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Centralising Women in P/CVE and Peacebuilding Programme Design

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Abstract
This policy paper provides a guiding framework for centralising the role of local women in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) and peacebuilding programmes. It draws on the author's research into the gendered appeals of violent extremist propaganda and field experiences implementing programmes across Southeast Asia. The approach outlined here builds on the "linkage" approach to propaganda analysis and P/CVE programme design arguing that women need to be capacitated with the knowledge and strategic tools and empowered through women's networks to develop locally nuanced solutions. The Capacitate to Outcompete, Persuade, and Empower (C.O.P.E) framework consists of four broad pillars. First, workshops to educate women about violent extremist strategies and P/CVE and peacebuilding approaches. Second, narrative-driven actions led by women addressing key psychosocial, political, economic, and health issues. Third, strategic communications efforts to promote empowerment goals. Fourth, establish grassroots women's networks as forums for bonding, support, and organisation for collective action. This paper highlights experiences implementing C.O.P.E offering a practical guide for design and implementation.

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Introduction

"We knew what was happening around us. We could see it coming. But we were too scared to say anything."

A Maranao woman reflecting on her experiences in the months leading up to the 2017 Marawi siege by pro-Islamic State militants in the southern Philippines.[2]

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An interviewee expressed this sentiment to me almost two years after a pro-Islamic State group, led by Isnilon Hapilon and the Maute Brothers, captured Marawi City in 2017 (Franco 2020; Jadoon, Jahanbanim and Willis 2020). During group discussions in workshops with women from Marawi, participants often expressed feelings of guilt and sadness at their city's situation and their sense of powerlessness leading up to, during, and after the siege. For a range of reasons, women often found themselves at the forefront of the conflict. In the months leading up to the siege, many said they were aware Islamic State elements were infiltrating the community and recruiting men, women and children. Yet, they felt unable to talk about what was going on around them because they were afraid of the repercussions. Indeed, this sentiment was a recurring theme in discussions with women across the Philippines, Indonesia and Bangladesh demonstrating the unique gendered experiences violent extremism has on women at the local level, the diverse roles women play in violent extremist groups, and the integral role female-led initiatives have on preventing violent extremist influence within their communities. Reflecting the experiences of women in other parts of the world (Kaufman and Williams 2012; Fink et al 2016; Ndung'u et al 2017), these women often highlighted the plethora of structural and perceptual barriers existing within their societies which hinders their agency, silences their voices, produces gendered harms and fuels violent extremism.[3] This policy paper provides a guiding framework for centralising the role of local women in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) and peacebuilding programmes. It draws on my research into the gendered appeals of violent extremist propaganda and field experiences implementing programming across Southeast Asia.

There is increasing appreciation for the gendered impacts of conflict and roles of women in conflict prevention, resolution, and peacebuilding. United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 is celebrated as an important step forward yet implementing the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda in localised contexts has proven problematic (Manchanda 2020; Kaufman and Williams 2012, 97) and seen by some as unsuitable to address local

[3] These gendered experiences are not unique to Southeast Asia, and the author's experiences supporting programme development in Raqqa, Syria, have highlighted the broadly shared experiences of women in communities confronted by the Islamic State.

gendered dynamics of violent extremism (Al-Kadi and Vale 2020, 249; Ni Aolain 2016). Scholarship devoted to comprehensively understanding women and gender in relation to violent extremism has grown significantly in recent years (Bloom 2011; Khalil 2019; Alexander 2019; Vale 2019) with much of this research seeking to dismantle persistent gendered assumptions about women's motivations and recruitment (Sjoberg and Gentry 2011 and 2016; Gentry, Sjoberg and Shepherd 2018; Parashar 2014). For example, scholars detail women's active roles as fundraisers, propagandists, recruiters, "reproducers," and combatants, and warn that positive-security biases afforded to women have potentially lethal consequences (e.g. Bloom 2017; Bloom and Matfess 2016; Bloom and Lokmanoglu 2020; Wood 2019; Fulmer et al 2019). Some literature also argues that because women are uniquely impacted by violent extremism (e.g. Kaufman and Williams 2012; Sjoberg 2014), gender perspectives and women's voices must be integrated into P/CVE (e.g. Cook 2020; True and Eddyono 2017; Davies and True 2019; Fink et al 2016; White 2020; Donnelly 2021).

This policy paper builds on the works of scholars such as Manchanda (2020), George (2020), Al-Kadi and Vale (2020) who critically assess external developmental actors applying Western centric "one-size-fits-all" policies, without a thorough investigation into local nuances, gender dynamics, and pre-existing factors which create inequalities. Manchanda (2020, 76) argues that for the WPS discourse to have meaningful impact on the lived realities of women, "its global prescriptive norms and priorities need to be mediated by sensitivity to contextual differences and diversities." Ndung'u et al similarly emphasise, "in order for P/CVE policies and programmes to respond to the specific needs of women, it is necessary for them to be anchored on evidence-based, nuanced and context-specific information" (2017, iii). Without an understanding of the complex and multifaceted dynamics of women, gender and violent extremism, responses will fail local women and could inadvertently exacerbate insecurities that drive violent extremism.

This policy paper argues that local female perspectives, participation in decision-making processes, and empowerment is key to safeguarding women and communities against violent extremism. Building on a growing body of literature that applies the "linkage"

approach (Ingram 2016b; Berger 2018; Reed and Dowling 2018; Whittaker and Elsayed 2019; Zeiger et al 2021) to propaganda analysis and P/CVE design,[4] it recommends capacitating local women with the knowledge and strategic tools to understand and confront violent extremists and other peace spoilers (pillar one), the material support to engage in *narrative-driven actions* (pillar two) and strategic communications (pillar three), and the establishment of local women's networks for organising collective action (pillar four). To these ends, this paper outlines the four pillars of the Capacitate to Out-Compete, Persuade and Empower (C.O.P.E) framework. These interconnected pillars are designed to "out-compete" violent extremists by positioning local women at front and centre in efforts to address key gender, psychosocial, political, and economic vulnerabilities through a range of strategic actions. The C.O.P.E framework was developed based on a combination of scholarly research and my professional experiences designing and implementing preventing and countering violent extremism and peacebuilding programmes, working mostly with civil society actors in Southeast Asia. The framework reflects the insights and experiences gained from engaging with local women from communities across Bangladesh, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

