Gender mainstreaming in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism

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Abstract

How does gender identity factor into preventing violent extremism, and rehabilitating individuals involved with terrorist networks? This question is becoming increasingly visible in the literature on preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) programs. However, it remains unclear how experts working on P/CVE initiatives understand the importance of gender in the context of violent extremism, and how they integrate gender-sensitive approaches in their work. By relying on the concept of gender mainstreaming, this paper aims to explore how much knowledge and understanding of gender perspectives in terrorism and violent extremism P/CVE practitioners have. Based on 10 interviews with 11 experts working on P/CVE programs, this study reveals that formal knowledge about gender perspectives in violent extremism remains relatively limited among P/CVE practitioners. On one hand, most experts intuitively realize how gender identity influences one's participation in, and disengagement from violent extremism. Most P/CVE practitioners also recognize the need for gender equality in planning and executing their programs. However, the interviews revealed that there remain several areas of improvement. Firstly, although the interviewed P/CVE practitioners appreciate the importance of having a gender-sensitive perspective, they are not sure how these insights can help build more effective P/CVE mechanisms. Moreover, some of the P/CVE experts remain unclear on what terminology should be used to describe gender-sensitive P/CVE work. This paper argues that there is a need for greater dialogue between global security organizations, academics, and the P/CVE practitioners working on the ground, to design more effective and community-oriented preventing and countering violent extremism programs.

Introduction

The significance of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) programs

Over 40,000 people from at least 80 countries have become affiliated with Islamic State (IS) – a terrorist organization, which occupied several regions of Syria and Iraq, and has committed numerous crimes against humanity (Vale and Cook, 2018). While the actual

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number of active IS supporters remains unclear – the official data also includes minors who travelled with their family members – it is known that several thousands of people chose to support this terrorist movement. These individuals came from countries as distant from each other as the United States, the Philippines, Pakistan, or Algeria. Although the Islamic State lost control over its occupied territories, many important questions remain. Why have so many people joined a terrorist movement, and could they have been prevented from doing so? What are the best ways of managing the cases of people who were involved with terrorist organizations, and are currently returning to their home countries?

These questions become even more pressing upon remembering that the Islamic State is not the only terrorist organization posing a threat to global security. Violent extremist movements have existed for at least several centuries and have been consistently able to attract new members. However, in the past several decades, many countries and institutions around the world have been implementing various community and state-wide initiatives aiming to dissuade people from supporting violent movements and to assist former members of violent extremist groups to reintegrate into society. These are widely known as preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) programs.

However, research suggests that many P/CVE initiatives have not avoided many pitfalls, including those related to gender. Several studies based on the analysis of existing P/CVE programs show that many initiatives do not sufficiently consider gender as a factor playing a role in one's process of radicalization, or even if such programs do, they reinforce gender stereotypes and fail to prevent threats (Gordon and True, 2019; Giscard D'Estaing, 2017; Schmidt, 2020). While other studies have focused on the wider question of how one can make deradicalization programs more gender-inclusive, little attention has been paid to the role of P/CVE practitioners – the professionals who directly work with people at risk of radicalization, or individuals seeking to leave extremist movements. This article aims to address this gap by investigating to what extent preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) practitioners understand and apply gender perspectives in their work. By utilizing the concept of "gender mainstreaming", the paper examines how P/CVE practitioners understand the significance of gender factors in violent extremism, and in their work as P/CVE professionals.

Paper overview

This article begins with a literature review, which defines key terms, analyses how gender dynamics factor in the way people participate in violent extremist movements and introduces the concept of "gender mainstreaming". Subsequently, the paper describes the adopted theoretical framework of the postcolonial feminist perspective in terrorism studies and justifies this choice. The next two sections explain the methodological approach and discuss the findings of conducted interviews with P/CVE professionals. In doing so, this paper aims to synthesize the findings from existing literature, and the insights gathered through interviews. Based on this analysis, the article subsequently formulates policy recommendations on integrating gender perspectives in the P/CVE initiatives.

Literature Review

Understanding terrorism and violent extremism

"Terrorism" and "violent extremism" are terms used to describe widely understood political violence, albeit not without controversies. Neither term has a universally accepted definition, and both "terrorism and "violent extremism" are often used interchangeably, despite the two words denoting slightly different phenomena. While "terrorism" usually denotes a direct act of violence, "violent extremism" generally refers to the wider act of accepting violence as a tool of political action. Various institutions and states around the world have developed different definitions of both terrorism and violent extremism (Striegher, 2015). The author acknowledges the ethical considerations and inherent power dynamics within the process of defining what "terrorism" and "violent extremism" mean. Hence, the author decided to adopt two definitions proposed by international organizations specializing in countering security threats.

