Do Mothers Know Best? How Assumptions Harm CVE

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OVERVIEW

United Nations Security Council Resolution 2242 advocates deliberate outreach to women in counter-terrorism projects. The UN secretary general's Plan of Action outlines how preventing violent extremism should protect and empower both women and women-led organisations. As a result, since the resolution was adopted in 2015, initiatives have been implemented around the world that seek to empower women, particularly mothers, to take a more active role in the community, family and economy, and to create spaces for raising awareness about violent extremism.

The idea that mothers are best placed to spot signs of radicalisation limits the scope of policy to counter violent extremism.

Such initiatives are based on assumptions about the ability of women to influence young people. The rationale is that women are inherently more peaceful than men and that, if empowered to do so, they can stop radicalisation to violence. Many schemes have focused on mothers. The assumption is that mothers are better able to detect signs of a move to extremism in their children. Critics of this approach point to the lack of publicly available evidence that supports it. There is (so far) no definitive evidence that mothers can spot and address increased radicalisation to violence in their children. This paper explores the thinking and assumptions behind this myth about women, specifically mothers, in countering violent extremism (CVE) programming.

The views of the author do not necessarily represent the views of the Institute.

A MYTH: MOTHERS SPOT SIGNS OF RADICALISATION

Women have played a role in modern violent ideological movements—as supporters, facilitators, recruiters and attackers. Despite this, terrorism research has tended to neglect women's participation in violent groups.[1] This failure to consider how counter-terrorism (CT) and countering violent extremism (CVE) strategies use and affect gender stereotypes has created blind spots. In CT and CVE in general, there has been an insufficient focus on the radicalisation of women and a paucity of assumptions-based approaches to including women in CVE. A failure to discuss how programmes affect gender relations and what their human-rights implications are for women and men has not helped.

This has started to change. The migration of thousands of women to the so-called Islamic State (also known as ISIS) inspired research exploring female motivations for joining the group.[2] It is starting to be publicly recognised that women can just as easily be involved—at least in a supportive role—in violent extremism. Meanwhile, CT and CVE strategies have started to engage more seriously with women. In 2015, UN Security Council Resolution 2242 called for the inclusion of women in devising CVE programmes.[3] The UN secretary general's 2016 Plan of Action on Preventing Violent Extremism included a pillar dedicated to the role of women and girls. It urged member states to mainstream gender perspectives, empower women and strive for gender equality.[4] The latest iteration of the UK's counter-terrorism strategy, Contest, released

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1 Laura Sjoberg, Gendering Global Conflict: Toward a Feminist Theory of War (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 13; J Ann Tickner, "You Just Don't Understand: Troubled Engagements Between Feminists and IR Theorists", International Studies Quarterly 41, no. 4 (1997): 611–32; Nicole Detraz, International Security and Gender (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2012); "Women and Terrorist Radicalization: Final Report, OSCE Secratariat – ODIHR Expert Roundtables", OSCE, March 2013, accessed 15 June 2017, https://www.osce.org/secretariat/99919?download=true

2 Elizabeth Pearson and Emily Winterbotham, "Women, Gender and Daesh Radicalisation", The RUSI Journal 162, no.3 (2017): 60-72, https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2017.1353251

3 United Nations Security Council Resolution 2242, Women and peace and security, S/RES/2242 (13 October 2015), available from http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2242.pdf

in 2018, mentioned women six times; the previous version made no specific reference to women.[5]

Though limited, CVE programming centred on women has started to gain momentum. Globally, civil-society initiatives are focusing on women's capacity to spot and react to extremism in their families or on tackling root causes of violent extremism, including in relation to gender. Government programmes in various countries have also been explicitly including women.

Women-centric CVE efforts generally take one or more of the following approaches:

1. Focusing on mothers and building their capacity to recognise when radicalisation is occurring, providing them with skills so they can influence thinking and behaviour in their children, families and communities.
2. Economically and socially empowering women, raising their status and voice in their families and communities so they have greater capacity to engage in CVE and their vulnerability to violent extremism is reduced.
3. Building the capacity of women to actively participate in CVE, peace and security agendas.

Research I collaborated on with Elizabeth Pearson revealed resistance among Muslim women in the West to current CVE approaches engaging women.[6] Many of these programmes view

4 "UN Chief Introduces New Action Plan to Prevent Violent Extremism", UN News, 15 January, 2016, https://www.un.org/apps/news/ story.asp?NewsID=53008#.WPjFOfkrKM8.