This policy paper begins by reviewing literature on gender, violent extremism, and approaches to P/CVE. It then establishes two conceptual premises underpinning C.O.P.E. First, the positive links between female empowerment and social cohesion which is a crucial for thwarting the appeal of violent extremists. Second, the "linkage" approach which emphasises the importance of out-competing violent extremists through persuasive communications synchronised with actions, i.e., *narrative-driven actions* (Ingram 2016b; Berger 2018; Ingram 2020). Next it offers a scholarly and empirical base for C.O.P.E by addressing the logic of violent extremist targeting of women, the role of women in violent extremist movements, and the potential resonance of these appeals and opportunities to women. The paper then outlines the four pillars of the C.O.P.E framework and reflects on

[4] Integrating peacebuilding approaches into programme design can help achieve P/CVE outcomes. For example, see Bosley 2020 and Steadman 2020.

lessons that have emerged during its implantation.[5] Ultimately, C.O.P.E offers overarching guidelines for policy and programme development with each pillar being purposely broad to facilitate the integration of local design and implementation nuances.

Research Trends in Gender, Violent Extremism, and P/CVE

This paper contributes to two streams of research. The first stream examines motivations for joining violent extremist groups as well as violent extremists' gendered strategies. These works argue that men and women are similarly driven by a mix of political, personal, rational-choice (e.g. promises of security and stability) and identity-choice factors (e.g. promises of belonging), and actively engage in terrorism of their own accord (e.g. Parashar 2014; Bloom 2011; Margolin 2019; de Leede 2018; de Leede 2021; Alison 2008; Mackenzie 2012; Kaufman and Williams 2012; Asal and Jadoon 2019; Sjoberg and Gentry 2011; Rafiq and Malik 2015). Research into violent extremist strategies contend that violent extremists mobilise women because female recruits offer strategic benefits to the group (Davis 2013; Khalil 2019; Cook and Vale 2019). For example, Wood (2019, 4), Margolin (2019), Bloom and Lokamoglu (2020, 8), Donnelly (2018) and Khelghat-Doost (2018, 854) argue that organisations such as Islamic State and Boko Haram recruit women as pragmatic contributors to organisational success. Some scholars suggest that movements which mobilise women are more likely to achieve organisational objectives because women signal greater community support, that it increases perceived legitimacy, and contributes to tactical effectiveness (Bigio and Volgestein 2019; Matfess 2020; Bloom and Matfess 2016; Fulmer et al. 2019). My article similarly argues that policy and P/CVE practitioners must recognise that women are motivated by a complex mix of political, psychosocial, economic and personal factors, and are recruited by organisations, such as Islamic State, due to the strategic advantages women offer.

[5] This paper presents the broad principles of the C.O.P.E framework. It has been applied in the field and future publications will outline the nuances of its application and evaluation results.

The second stream of research relates to women's roles in P/CVE. Common across these works is that gender inequality drives female recruitment, and female empowerment is key to safeguarding communities (Couture 2014; OSCE 2019; Fink et al 2016; Ndung'u et al 2017). However, two debates emerge at this juncture. First are criticisms of the militarisation of the WPS agenda and instrumentalization of women for counterterrorism. For example, directing resources towards integrating women into security sectors instead of disarmament and demilitarisation (Coomaraswamy et al 2015; Manchanda 2020; 70; Oudraat 2016, 26). However, there can be benefits to women's integration into security forces. For example, Bloom (2017) states that

> …if security forces avoid invasively searching women for fear of outraging the local conservative population…women are the ideal stealth operatives. If security personnel are too aggressive in searching women, they aid terrorist recruitment by…providing terrorists with propaganda that 'our women' are being violated.

Integrating women into security forces could potentially curb these obstacles (OSCE 2019). Furthermore, women may feel more comfortable reporting issues, particularly personal violence, to female security personnel (UNHRC 2021). Yet the opposite may also be true where women's distrust to security extends to female officers, indicating that perceptions of mistrust are associated with the institutions and roles people undertake. Deeper institutional reforms are needed so that women feel safe approaching security personnel (such as addressing sexual abuse of women in custody, the sceptical treatment of victims, and impunity of perpetrators in the Philippines, see Amnesty International 2001; Nguyen 2019).

Second are debates over harnessing women's positions as mothers and wives. Numerous scholars suggest that mothers can play important preventative roles (Majoran 2015; Eddyono and Davies 2018; True and Eddyono 2017; Schlaffer and Kropiunigg 2016). Counterarguments stress that this essentialises women's roles and further confines women to the private sphere. Ni Aolain (2015) and d'Estaing (2017) argue that invoking the symbolic

capital of motherhood shifts responsibility from states to mothers and results in putting women's lives and rights at risk. Winterbotham (2018) argues that such initiatives assume mothers do know best, without evaluating of their effectiveness. Furthermore, Winterbotham (2018) argues that focusing on women as mothers and wives diminishes the security threat women pose rendering security responses insufficient.

These debates are rooted in International Relations and feminist International Relations scholarship on women's roles in peacebuilding. Callaway (in Kaufman and Williams 2012, 61) argues that emphasising mothers and wives in conflict "presents a contradiction: the value given to female roles emphasises gender polarity, thus strengthening male roles as the dominant structure." On the other hand, Kaufman and Williams (2012, 60) find that many women self-identify and harness their roles as mothers and wives as a platform to political action and empowerment. Women thus "integrate what would be the traditional and private with the public and often feminist in order to take a political stand" (Kaufman and Williams, 2012, 62). Thompson and Eade (2004) found that the mother identity drew women together enabling them to establish support and security networks which are critical during times of conflict. Koppell (in Kaufman and Williams 2012, 13) suggests that,

> …By presupposing that all women's political activism is overtly feminist…the literature misses some of the subtilities that would otherwise help us understand why and how women act in the ways in which they do. Furthermore, it often puts women's attitudes regarding 'feminism' or 'activism' into a Western understanding of the terms. While many in the West would demean or look down upon women who define their activism based on their roles as mothers, in a non-Western setting many cultures elevate that role, thereby giving women additional status and, with that, credibility to act.

