

Gender-based norms and violent extremism: what's the way forward for prevention?

by Marta Pompili and Alice Roberti

The importance of gender mainstreaming in preventing violent extremism (PVE) has increasingly been highlighted by many United Nations instruments. Amongst others, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism recognize women's empowerment as an essential element for sustainable peace, while [UN Security Council Resolution 2242](#) urges Member States to “gather gender-sensitive research and data collection on the drivers of radicalization for women.”¹ In 2015, a Good Practice non-binding document on [Women and Countering Violent Extremism](#) was adopted by the Global Counter Terrorism Forum (GCTF) and an [Addendum with a Focus on Mainstreaming Gender](#) was published in 2019. In the for-

mer, Good Practice 2 recommends parties to “identify gender dynamics in radicalization leading to terrorism and preventing it among women and girls.”²

“As suggested by the GCTF Good Practice document, gender discrimination might play a role in the radicalization process:

“women and girls’ inequalities, sexual and gender-based violence, marginalization, and lack of opportunities, may make them more susceptible to the appeal of terrorism.”³ In light of this, the need to develop a holistic analysis of violent extremism that takes into consideration gender relations has increasingly gained international attention and context-specific and gender-sensitive research should

inform parties to better understand the reasons behind women and men's support to violent extremist groups.

For instance, as far as men and boys are concerned, socio-economic conditions leading to the inability to provide for their families might become a push factor to join violent extremist groups as they seek to comply with the ideal of the male breadwinner, provider, and head of the family. Violent extremist groups indeed usually provide a strict hierarchical structure and have been reported using women and children to exploit expectations around masculine roles by pressuring men and boys into committing acts of violence under the guise of protecting their families and demonstrating stereotypical “masculinity,” associated with (assumptions of) strength, violence, and authority.⁴ Men

“Men and boys may thus be radicalized by women themselves who encourage male actors in their families (e.g., brothers, sons, husbands) to take up arms



1 UN Security Council Resolution 2242 (2015), page 6.

2 Global Counter Terrorism Forum (2015). *Good Practices on Women and Countering Violent Extremism*, page 3.

3 Ibid., page 3.

4 International Alert (2020). *Dogmatism or Pragmatism? Violent extremism and gender in the central Sahel*.

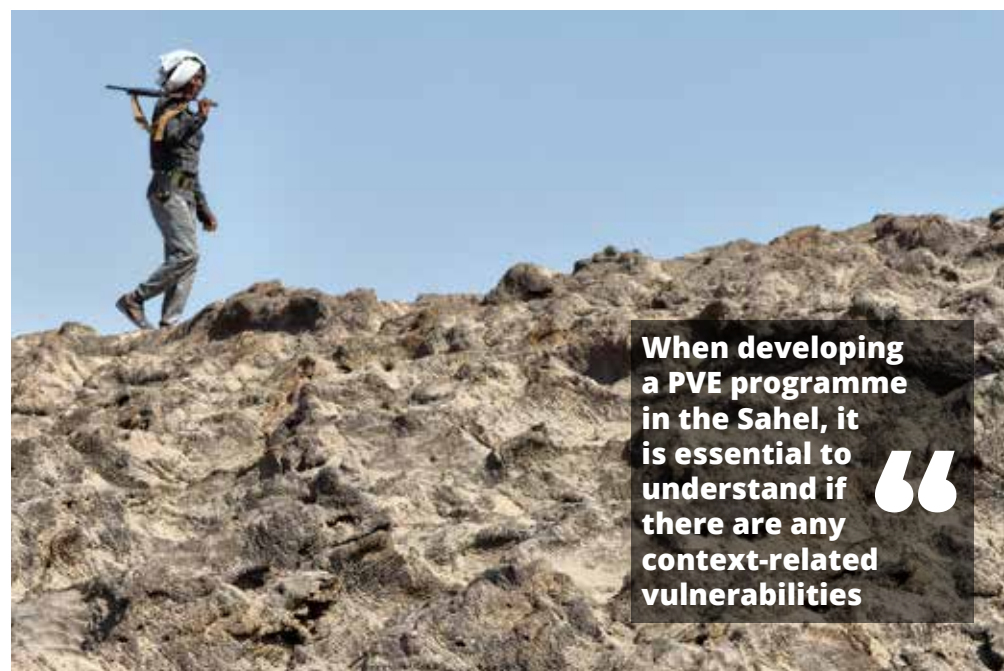
and boys may thus be radicalized by women themselves who encourage male actors in their families (e.g., brothers, sons, husbands) to take up arms and join extremist groups, which is sometimes considered a route to greater power and status.⁵ As mentioned by a 2022 report by the UN Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) and the International Peace Institute (IPI),⁶ these examples show how violent extremist groups can exploit masculinities by idealising the idea of the warrior and the protector.

