Summary Document and Analysis

Women and Countering Violent Extremism

Introduction

The role of women in propagating and countering violent extremism (CVE) is an understudied but critical security issue in the 21st century that directly relates to the implementation of UNSCR 1325 and the six resolutions on women, peace and security that have followed it. Research and experience demonstrate that women can enable, support, benefit from, be victims of, counteract and prevent violent extremism. Their roles and experiences are not monochromatic but rather diverse and shaped by context, community and history.


The panel discussion was comprised of five experts: Ms. Naureen Chowdhury Fink, Head of Research and Analysis at the Global Center on Cooperative Security; Ms. Suaad Allami, Founder and Director, Sadr City Women's Center and Legal Clinic, Iraq; Mr. Muhammad Rafiuddin Shah, Officer-in-Charge, UN Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force; Ms. Joy Onyesoh, President, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Nigeria; and, Ms. Carolin Schleker, Human Rights Officer, New York Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

The expert panelists raised a number of pressing issues. First and foremost, there was an emphasis on delinking religion and extremism. The panelists noted that though extremism is often conflated with religion, it is important to recognize that extremism takes many forms, such as nationalist-based extremism, prevalent in the Second World War. Second, it is important to acknowledge the varied roles women play in this arena including as preventers, sympathizers, mobilizers, and as perpetrators. Women are not just victims. It is important
that countering violent extremism efforts recognize them as partners in prevention and response frameworks, as well as agents of change. As such, women must be included in the design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation of strategies to counter violent extremism. Many of the panelists also emphasized that it is important to not essentialize women; we must acknowledge that women are not a homogenous group, and our CVE approaches should reflect that. In addition, it is crucial that there are political spaces for the many voices of women to be heard. It is in this space that we may find solutions, within local and culturally specific contexts. Further, it is essential that we do not securitize women’s roles in strategies to counter violent extremism. In doing this, we run the risk of further marginalizing women and women’s organizations. It is important that we take a more holistic approach, and focus on the development indicators that may lead to violent extremism. By addressing these everyday needs, we can help create an environment that allows for women, their families, and communities to fully participate in the prevention of violent extremism in their own societies. Finally, a common sentiment echoed throughout the discussion was a call for increased data collection and reporting on the gendered impact of counter terrorism strategies on women’s lives and women’s varied roles in violent extremism.

Delinking Terrorism and Religion

Today’s narrative of extremism is inundated with misconceptions of extremism as inherently religious in nature, often linked to Islam. It is important to recognize from the outset that violent extremism can manifest in many forms and out of various religious or non-religious motivations. During the discussion, Ms. Coomaraswamy challenged the dominant narrative that links religion and extremism. She discussed extremism outside of its dominant stereotype as something “inherently Islamic”, noting the extremist tactics employed by Buddhist and Hindu extremists in South Asia.

Non-religious extremist groups have wreaked havoc and pursued political agendas for decades. One recent example is the LTTE in Sri Lanka, which engaged in insurgent activities against the government of Sri Lanka for many years and yet did not have a religious coloring to their motivations or ambitions. Moreover, Islamic fundamentalism is only one example of extremism, although it receives the most attention from scholars, policymakers, and media outlets. Extremism is not an inherent element of religion; it is extremist groups that use religion as a pretext to mobilize support and further their goals. Yet, many are present today such as the ongoing efforts of extremist Buddhist monks pursuing a political, anti-Muslim agenda in Myanmar/Burma.
The impact of violent extremism on women’s lives

Women are differentially impacted by conflict, including extremism and terrorism. Time and again, as extremist groups have increased in influence, their territorial advance has been coupled with targeted, strategic attacks on women’s rights and freedoms, including the ability to move freely, engage in public life, access education and employment, enjoy health services, express themselves without the fear of repercussion and live as equal citizens. This is true in various geopolitical contexts as well as throughout different periods of history.

The kidnappings of hundreds of Nigerian schoolgirls in 2014 by Boko Haram, for example, signaled a much broader, violent extremist campaign for territorial and intellectual control. Indeed, an educated girl or an empowered woman seems to be causes of serious fear and frustration to violent extremists. Ms. Onyesoh echoed this sentiment in the discussion, and emphasized that we need to understand the links between violent extremism, militarism, and women as targets.

The roles women play in propagating violent extremism

In October 2014, three American teenagers from Denver attempted to travel to the Middle East to join ISIS but were intercepted in Germany before they could reach their final destination. The three young women had skipped school and, unbeknownst to their families, were bound for the raging conflict in Syria and Iraq, which has resulted in a humanitarian crisis. ISIS is known to have targeted women and girls deliberately as part of their violent offensive campaign including in the forms of mass abductions, torture, rape, and slavery. So why would three American girls want to join violent extremists?

The story of the three American teenagers is hardly unique. Women have supported or partaken in violent extremism for as long as it has existed, including as suicide bombers, recruiters, domestic servants, masterminds, soldiers and many other roles. This is true throughout history and beyond the terrain of Islamist groups. What is the attraction? What do they gain? Why are they motivated? To what extent is their membership voluntary or coerced? These are just some of the questions that must be answered to secure a deeper insight into women’s roles in propagating violent extremism. The responses to this aspect of women’s involvement are few. More research is required to develop a more nuanced understanding of the grievances that move women towards violent extremism and the pathways that strengthen their resilience against them.