As Kaufmann and Williams (2012, 92) assert, "The important point is that regardless of the particular ideological approach that was taken…the goal was the same, and that is women working actively for peace and the restructuring of society after conflict."

Women's positions should not be further entrenched into the private sphere. However, this paper argues that inadvertently undermining mothers and wives by highlighting the minimal influence they have in their own household and community can implicitly disparage many women's self-prescribed identities. Women already feel voiceless and powerless, often within their own home. By overtly emphasising economic recovery, and thus local women's integration into the market economy, liberal peacebuilding agendas and aligned P/CVE could reinforce perceptions of female worthlessness. As Rowlands (1995, 104) asserts,

> Economic activities may widen the range of options for marginalised people, but do not necessarily enable them to reach a point where they can take charge of creating for themselves the options from which they get to choose. To do that, a combination of confidence and self-esteem, information, analytical skills, ability to identify and tap into available resources, political and social influence…is needed.

Development and peacebuilding policies designed to empower women must be realistic with their goals and expectations. This can only occur if programming is locally designed and implemented. Indeed, the overarching goal of C.O.P.E is to support, capacitate and empower local women to enable *those women* to develop locally nuanced solutions to the challenges they face.

This argument also draws on George's (2020) research in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands examining the blind faith in applying the "economic peace paradigm" (the concept that integrating women into the formal market economy results in a substantial peace dividend, a concept that has been transferred to P/CVE) onto diverse communities while ignoring the "complex gendered realities that shape women's lives in post-conflict contexts" (George, 2020, 42). George argues that women's integration into the market economy often

causes more gendered burden, insecurity, and violence from family members who resent their earnings: "…the assumed peace dividend that accrues from women's earnings is not one that is paid voluntarily by women, but is produced in ways that undermine individual women's wellbeing" (George, 2020, 51). George reflects on discussions she had with local women who attended programmes on business development, and recounts one woman describing the sessions as "depressing: 'The trainers fill my head full of ideas about what I can do, but I look around me and realise I can't do any of it'" (George, 2020, 53). Nguyen similarly interviewed a woman in the Philippines who sought education, financial independence, and professional development, but was abused by her husband due to what "he sees as a breach of long-standing norms that wives should stay home and care for the family" (Nguyen, 2019, 431).

Similar sentiments were expressed to me during discussions with women across Southeast Asia. This is not to say that financial independence and women's access to work should not be prioritised, and the harms of material deprivation and the benefits of economic agency must never be dismissed as these are vital goals. Rather, these tensions underscore the need for locally contextualised approaches that progressively address broader structural and perceptual barriers to empowerment by recognising the often harsh, jarring realities of life for women living in certain parts of the world. This necessitates a whole of community and multilayered government approach with efforts to shape perceptions on women's worth and what women can and cannot do. As Kabeer (2005, 13) states,

> …education, employment, and political participation…is considered essential to the achievement of gender equality and women's empowerment. Each of these resources certainly has the potential to bring about positive changes in women's lives, but, in each case, it is the social relationships that govern access to the resource in question that will determine the extent to which this potential is realised.

Furthermore, empirical research must be calibrated to not only inform policy, programming, and actual practice, but generate metrics which then feed back into the research

that inevitably informs policy and design. Consequently, local women themselves must play a central role in identifying appropriate indicators of change that then inform programme evaluation design. Empowerment – and the means of realising it – ought to be defined by local women.

Establishing C.O.P.E's Foundations: Empowering Women, Out-Competing Violent Extremists

C.O.P.E is built on two broad premises. First, empowering women is an essential goal, with positive effects on community cohesion, peacebuilding, and P/CVE. For the purposes of my paper, empowerment is the process through which the disempowered acquires the ability to make choices, particularly strategic life choices like where to live, whether to marry, whether to work, and whether to have children. According to Kabeer (2005), three dimensions form empowerment – agency, resources and achievements. Agency is when choices are made and put into effect (Kabeer 2005, 14). Agency is not simply exercising choice but challenging power relations in exercising that choice. Empowerment and disempowerment are thus relational: "empowerment is rooted in how people see themselves – their sense of self-worth. This in turn is critically bound up with how they are seen by those around them and by their society" (Kabeer 2005, 15). Closely related are resources, which are the mediums through which agency is exercised. They encompass material and social resources which affect the ability to make choices. For example, "If a woman's primary form of access to resources is as a dependent member of the family, her capacity to make strategic choices is likely to be limited" (Kabeer 2005, 15). Resources and agency combined make up one's potential for living the lives they want. Therefore, perceptual and structural barriers may inhibit empowerment.

My paper argues that pre-existing gender inequalities and harms drive violent extremist recruitment. Therefore, female empowerment is key to safeguarding women and communities against violent extremism. The links between women's equality and security,

and a peaceful democratic society are well established (Nagel 2020; Hunt and Posa 2009; Hudson et al 2012; Lee-Koo 2011; Bouta et al 2004; Anderlini 2007; Kaufman and Williams 2012). Women's equal ability to become politically active and make decisions leads to more representative institutions and policies, which is vital for conflict resolution. As Kaufman and Williams stress, long-lasting peacebuilding requires reducing the fundamental causes of conflict (2012, 95). Reconstruction thus necessitates reform rather than a "return to normal" (Manchanda 2020, 69), and this can only be achieved if women are politically included (Bouta et al 2004, 52). This is particularly important from a P/CVE perspective because the political exclusion of women creates a vulnerability that could be exploited by violent extremists. The final pillar of the C.O.P.E framework recommends establishing forums comprised of local women and female-led civil society to facilitate dialogue, cooperation, and inclusive decision-making.

The four interconnected pillars of C.O.P.E are designed to break down perceptual and structural barriers which prevent women from safely realising their agency. This is because the gendered inequalities experienced by women in some areas, such as in health and education (Baliamoune-Lutz and McGillivray 2015), can have negative feedback loops impeding women's agency in other areas such as in social and economic participation (Loya 2014). Gendered health issues stemming from sexual exploitation, domestic violence, genital mutilation, rape, adolescent pregnancy, unsafe abortion, and forced marriages are a result of, and perpetuate female disempowerment. For instance, mothers aged 15-19 are twice as likely to die of pregnancy complications compared to women aged 20-24 (UNFPA 2020b), and infant mortality is 45% higher when births are separated by less than 2 years compared to 2-3 years (WHO 2020, Molitoris et al 2020). In the Philippines, childbearing adolescents are less likely to complete secondary education hindering future employment opportunities (UNFPA 2020a) and are more likely to experience violence within their relationship (Raj and Boehmer 2013). Unsafe abortion similarly has negative short and long-term health, social and economic repercussions on women, their families, and the state (Singh 2010). The continuing psychosocial consequences of gendered harms cannot be understated (Luga 2009).

