

GENDER & COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM (CVE)



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Women's equality lies at the heart of CVE: gender inequality predicts, serves, and propagates violent extremism (VE).

It is important to examine the relationship between violent extremism (VE) and women's position in society. Gender inequality is one of the best indicators of violent extremism. There is significant overlap between the countries most impacted by violent extremism and the countries where women's security is most precarious.¹ Violent extremist groups have capitalized on, profited from, and weaponized the subjugation of women. The use of women's bodies to wage and justify war is apparent in all forms of violent conflict, not just in conflicts involving VE, but analyzing these dynamics with a VE-specific lens is critical to designing effective CVE programs.

Understanding and treating gender equality as an integral CVE tool would not only illuminate a broader range of policy and programmatic options, it would also produce better results. Many extremist groups conflate morality with female chastity, blame broadened women's rights for societal disintegration, employ sexual violence to consolidate power, and monetize forced marriage and rape through ransom payments.² Even as extremist groups abuse and disempower women, they mobilize women with the false promise of increased agency.³ Perceived gender exclusion and inequity can motivate women to join violent extremist groups.⁴ Gender inequality is fundamental to the proliferation of VE, as an indicator, a weapon, and a principle reason women support violent extremist movements.

To date, CVE programming has overwhelmingly been designed for and directed at men, because VE is believed to be a primarily male endeavor. However, there are an estimated 600 Western female ISIS recruits and approximately 700 women from Tunisia have reportedly joined jihadist groups in Syria. Though these numbers are still relatively low, they are not insignificant. Moreover, some women choose to support VE groups without formally joining. Research suggests these women see VE as the best means of addressing their grievances, including lack of equality and political and social agency.⁵

Programs that do consider women often rely on women to sway their families and communities against VE groups, failing to consider that though women may hold this ability, they do not always hold this power.⁶ Furthermore, these programs assume that women will utilize their clout to fight *against* violent extremist groups, when some women choose to fight *for* violent extremist groups. If CVE programming aims to mobilize the power of women, it must ensure not only women's empowerment, but also women's equality. The goal of this paper is to draw the connections between CVE and gender equality, highlight policies and programs that have successfully and meaningfully integrated the goals of CVE and gender equality, and provide recommendations for a transformation of CVE that accounts for gender equality as a tactical requirement for successful policies and programs.

¹ Comparison of the Institute for Economics and Peace, Global Terrorism Index 2017 and the Georgetown Institute for Women Peace and Security, Women, Peace and Security Index.

² Jamille Bigio, Council on Foreign Relations, "How the Islamic State Benefits from Sexual Violence", November 2017.

³ Sarah Ladbury, DFID, "Women and Extremism: The Association of Women and Girls with Jihadi Groups and Implications for Programming", January 2015.

⁴ USAID, "People Not Pawns: Women's Participation in Violent Extremism Across MENA", September 2015.

⁵ Julia Billings, USAID, "People Not Pawns: Women's Participation in Violent Extremism Across MENA", September 2015.

⁶ Naureen Chowdhury Fink, Sara Zeiger, and Rafia Bhulai, Hedayah and The Global Center on Cooperative Security, "A Man's World? Exploring the Roles of Women in Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism", April 2016.

Case Studies

Inclusive Security and PAIMAN Alumni Trust in Pakistan

[Pakistani Women Moderating Extremism](#), implemented by the [Institute for Inclusive Security](#) and [PAIMAN Alumni Trust](#), built and supported Amn-oNisa, a coalition of women peacebuilders from across Pakistan dedicated to CVE. Through a series of workshops and meetings, members of Amn-oNisa formed strong connections and working relationships with one another, built their practical knowledge of CVE and women, peace and security issues, and developed their concrete advocacy skills, including target mapping and messaging for different audiences.

Though the program did not dismantle structural gender inequality in Pakistan, it worked to elevate the visibility and efficacy of female peacebuilders despite structural challenges, enabling them to chip away at inequality. Members from Balochistan province partnered with the provincial women's parliamentary caucus, who decided to back Amn-oNisa's recommendations in the Balochistan Provincial Assembly. Members formed alliances with religious leaders and scholars to discuss how to facilitate deeper understanding of Islamic theology, dispel misinterpretations, and promote peaceful Islamic values.

PAIMAN Alumni Trust also runs the 'Mothers TOLANA' program, which mobilizes mothers to combat violent extremism. Rather than assume mothers have the power to influence their sons and husbands and want to use that influence to dissuade them from joining violent extremist groups, Mothers TOLANA recognizes that operational effectiveness requires raising the status of women to be a central goal. Thus, the program aims to give the mothers marketable livelihood skills to raise their position in the family and community and to build their capacity to recognize signs of violent extremism. With these skills they are able to promote dialogue and community peacebuilding to preempt early signs from escalating to violence. As of April 2016, at least 15,000 female community members have been educated through the program and there are several concrete examples of Mothers TOLANA members using their training to prevent an act of violent extremism.⁷

Sisters Against Violent Extremism (SAVE) in India

[SAVE](#) launched *Mothers for Change* in India to help the families of victims of the 26/11 attacks⁸ to heal and to empower mothers to educate their communities and families against the ideologies of violent extremism. Like Mothers TOLANA, *Mothers for Change* has the dual goals of elevating the status of women in society and encouraging women to use that status to compel those close to them to resist VE. Through storytelling and dialogue workshops, *Mothers for Change* equipped participants to take on greater authority within a male-dominated domestic and social landscape and assert more influence over their families and communities.