Concerning women and girls, in the context of violent extremist groups it is important to recognize that their roles are neither confined solely to victims nor to perpetrators. Women and girls can indeed be victims of gender-based violence and at the same time be activists, recruiters, fundraisers, and perpetrators. Women may also take active roles in logistics, finance, intelligence collection, reconnaissance, enforcement of morality laws, or in the provision of auxiliary services.⁷ In this con-

text, violent extremist groups may play a dual role: on one hand, they target female actors as a means of control, segregation, and subordination and women can be radicalized to violence through marital obedience and loyalty as well as family status.⁸ On the other hand, violent extremism may be an actively chosen route by women to escape conditions of subjugation and violence, gain opportunities and change the status that existing gender norms do not allow. This may appear particularly appealing for youth, even without necessarily sharing the violent extremist ideology. It is also worth noting that, in other cases, women are indirect victims of violent radicalization, i.e., by becoming widows, lacking a source of income, and/or by being displaced.⁹

According to UNICRI's experience, this analysis is particularly relevant in the Sahel, where restricted access to education and healthcare, lack of economic opportunities and widespread diffusion of violence against women constitute a breeding ground

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for violent extremist ideologies. As outlined in the report “*Dogmatism or Pragmatism? Violent extremism and gender in the central Sahel*” published in 2020 by International Alert in the context of a project of UNICRI, in this region gender roles and related expectations can contribute to individuals' support to violent extremism, since “the ‘jihadist governance’ often takes a strongly gendered approach, combining elements of continuity and disruption of the social norms of rural communities.”¹⁰ On one side, violent extremist groups make significant efforts to ensure women conform to jihadist behavioural ideology, disciplining communities, and instituting power relations. For instance, in Mauritania, Soninke women — known for their colourful clothing and jewellery — need to cover themselves in public spaces with thick black robes, following the ‘correct manner’.¹¹

On the other hand, the same gendered ‘jihadist governance’ may challenge the current power relationships marked by extreme patriarchy by suggesting progressive measures — including relaxed conditions for access to mar-

riage or respect for marital obligations. Therefore, individuals living in a context with fixed and rigid gender roles, as well as widespread gender discrimination and violence, may be more susceptible to violent extremist groups propaganda, as these groups often target women by attacking their bodies or integrity, or on the contrary, by using false narratives of women's empowerment.¹²

“ The ‘jihadist governance’ often takes a strongly gendered approach

For these reasons, when developing a PVE programme in the Sahel, it is essential to understand if there are any context-related vulnerabilities that might be exploited by violent extremist groups in relation to gender. A project that aims to build resilience to violent extremism must consider how gender discrimination and violence have an impact on women's marginalization and on their appeal towards extremist groups' propaganda.¹³ The prevention of violent extremism requires a mul-

5 Johnston, M., True, J., Monash University and UN Women (2019). *Misogyny and Violent Extremism: Implications for Preventing Violent Extremism*; and OSCE, WIN (2022). *The Linkages between Violent Misogyny and Violent Extremism and Radicalization that lead to Terrorism*.