Ms. Chowdhury Fink shed some light on this topic. She noted that this is a complicated issue, and that women join extremist forces for a number of social, economic, and political opportunities. Yet, much more research is needed to understand why educated, middle class Western women are flocking to join terrorist organizations such as ISIS.
It is also important to not just understand why women join violent extremism, but how they do so. For example, the use of social media to promote extremist ideologies has become a very effective way to recruit new members, including women. What are the tactics and tools that are being used by violent extremists to communicate with potential recruits and how are they communicating in return? Some individuals and organizations are doing this type of research but a much greater evidence base is required to better understand these issues. The normalization of violence and desensitization about armed conflict is one possible explanation, along with poverty and oppression. In short, there are no clear-cut explanations and external forces as well as internal desires can shape motivations.

The roles women play in countering violent extremism

Increasing recognition of the need to situate counter terrorism and violent extremism responses more firmly within a women, peace and security framework has brought into the focus the potential ways to engage women as leaders and partners in prevention and response frameworks. UN Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) and the six resolutions on women, peace and security that have followed it emphasize the role that women play in international peace and security efforts, including conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

Women are often uniquely positioned within their families and communities to provide essential information to those working to counter extremism. In many cases, CVE practitioners engage with only certain community gatekeepers and neglect the input of women and women’s civil society groups who may also have access or intelligence. Anecdotal evidence also shows that family ties are a strong predictor of extremism, and that women are central to understanding how to leverage the role of the family in promoting positive change.

Recalling the real spirit of resolution 1325 which was reminding the Security Council that women’s leadership is an untapped resource for peace, and that injustices and inequalities embedded in gender relations are a long term threat to development and stability, it is important to recognize that gender equality represents a buffer to the spread of radicalization and violent extremism. As such, strategies to counter violent extremism that promote women’s participation, leadership and empowerment are critical.

We must also be careful when securitizing women’s roles in strategies to counter violent extremism. By doing this, we run the risk of further marginalizing women and women’s organizations, potentially making them targets for extremist groups. In many situations, efforts to counter terrorism and violent extremism have resulted in an adverse impact on women’s rights and women’s rights organizations. For example, funds used to combat terrorism have been diverted from budgets addressing broader socio-economic conditions, under-resourcing the issues that are often of priority to women. At the same time, international restrictions on
financing related to terrorism need to be reviewed to ensure they do not discriminate against civil society women’s organizations that have the potential to counter violent extremism.

Conclusions and recommendations

**UN Security Council resolutions on counter-terrorism should further recognize the role of women in prevention and response frameworks.** While terrorism was not mentioned in resolution 1325 (2000), the most recent Security Council resolution on women, peace and security - 2122 (2013) - refers to the Security Council’s intention to increase its attention to WPS issues in all thematic areas of work on its agenda, including in relation to peace and security threats caused by terrorist acts. In September this year, the Security Council adopted resolution 2178, which focuses on the emerging threat posed by foreign terrorist fighters and calls for the need to empower women as a prevention response to the spread of violent extremism. In addition, during the annual debate on women, peace and security on 28 October 2014 a Presidential Statement was issued which reiterated the role of women’s participation and empowerment as a buffer to the spread of extremism while also noting the specific consequences of violent extremism on the rights of women and girls.

**Effective CVE strategies must be coordinated, multi-sectoral approaches that include high-level diplomacy and leverage military action with governance, development, and human rights programming that include the promotion of gender equality.** As extremist groups continue to grow in power and influence, so too does the focus on military solutions to stop their progress. These groups take advantage of lack of governance and rule of law, insecurity, as well as inequality that are then exacerbated through conflict. As such, a military and security response, while limiting their capabilities, ultimately cannot stop the spread of their ideas.

**Inter-cultural and cross-cultural dialogue and exchange** can also play a critical role in dissuading violent extremists. Intolerance is, in part, bred out of ignorance. Dialogue is necessary between and within cultures through social interaction and education. Women can and must have a safe space to engage in these types of dialogues, as they are often the first to reach across divides and build bridges. Peace is in the interest of women who are impacted differentially by conflict and also tasked with the business of living – of keeping families intact and ensuring livelihoods.

**It is important to not essentialize women** and assume that their natural disposition will be towards peace simply because they are mothers. The traditional roles ascribed to women in many societies as wives and mothers often uniquely position them to act as powerful agents of prevention. Yet, while mothers are their children’s first teachers, what is taught is not always peaceful and tolerant. When considering how to engage and empower women for countering
violent extremism, it is important to understand the varied roles of women in this area including the motives that move women towards violent extremism.

**Culturally relevant solutions** are an important step towards increasing the efficiency of countering violent extremism and this requires local knowledge, without which a women’s rights agenda is not sustainable. It is also important to remember that women are not a monolithic social group. Their potential and their power will be shaped by their self-perception and how their communities perceive them. As mentioned by Ms. Allami in the discussion, the millions of widows in Iraq today represent an untapped resource in countering violent extremism but in order for them to rise up as leaders, they must be protected and able to use their voice. Their perspectives on and approaches to countering violent extremism will be distinct based on their lived experiences. Legal reforms that are then followed up with implementation can provide an important avenue towards improving the lives of women and reinforcing their ability to lead as change makers in countering violent extremism.

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