These types of physical, psychological, and social harms can offer opportunities for violent extremist exploitation by offering false promises of hope and empowerment. P/CVE policy and programming must therefore be tailored to address and prevent gendered harms. The second pillar of C.O.P.E is designed to "out-compete" violent extremists by implementing community activities, designed and led by local women, which target key psychosocial, political, economic, and health vulnerabilities. For example, facilitating access to reproductive health, family planning resources and psychosocial rehabilitation can reduce associated short-term and long-term negative health impacts on women, as well as on family members and the broader community (Varkey et al 2010; Klevens and Ports 2017; World Bank 2012; Gates 2019; Sen 2001). However, addressing the underlying perceptual, social, and power dynamics (Bosley 2020) which prohibit women's agency is crucial to ensuring women can safely access resources without fear of violence, ostracization and further insecurity. Thus, the third pillar of C.O.P.E focuses on persuasive communications that shapes local perceptions on issues such as perceptions of women's worth, what women can and cannot do, and victim shaming.

The second premise is rooted in Ingram's "linkage" approach (e.g. Ingram 2017; Ingram 2016b). The "linkage" approach has been applied as an analytical framework in scholarly publications including journal articles (Ingram 2015; Ingram 2016a; Berger 2017; Whiteside 2018; Reed and Dowling 2018; Whittaker and Elsayed 2019; Zeiger et al 2021) and books (Berger 2018; Ingram, Winter, Whiteside 2020). The linkage approach has also been applied as an evaluation mechanism for assessing P/CVE messaging (Whittaker and Elsayed 2019) while the practical methodology has informed programming in several countries across Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, especially where the Islamic State and al-Qa'ida have been most active. A core principle of the "linkage" approach is the importance of out-competing violent extremist influence through competing "systems of control" (via actions) and "systems of meaning" (via messaging). This principle reflects a central contention underpinning the analytical method that the purpose of violent extremist

propaganda is to shape the perceptions and mobilise the support of target audiences by deploying rational-choice and identity-choice messaging (Ingram 2015).

Rational-choice messaging tends to be used to promote a violent extremist group's "competitive systems of control," i.e. its politico-military and social systems intended to address the needs of the populace (Fall 1965). According to David Kilcullen, "In irregular conflicts…the local armed actor that a given population perceives as best able to establish a predictable, consistent, and wide-spectrum normative system of control is most likely to dominate that population and its residential areas" (Kilcullen, 2013, 126). For example, following military victories across Syria and Iraq, Islamic State sought to fill power vacuums by administering a system of governance (Kilcullen 2015; Zelin 2015; Milton 2016; Winter 2018; Whiteside 2016) and official Islamic State propaganda amplified these activities (Islamic State Report 2014a; Islamic State Report 2014b) by portraying its alternative governance initiatives (Islamic State News 2014a; Islamic State Report 2014c) as the only reliable sources of credibility, legitimacy, stability and livelihood (Ingram, Winter, Whiteside 2020, 168). These rational-choice factors feature prominently in Islamic State propaganda to female audiences (Ingram 2019) and are central to mobilising female support.

Identity-choice messaging seeks to construct a "competitive system of meaning" for its audiences by offering an alternative frame through which to interpret the world. In the case of the Islamic State, this frame positions it as the champion of an in-group (i.e. Islamic State-aligned Sunni Muslims) and the bearers of solutions confronting crisis causing out-group identities (literally everyone else) who threaten the in-group's existence. Such "linkage dynamics" (Ingram 2017; Berger 2018) seek to motivate audiences to shape their own identities to align with the Islamic State's identity, solution and crisis constructs. This provokes readers to make "logic of appropriateness" decisions – decisions in accordance with their adopted identities. Rational-choice and identity-choice appeals are mutually reinforcing. When targeting women, for instance, the Islamic State breaks down in-group and out-group identities into five individual gender identities, or female representations: "supporter," "mother/sister/wife," and "fighter" belong to the in-group, "corruptor" belongs to the out-

group, and "victim" is in need of saving (Ingram 2016c, Ingram 2018, Ingram 2019). The five female representations symbolise how to and not to behave and offer women alternative paths to empowerment through action and powerful identities.

These two premises have important implications for peacebuilding and P/CVE policy and programming. The first underscores the importance of empowering women to strengthen community cohesion and safeguard women from extremist influence. However, barriers to female empowerment are rooted in perceptions (dominant systems of meaning) and structures (dominant systems of control) which limit women's agency and ability to access resources. Violent extremist groups attempt to exploit these pre-existing inequalities by offering women a competitive system of meaning (e.g. a reality where women are valued and needed) and competitive systems of control (e.g. access to services and opportunities for security and livelihood) as pathways to empowerment. The second suggests that P/CVE policy and programming must be designed to out-compete violent extremist's false promises of empowerment through persuasive communications that are supported by and synchronised with actions on the ground. These *narrative-driven actions* must be geared towards shaping perceptions on gender equality, facilitating women's access to resources (social, political, education, legal, security, economic and health infrastructure) and improving the welfare of women individually and collectively (e.g. addressing physical and psychological challenges such as through trauma-informed care, see Bosley 2020; McDonald 2010; McDevitt-Murphy et al 2010).

