilizing women into digital peace actors (Zeiger & Gyte, 2023).

Promotion of Academic and Policy Research on Women in CVE

There is still a great need to investigate and study longitudinal, comparative, and specific regions on women in extremism and CVE. Research institutes and centers may also be urged and funded to investigate women's motivation, pathways, and experiences in diverse ideological contexts-right wing, nationalist, separatist movements, and the long-range effects of women being included in CVE efforts.

By implementing these recommendations, stakeholders at all levels can address the gender deficit in CVE, foster inclusive peacebuilding, and enhance the overall effects of global counterterrorism efforts.

Conclusion

Countering violent extremism (CVE) remains probably one of the most pressing issues for global security in the present century. Most CVE policies, as shown by the research, remain male-centric and do not sufficiently recognize the multiplicity of roles played by women. Not only are women victims of violent extremism; however, they also serve as important engines of change, either directly as participants in extremist movements or through constructive engagement as significant players in efforts to prevent radicalization and build peace. Their exclusion from counterterrorism strategies is not simply an issue of inequity; it loses the potential opportunity for one of the strongest but most ineffective weapons in bringing down extremist acts.

According to the literature, women can be community leaders, educators, caregivers, and even peacebuilders. This places them in a prime position to identify early indications of radicalization in their communities, access informal networks to intervene, and provide alternative narratives against extremist ideologies. However, the support offered to women outside the international laws is minimal, especially in policy and practice; their significance is found to be lacking. Notwithstanding international frameworks, including UNSCR 1325, contributions by women tend to be ill-supported and vastly underrepresented in policy and practice.

This indicates a paradigm shift, viewing women not as passive beneficiaries but rather as strategic stakeholders and leaders in CVE initiatives. Indeed, it concerns mainstreaming gender into all efforts related to CVE, but it also requires the removal of system-imposed barriers, investing in grassroots women-led initiatives, enhancing gender-disaggregated data missions, and embedding digital and community-based engagement.

In their approach to counterterrorism, they should adopt a more inclusive stance by putting gender at the center of analysis and action. Hence, such approaches will yield better outcomes in the form of effectiveness, sustainability, and legitimacy for efforts related to CVE. As violent extremism evolves, we must likewise evolve our strategies. One would be able to devise more holistic solutions by taking into account the distinct perspectives, historical experiences, and contributions of women, which promote both security and social cohesion in the long term.

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