6 Dier, A. and Baldwin, B., United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED), International Peace Institute (IPI) (2022). *Masculinities and Violent Extremism*.

7 Global Counter Terrorism Forum (2019). *Addendum to the GCTF Good Practices on Women and Countering Violent Extremism, with a Focus on Mainstreaming Gender*; and OSCE (2019). *Understanding the Role of Gender in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism - Good Practices for Law Enforcement*; and Johnston, M., True, J., Monash University and UN Women (2019). *Misogyny and Violent Extremism: Implications for Preventing Violent Extremism*.

8 Monash University and UN Women (2019). *Gender Equality and Violent Extremism: A Research Agenda for Libya*.

9 International Alert (2020). *Dogmatism or Pragmatism? Violent Extremism and Gender in the Central Sahel*.

10 Ibid. p. 61.

11 UNICRI (2020). *Many Hands on an Elephant. What Enhances Community Resilience to Radicalisation into Violent Extremism?*

12 UN Women (2021). *In brief: Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) Focus Areas*.

13 For instance, the 6th Review Resolution of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (2018) urges, inter alia, the integration of a gender analysis on the drivers of radicalization of women to violent extremism and terrorism in relevant programmes. Available from: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N18/198/80/PDF/N1819880.pdf?OpenElement> (lastly visited on 28 February 2023).



tifaceted approach that addresses the underlying causes of radicalization and acknowledges the significant role played by gender relations and related dynamics. This includes addressing social, economic, cultural, and political factors that contribute to an individual's susceptibility to violent extremist ideologies. It also involves providing individuals with alternative narratives and opportunities that can help them become more resilient to violent extremist messages and choose a more peaceful and inclusive path.¹⁴

Furthermore, PVE programmes that exclusively consider men as violent actors, and women and girls as victims or nurturing educators, fail to address other significant and relevant aspects that lead to violent extremist radicalization. Designing a PVE programme following a binary analysis of gender fails to transform gender relations and it is ineffective in achieving a full understanding of the linkages between gender dynamics, roles, expectations, and discrimination on one side, and radicalization leading to violent extremism on the other.¹⁵ In addition, it is also essential to conduct context-specific

research, considering that strategies, tools and messages vary according to the different violent extremist group taken into account. In conclusion, to develop an effective programme against violent extremism, gender-sensitive and comprehensive interventions are required. Such interventions must rely on the assumption that the interactions between men, women and violent extremist groups are not uniform throughout the Sahel and need to be analysed in consideration of the specific contexts, demands, needs and expectations of local communities.¹⁶

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To this end, in December 2022, thanks to the generous support of the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), UNICRI officially launched the project "[Gender-based Discrimination and Prevention of Violent Extremism in the Sahel](#)". In the context of this two-year project, the Institute will con-



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duct research in Mali, Mauritania, and Niger to generate knowledge on the impact of gender-based discrimination on radicalization leading to violent extremism. The research findings will form the basis for the development of tailor-made training modules

for national authorities as well as for civil society organizations from each of the three countries. Context-specific and gender-sensitive research will help parties to better understand the reasons behind women and men's support to violent extremist groups

in the target countries and, consequently, will support the development of effective PVE policies and programmes, contributing to building safer, more equal, and more empowered communities in the region.

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¹⁴ Asante, D. and Shepherd, L.J. (2020). *Gender and Countering Violent Extremism in Women, Peace and Security National Action Plans*, European Journal of Politics and Gender, 3(3); UN Women (2019). *Gender Mainstreaming Principles, Dimensions and Priorities for PVE*.

¹⁵ Asante, D. and Shepherd, L.J. (2020). *Gender and Countering Violent Extremism in Women, Peace and Security National Action Plans*, European Journal of Politics and Gender, 3(3).

¹⁶ Context-specificity is underscored in many international documents. See, for instance, Global Counter Terrorism Forum (2015). *Good Practices on Women and Countering Violent Extremism*, in particular Good Practice #11.