

Challenging Conventional Wisdom, Transforming Current Practices

A Gendered Lens on PVE

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1 Introduction

Despite news of the decimation of Daesh/ISIS in Syria and Iraq, the spectre of violent extremism in its various forms remains central in the global security discourse. For good reason: extremist ideological movements that either overtly use or advocate for violence, or implicitly condone it in pursuit of their cause, continue to threaten peace and security in communities across the world. As the Global Terrorism Index (GTI)¹ indicates, 2016 may have seen a decline in the overall number of deaths due to terror but more countries are now affected. In 2015, 65 countries worldwide experienced a terror attack. By 2016, the number had risen to 77 – some two-thirds of all states globally. While the countries most affected by extremism in 2014 – notably Pakistan, Nigeria, Syria and Iraq – have seen the biggest declines in deaths, among OECD member states, there was a 67% increase in attacks and an increase of nearly 600% in deaths between 2014 and 2016. In the US alone, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), there were some 917 hate groups operating across the country in 2016, including 193 Black Separatist groups. The overwhelming majority were white supremacist groups, with anti-Muslim groups experiencing a 197% increase in numbers just between 2015 and 2016.

Internationally and at the United Nations, the momentum to develop national action plans on preventing violent extremism (PVE) persists. Some governments are embracing the agenda, recognising the scale of the problem. As Mohammed Abu-Nimer also notes in his lead article, for others, PVE is the topic du jour that brings financial or political advantages, particularly given the budgets that traditional bilateral donors are allocating to the cause. There is also much debate about the process by which the plans are being designed, developed and implemented. In some contexts, state security authorities are taking the lead, with little involvement of other sectors or civil society. Elsewhere, advocacy from the grassroots and the global community is fostering more inclusive processes. In the case of Kenya, the national strategy was adopted but it lacked any mention of the gendered dimensions of violent extremism, so a women-led coalition of organisations has undertaken extensive consultations to develop a shadow or annex plan in the form of a ‘Women’s Charter’ to address the gaps in the existing plan.²

Yet despite the myriad policy directives and action plans to prevent and counter this phenomenon, there is still no agreed definition of what ‘violent extremism’ means.³ In the United States in particular, incidents of mass shootings that involve white men as perpetrators are typically categorised as ‘lone wolf’ attacks or are described in terms of young men with mental health problems, while those involving Muslims are labelled as terror or extremist attacks. Hate crimes by right-wing groups, many of them overtly or implicitly affiliated with white supremacists and representing over 70% of terror attacks in the US since 9/11, receive little attention, on the other hand.⁴ Similarly, excessive force by security actors against minorities has not resulted in commensurate justice for the perpetrators or in security sector reform measures to reduce the incidents of abuse significantly.⁵ In other words, domestically and in foreign policy, as Abu-Nimer (2018) also notes, politics dictates which crimes or locations and which forms of violence are labelled as violent extremism and thus deserving of attention and resources.

1 See <http://globalterrorismindex.org/>.

2 The International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) that I run and members of the Women’s Alliance for Security Leadership (WASL) have provided support to the Kenyan women’s groups as they advocate for the Women’s Charter.

3 Naz Modirzadeh: “If It’s Broke, Don’t Make it Worse: A Critique of the U.N. Secretary-General’s Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism”, *Lawfare*, 23 January 2016, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/if-its-broke-dont-make-it-worse-critique-un-secretary-generals-plan-action-prevent-violent-extremism>.

4 Amy Sherman, “Fact-checking Cory Booker’s statistic on attacks by white nationalist hate groups”, *Politifact*, 18 January 2018, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2018/jan/18/cory-booker/fact-checking-cory-bookers-statistic-attacks-white/>.

5 Haeyoun Park and Jasmine C. Lee, “Looking for Accountability in Police-Involved Deaths of Blacks”, *The New York Times*, 3 May 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/07/12/us/looking-for-accountability-in-police-involved-deaths-of-blacks.html>.

The media, meanwhile, has honed in on the use of extreme and often public violence, such as beheadings, suicide bombings and random terror attacks on civilians. But *extreme violence* and attacks on civilians are neither new, nor unique to such groups. They were evident in the wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia in the 1990s, when militias hacked off people's limbs. They were a feature of the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, which kidnapped boys and girls and forced them to kill and maim their own relatives and neighbours. Many states perpetrate acts of extreme violence, including some against innocent civilians. In addition, neither the purported economic and political goals and desire for territorial control nor the transnational nature of contemporary violent extremist movements are unique. The socialist and liberation movements of the late 20th century were also transnational, and had a mix of economic, socio-political and ideological goals. Finally, as the 2017 GTI indicates, there is a correlation between incidences of violent extremism and levels of brutality and abuse by state security actors across a range of countries. The 2017 mass attack and deportation of the Rohingya in Myanmar led by the Buddhist-majority state army and supported by Buddhist militias is a case in point. In the case of Iraq, the US-led coalition bombings against ISIS in Mosul have reportedly resulted in over 3200 deaths.⁶ This, too, concurs with the observations of local activists quoted in Abu-Nimer's paper (2018, 6), who say: "We have had political violence and mass crimes for decades." In effect, in international policy circles, the acts of extreme violence are not the primary concern. Reactions are dependent on who the perpetrator is, and where the violence is occurring.

There is, however, one critical differentiating factor: today's violent extremist movements use manipulation of visceral human identities. Their strategy to mobilise by co-opting and warping issues of ethnicity, race, religion and gender – across national borders, combined with the easy connectivity provided by technology – makes them a unique modern force. Doing so in an age when most societies, communities and even individuals are extremely diverse and pluralistic in nature, and many people have 'fusion' identities due to mixed marriages, migration and greater attention to gender identities, etc., further increases the potential threat they represent to the social cohesion and domestic peace architecture of countries globally.