Building an Empirical Base

Having outlined the major scholarly trends and conceptual premises upon which C.O.P.E is based, it is important to now consider four key areas that must be incorporated into P/CVE programme design including the logic of violent extremist targeting of women, the role of women in violent extremist movements, and the potential resonance of these appeals and opportunities for women. P/CVE programming must be evidence-based and tailored to local

dynamics with strategies informed by an understanding of the local violent extremist organisation/s operating in the area. The focus of this analysis is on Islamic State, reflective of where the programme has been applied, and woven throughout are reflections from my professional experiences working with women in areas where Islamic State have been active in the Philippines, Bangladesh, and Indonesia. The insights of local women were collected during group discussions conducted across capacity-building workshops attended by a total of 81 participants. These workshops were conducted in Indonesia, Bangladesh, and the Philippines. On the condition of anonymity,[6] participants verbally consented to their insights and perspectives being collected during these discussions.[7]

Islamic State propaganda appeals to women: five female representations

A study of how the Islamic State constructs its propaganda to appeal to women contributed to the empirical foundations of C.O.P.E's policy principles (Ingram 2021). Islamic State propaganda targeting women tends to leverage five female representations (Ingram 2016c; Ingram 2018; Ingram 2021). "Supporter," "mother/sister/wife" and "fighter" are constructed as members of the in-group and act as standards to be emulated. "Corruptor" women are presented as members of the out-group whose behaviours should be rejected, and "victim" represents women in need and worthy of being saved (Ingram 2016c; Ingram 2021). These representations are used to shape how audiences perceive what it means to be a "good" Muslim woman (according to Islamic State) by linking positive or negative traits to each representation. Islamic State messaging draws on jurisprudence to call for strict binary gender roles framed as being innate to men and women. If men and women transgress these roles prescribed by the Islamic State, they violate nature and the will of God. This in turn motivates women to conform to Islamic State's expectations of "real" women.

[6] No identifying information on the participants was collected. All consent was given on the condition of anonymity.
[7] All women provided written informed consent to participating in the programme and research when signing in as a participant to the workshops. Their consent to participate was then requested again verbally in their language before beginning each session of the programme.

Cost-benefit (or rational-choice) reasoning is also used by Islamic State propagandists to convince women that it is the safer and smarter option to conform to its in-group female representations. Islamic State achieve this by portraying women as victims of localised gendered crises. Gendered crises are personal experiences of the global crisis inflicted upon the *Ummah* by the out-group. For example, Umm Sulaym al-Muhajirah describes feelings of alienation and concern for the welfare of her children while living in Australia, which she rectified by becoming a "supporter" and performing *hijrah* (migration) to the Caliphate (Rumiyah 2017a, 30-35). As a result, gendered messaging situates the conflict at the local, individual level to place the responsibility to act on to the audience member. Audiences are presented with an opportunity to be their own solution to personal crises by conforming to in-group female representations. Leveraging gender thus personalises Islamic State's competitive system of meaning and presents how Islamic State's actions can help resolve women's gendered insecurities.

Strategically, the roles, values and behaviours characterising in-group female representations are actions which are likely to directly benefit Islamic State's socio-political and military objectives on the ground. In-group female representations therefore aim to empower and persuade women that they have individual agency and play important roles in establishing a Caliphate and saving the in-group (e.g. al-Muhajirah 2015b, 44). For example, "supporter" women live outside of Islamic State territory and must migrate to the Caliphate to save themselves and strengthen the in-group (Dabiq 2015a, 50-51; Al-Muhājirah 2015a, 32-37; Rumiyah 2017b, 34-35; Rumiyah 2017c, 30-35). "Mothers/sisters/wives" are promised security and better livelihoods in the Caliphate where they must raise the next generation of "lion cubs" (Al-Muhājirah 2015b, 44; Rumiyah 2017b, 34; Rumiyah 2017d, 18) and encourage men to wage jihad (Rumiyah 2016a, 28-30; Rumiyah 2016b, 32-33; Rumiyah 2017e, 12-15). If conditions deem it necessary, "fighter" women are encouraged to take up arms and join men on the frontlines (Inside the Caliphate 2018).

An analysis of gendered appeals in Islamic State propaganda targeted towards women found that "supporter," "mother/sister/wife," and "fighter" constitutes 61.95 per cent of all

female representations in *Dabiq,* and 64.5 per cent of all female representations in *Rumiyah* (Ingram 2021). This suggests that Islamic State is likely to prioritise positive and empowering appeals when seeking to target and appeal to women. However, it is important to note that when Islamic State manipulates gender constructs in messaging targeted towards broader audiences (i.e. largely male-dominated audiences), it tends to be dominated by negative female representations (i.e. "corruptor" and "victim" representations constitute 53.6 per cent of representation occurrences in *Dabiq* and 58.33 per cent in *Rumiyah*). This suggests that when Islamic State are seeking to appeal to women it is positive and empowering appeals that are likely to dominate in contrast to negative portrayals of women as "victims" and "corruptors" when it is appealing to broader, predominantly male, audiences.

These female representations are manipulated differently contingent upon strategic context, territorial control, and target audience (Ingram 2018). This follows a clear strategic logic, whereby it is in Islamic State's best interest for the roles of women to change to cater to its changing politico-military needs. During periods of strength (e.g. circa 2014-2016), its messaging tended to portrayed women as strategically valuable to address the needs of a functioning polity. Reflecting this, "supporter" and "mother/sister/wife" representations were most significant in messaging targeted towards women, comprising 16.86 per cent and 62.79 per cent of all female representations respectively (Ingram 2021).

As Islamic State transitioned to an insurgency (e.g. circa 2017-present), messaging portrayed women as still essential for responding to pressures on resources, personnel losses, and defeat on the frontline. The prominence of the "supporter" representation dramatically decreased to 5.03 per cent coinciding with the Islamic State's territorial losses, potentially indicating a reduced need to coax women to perform *hijrah* to a crumbling Caliphate. Instead, messaging emphasised the correct conduct of "true" Muslim "mothers," "sisters" and "wives" as the primary focus (69.18 per cent). Women were also portrayed fighting for the first time in 2018 (Inside the Caliphate 2018). While "fighter" rarely occurred in female specific articles, its frequency in messaging designed for male audiences increased by 83.3 per cent (Ingram 2021). This suggests that as Islamic State suffered losses during its transition back to an

insurgency, its attempts to shame men towards taking action significantly increased. Monitoring the frequency with which these representations are deployed in the Islamic State's propaganda is vital for assessing how the group is seeking to appeal to women and, more broadly, offers insights into its strategic thinking. Current research is examining the role of these representations in far-right extremist propaganda, and the implications for P/CVE.