For the sake of consistency, the paper relies on the definition of terrorism included in the 2004 UN Security Council Resolution 1566, which describes terrorism as:

> "Criminal acts including against civilians, committed with the intent to cause death or serious bodily injury, or taking of hostages, with the purpose to provoke a state of terror in the general public or in a group of persons or particular persons, intimidate a

population or compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act."

(UN Security Council Resolution 1566, 2004)

Regarding the term "violent extremism", this article relies on the working definition of violent extremism and radicalization (VERLT) proposed by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE):

"Radicalization that leads to terrorism is the dynamic process whereby an individual comes to accept terrorist violence as possible, perhaps even legitimate, course of action. This may eventually, but not necessarily, lead this person to advocate, act in support of, or to engage in terrorism".

(Organization for the Security and Co-Operation in Europe, 2019)

Countering violent extremism and preventing violent extremism (PVE/CVE)

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the issues of terrorism and violent extremism have become a priority in the global and local agendas. Many governments and institutions around the world have formulated national and regional strategies for preventing the development of violent extremist groups, addressing radicalization, and rehabilitating ex-offenders (Jani, 2017; Gunaratna and Hussin, 2018; Rabasa et al. 2010). Here, at least two categories of such programs can be distinguished: preventing violent extremism (PVE) and countering violent extremism (CVE). While PVE programs aim to prevent or stop terrorist threats from arising, CVE means applying strategies to minimize the harm already done by violent extremist movements. For instance, many PVE initiatives include community outreach efforts, engaging with the youth at risk of radicalization. On the other hand, CVE initiatives aim to facilitate the exit from violent extremist groups and reintegration into society (Stephens et al. 2019). Many times, both PVE and CVE initiatives are managed within the same organization, or by the same individual. Both P/CVE programs are implemented by mostly public and non-profit sectors, however, some of them receive government funding or support. Additionally, many think tanks and academic centres have been researching and contributing to P/CVE initiatives (Schuurman and Eijikman, 2015; Vale and Cook, 2018). Therefore, the development of

P/CVE programs became a global effort, bringing together policymakers, academics, representatives of non-profit organizations, social workers, and state security actors.

However, the development of P/CVE programs around the world did not take place in the same way. This is because different world regions have been exposed to different levels of the terrorist threat and grapple with many other issues. Consequently, there is much diversity in the form, scope, and designs of preventing and countering violent extremism initiatives. An exit programme for former neo-Nazi movement members in Denmark will greatly vary from an initiative aiming to curb the spread of the Islamic State propaganda in Indonesian universities. According to the Foreign Policy Research Institute, "There is no universal consensus regarding what exactly constitutes 'preventing' or 'countering violent extremism' (PVE/CVE) nor what forms these should take" (McCants and Watts, 2012). Therefore, this paper recognizes the inherently diverse nature of the P/CVE field but explores gender mainstreaming in both PVE and CVE as both fields heavily overlap.

Applying the concepts of gender and gender mainstreaming to the PVE/CVE areas

To understand how and why gender matters in the P/CVE programs, one needs a thorough understanding of what gender and gender mainstreaming exactly mean. Therefore, this section aims to analyze both concepts, and then explain their importance to the paper.

The World Health Organization defines gender as "the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed" (World Health Organization, 2021). These characteristics include norms of behaviour, roles, and expectations related to being a man or a woman. Thus, gender differs from biological sex, which refers to the physiological characteristics of people. Traditionally, gender has been understood in a binary way (men and women). However, advancements in feminist and postcolonial studies have offered new perspectives on this issue. Firstly, numerous communities around the world distinguish more than one gender (as in the case of hijras in South Asian countries). Secondly, many people identify as neither man nor woman, thus falling under the category of non-binary, or genderqueer people (Wick, 2022). Gender as a unit of analysis and source of perspectives has been popularized with the advancement of scholarly feminist theories, and the wider feminism movement worldwide. This paper utilizes two categories of "male" and "female" to analyse the topic of gender mainstreaming in PVE/CVE. That is because there is still very little

scholarship on the experiences and roles of non-binary/genderqueer people in the context of preventing and countering violent extremism.

"Gender mainstreaming" refers to the widely understood process of applying gender perspectives in public policy. This concept was developed in the United Nations community and has its roots in the 1985 Third World Conference of Women held in Nairobi, Kenya. In 1997, the UN Economic and Social Council agreed on the following definition of gender mainstreaming:

> "The process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programs, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programs in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality"
> (United Nations Economic and Social Council, 1997).