In responding to Abu-Nimer's framing article, this paper offers points of agreement and difference in an effort to deepen our collective understanding of the phenomenon of violent extremism and the responses needed to enable effective transformation. It does so first by offering a conceptual shift to move beyond limitations of the current terminology and discourse. Second, it provides an overview of the relevance of identity to VE with particular attention to the centrality of gender to the ideology, recruitment and action of violent extremists, as well as the importance of women in particular in countering, preventing and providing clear alternatives to such groups. In doing so, it challenges Abu-Nimer's assertion (2018, 7) that the inclusion of women is often externally driven and that they are thus being instrumentalised. While I agree with Abu-Nimer's views on the need for an integrative approach to religious agencies, his lack of attention to gender perspectives is notable; I therefore also argue for caution. Too often, religious institutions – even the more moderate ones – are at odds with principles of gender equality and non-discrimination. Thus, while their inclusion in P/CVE efforts is essential and in many cases is occurring at the grassroots, their legitimacy or authority should not be elevated above those of women- or youth-led organisations and others active in this sphere. Experience from international mediation efforts indicates that while the legitimacy of women's human rights defenders and peacebuilders is often questioned, that of religious leaders is assumed.

In sum, however, I concur with Abu Nimer's call for a transformative lens anchored on PVE. The discussion and recommendations below offer a framework for a shift in the discourse and practice of C/PVE to embrace the issues of identity and articulate an agenda that is not only 'against' extremism, but also pro-peace, resilience, equality and pluralism (PREP).

6 Jack Moore, "Mosul Battle: U.S. Coalition, Iraq Killed Ten Times More Civilians Than They Claim", Newsweek, 20 December 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/mosul-battle-us-coalition-killed-ten-times-more-civilians-it-claims-753349>.

2 Extremism in the Age of Pluralistic Identities

When the UN issued the Secretary-General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism (UN 2016), a notable omission was an agreed definition of 'violent extremism'. Given the inherently political nature of the challenge (as noted above), it is understandable why it was difficult to pinpoint. Nonetheless, if resources are being ploughed into the agenda, there is at least a need to articulate the parameters and characteristics of the phenomenon that we seek to prevent or counter, and the alternative that we want to instil and establish.

So how can we define or characterise 'violent extremism'? Across the range of violent extremist movements that exist, there are shared features. Such movements tap and seek to elevate one core identity as being superior to all else. Where religion is used to recruit, for example, the tactics are to emphasise their target's religious identity (e.g. Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism) while diminishing other aspects such as nationality, ethnicity or cultural heritage. Movements that use race apply similar tactics. In the US, for example, white supremacists are by definition advocating for the supremacy of 'white' people and the separation of races. They denigrate mixing of the races and portray themselves as victims or as facing existential threats. In effect, even if an African American or an Arab adhered to their economic or political views, by virtue of their race, membership of such movements would either be denied to them or would be conditional upon their subscribing to their own subjugation and diminished status.

The rigid interpretations of religious, cultural, national, ethnic or sectarian identity that extremist movements espouse aim to foster deep 'bonds' between their followers and recruits, while fomenting divisions with and exclusion of others. This normalisation of intolerance and disrespect for people of different ethnicities, religions, gender or nationalities lays the groundwork from which the more radicalised and violent forms of extremism can grow.

Extremists present their religious or ethno-racial framings as 'the truth' and seek to undermine and discredit other manifestations of that faith or culture. In particular, they take aim at the moderate and syncretic practices that typically accept, respect and integrate diversity.

These movements recognise the importance of formal educational spaces to impart their worldviews, values and ideologies. They are present in schools and universities, religious institutions, and social and mainstream media. While they claim to teach or adhere to ethics and morality, they are teaching a sense of 'otherness' – us against them – that implicitly (and increasingly explicitly) condones bigotry and racism and lays the foundations for acts of violence.

The rise of extremist identity-based movements cloaked in the mantle of faiths and ethnicities is also a result of the phenomenon of extreme pluralism evident within countries and communities worldwide. Various factors have contributed to this state of extreme pluralism. On the one hand, structural economic policies that have fostered the opening of markets, privatisation and globalisation have catalysed migration on a hitherto unprecedented scale – across and within countries. Urbanisation is also a factor and an outcome, as people from different traditional backgrounds merge into crowded settings. Often, they are caught between being untethered from the social norms that moderated values and actions, while encountering new norms and practices.

Hyper-connectivity via technology has also contributed to this state of extreme pluralism – enabling people from far corners of the world to be linked with each other, to sustain the past or create new relations. But while this virtual connectivity has led to the creation of new imagined communities based on identity, it is also shredding the physical connectivity that existed in traditional communities. Instead of fostering greater cohesion and integration, it contributes to separation.

In addition, progressive forces that have sought to be inclusive and accepting of all forms of diversity have an impact. With different forces shedding light on and emphasising aspects of identity, we are all becoming more conscious of our own multiple identities – be it our gender, sexuality, age, race, ethnicity, religion or physical ability, to name a few. At its best, this exposure to differences in culture and human experience fosters greater empathy, relatability and respect among people. Each can be a bridge to another person in ways that in the past we may have found ‘unrelatable’.

But it is also prompting internal crises for people and communities. At a national level, the fear is manifested in the debates about national identity such as ‘Frenchness’ as raised by Marie Le Pen’s extreme right-wing party, the ‘British values’ that have been a consistent theme in the UK’s political and social discussions, or the “make America great again” slogan that is tied so inherently with the alt-right movements. These issues are also reflected in debates about the content of educational curricula, as many people consider the rising diversity in the citizenry as a threat to and dilution of hegemonic national or religious identities and the values associated with their states and societies.

At the community level, the fear of losing identity or losing status, evident among white supremacists on the one hand and minority diaspora or displaced communities on the other, can lead to defensive protection of and adherence to restrictive traditional practices. Diaspora groups, for example, often remain frozen in history, while in their nation of origin practices evolve and change.