Mothers for Change had the added elements of recognizing the unique trauma that wives and families of victims of terrorism undergo and helping to facilitate a healing process. This process is crucial for the emotional wellbeing of participants, but also serves as a CVE tool. Retribution is a powerful motivator and exposure to violence and experiences of injustice foment the likelihood of women supporting and joining violent extremist causes. Recognizing this, and the role empowered women can play in influencing their children's attitudes toward VE, the *Mothers for Change* program provided emotional support and counseling to its participants. In doing so, it allowed the participants to work through their trauma and discuss their grievances.

Murshidat Program in Morocco

The [Murshidat Program in Morocco](#) is a statewide initiative that trains and certifies female preachers, or *murshidas*, to promote religious moderation and tolerance to curb violent extremism. Under the program, which has been in place since 2005, 50 female preachers and 150 imams graduate annually. The role of *murshidas* in their communities is

⁷ Mossarat Qadeem, UN Chronicle, "Women's Participation in Transforming Conflict and Violent Extremism", April 2016.

⁸ The 26/11 attacks were a series of 12 coordinated shooting and bombing attacks lasting four days across Mumbai carried out by 10 members Lashkar-e-Taiba, a terrorist organization based in Pakistan in November 2008.

expansive; they work in mosques, schools, hospitals, prisons, and other institutions and their responsibilities span from counseling female prisoners, to serving as community mediators, to providing religious education.

Though *murshidas* are charged with countering violent extremist ideologies in their communities, the goal of the program is also to foster gender equality and open a traditionally male dominated space- mosque leadership - to women. For the Moroccan state, the goals are inseparable. Morocco has deemed that affording education, service provision, and equal opportunity to women is required for effective CVE. Thus, the *Murshidat* Program is part of a broader effort to place women at the center of Morocco's national CVE strategy: the second tier of Morocco's three pillar strategy for CVE focuses on the expansion of legal rights, political empowerment of women, and youth education.

The program has been a success in terms of promoting gender equality and discouraging violent extremism. Women have a greater role in religious affairs, several previously taboo women's issues can now be openly discussed, the sentiment that the mosque leadership positions should be reserved for men is diminishing, and some misconceptions about women peddled by extremist fatwas have been addressed.⁹ In 2009, the United States Department of State explicitly praised the program for its success in countering terrorism and spreading peaceful Islamic teachings.¹⁰

Women in International Security Horn of Africa (WIIS HoA) in Kenya

[Women in International Security HoA](#) recognizes the role that Kenyan women play in both countering and proliferating violent extremism and works to ensure all the diversity of women's roles is considered and accounted for in CVE policy and programming. The group collaborated with the Kenyan government to guarantee Kenya's National Countering Terrorism Strategy adequately addressed the role of women in violent extremist groups. Additionally, WIIS HoA trains women to be spiritual leaders and mentors, using specific examples from the Quran that highlight women's value in Islam to combat the faulty idea that religious leadership is an exclusively male domain. By elevating women's voices and experiences to the highest levels of government and religious institutions, WIIS HoA empowers women, contributes to gender equality, and increases the efficacy of CVE programming by ensuring more comprehensive policy and deeper understanding of the Islamic faith.

The group also heads up a de-radicalization program that includes vocational training for women incarcerated for terrorism, community-based support groups for women who have left al-Shabaab, and family reintegration programs. WIIS HoA is thus filling a crucial gap in the CVE sphere: most deradicalization programs focus on men and fail to account for the growing number of women who serve as combatants or otherwise support VE groups. Deradicalization programs that do target female combatants overwhelmingly include women in existing programs designed for men, rather than designing programs explicitly for women. WIIS HoA has bucked this trend and created a female specific deradicalization program, ensuring the unique needs of female combatants are considered in reintegration efforts.

CVE and Gender Equality are Twin Goals

There are numerous other examples of how CVE initiatives and research can and should take on a gendered lens. [Aware Girls](#) in Pakistan has focused on increasing the civic and political empowerment of women to promote non-violence and peaceful action. Women from across Afghanistan have taken it upon themselves to address the issues of gender equality and VE, [conducting home visits](#) to relatives and friends who have been radicalized and [broadcasting radio programs](#) championing women's rights and democratization. Our Secure Future published [innovative research](#) elucidating the way men's experience with VE is gendered and arguing for the importance of engaging men in the WPS agenda. The programs and examples highlighted here make clear that gender equality is not only a moral imperative; it is a strategic necessity. CVE initiatives inhibit their own effectiveness by not recognizing the integral role gender inequality plays in the rise of violent extremism. Women's equality is not peripheral to peace- it is fundamental.

⁹ Hassan al-Ashraf, The New Arab, "Morocco's Murshidat female religious guides preach tolerance and moderation", May 2016.

¹⁰ Hassan al-Ashraf, The New Arab, "Morocco's Murshidat female religious guides preach tolerance and moderation", May 2016.

Recommendations

These cases provide building blocks for a fieldwide programmatic transformation that recognizes gender inequality as a root cause of VE and that gender equality must be primary goal of CVE. To realize that transformation, implementers and policymakers must:

- Form partnerships with local women's organizations who often have strong community connections and a deep knowledge of gender dynamics on the ground, but may not have strong CVE tools and knowledge.
- Perform contextual analysis of the status of women prior to designing programs or writing policy.
- Examine how drivers of VE differ or align for men and women in various contexts and design programs and policies that account for gender-specific drivers.
- Employ metrics and indicators that measure gender equality, rather than just disaggregating existing data by gender. These indicators can be adapted from existing sources like the OECD, SDG 5, and UNDP.
- Ensure the equal participation of women in all positions (researchers, practitioners, policymakers, local actors, etc.).
- Define gender equality as a core goal of CVE policy and programming instead of simply using women as a tool to fight VE.
- Broaden the range of policy and programming dealing with gender to account for the diverse roles women have