5 Home Office, CONTEST: The United Kingdom's Strategy for Countering Terrorism, (UK, June 2011), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/ government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/714402/ 060618_CCS207_CCS0218929798-1_CONTEST_3.0_WEB.PDF and (UK, June 2018), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/ uploads/attachment_data/file/714402/ 060618_CCS207_CCS0218929798-1_CONTEST_3.0_WEB.PDF

6 Emily Winterbotham and Elizabeth Pearson, "Different Cities, Shared Stories: A Five-Country Study Challenging Assumptions Around Muslim Women and CVE Interventions", The RUSI Journal 161, no.5 (2016): 54-65, https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2016.1253377; Pearson and Winterbotham, "Women, Gender and Daesh Radicalisation", 60-72.

women as victims or as an untapped resource in preventing violent extremism. This is because they are perceived to be inherently peaceful or have innate maternal abilities to spot the signs of radicalisation in their children.[7] In some contexts, women can—and do—play a significant role in countering violent extremism. To demonstrate real-world impact, however, CVE programmes need to affect recruitment or radicalisation processes.

To have that impact, CVE activities need to address the causes of localised radicalisation and recruitment. They also need to be targeted at communities in which there is a risk of extremism or recruitment.[8] There is (so far) no definitive evidence showing the specific advantages of women for CVE. This reflects the paucity in this field when it comes to evaluation.[9] The prevalence of these assumptions undermines the overall effectiveness of CVE. Conflating this work with broader gender-equality goals could also be counterproductive and damaging to both agendas.

7 Katherine E. Brown, "Gender and Counter-Radicalisation: Women and Emerging Counter-Terror Measures", in Gender, National Security and Counter-Terrorism, ed. Jayne Huckerby and Margaret L. Satterthwaite (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013), 41; Belquis Ahmadi and Sadaf Lakhani, "Afghan Women and Violent Extremism: Colluding, Perpetrating, or Preventing?", United States Institute for Peace, November 2016, 2.

8 Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development – EuropeAid, Unit "Security, Nuclear Safety", Operational Guidelines on the preparation and implementation of EU financed actions specific to countering terrorism and violent extremism in third countries, http://ct-morse.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/EU-CT-CVE-guidelines.pdf

9 Sofia Patel, "The Sultanate of Women: Exploring female roles in perpetrating and preventing violent extremism", Australian Strategic Policy Institute, February 2017, https://s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/ad-aspi/import/SR100_Sultanate-of-women_v2.pdf?7BtsSZBgI0DezLXkbPXgQXW.A5UiIYFz; Peter Romaniuk, "Does CVE Work? Lessons Learned from the Global Effort to Counter Violent Extremism," Global Center on Cooperative Security, September 2015, 36.

ASSUMPTION ONE: WOMEN ARE MORE PEACEFUL THAN MEN

Violent actors in extreme movements have predominantly been men.[10] A key assumption guiding CVE interventions is that women, as inherent peace-builders, can positively influence violent men, if empowered. The first US government preventing violent extremism strategy, launched in August 2011, included stereotypes such as women being more peaceful and moderate as the basis for including them in CVE initiatives.[11] Until its June 2011 revision, the UK's Prevent programme had an explicit focus on the role of Muslim women, including one of five objectives to challenge violent ideology by supporting "mainstream voices".[12] Morocco's Murshidat programme trains women to offer religious counselling to other women. The idea is that they could serve as the voice of tolerant and moderate Islam.[13]

There are issues with the assumptions on which these programmes are based. The most obvious is that they ignore significant findings regarding women's involvement in, and support for, violent extremism.[14] In a study I co-authored with Pearson, published by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) in 2016, participants in the UK, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Canada challenged the assumption that women are pacifist moderates who naturally wish to tackle the violence (of men).

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10 Mia Bloom, Bombshell: Women and Terrorism, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Edwin Bakker, "Jihadi Terrorists in Europe: Their Characteristics and the Circumstances in Which They Joined the Jihad: An Exploratory Study," Clingendael Institute, December 2006), 36; Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Laura Grossman, "Homegrown Terrorists in the U.S. and U.K.: An Empirical Examination of the Radicalization Process," Foundation for Defense of Democracies, April 2009, 63.