At an individual level, especially for young people from minority backgrounds, it can be a struggle to find acceptance of their layered and complex identities. As a discussion with former ISIS affiliates in the UK highlighted in 2015, the issue of mixed and plural identity can heighten vulnerability to recruitment. “Many young British Muslims are confused about where we fit in the world,” said one discussant. Another reflected: “Women can find the issue of identity particularly difficult. What does it mean to be British, Muslim, Somali, Ethiopian?” For some, though, the situation is more clear-cut: “They no longer have to wrestle with are you this, are you that – you’re a Muslim.”⁷

Herein lies the challenge: is a boy or girl born in France to originally Algerian parents, whose faith is Islam, French, Muslim, Arab, North African, Algerian or all of the above? What happens when he/she self-identifies in one way, but is identified or categorised by his/her community or society at large in other ways? If they and their communities’ histories are absent from school history books, literature, the arts or other subjects, they may be drawn to external sources to understand and assert their identity. The pull into one overarching communal religious identity is pervasive and strong.

Addressing it requires the will to tackle some uncomfortable truths. In Europe, for example, this may mean discussions about the history of colonialism and the economic contributions of the colonised states to the wealth of the colonisers. These are discussions from which many governments still shy away. But such a process can also be joyful. For example, the art, music, architecture and mythology of South Asia could be integrated into schools’ curricula for the arts and literature. Perhaps the best example of this exists in the food and restaurant sector, where chefs willingly embrace fusion by combining the flavours and styles of different cuisines. If the will exists to engage in such discourse, the ways forward are endless and ultimately transformative.

However, if formal educational spaces do not provide a means of understanding pluralism or discussions about the similarities and differences across faiths and cultures, then external forces fill that void. Identity-based movements are exploiting these spaces to promote their ideals and norms, and some veer to the extreme.

Herein lies the paradox: the principle of freedom of expression, which is at the heart of liberal democracies, has enabled the rise of the very same extremist and regressive forces that now challenge the liberalism and pluralism of societies in which they flourished. The formal and informal spaces, including

7 Joanna Witt, “Why Do Young Women Want To Join Islamic State?”, *The Guardian*, 27 July 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/membership/2015/jul/27/guardian-live-why-do-young-women-want-to-join-islamic-state>.

social media, which influence and inform today's youth, are thus at the frontlines of the struggle against extremism and for social cohesion, inclusivity and pluralism (Alava et al. 2017).

While the challenges are significant, it is also critical to ensure a balanced and practical perspective. In most contexts, the clear majority of the population – youth or otherwise – are *not* engaged in or attracted to the extremist ideologues and the drive towards violence. But the media and policy community tend to ignore them, including the very many who are active and vocal against extremism in their own settings. We take much of this for granted. But we need to value and celebrate this peaceful pluralistic majority.

3 Celebrating the Alternative: Peace, Resilience, Equality and Pluralism

We need to focus more attention on better understanding the experiences that enable young and old alike to embrace pluralism, equal rights and peace, and recoil from intolerance and bigotry. In other words, as much as we need to make infertile the breeding ground for extremism, we must also sow the seeds that foster cohesion and enable us to acknowledge our own and each other's plural identities. This is why the framing of both 'countering' and 'preventing' violent extremism, while necessary, is not sufficient. These terms state what we are 'against'. Even prevention – which, as Abu-Nimer says, is a framework to enable more comprehensive approaches – is problem-, not solution-oriented. A health analogy is helpful in explaining this shift. If a person has a bacterial illness, they are cured with antibiotics to counter and fight the bacteria. Prior to becoming ill, we seek to prevent diseases by offering immunisation. But these measures are encompassed in broader efforts to ensure good health, such as maintaining levels of hygiene, good exercise and nutrition.

Applied to the C/PVE agenda and to move towards a truly transformative agenda, as Abu-Nimer also suggests, we need a conceptual shift to define what we aspire to. If visceral identity and relations based on faith, gender, familial, ethnic or national ties are being exploited to foster exclusion and division, then the multiple identities that bind us across the divisions need to be recognised, articulated, elevated and celebrated. Drawing on ICAN's work with its grassroots partners and members of the Women's Alliance for Security Leadership in over 35 countries, and building on the human security and women, peace and security frameworks already formulated in international policy, I offer the framework of PREP – peace, resilience, equality and pluralism.

The *peace* component refers to adherence to non-violence and limitations on the use of security forces and violent means to address the threats, and prioritising attention to social cohesion and development. At a minimum, instead of counter-terrorism (CT) strategies driving practices, incorporating P/CVE efforts and subsuming the majority of the resources, CT and the related security interventions should be a component of a broader PREP strategy. This would also mean a commensurate reallocation of resources away from CT and towards non-violent efforts.

Attention to *resilience* is needed from multiple perspectives. On the one hand, it is essential to foster religious and cultural literacy so that people are resilient against the messages of extremist rhetoric and teachings. Where religion is being exploited, this includes pushback against the fringe and extremist versions, and dissemination of moderate interpretations. Where race and ethnicity are drawn upon to create a mythical past, multi-perspective history is needed. On the other hand, resilience also encapsulates the need to teach and foster multiple skills among young people, so that they can withstand shocks and

crises. This includes education and skills development for income generation and livelihoods, as well as the psycho-social skills needed for self-care in times of uncertainty and vulnerability.

Fostering respect and *equality* among people – based on gender, race, ethnicity, economic status or other factors – is also critical. Given that violent extremism is part-rooted in the notion of superiority that allows for the justification of violence and subjugation of others, instilling a sense of equality and respect for others is essential. But it cannot be rhetorical. States have to demonstrate their own respect for their citizenry by adhering to the universal principles of human rights. Their security and intelligence apparatus must respect people’s rights. Laws must be reformed or adopted to ensure equality and end discrimination.

Finally, attention to fostering *pluralism* and respect for the multiplicity of identities is essential. It can generate innovation and creativity through the interactions between cultures and religions. More significantly, by encouraging recognition of plural identities, we can foster increased ‘relatability’ and empathy rather than division. As Bushra Qadeem, a Pakistani school principal who introduced peace education into her curriculum notes, teaching students the value of diversity is essential. One simple method she uses for younger children is to divide them into two groups, providing one group with a bag filled with candy in an array of colours, while giving the second group a bag with just yellow candies. The children are instructed to produce a piece of artwork depicting a garden, using their candies. As one group produces a monochrome image of the world, the other a multi-coloured one, the result is immediately evident. Through this one simple exercise, the children see the value of diversity and the fact that it is a reality in life, yet it is taken for granted.