Local recruitment and drivers of support

The recurring feedback I received from women in Indonesia, Bangladesh and the Philippines was that Islamic State's local efforts to recruit women played on these five female representations in locally nuanced ways. In these contexts, poverty and stability were described as factors that motivated women, often alongside the influence of family members, to join the local Islamic State group operating in their communities. For example, in Indonesia many interviewees highlighted how women were the instigating force encouraging their families to mobilise locally or migrate to the Caliphate. In Marawi, women were promised 30-40,000 pesos if they joined Islamic State and with additional financial incentives for recruiting others (Ingram 2019). Local women in Mindanao regularly indicated that the majority of recruitment occurred in isolated rural areas, where living conditions are poor, and recruiters have easier access to populations. The promises of elevated social standing often appeared to be at least as powerful a lure for women as financial gain.

This is not unique to Southeast Asia or even the Islamic State. For example, P/CVE strategies in Morocco and Bangladesh identify poverty and women's lower social standing as a catalyst for recruitment (Couture 2014). Nwangwu and Ezeibe (2019) note that unemployment and poverty are central to Boko Haram's recruitment of women and children in Kenya. Ndung'u et al. (2017, 33) interviewed women in Majengo and Mombasa and found that many joined Al Shabaab because of promises of a job and better livelihoods. They conclude that,

> …women involved seem to be caught in the centre of this web: not only are they vulnerable to the economic lure of joining an extremist group, but they are also doubly affected by the impact of violent extremism…because women experience the economic downturn of the communities affected by terrorist attacks as well as often losing their families' breadwinners to violent extremism, through death or recruitment (Ndung'u et al., 2017, 34).

Johnston, True and Benalla's (2019, 28) study of gender dynamics and violent extremism in Libya similarly found that the "changing gender roles brought about by the economic hardships of war have paradoxically helped violent extremist groups recruit women…because violent extremist groups target excluded and vulnerable women…".

A consistent theme across scholarly research, and the responses of women during in-field workshops, are that violent extremists exploit pre-existing gender inequalities by offering women prospects of empowerment or, at the very least, relief from these pressures. During discussions in Bangladesh women spoke of the impact of everyday insecurities which they felt needs to be addressed in any P/CVE and peacebuilding effort, such as not having the freedom to talk and fear of violence, while many women in the Philippines discussed traumas associated with relationships and even child marriage. For many women, supporting violent extremist organisations is a means of exercising agency and taking political action to change their lives. Kaufmann and Williams (2012, 64) assert that many of the reasons that motivate women to work together for peace are similar to the reasons for engaging in violence. For women to support and engage in irregular conflict, women must believe that they have few alternatives (Kaufmann and Williams 2012, 64). This suggests that,

> …women resort to acts of violence as a source of empowerment, something that they often do not experience in traditional, patriarchal societies. Hence, in looking for ways to acquire a sense of political agency, they choose a means that allows them to make a difference… (Kaufmann and Williams 2012, 65).

It is essential P/CVE initiatives are led by local women who have the experiences and understanding of local dynamics and the conditions which may increase susceptibilities to violent extremism. This also underscores the importance of out-competing violent extremists with actions and messaging to facilitate women's political activism, access to resources, and changing perceptions of women in society.

Women's roles in Islamic State

Several studies explore how recruiters promise women important roles which are framed to be central to Islamic State's mission and essential for the survival of women's families and the in-group (Bloom 2011; Vale 2019; Santos 2020; Margolin 2019). Many violent extremist groups recognise the tactical advantages (Davis 2013; Margolin 2019) of female combatants due to positive-security biases afforded to women. Female combatants in Boko Haram have been so effective, killing more than 1,200 people from 2014 to 2018, that they comprise almost two-thirds of the group's suicide attackers (Bloom and Matfess 2016). A study by Fulmer et al (2019) compared five different violent extremist groups and found that suicide attacks conducted by women were not only less likely to fail but killed an average of 8.4 victims compared to 5.3 if the attack was conducted by men. Demonstrating this lethality, in August 2020 two women carried out a suicide attack in Sulu in the Philippines killing 14 and injuring 75. Indeed, leading up to the Marawi siege, women were recruited as snipers due to a belief that women can "focus longer and have steadier hands" (Ingram 2019).

Women were also used to recruit men and other women by exploiting their roles as mothers, sisters and wives (evocative of the "mother/sister/wife" representation). Violent extremists will often exploit familial roles to achieve strategic ends. The family attacks in Surabaya in 2018, a couple's suicide bombing in Jolo in 2019, and a husband and wife's suicide bombing in Makassar in 2021 exemplify this strategy. This tactic also highlights the important auxiliary roles women play in violent extremist organisations. Reports by Bigio and Vogelstein (2019) and the UNODC (2019) detail women's roles as recruiters, law enforcers and fundraisers for Islamic State, Boko Haram, Al Shabaab and Jemaah Islamiyah. Matfess

(2020, 5) highlights strategic benefits female membership offers such as logistics management, clandestine operations, legitimising group activity, and boosting members' morale. The women interviewed in Al Jazeera's "Women of ISIL" provide graphic details of the Al-Khansaa Brigade's brutality towards female "transgressors" (Al Jazeera 2019). Failing to recognise the strategic importance of women for violent extremist objectives can have negative impacts on security and P/CVE development. This further underscores the need for female led P/CVE that holistically addresses the vulnerabilities driving women to violent extremism.

Gendered impacts of violent extremism

The insecurities women experience in conflicted affected environments are exacerbated by violent extremism. Women are susceptible to sexual violence perpetrated by those who are supposed to protect them, such as security personnel, in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps and in evacuation centres (Nguyen 2019; Amnesty International 2001). For example, women in Mindanao expressed a range of psychosocial insecurities resulting from ongoing, multigenerational violence. Feelings of hopelessness are exacerbated through cycles of displacement to evacuation centres and return to destroyed homes (Dwyer and Cagoco-Guiam 2012). Women and girls in IDP camps suffer the brunt of protracted conflicts, with limited access to feminine hygiene and reproductive health resources (Tanyag 2016). Women whose husbands leave for conflict or are killed suffer immense economic strain increasing their vulnerabilities to exploitation (Tanyag 2016). Women who manage to find employment may then feel guilty for neglecting traditional roles and are often subjected to backlash (New Humanitarian 2008). According to several reports, the increased economic pressures during and after the Marawi siege resulted in an increase in child marriages, commercial sexual exploitation, and domestic violence (UNFPA 2019; Cepeda 2019).