It has been argued that gender mainstreaming makes public policy more inclusive and effective, as it takes into consideration the perspectives of diverse audiences. On the other hand, gender mainstreaming has been also criticized for its failure to introduce desired outcomes, transforming gender equality into a performative rather than empowering act, and representing mostly Western and middle-class feminist perspectives, thus discounting the voices of more marginalized groups (Palmary and Nunez, 2009). This paper aims to contribute to this ongoing conversation by asking the following questions: how important is gender mainstreaming in P/CVE according to experts in this field? How do P/CVE practitioners conceptualize, understand, and apply gender mainstreaming in their work?

Current literature on applying gender perspectives in P/CVE

For a long time, the significance of applying gender-sensitive perspectives was not a very popular topic among scholars writing on P/CVE programs. Despite an increased awareness of gender as a factor influencing participation in violent extremism, few researchers and practitioners in the field of P/CVE initiatives have seemed to consider gender

identity as a factor potentially affecting the outcomes of such programs. Most studies have focused on the overall P/CVE and individual deradicalization programs, without distinguishing between female and male participants (Suratman, 2018; Jayakumar, 2019). At first sight, such an approach seems reasonable, because males usually account for a higher percentage of terrorist groups' members than women. However, some scholars pointed out that conflating all terrorist actors into a single group and not applying a gender-sensitive approach could translate into potentially negative effects. For instance, it has been argued that P/CVE programs often do not achieve their goals among female participants due to the programs' reliance on gender stereotypes and limited understanding of women's roles in terrorist networks (Davis, 2020). Despite recent developments in the research on women in violent extremism, there still exists a literature gap on the significance of including gender-sensitivity tools in P/CVE.

Nevertheless, several research works stand out by providing compelling evidence for why gender should be taken into consideration while planning and executing P/CVE programs. In her 2020 paper "Duped: Examining Gender Stereotypes in Disengagement and Deradicalization Practices", Rachel Schmidt argues that the traditional Western narratives viewing women involved with terrorist groups as helpless victims are very narrow and often misleading. The author shows that gender stereotypes portraying women as naive and devoid of personal agency can have a significant negative effect on reintegration strategies. While some former female combatants exploit the trope of "weak Muslim women" to escape criminal prosecution, others might be unable to access assistance programs for former extremists, since they are not considered as dangerous as their male companions. Similarly, Cunningham (2007) analyses three case studies when the authorities' inadequate attention toward female combatants resulted in the increased operational success of terrorist groups in Chechnya, Palestine, and the United States. For instance, many terrorist groups have assigned the tasks of transporting and detonating bombs to women, who are less likely to be stopped at security checkpoints. These findings are further echoed in the works of Davis (2020), Gentry and Sjoberg (2015), Brown (2013), and Sutten (2009), which all agree that women's participation and influence in terrorist groups are often underestimated by the state apparatus, which results in the inadequacy of P/CVE practices towards women. Finally, the works by Alison (2009) and Shekhawat (2009) challenge the image of women as mere victims of

extremism, by demonstrating that women have actively participated in various extremist organizations around the world, often taking up significant leadership roles. All these works indicate that women's participation in political violence remains largely misunderstood. Hence, effective P/CVE programs need to be based on a holistic understanding of how both men and women participate in and disengage from violence.

However, several feminist security studies (FSS) experts claim that placing a strong focus on gender in preventing and countering violent extremism also carries risks. It has been argued that certain P/CVE initiatives may lead to instrumentalizing women, entrenching traditionally understood gender roles, and putting them at risk of backlash from extremist groups (Möller-Loswick, 2017). For instance, some P/CVE initiatives teaching women how to spot signs of radicalization among their children have been criticized for shifting the responsibility for preventing violent extremism from wider society to women, who already bear the burden of gender-based inequalities (Giscard D'Estaing, 2017). Thus, it seems that there is a thin line between P/CVE programs empowering women and co-opting them for political ends.

The discussed sources make a powerful case for implementing gender-sensitive approaches to CVE and rehabilitation and reintegration programs. However, most of the published works focus on gender dynamics within terrorist groups. At the same time, there is little research on how the knowledge about gender perspectives is understood and applied by the experts working on preventing and countering violent extremism. The question of whether P/CVE practitioners understand the gender dynamics of terrorism, and benefit from this knowledge in their everyday work, remains mostly unanswered. Thus, there remains a need for the insights of P/CVE experts working in the field. This study aims to address this gap.