In sum, to achieve the transformation to which Abu-Nimer refers, the paradigm has to evolve. What started with counter-terrorism and shifted to CVE then PVE needs to move towards PREP: peace, resilience, equality and pluralism. CT and C/VE should be encompassed within that broader goal.

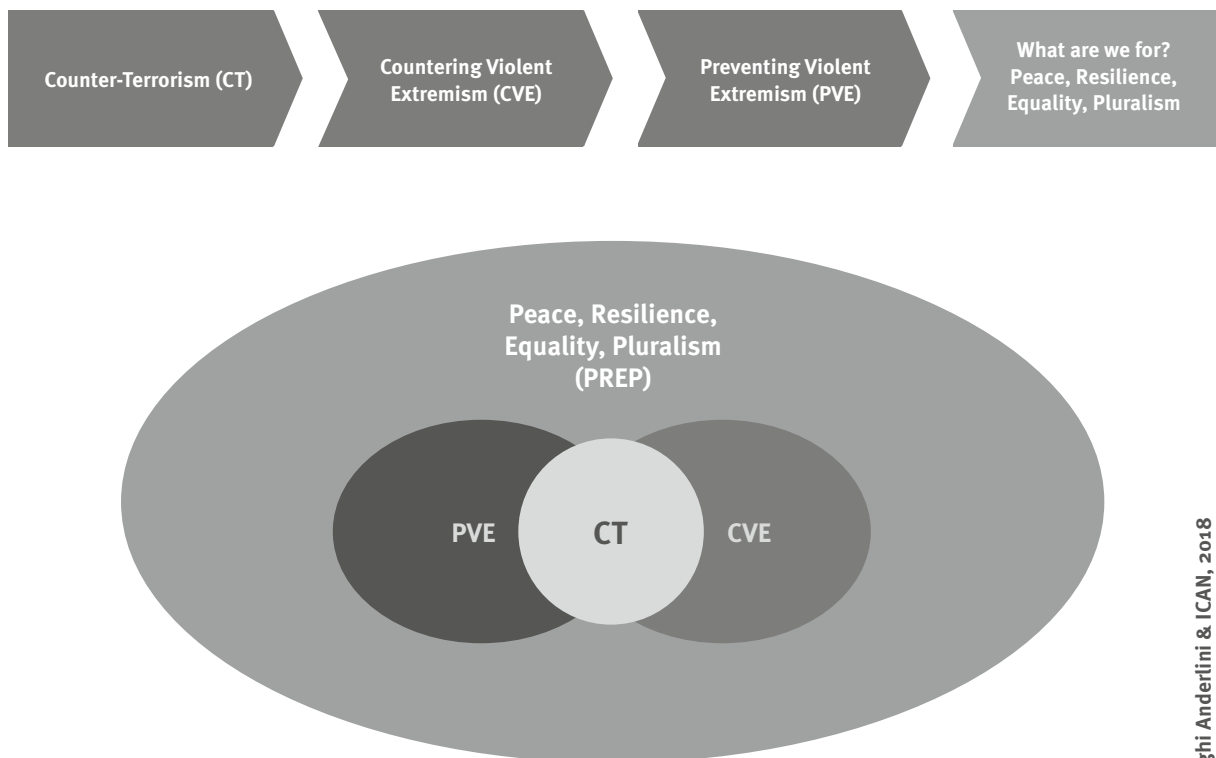


Figure 1: Evolving the paradigm: PREP

4 The Critical Role of Gender Identity

Abu-Nimer acknowledges the importance of an integrated approach that is inclusive of gender and minority perspectives. But he makes three questionable assertions. First, he conflates ‘gender’ with women and lists them alongside minorities, whereas women represent 50% or more of the population: “The steps towards engaging religious agencies strongly resemble those of other areas: racial and ethnic studies, gender, peacebuilding and other fields working *with marginalised minorities*.” (Abu-Nimer 2018, 7, emphasis added.) Second, he claims that women and other marginalised groups have been instrumentalised in this agenda, noting “the early steps were mostly in the form of symbolic involvement of gender, racial minorities ...” (ibid.). Finally, in making the case for more robust inclusion of religious agencies, he assumes that the other sectors – notably women – are already fully integrated and resourced, while religious actors are still excluded.

The discussion below provides an alternative perspective on these assertions, by demonstrating the centrality and restricted definitions of gender norms to contemporary VE movements. This is evident in the ideologies, their recruitment tactics and actions, and in the forces that challenge and counter their spread. But it is yet to be fully integrated in the responses or resources provided by international actors.

4.1 Gender in the ideology of violent extremism⁸

The control, co-option, coercion and subjugation of women are central features of the ideology of VE movements today. Long before violent extremism became a concern for the international peace and security community, women and particularly women’s human rights defenders were warning about its escalation and impact.⁹ Globally since the seminal Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, there has been a rising backlash against women’s rights across cultures, religions and regions. Women’s basic physical and legal rights and security are at the centre of these ideological battles. In each instance, the vociferous minority has made significant strides into mainstream debate and daily life. Women are facing new challenges, ranging from limitations on reproductive health rights in the United States, to girls’ access to education as witnessed in the attacks on schoolgirls in Pakistan and Nigeria, to the accelerated spread of the hijab and niqab among Muslims who previously did not adhere to such dress codes. But the attacks on women were long ignored by the policy and security elite globally because violence against women has been victim to cultural relativism, as policy-makers have either ignored or explained it away as cultural norms and practices. Such violence has also been ignored by security actors, as in principle, the abuse, subjugation or even murder of women is not deemed to be a threat to national or international security.

Thus the targeting of and impact on women are not accidental or ‘collateral damage’. They are deliberate, tactical and strategic. In non-western settings, conservative and extremist movements typically tie concepts of women’s rights to notions of ‘western’ immorality and feminism as an extension of colonialist politics.¹⁰ The more extreme movements create boundaries between women and men, manifested through legal and physical means, including the regression of women away from the public space and life. They promulgate rigid understandings of religious texts that define what it means to be a good wife, daughter or woman.¹¹

⁸ This section contains excerpts from a 2015 paper co-written by the author for a UN Women Experts Group meeting. The full paper is available at <http://www.icanpeacework.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Extremism-in-the-Mainstream-UNW.pdf>.