11 CHR&GJ, "Women and Preventing Violent Extremism: The US and UK Experiences", briefing paper, https://chrgj.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Women-and-Violent-Extremism-The-US-and-UK-Experiences.pdf.

12 Ibid.

13 Iffat Idris with Ayat Abdelaziz, "Women and Countering Violent Extremism", GSDRC Helpdesk Research Report, May 2017, 3.

14 Nelly Lahoud, "The Neglected Sex: The Jihadis' Exclusion of Women From Jihad", Terrorism and Political Violence 26, no.5 (2014): 780-802; Bloom, Bombshells; Devorah Margolin, "A Palestinian Woman's Place in Terrorism: Organized Perpetrators or Individual Actors?," Studies in Conflict & Terrorism 39, no.10 (2016): 912-934.

Respondents in all the countries flagged that it would be wrong to assume violent actors were always men, or that mothers would naturally agree with governments or ally with the state.[15]

In any case, the concept of what is moderate, particularly when it comes to religion, is a matter of much debate. Religious communities are ethnically, politically and theologically diverse. It is unclear what moderate religion means in practice. Crucially, the politics of labelling an individual or group as moderate has a tendency to delegitimise these actors and does little to diminish the attraction of more radical alternatives.[16] Further, focusing on so-called moderate voices has resulted in religious conservatism being seen as a slippery slope to violent extremism. In reality, however, assumed links between conservative ideas, radicalisation and violent extremism have not been supported by the evidence.[17]

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15 Winterbotham and Pearson, "Different Cities, Shared Stories", 54-65.

16 M.S. Elshimi, De-Radicalisation in the UK Prevent Strategy: Security, Identity and Religion, (London: Routledge, 2017).

17 Manni Crone, "Radicalisation revisited: violence, politics and the skills of the body", International Affairs 92, no. 3 (May 2016): 587-604, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12604.

ASSUMPTION TWO: MOTHERS ARE BETTER ABLE TO SPOT RADICALISATION

Many CVE schemes have centred on mothers having the innate and physical ability, as main care-givers, to be better able to spot signs of radicalisation. Both the literature and CVE programmes overemphasise the role women can play as matriarchs. Children are presumed to listen to their mothers because they view them as figures of respect and authority. The assumption is therefore that women can be critical in stopping their children from following a radical path.[18] Prevent before 2011 drew on the assumption that women were at the heart of their communities and their families.[19] Engagement with women was based on the understanding that mothers were most likely to see and influence changes in their children's behaviour, but may not have the confidence or access (to the police, for example) to share these concerns.

One of the most well-known organisations operating in this space is Women Without Borders and Sisters Against Violent Extremism (SAVE). The organisation's programming in India, Tajikistan, Pakistan, Indonesia, Nigeria and Tanzania to date focuses on the capacity of women to spot and address violent extremism their families.[20] This is based on the belief that mothers are a "buffer between radical influences and those targeted next" because women are well placed to recognise deviant behaviour in their children.[21] The PAIMAN Alumni Trust in Pakistan also emphasises the supposed influence of mothers. A UN Women programme in Kenya was based on the consensus that it was relevant to engage women as the "key custodian of family values" because "men have no time in the family".[22]

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18 "A Man's World: Exploring the Roles of Women in Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism", ed. Naureen Chowdhury Fink, Sara Zeiger and Rafia Bhulai, Hedayah and the Global Centre on Cooperative Security, 2016, http://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/AMansWorld_FULL.pdf.

19 CHR&GJ, "Women and Preventing Violent Extremism", 4; Ibid., 5.

20 "The Roles and Capabilities of Yemeni Women against Violent Extremism", Sisters Against Violent Extremism (SAVE), 2010.

21 "Can Mothers Challenge Extremism? Mothers' perceptions and attitudes of radicalisation and violent extremism", ed. Edit Schlaffer and Ulrich Kropiunigg, Women Without Borders, 2015, 6.

