

Women, Deradicalization, and Rehabilitation:

Lessons from an Expert Workshop

By Rebecca Turkington and Agathe Christien | April 2018

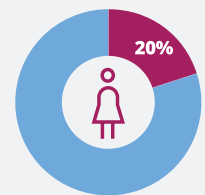
 COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

With the rise of violent extremist groups around the world, questions around how to disengage and reintegrate participants from these groups back into their societies have become urgent. To date, most deradicalization programs have been designed for men, and there have been few efforts to create programs that specifically address the needs of women returnees. The underlying assumption that women lack agency permeates legal and policy responses to extremism and can have serious consequences. Though women remain relatively neglected, their participation in violent extremism is only growing. Women represent up to 20% of Western recruits to the Islamic State, and Boko Haram has used female suicide bombers at unprecedented levels. As greater numbers of women are joining extremist groups, failing to investigate and prosecute them upon their return risks creating a dangerous gap in security processes.

Introduction

With the rise of violent extremist groups around the world, questions around how to disengage and reintegrate participants from these groups back into their societies have risen to the fore. To date, female participants have been relatively neglected, despite evidence of their growing numbers. Europol's 2016 EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report found that the share of women arrested on terrorism charges rose from 18 to 25 percent between 2015 and 2016.¹ Another 2016 study found that 20 percent of all Western recruits to the Islamic State are women,² and media coverage of the battle for Mosul highlighted the presence of radicalized women from Germany, Canada, and other Western countries.³ In Nigeria, Boko Haram has used women suicide bombers at unprecedented levels.⁴

Women participants in violent extremist groups are returning to their places of origin in Europe, Africa, Asia, and the United States at a time when few deradicalization, rehabilitation, and reintegration programs are taking their needs into account. These programs have historically focused on men, and scant research addresses the gendered dynamics of this process.



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This summary outlines the main findings from an expert workshop on “Women, Deradicalization, and Reintegration” hosted by the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security in September 2017 as part of the Bridging Theory and Practice series. This series convenes top researchers, practitioners, and policymakers from a range of disciplines to discuss global issues with major implications for the women, peace, and security agenda. The workshop was conducted under Chatham House rules. While these recommendations are not intended to capture a consensus, they aim to be a starting point for a larger conversation around women, deradicalization, and rehabilitation that looks critically at where current programs fail to address gender and how greater consideration of women’s needs can enhance deradicalization efforts.

What We Know: Lessons Learned from Research and Practice

What is deradicalization?

The concept of deradicalization is highly contested among scholars. The term itself lacks clear definition,⁵ and there is no consensus on what constitutes successful deradicalization.⁶ Academics and practitioners tend to use terms like “deradicalization,” “counter-radicalization,” and “rehabilitation” interchangeably.⁷ One distinction is that deradicalization efforts occur after groups or individuals commit criminal acts, whereas counter-radicalization policies and programs are preemptive, seeking to dissuade individuals at risk of radicalization. Deradicalization also differs from disengagement. The former includes a cognitive component and change in ideology, whereas individuals who disengage from violent groups and behaviors may not be considered deradicalized.⁸ Here, the terms “deradicalization” and “rehabilitation” are used to encompass the process of reintegrating individuals who have left violent extremist groups back into their societies.



Deradicalization programming has evolved toward more individualized approaches that incorporate local, social, and cultural dynamics.

Deradicalization programs and approaches vary greatly across countries. In the aftermath of 9/11 and the 2002 Bali attacks, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Indonesia launched “first generation” deradicalization programs, which consisted of both prison-based education and post-incarceration monitoring and aftercare. Theological re-education and vocational training were core elements of these programs.⁹ Deradicalization programming has evolved toward more individualized approaches that incorporate local, social, and cultural dynamics. Many of the newer programs, particularly in Western democracies, also focus on broader community engagement and resilience, and are beginning to develop early interventions to counter radicalization before it becomes violent.

It is very difficult to evaluate these programs. Deradicalization research confronts a lack of data on baselines, outcomes, and counterfactuals, as well as a lack of consensus about how to measure success. Furthermore, programs often lack transparency, and NGOs and academics face difficulties accessing information.¹⁰

Research gaps

Published literature on gender and deradicalization is scarce. A growing number of studies focus on women as violent actors, their pathways to radicalization and roles within violent extremist groups,¹¹ and their roles in countering violent extremism (CVE).¹² But as the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering



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terrorism Fionnuala Ní Aoláin noted, “little consistent thought has been given to the gender dynamics and gender specificity of deradicalization programs.”¹³ Some related fields of practice, however, have begun to approach disengagement and rehabilitation with a gendered lens, revealing the particular challenges facing women in these processes. For example, the demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) processes after violent conflict and the strategies for gang disengagement both offer important perspectives.

How do current deradicalization and rehabilitation programs deal with women?