What gender mainstreaming in P/CVE looks like

The concept of gender mainstreaming in preventing and countering violent extremism features in many documents authored by international and regional security organizations. Some of the most important sources include United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2242, UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (Women, Peace, and Security Agenda), and "Good Practices on Women and Countering Violent Extremism," a document published by the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) – a non-profit global network of

organizations and experts working on the problems of terrorism and violent extremism (GCTF, 2021). These documents propose policy approaches which help remain gender-sensitive while tackling the issues of armed conflict, violent extremism, and terrorism. Below is a non-exhaustive list of measures which are often regarded as gender-mainstreaming tools:

- Including women and girls in all stages of designing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating P/CVE programs, policies, and practices
- Ensuring female participation, particularly among community-facing staff members
- Involving men and boys in inclusive efforts to prevent and respond to violent extremism
- Examining the different factors which lead men and women to become involved in terrorism, and working to address these factors
- Supporting local women's peacemaking initiatives
- Recognizing the different needs of female and male ex-combatants and considering the needs of their dependants (such as young children and elder family members)
- Considering the impacts of counterterrorism and P/CVE strategies on women's human rights and women's organizations
- Increasing funding for gender-responsive training, analysis, and programs (United Nations, 2000; Global Counterterrorism Forum, 2014)

The concept of gender mainstreaming in P/CVE means not only ensuring gender diversity among the experts but also being aware that violent extremism and terrorism differently impact men, women, and non-binary people. Thus, the purpose of gender mainstreaming tools is to help P/CVE practitioners realize that their work is received by, and impacts people of different gender identities in different ways.

Advantages of gender mainstreaming in P/CVE

Scholarship examining the need for gender analysis in P/CVE has experienced growth over the past several years (Davies et al. 2017; Gordon and True, 2019; Wulan, 2019), formulating the following reasons for including gender mainstreaming tools in P/CVE:

- High awareness of gender equality among people at risk of radicalization could help them become more suspicious of extremist propaganda which often relies on gender stereotypes.

- Ensuring female staff representation (be it counsellors, police officers, or community workers) makes P/CVE programs accessible to those women who might be uncomfortable interacting with male professionals or who might not be allowed to do so because of cultural conventions.

- There is a need to counteract the stereotypes and myths about women's participation in terrorism, which perpetuate the image of women as naive and devoid of any personal agency.

- Recognizing gender-based violence factors helps P/CVE experts better understand how men and women experience terrorism and violent extremism differently. This could be especially helpful for P/CVE practitioners working with former members of extremist groups or victims of terrorism (Idris, 2019)

- The causal relationship between the prevalence of violent extremism and gender-based violence has been documented by several studies (Gordon and True, 2019). By addressing gender inequality, P/CVE initiatives could potentially address the violent behaviours which feed into radicalization.

Consequently, gender mainstreaming aims to make P/CVE practitioners cognizant of how the issue of gender intersects with one's process of radicalization, membership within a terrorist and violent extremist movement, and deradicalization. This in turn should inform their practice, making the managed P/CVE initiatives more accessible and helpful to people of different gender identities.

Theoretical Framework

This paper relies on the postcolonial feminist perspective in terrorism studies. As outlined by Jacob Stump and Priya Dixit, this research approach emphasizes the gendered nature of terrorism and violent extremism while also recognizing that much of the standard knowledge about terrorism has been produced by experts from the Global North (Stump and

Dixit, 2012). Hence, this study sets out to explore what giving voice to P/CVE practitioners from various ethnic, religious, and gender backgrounds could teach us about the feasibility and value of gender mainstreaming in P/CVE strategies.

Methodology

This article is based on 10 semi-structured and in-depth interviews with 11 individuals engaged in P/CVE work. This includes professionals and academics working on the design, implementation, and monitoring of programs focusing on Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE), Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), and/or rehabilitation and reintegration of individuals involved with terrorist activities or inspired by extremist views. Some of the interviewed professionals have also conducted academic research on P/CVE programs or worked at the intersection of gender studies and security studies.