These traumas and insecurities provide fertile ground for violent extremist influence. This is because violent extremist groups benefit strategically from *both* the subjugation of women as a result of pre-existing structures and perceptions, and from acts committed by

violent extremist organisations designed to perpetuate inequalities (Hudson and Hodgson 2020). The previous discussion explored how Islamic State propaganda and local recruitment efforts exploit women's marginalisation by offering false promises of empowerment. Yet, violent extremist groups also direct violence toward women as a means of driving instability in the community, sabotaging social cohesion, and widening gender disparities. As Bloom and Matfess state, "Understood as a means of fostering cohesiveness among forcibly conscripted soldiers, while simultaneously undermining external social bonds and instilling fear, violence against women is particularly suited to the goals of terrorist organisations" (Bloom and Matfess, 2016, 107).

Rape and sexual violence are common instruments of war due to the devastating effects it has on victims, families, communities, and its ability to destroy cultures. McDevitt-Murphy et al (2010, 294) state "because of women's role in maintaining family and community cohesion, mass sexual assault destroys the social fabric." A former member of Al Shabaab interviewed by Ndung'u et al. (2017, 33) reveals abhorrent gendered violence:

> We experienced sexual, verbal and physical abuse. Some girls were forcefully married. Almost 75% of the girls were infected with HIV. The fighters would not use protection and would forcefully have sex with the girls when they were menstruating. I did not get married and did not have children when I was at the camp. Other girls had babies; there were many children in this camp and no one was really taking care of them. We were forced to take drugs mixed with water.

Violent extremist groups may benefit financially from rape and sexual violence. Islamic State enforced the enslavement of Yazidi women and girls and generated an estimated US $90 million through extortion and ransoms (Hutchinson 2020; Bigio 2020; Al-Dayel, Mumford and Bales 2020). Boko Haram similarly kidnaps women and girls to lure security forces into an ambush and generate ransom payments (Bloom and Matfess 2016). Women in Marawi told me that Islamic State violently targets (and recruits) women in an effort to

destroy community cohesion. Because of this targeting, women were often the first to identify Islamic State's infiltration into their communities. These gendered impacts highlight that local women see and experience violent extremism differently from men and, often, first. This yet again underscores the importance of harnessing women's voices in P/CVE so that they have the opportunity to represent their own interests and address the needs and complexities of their communities.

Capacitate to Out-Compete, Persuade, and Empower (C.O.P.E)

Women in communities affected by violent extremism frequently indicate that they feel voiceless and powerless. It is clear from this analysis that women must have a central role in preventing violent extremist recruitment of not only other women, but of all members of their communities. This requires empowering local women and ensuring that their welfare and perspectives are prioritised. The C.O.P.E framework offers a methodical and evidence-based approach to programme design and implementation calibrated to centralise and enable the role of local women. The specific details of each pillar must be established in collaboration with the local community and tailored to address the needs, sensitivities, gender, and power dynamics of that community.

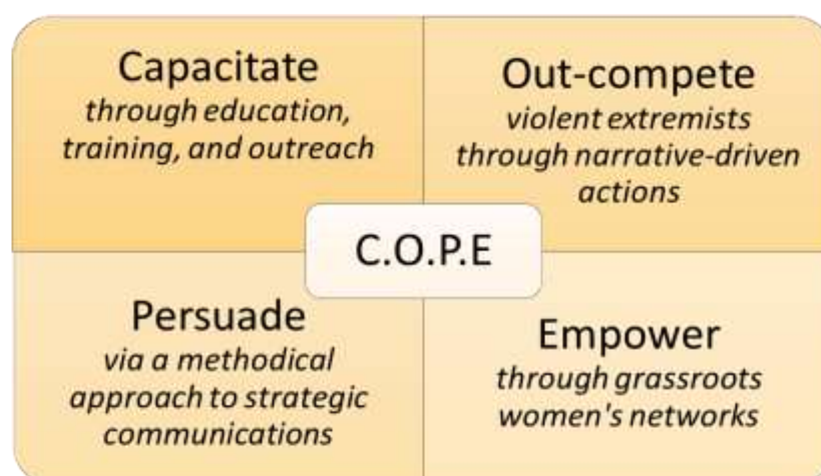

Figure 1: The C.O.P.E Framework

Capacitate through education, training and outreach

The first pillar focuses on local capacity building. Local female-led civil society need access to training, presented in the vernacular, that provides them with an understanding of trends in violent extremist propaganda and recruitment, community-based approaches to prevention, and broad principles for effective civil society P/CVE. These workshops also act as forums to connect local women with each other, learn from their collective experiences, and encourage support and collaboration. For example, in workshops conducted with women in Indonesia, the five female representations of women that characterises gendered propaganda resonated with the participants and helped them to make sense of not only their experiences but strategies being used by local violent extremists.

Women who receive this training can then go on to share what they have learned with other local women, particularly those in remote areas and vulnerable communities, creating sustainable cycles of knowledge sharing through their social networks. Local female-led civil society often have a nuanced understanding of their communities and can tailor what they have learned to address specific individual and collective needs. Providing material support to women's networks that enable them to have a direct and practical impact on their communities is vital. For example, financial and food security pressures have increased across Mindanao during the COVID-19 pandemic and so the provision of material support to local civil society groups has allowed for food, hygiene kit, and mask distribution synchronised with messaging efforts. From a psychosocial perspective, social activities where women can be or feel as if they are able to affect change is critical for psychological well-being and strengthens people's sense of self-efficacy (McDonald 2010, 231).

Out-Compete violent extremists and other 'peace spoilers'

Building on the first pillar, the second pillar recommends providing support so that local women can address practical needs in their communities through *narrative-driven actions,* i.e. community-based activities delivered with messaging that amplifies the reach and impact of those activities. Delivering actions with messaging helps to project a kind-of civil

society based system of control and meaning that offers an alternative to those of more malign actors such as violent extremists.