To date, most deradicalization programs have been designed primarily for men, and there have been few efforts to create programs specifically for women returning from extremist groups. The underlying assumption that women lack agency permeates legal and policy responses to extremism and can have serious security consequences. While many women in these groups have been kidnapped, such as the famous cases of the Chibok schoolgirls in Nigeria or of trafficked Yazidis in Iraq, others join for the same varied reasons men do, including family or personal ties, desire for revenge, lack of opportunity, feelings of isolation, or religious ideology.¹⁴ In some situations, women who at first were victims become perpetrators, either to better their situation, through personal relationships, or due to indoctrination to radical ideas. Thus, there is not a simple binary between victim and perpetrator, and women engage in extremist violence in complicated ways. Responses to women extremists tend to overlook this nuance, assuming instead that women have been coerced into extremist groups. This can lead to more lenient sentencing, inadequate rehabilitation programming, and perhaps even letting dangerous actors slip through the cracks. Feminist criminology acknowledges the frictions inherent in advocating for equal treatment of women in the justice system, which can lead to harsher sentencing. Protected status that denies women’s agency in extremist groups, however, creates a dangerous security blind spot.

The United States exhibits significant gender bias in trying and sentencing homegrown extremists.

In many countries, the legal system is ill-equipped to address returned female fighters. The United States exhibits significant gender bias in trying and sentencing homegrown extremists. Court transcripts reveal that some judges use the trope of a “jihadi bride” to explain that women accused of material support to terrorist groups were duped under false pretenses, while men face the consequences of their actions with longer prison sentences.¹⁵ European court systems exhibit similar biases, and in most

high-profile cases women receive sentences well below the country average.¹⁶ While men's agency is assumed, women are infantilized or sexualized, despite mounting evidence that women join terrorist organizations for most of the same reasons as men. Because greater numbers of women are joining extremist groups, failing to investigate and prosecute them upon their return risks creating a gap in security and justice processes.



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In places such as Nigeria or Kenya, where there is a larger population of former female extremists, prisons and rehabilitation programs face some gendered challenges.¹⁷ Most women returning from Boko Haram come back pregnant or with small children, and communities that may be willing to take back returnees are often wary about accepting their children, who are seen as tainted by terrorist blood. Boy children in particular are regarded with suspicion, as men inherit property in most villages. Research on women in gangs finds that ex-gang members who are mothers may not access social services and community agencies because they fear that their children will be apprehended.¹⁸ This finding points to the necessity of taking into account the needs of mothers and children in order to successfully reach former extremists.

Additionally, it may be difficult to rehabilitate women extremists when the societies they return to offer few viable alternatives. Often, women who join armed political groups, such as the FARC in Colombia, say membership in such groups gave them more freedom and opportunity than traditional society.¹⁹ In Sierra Leone, Nepal, Northern Ireland, and elsewhere, former female combatants were disillusioned in post-conflict transitions after being stripped of the political agency and relative equality they had gained as insurgents.²⁰ Experience from Nigeria suggests that this phenomenon carries over to other types of extremist groups. Some women report joining Boko Haram for material and social opportunities not available in their own villages, where they have little access to education or economic empowerment.²¹ After their participation in extremist groups, these women return to societies where poverty and social marginalization remain unchanged, and some have even returned to Boko Haram after completing deradicalization programs.²² Their grievances will not be addressed without major changes to social norms and opening new socioeconomic opportunities for women.



Women's employment outcomes following short prison sentences are 3X worse than those for men.

To address this gap, practitioners working in Kenya and Nigeria have identified that prison programs should be more tailored to women's needs. Deradicalization programs for men often include jobs training and other prison-based education, while women jailed for terrorist activity in Kenya have reported being bored or uninterested by the programs available. This gap also exists in other fields. For instance,

male ex-combatants are more likely to receive skills training and employment opportunities during the DDR process, leaving women ex-combatants economically marginalized.²³ Similarly, research on gender and gangs finds that women's employment outcomes following short prison sentences are three times worse than those for men.²⁴ Because former women gang members commonly cite employment as an important source of assistance in the disengagement process,²⁵ it is important for prison systems to improve jobs training programs for women.

Ways Ahead: Improving Research, Policy, and Programs

Researchers and practitioners have highlighted the gaps in deradicalization and rehabilitation programming for women. Existing programs devote inadequate resources and attention to women returning from extremist groups, and misunderstandings of women's roles and motivations often mean that legal and social solutions do not address their needs and grievances. In order to better tackle the challenge of returning female extremists, workshop participants identified four key dynamics of women's participation in extremist groups that should inform deradicalization and rehabilitation policy and programming.