⁹ Cassandra Balchin with Deepa Shankaran, “Exposed: Ten Myths about Religious Fundamentalisms”, *awid women’s rights*, 31 October 2008, <https://www.awid.org/publications/exposed-ten-myths-about-religious-fundamentalisms>.

¹⁰ The tensions surrounding women’s rights and colonialism are addressed in various publications, including Commonwealth Secretariat (2005).

¹¹ American national security expert, personal communication, September 2013.

Similarly, the status of men is clearly articulated, and there is often a clear implication that women are under the protection (and, by extension, ownership) of men. This is nowhere more evident than in the sexual enslavement and exploitation of women.

The ideology taps into different norms of masculinity. On the one hand, it elevates the notion of patriarchy such that men are dominant and women subservient to them. On the other hand, this entitlement is fused with notions of men as warriors and protectors of a 'cause'. This lays the foundations for violence, for it is justified as a means to an end for a higher cause. Writing about the role of women in America's white supremacist movements, Elizabeth Gillespie McRae notes "the central role ascribed to white male sexual and status anxiety and lust for dominance in fomenting organized white-supremacist activities".¹² She further states that a key argument against desegregation was the "narrative that saw white women and girls as vulnerable (to black men), and white men as protectors – a story line that simultaneously elevated white men and rendered women helpmates and beneficiaries, not activists".

In the *public sphere*, using the pulpit and media, the targeting of women who are outspoken or contradict the edicts and ideology is either condoned or encouraged. Often women are blamed – the way they dress, the places they frequent, their mannerisms or the fact that they are alone – for the physical attacks they endure. The mainstream and social media platforms are powerful tools that fringe actors use to convey their viewpoint. In the *political sphere*, women are accused of indecency and often face threats to their lives for daring to speak out or enter politics. The movements also draw on and use women strategically in politics and propaganda. They recognise the social influence of women and their ability to mobilise at grassroots levels. They also recognise and enable women's roles as caretakers and homemakers. They recruit or co-opt them into their political structures to espouse their regressive views on matters of gender equality. For example, the Salafi Nour party in Egypt claims to support women's education and social work but does not encourage women's leadership as politicians. "The women give lectures to young or older men," writes Walid Salah, but "they have to talk from behind a black curtain or address the audience from another room through loudspeakers."¹³

In the *legal sphere*, the suspension of equal rights legislation and introduction of discriminatory laws are both a means and an end for conservative as well as extreme movements. Governments, even if not religious in nature, appease movements and conservative forces by supporting and often promoting pushback on women's rights. The issues vary across regions, but the impetus to control women's bodies and legal persona is shared. The unholy alliance of states and extremist ideological movements was firmly addressed in the July 2017 report by the UN's Special Rapporteur in the field of Cultural Rights, Karima Bennouna, which included submissions from 54 countries (UN 2017). In remarks about her findings, Bennouna states, "The political practice of partnering with non-violent extremist groups are also marked as a cause of concern ... Governments that cite cultural practices while objecting to women's rights defenders are 'aiding and abetting extremism'". She further noted, "In many places where governments have strategies for what is called combatting violent extremism ... they sometimes base strategies on partnering with what they deem to be 'moderate extremists' or fundamentalists of various stripes ..." But she warned, "Governments must not make the mistake of thinking they can use so-called 'non-violent extremism ... The highest price for such blunders is paid by women", explaining that "[o]ften these so-called non-violent extremists espouse a discourse of discrimination against women that ... ends up producing a great deal of violence against women."¹⁴

¹² Elizabeth Gillespie McRae, "The Women Behind White Power", *The New York Times*, 2 February 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/02/opinion/sunday/white-supremacy-forgot-women.html>.

¹³ Walid Salah, "Egypt's Islamist Parties Are All About Marriage, Not Politics for Women", *Al Monitor*, 26 April 2017, on <http://www.newageislam.com/islam,-women-and-feminism/egypt-s-islamist-parties-are-all-about-marriage,-not-politics-for-women/d/110938>.

¹⁴ Karima Bennouna, "Statement", UN General Assembly, New York, 25 October 2017, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22331&LangID=E>.

4.2 Gender in recruitment

We take it for granted that the majority of fighters and adherents to extremist movements are young men recruited and groomed by older men. But why? What attracts them? What makes them vulnerable to recruitment? There is significant research being done currently on the ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors associated with radicalisation. The reality is that there are countless variables and significant differences from one context to the other. Economic incentives are relevant in some settings, especially where poverty is rife and jobs are few, but they are not the common denominator across countries. Other socio-political and psycho-social factors are more evident.

Many of those who join and support these movements have borne the brunt of decades of state corruption, poor governance, repressive regimes and poor development policies (ICAN 2017). Although they come from various socio-economic classes, they have witnessed or experienced rising inequality and absence of opportunity to live dignified lives (UNDP 2017). As young men, they are facing a challenge of fulfilling their own socially circumscribed or ‘gendered’ roles such as being good providers and husbands. Yet many lack the skills or education needed to compete in a competitive and often service-oriented workplace. They also find themselves in competition with women – often better educated – for the few scarce jobs that do exist. As noted in the 2017 UNDP report, “Journey to Extremism”, the majority of respondents who were recruited into violent movements expressed high dissatisfaction with the government, including the “belief that government only looks after the interests of a few”, and had “low level of trust in government authorities”. As the report shows, “[g]rievances against security actors, as well as politicians, are particularly marked, with an average of 78 percent rating low levels of trust in the police, politicians and military.” In addition, “Those most susceptible to recruitment express a significantly lower degree of confidence in the potential for democratic institutions to deliver progress or meaningful change.” (UNDP 2017, 5.)