To date there have been limited publicly available evaluations of this type of work—a reflection of the lack of independent evaluations in the field.[23] Impact is hard to prove. Budgets are limited, CVE initiatives typically form single elements of broader responses, and it is often impossible to attribute change to the intervention itself.[24] Yet, evidence is needed. In research conducted by Women Without Borders in 2015, 55 per cent of mothers interviewed believed they could prevent their children from becoming violent extremists, while 36 per cent did not think they would be able to.[25] Interviewees requested more training about the warning signs of radicalisation, alongside other skills including computer use or developing self-confidence.[26] The conclusion was that mothers confronted with warning signs are uncertain about how to respond, but that if they are provided with more knowledge or understanding of the online world, they can "optimise the unique access mothers have to their children".[27]

But it is still unclear whether mothers are best placed to identify and address the warning signs of radicalisation in all contexts. Some research suggests that the mothers or parents of children involved in violent activities can be more disillusioned and sceptical of preventive measures.[28] The 2015 research mentioned above suggests this is linked to parents' fear that they will be blamed for their children joining a terrorist group.[29] In relation to parents in

22 Mohamed Abdilatif, "Evaluation of UNDP's Engaging Women in Preventing and Countering Extremist Violence in Kenya", UN Women, June 2017, 19.

23 Romaniuk, "Does CVE Work", 36; Caitlin Mastroe and Susan Szmania, "Surveying CVE Metrics in Prevention, Disengagement and Deradicalization Programs", Report to the Office of University Programs, Science and Technology Directorate, US Department of Homeland Security, College Park, MD, Start, 2016, http://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START_SurveyingCVEMetrics_March2016.pdf.

24 James Khalil, and Martine Zeuthen, "Countering Violent Extremism and Risk Reduction, A Guide to Programme Design and Evaluation", RUSI Whitehall Report, 2016, 2-16; Lasse Lindekilde, "Value for Money? Problems of Impact Assessment of Counter-Radicalization Policies on End Target Groups: The Case of Denmark", European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research 18, no.4 (June 2012): 385-402.

25 Schlaffer and Kropiunigg, "Can Mothers Challenge Extremism?", 13.

26 Ibid., 18.

27 Ibid., 19.

28 Ibid., 6; Pearson and Winterbotham, "Gender and Radicalisation", 68.

the West, the 2016 RUSI study also highlights concerns regarding radicalisation and blame. Parents in this study explained it was difficult to distinguish between "normal teenage experimentation and when changes warranted intervention".[30] Additionally, the speed at which young people were radicalising meant there was little time for parents to assess the risk.[31]

Even when evaluations are available, indicators of success do not always translate into impact on recruitment or levels of violence. An evaluation of UN Women's programme in Kenya reported that women had improved capacity and empowerment to engage in CVE and related activities in Wajir, Mandera, Mombasa, Kilifi and Kwale.[32] The project increased non-coercive means to delegitimise extremist ideologies, which were perceived to reduce the number of terrorist group supporters and recruits.[33] These are positive indicators and the programme deserves further evaluation.

However, other indicators included in the programme and evaluation—such as awareness about child marriage and the reduction in rape cases in Mombasa county—are less directly related to CVE objectives.[34] They indicate more engagement of women in the security field. Acknowledging the links between increased violence towards women and girls, and the presence and actions of violent extremist groups, is important, as is recognising that awareness of these issues is positive in general. But unless child marriage and rape cases were identified at the outset of the programme as possible causes of violent extremism, they do not necessarily indicate CVE success.

Other research reveals that programmes can face severe operational challenges, particularly where women are not viewed as having authoritative viewpoints. Afghanistan is one example. A paper published by the United States Institute for Peace (USIP) argues, "Poor women's influence within patriarchal communities is not a given."[35] Women in Afghanistan in this study reportedly had

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29 Schlaffer and Kropiunigg, "Can Mothers Challenge Extremism?", 6.

30 Pearson and Winterbotham, "Gender and Radicalisation", 68.

31 Ibid., 68.

32 Abdilatif, "Evaluation" of UNDP's Engaging Women", 21.

33 Ibid., 23.

34 Ibid., 26.

35 Ahmadi and Lakhani, "Afghan Women and Violent Extremism", 6-7.

no prior knowledge of their husbands' or sons' decision to join the Taliban, limiting their ability to discourage or prevent their sons and husbands.[36] Mothers may also miss signs of radicalisation—not least because some of these signs may be more conservative behaviours that are welcomed in many parts of rural Afghanistan. If they do notice something troubling, they may not have the tools to do anything about it. With limited access to information and exposure to life outside the home (a situation that is unlikely to change during the course of one programme), it can be harder to act.[37]