The draw of material and leadership opportunities

In order to create and expand deradicalization and rehabilitation programs for women returnees, policymakers need to better understand women's motivations and expectations when joining extremist groups and how they might influence disengagement. Additionally, it is important to understand whether ideology and religion were initial drivers to join a radical group or mostly a retention mechanism. Research to date shows that women and men tend to voluntarily join radical groups for similar reasons, such as power, belonging, and leadership opportunities. In the cases of Boko Haram and al-Shabaab, material and leadership opportunities were more important drivers of recruitment for women than ideology and religion.²⁶

Importance of family and social relationships

Women demonstrate a higher tendency to join extremist groups via personal relationships.²⁷ This can have significant implications for how they exit groups, since familial and social ties may be difficult to break, even in cases of disillusionment or cognitive shift. Research on gangs shows that the women who are most successfully rehabilitated are those who maintain close social ties with family and friends.²⁸ Former combatants, such as women in the Colombian FARC, are more likely to successfully reintegrate into society when they are part of networks with other former combatants.²⁹ Deradicalization and rehabilitation programs should build on these lessons and investigate how relationships and networks can be leveraged to support women's rehabilitation. Social ties also influence whether communities accept women returnees. The stigma of sexual violence often leads to alienation and social isolation for women returnees, even those who were kidnapped or trafficked. Anecdotal evidence indicates that public support from religious leaders or other important community figures can reduce this stigma.³⁰ Finally, deradicalization and rehabilitation programs should explicitly address the issue of extremists' children. Whether or not children are welcomed back into the community affects what happens to their mothers.

Women as community gatekeepers

Women can play a key role in determining whether and how communities accept back former extremists. Women religious leaders, psychologists, teachers, elected officials, civil society leaders, and others can serve as gatekeepers, influencing who is welcomed into—or back into—communities. Successful reintegration of returnees depends on buy-in from such women, and programs should consult with women community leaders to ensure they understand and support reintegration.



Women faith leaders are being trained to counter extremist interpretations of Islam, leveraging their familial and social influence.

Many scholars also have pointed out the potential of women community leaders in the prevention of extremism and as early-warning monitors for rising radicalization, given their close knowledge of community and family dynamics.³¹ For instance, in Morocco, women faith leaders are being trained to counter extremist interpretations of Islam, leveraging their familial and social influence.³² Identifying, empowering, and consulting credible women leaders is a crucial part of creating sustainable deradicalization and rehabilitation programs that address individual and community needs.

Security sector reform

Deradicalization and rehabilitation, as well as broader CVE goals, require community trust in local and national security forces. In many cases, not only is such trust missing, but abuse by the military and police is a driver of extremism.³³ Police forces that are representative

of the populations they protect are better able to access, communicate with, and respond to the needs of communities.³⁴ Additionally, women returnees represent a potential security risk; some foreign fighters return to their extremist groups even after completing deradicalization programs. Without sufficient female police or military officers to conduct searches, engage with women at the community level, or access the population of returned women fighters, serious security gaps remain. Furthermore, before women can be incorporated into preventing and combating extremism, they must be willing and able to work with security actors. Structural barriers, as well as social and cultural norms, can hinder women's engagement with police. For instance, when countries have mandatory sentencing laws for material support to extremist groups, women may be reluctant to report radical activity that will result in incarceration.



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Recommendations

For policymakers

- **Criminal justice:** Review legislation on sentencing and be aware of how gendered narratives influence terrorism cases.
- **Structural reforms:** Recognize grievances that drive women and men to join extremist groups—including lack of economic opportunities, education, or political voice—and work to implement reforms and programs to address these gaps.
- **Security sector:** To ensure that returning radicalized women are taken seriously as a possible security risk, include women in operational roles in CVE, counterterrorism, and security sector work. A more diverse security sector, paired with training for security forces on women's complex roles in violent extremism, can also improve reporting and community trust.

For practitioners

- **Authentic voices:** Identify credible community actors—especially women religious leaders, psychologists, teachers, elected officials, and civil society leaders—who can help reintegrate returning participants because of the respect and status they hold in their communities. If critical actors are not at the table, identify and address the barriers that keep them from being involved.
- **Youth:** Make sure young people, particularly young women, are part of program design and implementation, and are not just targets of programming.
- **Alternatives:** Men and women often join extremist groups to fill economic, social, or political voids. Provide viable alternative channels that address those grievances. For women, this can include greater voice and agency in their communities, improved economic opportunities, and transformation of patriarchal social norms.

For researchers

- **Data collection:** Rectify the significant gaps in regional-level data on extremism and in gender-disaggregated data across the board. Areas that could be improved with minimal investment include data on women in security forces and local governance institutions.
- **Contextual factors:** Continue to investigate drivers of women's participation in extremist groups, and the operational roles they fill, in order to provide a more comprehensive contextualization for deradicalization and rehabilitation programs.
- **Sharing research:** Break down silos between fields to allow for useful comparative research on different forms of extremism. Greater efforts should be made to inform media and policymakers about existing evidence-based research on women and extremism.

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