Religious motives also play a role. There is a consistent lack of religious literacy across many settings. So young men who are religious are being lured with extremist religious ideology that implicitly and explicitly condones the use of violence or discrimination against ‘outsiders’ or ‘others’ in the name of God, or ethnic or racial supremacy.

There is also deliberate outreach and recruitment of women. In general, women’s involvement in armed ideologically-driven movements is not a new phenomenon. Women have been active in many of the leftist and national liberation movements of past decades across Latin America, Africa and Asia. Although statistics are difficult to find, women are likely to have made up as much as 30%-40% of such militant movements. For example, they comprised some 30% of the Sri Lankan Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).¹⁵ Among the demobilised members of Nepal’s Maoist movement, some 20-40% were female (Marks 2017). They are often motivated by their need to assert agency and garner respect for contributing to a greater – preferably just – cause. Many also join to avenge crimes committed against them by state actors, or abuses suffered by their families and male relatives.

In the case of current movements that claim the mantle of Islam, the recruitment of women is evident in a number of ways. In Pakistan in 2008, a radical Sheikh on local radio stations recruited the mothers of young men by railing against the injustice and corruption of the state and offering the promise of a just and equitable Islamic society. The women donated their gold and encouraged their sons to join the Pakistani Taliban movement. Also in Pakistan, the growth of women-only madrassahs – religious schools (with funding from various sources, including Gulf Arab states and individuals) – has provided a steady flow of women who are educated in regressive, Wahhabi-style interpretations of Islam. The curricula are designed by men with three key goals: to educate girls to be ideal mothers, train them to perform their domestic chores, and ensure women preserve and transmit conservative Islamic traditions and beliefs to their offspring. In recruiting women, economic benefits are often an enticement. In Pakistan, Paiman Trust

¹⁵ LTTE, Mapping Militant Organizations Project, Stanford University, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/225> (as at 8 July 2015).

identifies, engages and deradicalises women affiliated with extremist groups. Many of them earn incomes sewing suicide belts, believing that they are thus fulfilling their religious duty.¹⁶

Quality of life is a clear enticement in other settings too. Among some women affiliated with Boko Haram, there has been reluctance to leave the movement. As one woman noted, she had ‘slaves’ who “washed, cooked, and babysat for her”. Another woman interviewed was also frank about the benefits. “There was 100% better treatment as a wife under Boko Haram. There were more gifts, better food, and a lot of sex that I always enjoyed.” For those who had never had access to any education, the mandatory Quran classes were welcome as an opportunity to learn.¹⁷

Meanwhile, the recruitment of young women (mostly under 18) in Europe reflects the tensions that second- and third-generation migrants in particular are experiencing. The pressures are immense from all sides. At home and within their communities, they may be pressed into conforming with conservative and submissive notions of femininity – to heed the guidance of their parents and live restricted lives. While they may seek greater freedom of choice and agency, the hyper-sexualised society they live in also puts pressures on them. These tensions around gender conformity mixed with a sense of alienation, desire to belong and have a clear identity, and contribute to a greater cause are factors that make them vulnerable to recruitment.

It is notable that movements that espouse discriminatory attitudes towards women are making a great effort to recruit them and seem to offer not only a sense of empowerment but also freedom from social and even sexual restrictions. Meanwhile, states that claim to stand for gender equality and women’s rights often recede into paternalism and their own forms of nationalism when it comes to issues pertaining to minority women, especially Muslims. The hijab ban across European countries is a case in point. Legislation to ban various women’s covering and clothing is at odds with concepts of freedom of expression, the right to choose and gender equality.¹⁸ France’s burkini ban in 2016 was a particularly notable moment of discrimination.¹⁹ In the UK, the government has done little to improve police capacities for dealing with so-called ‘honour’ crimes, including murder, rape and mutilation that affect women from various minority communities.²⁰

4.3 Gender as a unifying identity to counter and resist extremism

If women’s rights defenders and peace activists were the first to feel and see the rise of extremisms, then women-led organisations active in promoting peace and security have also been the first to mobilise in resistance to the exclusionary ideologies and offer alternative, more inclusive interpretations of religious texts and visions for their societies. Because addressing violent extremism is a sensitive and securitised issue in most settings, it is not the domain of traditional development and rights groups. Among women’s movements too, only a subset of organisations that are involved in peace and security work engage in these efforts. But they do so bringing a rights and peacebuilding lens to their efforts. Depending on the setting, the labelling of their work may vary. Where the state provides space for overt P/CVE work, women’s organisations also work under this umbrella. But in many contexts, they engage in P/CVE work under the softer umbrella of social harmony or development.

What is notable (as illustrated in the table below) is that women-led organisations that are active in this sphere of work have parallels with the extremist movements. Like them, they are locally rooted. They are trusted because of their track record of service to their communities, addressing grievances or aspirations.

16 ICAN and Rana Allam, “These Pakistani Women Are Cutting Off Extremists’ Resources – One Thread at a Time”, Ms. Magazine Blog, 24 January 2018, <http://msmagazine.com/blog/2018/01/24/pakistani-women-cutting-off-extremists-resources-one-thread-time/>.

17 Hilary Matfess, “Rescued and Deradicalised Women are Returning to Boko Haram. Why?”, African Arguments, 1 November 2017, <http://africanarguments.org/2017/11/01/rescued-and-deradicalised-women-are-returning-to-boko-haram-why/>.