Other studies on Afghanistan support this conclusion. Research on the Female Engagement Team approach introduced by the US is another example. The concept envisaged female International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) soldiers building trusting relationships with Afghan women. The thinking was that this would result in women turning against the Taliban in favour of ISAF and subsequently influencing their male family members. The research suggests these assumptions were flawed—including the belief that Afghan women would engage with foreign women just because they were women and that rapport would automatically translate into trust. This ignored the complex role of women in the Taliban insurgency and the "deeply patriarchal nature of Afghan society".[38]

At the same time, programmes focused on mothers can limit the scope and impact of CVE efforts. In relation to Islamist extremism in the UK, researcher Katherine Brown (who has also authored a paper in this series) highlights that this applies what she terms a "maternalistic logic" to programming: an understanding of Muslim women according to "their expected gender and racialised role as mothers". This assumes not only that women are guided by a maternal instinct but also that women, particularly Muslim mothers, are more present in the home and can therefore spot signs of radicalisation in their children.[39]

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36 Ibid.

37 Ibid., 7.

38 S. Ladbury, "Women and Extremism: the Association of Women and Girls with Jihadi Groups and Implications for Programming", Department for International Development, 2015, 35.

39 Brown, "Gender and Counter-Radicalisation", 41; Winterbotham and Pearson, "Different Cities, Shared Stories", 56.

This is often resisted by women who envisage a more active role in society, including in countering radicalisation, but who also emphasise the need for men and fathers to be involved. The 2016 RUSI study found that around one-quarter of women in all the countries surveyed made some reference to the disempowering effect of these types of CVE programmes. They suggested that such initiatives entrench stereotypes about women and patriarchal dynamics.[40] Instead, mothers advocated being public facing in professional and leadership roles to counter violent extremism effectively.[41]

Context, however, is key. This study drew its conclusions based on research in the West. In other contexts, women may be most present in the home and solely responsible for bringing up children. However, as evident in the research on rural Afghanistan, this does not necessarily equate to an ability to counter radicalisation.

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40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

ASSUMPTION THREE: GENDER EQUALITY REDUCES VIOLENT EXTREMISM

This thinking embodies evidence regarding women's empowerment and peaceful societies.[42] In areas where there are operational challenges because women are not viewed as authorities in families or communities, the solution often proposed is to integrate self-confidence, competence and empowerment approaches alongside CVE skills (for example, trainings on identifying and addressing the warning signs of radicalisation).[43] Therefore the final 'myth' this paper addresses is perhaps the most uncomfortable.

According to the USIP report on Afghan women and violent extremism,

The predominance of a narrative of women as victims – even when they have been involved directly in violent extremism – has translated into theories of change that the empowerment of women and closing the gap on gender inequalities will make a positive contribution to countering violent extremism.[44]

This has inspired a range of gender-equality programmes empowering women through livelihoods, skills and education programmes based on the assumption that progress on broader gender goals can prevent radicalisation to violence.[45]

Research by Krista London Couture draws on two case studies in support of this approach: Bangladesh and Morocco. In Bangladesh, the government has implemented a programme to support women's economic, educational and social empowerment.[46]Indicators for success include women

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42 Marie O'Reilly, "Why Women? Inclusive Security and Peaceful Societies", Inclusive Security, October 2015.

43 Andrew Majoran, "Mothers and Wives: Women's Potential Role in Countering Violent Extremism", The Mackenzie Institute Security Matters, 2 April 2015.

44 Ahmadi and Lakhani, 12.

45 Ibid., 12; Krista London Couture, "National Counterterrorism Center, A Gendered Approach to Countering Violent Extremism Lessons Learned from Women in Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention Applied Successfully in Bangladesh and Morocco", Centre for 21st Security and Intelligence, Policy Paper, July 2014, 17.

participating more in the economy, higher levels of education and increased family planning.[47] In Morocco, gender equality has been identified as a means to battle extremism.[48] Although Couture acknowledges critiques of the Morocco programme due to lack of empirical data, she does not appear to take them into account on the basis that it is hard to measure success in this area anyway.[49]

Care should be taken with assumptions. Couture claims only a correlation between the empowerment of women and a reduction in violent extremism.[50] Correlation does not imply causation. There is overwhelming quantitative evidence that women's empowerment and gender equality are associated with peace and stability, and correlations exist between gender inequalities and violent conflict.[51] Yet, this is insufficient to prove the causal factors of violent extremism. This is not to say that in some contexts gender inequality might be a cause of violent extremism. Women can join extremist groups to overcome feelings of victimisation.[52] But, more generally, as one literature review points out, "The impact of such efforts at female empowerment at countering violent extremism is more ambiguous."[53] A review of Prevent revealed that while women's projects brought benefits such as improving access to services, education and the arts, this did not inevitably translate into improving women's response to terrorism.[54] Meanwhile, it is also true that violent extremism emerges in peaceful, stable and relatively equal societies.