Narrative-driven actions cannot operate on a one size fits all basis but be tailored to the local context. Western-centric agendas must be mediated by local gendered "social, political and cultural factors that create the condition of vulnerabilities, physical (and sexual), economic and social" (Manchanda 2020, 76). This underscores the importance for programming to be developed, implemented and evaluated by local female-led groups. Furthermore, programmes must have clear and measurable indicators of success across locally-informed female empowerment markers such as social (rates of access to education, rates of underage marriage), political (female inclusion and agency), economic (whether women have a say in household expenditure, whether women can spend income free from coercion/backlash, female unemployment rates that do not perpetuate female dominated low status jobs), and health markers (rates of violence, access to birth control and health care, infant and female mortality). Evaluating the impact and reach of these efforts can be achieved through a mix of surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions. These assessments then provide an evidence base for shaping and reshaping programming over time.

Persuade via a methodical approach to strategic communications

The third pillar focuses on persuasive communications driven by three aims. First, these communications must offer an alternative to the gender appeals in violent extremist propaganda. This requires both an understanding of the strategic logic of gendered appeals (e.g. the five female representations) and an understanding of the unique ways in which local women and girls are recruited. Applying the linkage approach to strategic communications, the key to dismantling violent extremist propaganda appeals to women is to discredit, in the example of Islamic State, its five representations of women and how these are linked to its competitive systems of meaning and control. For example, Islamic State messaging seeks to persuade women living outside of its areas of territorial control that their grievances could be solved by performing *hijrah* to where they can enjoy security and stability (i.e. becoming a

"supporter" to reap the benefits of Islamic State control). Harnessing the voices of women who lived under Islamic State control can be a powerful means of delegitimising Islamic State's utopian promises, where in reality women and girls were tortured, murdered, enslaved and raped. This also contributes to a broader effort of exacerbating Islamic State's say-do or credibility gap.

Second, persuasive communications must promote and amplify the practical *narrative-driven actions* conducted as part of pillar two. After all, to out-compete violent extremists, civil society must present themselves as effective sources of both 'meaning' and 'control' for their communities. Persuasive communications must therefore also reshape those pre-existing perceptions in society that generate female disempowerment. Women who attended workshops across Indonesia, the Philippines and Bangladesh expressed their biggest concern is social perceptions on women's worth, and that they do not feel safe talking in public. For example, the women I engaged with often identified their roles as mothers and wives as sources of pride and empowerment – even if others around them do not have the same perception. As one woman explained,

> To me, ISIS seems like the right way because they say mothers are important. Then development people come into my country and say this is not good enough and we must get jobs. But in my culture, being a mother is very important.

The third purpose of persuasive communications is therefore to provide women with a cost-efficient and effective way of shaping audience perceptions on key issues. Strategic communications capacity building workshops can be an invaluable tool to equip local female-led civil society with the skills needed to develop and design their own proactive messaging campaigns which seek to alter perceptions on female empowerment and gender equality. Local women have the deepest understanding of hinderances to female empowerment, what empowerment realistically looks like in their communities, as well as the factors needed for effective messaging campaigns.

Empower through connection

The fourth pillar is arguably the most important: establish grassroots women's networks where women can bond and organise for collective action. Women are often the barometers of a community's susceptibility to violent extremism. However, women need to feel safe and comfortable enough to access resources and approach the appropriate authorities to seek help. Therefore, to accelerate one woman's empowerment, connect her to other women. These networks then enable women to meaningfully engage with sectors that they may feel uncomfortable meeting with individually, such as security and law enforcement agencies. Female-led civil society organisations are useful partners in mitigating violence and can operate as a mediating body to interact with local police to alert them to gendered safety issues they and others in the community are experiencing.

Access to trauma-informed care is vital and should be integrated across law enforcement, social workers, educators, and other social service providers. However, access is difficult for displaced peoples and communities with weakened governance. In lieu, social connection and support in a physically safe environment is critical for trauma recovery: "promoting feelings of safety among traumatised individuals is critical, because any previously held sense of safety has been largely disrupted through the experience of a threat of annihilation" (McDonald 2010, 228). Connecting women to other women facilitates social connection which is essential for traumatised individuals. As McDonald (2010, 233) notes, "social support can be restored through group sharing of trauma stories, and these can also be facilitated through activities."

I have often witnessed it in the workshops I have conducted; one woman shares her personal stories of trauma, prompting many other women to feel comfortable enough to share their own stories. During focus group discussions in Bangladesh, women discussed problems affecting their everyday lives. Women spoke of feeling invisible and ignored. One woman said, "From the age of 3, we are taught to be scared of being raped." Yet, most of the women who spoke of their traumas that day also expressed that this workshop was the first time they have *ever* spoken about these experiences, and it was because they were in a physically safe

space connected to women with similar stories. The opportunity to have a voice, share trauma stories and connect with women who have similar experiences can be a powerfully cathartic process. These social support networks and safe environments are essential for trauma recovery, empowerment, as well as prevention and disengagement from violent extremism.

Just as P/CVE cannot be successful without women, it cannot be successful without men. It is essential that policies and programming are geared towards empowering women, but this is as a result of deeper structural and perceptual barriers to female empowerment which foster violent extremism. The sustainability of any efforts to support women will be limited if dominant perceptions and social relations dictate women unworthy of accessing the necessary resources and opportunities for empowerment and equality. The structural and perceptual barriers discussed in this article will only be comprehensively addressed and maintained if both men and women are included in efforts towards gender equality and addressing the complex mix of psychosocial, political, and economic factors that render communities conducive to violent extremism.

Conclusion

This policy paper presented a framework for designing P/CVE that centralises local women. It incorporates scholarly research and in-field experiences related to the unique gendered experiences of violent extremism at the local level, the diverse roles women play in violent extremist groups, and the integral role female-led initiatives have on preventing violent extremism within their communities. This article argues that local female perspectives, participation in decision-making processes, and empowerment is key to safeguarding women and communities against violent extremism. The four pillars of the C.O.P.E framework are designed to not only address the complex mix of structural and perceptual barriers hindering female empowerment and fostering violent extremism, but amplify women's voices, improves their welfare, and enable them to have the power needed to command the trajectory of their own lives and communities.

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