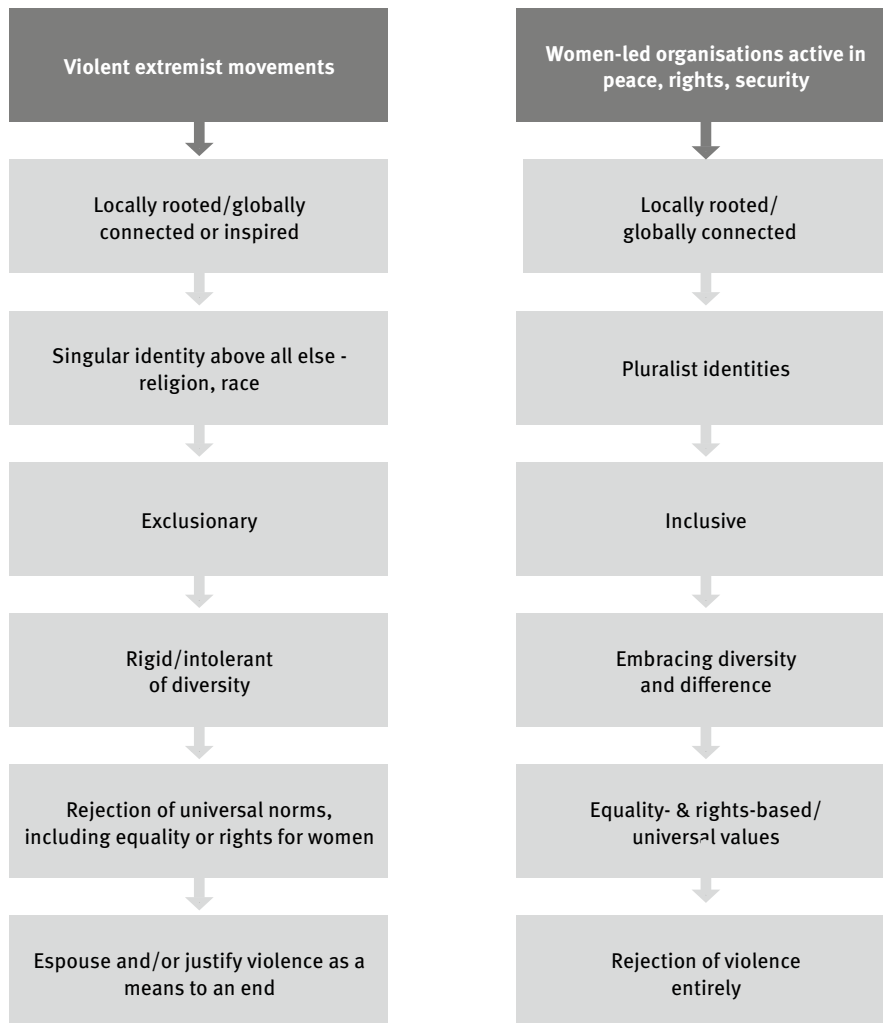
18 Matthew Weaver, “Burqa Bans, Headscarves and Veils: a Timeline of Legislation in the West”, The Guardian, 14 March 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/14/headscarves-and-muslim-veil-ban-debate-timeline>.

19 Sanam Naraghi Anderlini, “In Riyadh and the Riviera, women have to fight for the right to be themselves”, The Guardian, 27 August 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/aug/27/burkini-ban-riyadh-riviera-women-fight>.

20 Tracy McVeigh, “Theresa May wrong to link ‘honour’ killings and terrorism, say campaigners”, The Guardian, 23 July 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/jul/23/theresa-may-wrong-link-honour-killings-terrorism>.

Because they are of the community, they have an understanding of the context and cultural nuances of their settings, and are thus able to adapt their messages and their activities to fit local needs and evolving changes. Many of their leaders are charismatic and respected for their education and religious scholarship.

But precisely because they are trusted and recognise the aspirations and grievances of their communities, yet offer a non-violent, pluralistic alternative approach that is also religiously and culturally credible, they pose a key threat to extremist movements. However, their potential is as yet unfulfilled. Their efforts are often circumscribed because they lack resources to expand and the space for civil society activism is shrinking. Internationally, they still have to fight to be recognised.

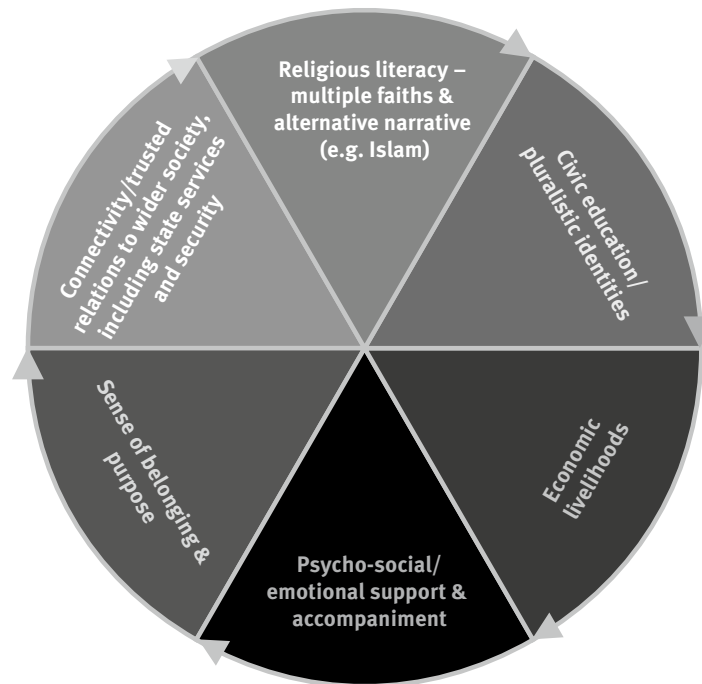


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Table 1: Locally rooted, globally connected: women-led peace and security organisations and their violent extremist counterparts

Equally of note is that when such locally rooted groups are connected ‘globally’ – for example, through the evolving Women’s Alliance for Security Leadership (WASL)²¹ – they demonstrate that despite the differences across countries and cultures, the basic ingredients of what they are offering in their approaches to P/CVE, deradicalisation and rehabilitation are strikingly similar (see Figure 2). For example, in Iraq and Pakistan, local women have pioneered programmes that combine religious literacy with psycho-social support and continued mentoring, livelihoods and skills training and thus provide an alternative unit to which young men can belong.