46 Ibid., 35.

47 Ibid, 23.

48 Ibid., 31.

49 Ibid., 32.

50 Idris with Abdelaziz, "Women and Countering Violent Extremism", 17.

51 Valerie Hudson, Bonnie Ballif-Spanvill, Mary Caprioli, and Chad F. Emmett, Sex and World Peace (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Mary Caprioli, "Gendered Conflict", Journal of Peace Research 37, no. 1 (2000): 53-68; Mary Caprioli and Mark Boyer, "Gender, Violence, and International Crisis", Journal of Conflict Resolution 45 (August 2001): 503-518; Patrick M. Regan and Aida Paskeviciute, "Women's Access to Politics and Peaceful States", Journal of Peace Research 40, no. 3 (2003): 287-302; Fink et al, 2013 in Iffat Idris, GSDRC Helpdesk Research Report, 3.

52 Chantal de Jonge Oudraat, "Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE): The Role of Women and Women's Organizations" in "A Man's World", ed. Fink et al, 2016,21.

53 Idris with Abdelaziz, "Women and Countering Violent Extremism", 6.

54 CHR&GJ, "Women and Preventing Violent Extremism", 4.

Conflating empowerment agendas with security-focused ones could be counterproductive and risks undermining both. There is a need to address violence against women, including at the hands of violent extremist groups, but this does not have to be accomplished under the banner of CVE. Search for Common Ground, an NGO, highlights that communities in the Sahel are struggling with challenges of economic opportunity, child marriage, gender-based violence and Boko Haram's bloodshed. The group argues that, "Governance and development work should not all be directed to serve the purpose of CVE, as it disorients us from the need to focus broadly on grievances and dividing lines."[55] Others argue it is important that gender empowerment is not seen as a tool for CVE but pursued in its own right.[56] On a practical level, associating women with security agendas risks backlash by violent extremists.[57] Inadvertently, these programmes could increase violence in the short term during the wait for the longer-term benefits of gender equality.

The concept of what is empowering for women may also be flawed and is certainly contextually defined. Boko Haram is known for its high-profile abductions of women and girls, but there are women (like men) who join the ISIS affiliate for tangible benefits such as gifts, better food and sex.[58] A study I conducted with Elizabeth Pearson (another co-author in this series) showed that many Muslim women, including those who did not support ISIS, understood that women joining the group—irrespective of the reality of the relegated role of women in the so-called caliphate—were asserting their independence from their families and from Western ideas about feminism and equality.[59]

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55 "Transforming Violent Extremism: A Peacebuilder's Guide", Search for Common Ground, 2017.

56 Jayne Huckerby, "The Complexities of Women, Peace, Security and Countering Violent Extremism", Just Security, 24 September 2015, https://www.justsecurity.org/26337/womens- rights-simple-tool-counterterrorism/; Idris with Abdelaziz, "Women and Countering Violent Extremism", 2.

57 Huckerby, "The Complexities of Women, Peace, Security".

58 Hilary Matfess, "Rescued and Deradicalised Women Are Returning to Boko Haram: Why?", African Arguments, 1 November 2017; Hilary Matfess, Women and the War on Boko Haram: Wives, Weapons, Witnesses (African Arguments) (London: Zed Books, 2017); Jacob Zenn and Elizabeth Pearson, "Women, Gender and the evolving tactics of Boko Haram", Journal of Terrorism Research 5, no.1 (2014), DOI: http://doi.org/10.15664/jtr.828, 43.

The research shows that Muslim women have criticised CVE strategies for seeking to impose Western understandings of gender equality on Muslim communities. That is not least because the implicit assumptions are that the failed assimilation of Muslims in the West contributes to radicalisation and that gender equality is an important part of integration.[60] In fact, CVE programmes in the Netherlands have been linked to initiatives integrating Muslim women through secularisation. This has been criticised by some academics for seeking to impose a particular understanding of equality on Dutch Muslim women.[61]

The links between failed integration in the West and violent extremism have not been proved. Extremists have varied widely in background, age, socio-economic status, literacy levels, occupation and criminal records. Empirical research neither supports the hypothesis that failed integration in a Western nation is a major cause of radicalism nor that Muslim radicals integrate more poorly than non-radicals.[62]

59 Pearson and Winterbotham, "Women, Gender and Daesh Radicalisation."

60 Brown, "Gender and Counter- Radicalization", 42; CHR&GJ, "Women and Preventing Violent Extremism"; Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, "Violent Radicalization in Europe: What We Know and What We Do Not Know", Studies in Conflict and Terrorism 33, no. 9 (August 2010): 797–814 in Winterbotham and Pearson, "Different Cities, Shared stories", 56.

61 Sarah Bracke, "Subjects of Debate: Secular and Sexual Exceptionalism, and Muslim Women in The Netherlands", Feminist Review no. 98 (2011): 28-46.

62 Marco Goli and Shahamak Rezai, "Radical Islamism and Migrant Integration in Denmark: An Empirical Inquiry", Journal of Strategic Security 4, no. 4 (2012): 81-114. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.4.4.4

STOPPING THE STEREOTYPES

The increased attention of the international community and national governments to the role of women in CVE efforts is to be welcomed. Women need to be included in security planning and efforts to counter violent extremism. But many initiatives to engage women fail to properly incorporate a gender perspective. They perpetuate stereotypes as a result. Effective efforts to deal with violent extremism call for greater attention to gender relations and gender inequalities in societies. An evaluation of the EU's STRIVE programme in the Horn of Africa, published in 2017, showed that there are significant differences between Somaliland and Kenya, the former being more conservative. Different approaches were needed.[63] In places where women's voices and agency are restricted, efforts to empower women with skills to identify the indicators of radicalisation are likely to have limited impact on countering violent extremism in the short term.

Empowerment programmes may bring long-term benefits, but before that, reaction to such initiatives could increase levels of violence or have limited impact on the immediate threat of violent extremism. In some contexts, it may be important before engaging women in CVE to first induce a broader cultural shift in local perceptions of gender.[64] This is a big, cross-generational task. It has implications for programming and challenges the contention that focusing solely on women's empowerment in one project or programme will be enough to mobilise women in preventing violent extremism. CVE should be pursued as an immediate response to those at risk of recruitment and radicalisation. Targeted programming that addresses a community's needs and local factors leading to violence is likely to result in better programmes.

Sensitivity to gender-related issues can improve the way programmes are designed. At the same time, challenging assumptions is the first step to ensuring a more constructive role

63 Julian Brett and Andre Kahlmeyer, "STRIVE (Horn of Africa)", Evaluation Report, 23 January 2017, http://ct-morse.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/170124-STRIVE-evaluation-Report-Final.pdf.

64 "STRIVE Lessons Learned, Horn of Africa", Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), April 2017, http://ct-morse.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Strive-Lessons-Learned-Report-Final-Version.pdf; Brett and Kahlmeyer, "STRIVE (Horn of Africa)."

for women in CVE. These myths treat women as caretakers and key figures in families, and in society at large, in upholding values. Women are viewed in their relation to male family members as mothers, sisters, wives and so on, rather than as individuals with agency and influence. Of course, women can feel agency in these roles. But assumptions have limited the understanding of the dynamics of violent extremism. CVE efforts, including those aimed at women, will only be more effective if this is taken into account.

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- ISIS, Women and Jihad: Breaking With Convention *(https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/isis-women-and-jihad-breaking-convention)*
- Boko Haram's Split on Women in Combat *(https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/boko-harams-split-women-combat)*
- Why Men Fight and Women Don't: Masculinity and Extremist Violence *(https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/why-men-fight-and-women-dont-masculinity-and-extremist-violence)*
- White Widows: The Myth of the Deadliest Jihadi Women *(https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/white-widows-myth-deadliest-jihadi-women)*
- Do Mothers Know Best? How Assumptions Harm CVE
- Neither Feminists nor Victims: How Women's Agency Has Shaped Palestinian Violence *(https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/womens-agency-palestinian-violence)*

The idea that mothers are best placed to spot signs of radicalisation limits the scope of policy to counter violent extremism.

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