21 See <http://www.icanpeacework.org/our-work/womens-alliance-for-security-leadership/>.



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Figure 2: Shared components of P/CVE programmes run by WASL members across different country contexts

Yet they face a multitude of challenges. Their capacity for developing and implementing long-term strategies is often limited by the need to respond to more immediate crises and challenges on the ground or to tightened security conditions. They are hindered by attacks from national security apparatuses and a lack of recognition from the international policy community. Too often, despite the commitments made in UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000)²² and UNSCR 2242 (2015)²³ and rhetorical support for women's leadership and participation, the perspectives and experiences that women bring forward are categorised as 'women's issues' or disconnected from peace and security and, now, PVE-related debates and decisions. The narrative of western-based scholars and NGOs that claim women are being 'instrumentalised' further exacerbates the situation as it denigrates the expertise, innovation and courage of women at the frontlines of the struggle against violent extremism, who offer critical lessons and solutions. In this regard, Abu-Nimer's framing of international approaches that commence with instrumentalisation and shift towards compartmentalisation, but rarely reach the necessary integration, is also applicable to the experiences of women-led organisations. Their situation is doubly challenging as often other civil society sectors, notably the religious institutions, are also reluctant to engage women on an equal footing.

Box: Al-Ferdows Foundation's work on demobilisation and rehabilitation in Iraq

In 2015, after 20 years of community service to war widows and children and promoting peace in her province of Basra, Fatima Al-Bahadely found her teenage sons at direct risk of recruitment into militias. Drawing on her religious and cultural knowledge and her community ties, she initiated a deradicalisation programme to demobilise and rehabilitate youths from militias. Al-Ferdows did this by providing the young people with a mix of religious literacy while working to promote their positive involvement in their communities and encouraging them to return to school (for the younger cohort). Impact: In three months they deradicalised and rehabilitated 150 youths from militias. Much of the success is due to the trust and legitimacy that Fatima Al-Bahadely had nurtured.

For more information, see www.icanpeacework.org/our-work/innovative-peace-fund/

²² See <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/>.

²³ See http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2242.pdf.

5 Conclusions

When viewed through the lens of core identities such as ethnicity, religion and gender, the phenomenon of violent extremism becomes more distinguishable from other regional and transnational ideological movements. Such a lens also reveals that focusing on ‘violent’ extremism is not enough. The ideologies that foment hate and bigotry must also be tackled, as their spread into the mainstream provides the space for violence to take root and become normalised. It is a fine line, of course, because as is evident in many countries, the threat of terror and extremism is already being used to shut down legitimate dissent and threatens freedom of speech and expression, particularly as it relates to criticism of state actions or demands for human rights. Indeed, many states are already using the P/CVE agenda to shut down civic engagement and civil society organisations. But the spread of bigotry and intolerance through words and ideas – often directed first at women and minorities – creates an environment where violence can fester, erupt and shift from the extremes into the mainstream of society. These tensions between ‘hate speech’ and ‘freedom of speech’ must be recognised and addressed. Equally, there is an urgent need to embrace and celebrate the plurality of identities that exist in every society, so that people – especially the young – can see an equally dignified representation of their heritage, different cultures and religions in the societies in which they were born in and contribute to.

Second, the international policy and security community needs to take the gender lens more seriously as it is a very effective ‘early warning’ indicator of rising extremism. The violence that extremist groups and individuals condone and perpetrate against women and marginalised communities but gets little attention or is framed as ‘cultural’ is the same phenomenon that metastasises and spreads to become the high profile ‘terrorism’ or ‘violent extremism’ that gains attention. In the United States, for example, the correlation between violent actors (mass shooters) and their history of domestic abuse is widely noted. However, the issue dates back much further. As Ayesha Imam, Jenny Morgan and Nira Yuval-Davis wrote in 2004 about Algeria, “[w]e need to bear in mind here that violence against women did not start with the terrorism of the early 1990s ... Women were targeted by Muslim fundamentalists long before that. In the early 1980s ... the first victims of religious and political violence were women. Vociferous Friday sermons at the mosque focused on women and their bodies ... Young male Muslim fundamentalists attacked female students on university campuses with the tacit approval of the police, who did not intervene to protect women ... [I]n June 1989, a group of fundamentalists set fire to the house of a divorced woman who lived alone with her children ... The silence and complicity of the state comforted and even encouraged Muslim fundamentalists in their virulent attacks against women ... As early as the 1980s, women were warning that although Muslim fundamentalists were targeting them first, this violence would soon reach men too if nothing was done. Yet the secular state did not do anything to protect women.” (Imam et al. 2004, 119ff.)

Related to this is recognition of the work that women’s pro-peace and pro-rights organisations are engaged in. They offer a powerful counterweight to the rising extremist movements, and their vision is rooted in peace, resilience, equality and recognition of pluralistic identities. Indeed, a vibrant and independent civil society is vital to PVE, as it provides space for moderate and constructive critique, dissent and voice. But to thrive, civil society organisations need a conducive legal and financial environment. They must not be squeezed between threats from the state and attacks from extremist movements.

Third, if the agenda and this area of research and work are confined to ‘countering’ or even the more expansive ‘preventing’ of violent extremism, it will be limited and ineffective. Extremist movements recruit by promising desirable alternatives to people’s grievances. They also tap into the aspirations of youth and women. *Simply being against them is not enough.* The international community must heed the call of civil society and articulate and stand by a set of values and principles that promote peace, resilience, equality and pluralism (PREP), are rooted in dignity and offer non-violent practical alternatives. The extremism phenomenon cannot be addressed simply through security, governance or other ‘siloes’ approaches. Reform is needed in the economic, education and social spheres and should be approached in a holistic manner.

Finally, significant policy changes are needed. As Abu-Nimer says, it is not enough to either instrumentalise or compartmentalise by calling for support to women’s NGOs, youth or other civil society on the ground, and implicitly putting the burden on their shoulders. It is essential to listen and heed their advice regarding urgent policy and programmatic changes that are firmly in the realm of state responsibility. Civil society can work alongside and in complementary form to states and multilateral institutions. Indeed, CSOs such as women’s organisations often have unique strengths and value to contribute, but they cannot bring sustained change on a sufficient scale without governments being fully on board. It is a case of needing a ‘whole of government’ and ‘whole of society’ approach. One starting point can be fostering a shared understanding of the phenomenon and recognition of the fact that extreme pluralism is not only the context in which ideological extremism is rising, but also the source of the best and most creative solutions and pathway for the future.

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About the author

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