Recruitment of participants

The research participants were recruited in several ways. Firstly, the websites of leading security studies think tanks in Europe, Southeast Asia, and North America were screened to identify experts on P/CVE initiatives. Relevant individuals were sent an interview invitation via email and LinkedIn. Secondly, the Participant Database of the European Union's Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN) was searched using the following filters: Returning foreign terrorist fighters and their families, Deradicalization/Disengagement, Prevention, Rehabilitation, and Gender/women. Again, relevant individuals were sent an interview invitation via their email addresses posted on the RAN website. Finally, the study utilized a snowball sampling technique whereby interviewed individuals referred the author to other P/CVE experts. The below table summarizes the characteristics of interviewed P/CVE practitioners:

Letter Code	Entity	Location
A	International organization	Middle East
B	Intergovernmental agency	United Kingdom
C	Non-governmental organization	Singapore/Indonesia
D	Civil society organization, academic centre	Singapore/Indonesia
E	Regional foundation	Indonesia
F	State-funded non-profit network	Austria
G	Non-governmental organization	Sweden
H	Non-profit research network	Germany
I	Civil society organization	Sweden
J	Youth initiative, academic centre	Singapore
K	Youth initiative, academic centre, counselling initiative	Singapore

Table 1: Characteristics of P/CVE practitioners interviewed

All interviewees were offered an option to remain anonymous and be quoted simply as a P/CVE practitioner from a given country or region. While many interviewees emphasized a need for confidentiality, some agreed to be quoted with attribution. Nevertheless, for the sake of consistency, all research participants were assigned a code letter from A to J and quoted as such. Despite applying robust open recruitment techniques, only two out of eleven interviewees were females. This trend, while surprising, probably results from the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic which has been noted for hampering women's participation in research and professional work (Ribarovska et al. 2021; Cui et al. 2020, Bateman and Ross, 2020).

The overwhelming majority of the interviews were conducted via Zoom, with one interview being conducted in person. Participants J and K were interviewed together, as they worked in the same organization. Each interview lasted from 30 to 90 minutes, depending on the interviewee's preference and availability. The average interview time amounted to 60 minutes. None of the interviews was recorded, and the author took extensive handwritten

notes during the interviews, from which numerous quotes were identified by the author, and then double-confirmed with the interviewed experts. All interviews were conducted between December 2020 and February 2021. Upon rewriting the quotes and confirming them with the interviewees, a qualitative analysis of the obtained interview data took place. The study relied on two methods frequently used in social science research*: a priori coding* (predetermined) and *emergent coding*. As outlined by Stemler (2001) and Stuckey (2015), *the a priori coding* takes place when the researcher first creates codes and then applies them to the data. On the other hand, emergent coding refers to formulating codes based on the text.

Ethical consent procedures

The original research project which provided data for this paper was conducted as a part of the author's undergraduate thesis project at Yale-NUS College between Fall 2020 and Spring 2021. For this reason, this study had to receive official approval from the Yale-NUS College Ethics Review Committee (CERC), which was obtained in November 2020. As a part of the official requirements, all interviewed individuals received a Participant Information Sheet listing their rights as research program participants before the interviews took place. Moreover, all interviewees were asked to confirm their verbal consent for taking part in the interview at the beginning of a conversation with the author.

Rationale

By conducting interviews with P/CVE practitioners hailing from different backgrounds, this study relies on postcolonial feminist perspectives on terrorism studies. Through conducting interviews, this paper aims to showcase and analyse the global body of knowledge and perspectives about P/CVE. The interviewed P/CVE practitioners specialize in different subfields, work in different geographical areas, and hold different cultural, religious, and gender identities. Consequently, this study hopes to break away from the long-standing tendency to consult mostly Western sources, which remains prevalent in terrorism studies (Runyan, 2019)

The methodology of this paper results mainly from then COVID-19 restrictions, which did not allow for international travel and direct contact with P/CVE experts based outside Singapore. Moreover, the rather sensitive nature of the investigated topic does not allow for

utilizing many research methods, such as conducting a survey, focus group discussion or participant observation. Therefore, the methodology relies on secondary sources and interviews conducted with experts. While not ideal, these methods allow for gaining an understanding of the investigated topic and making valuable inferences.

Findings and Discussion

This paper relied on the a priori (determined) and emergent coding. In the case of this paper, several themes were identified while conducting the literature review. Many sources reviewed before interviews discussed the themes of gendered extremist propaganda, gender bias within the P/CVE and the law enforcement system, and the impact of gender mainstreaming on P/CVE efforts. Based on these topics, the author identified the first several codes which served as a basis for the list of questions asked to each interviewee. The themes identified from a priori coding included: *the advantages of including gender perspectives in P/CVE, gender equality in P/CVE organizations*, *the future of gender mainstreaming in P/CVE*, *the need to address gender inequality and gendered extremist propaganda, gendered perceptions and treatment of male and female convicts,* and *the impact of gender identity on the rehabilitation and reintegration process of former extremists*.

However, it was also expected that more themes might emerge in the process of conducting interviews and analysing the transcripts. Hence, all the interview transcripts were read with close attention to identify more themes which came across only during the interviews. The emerging codes included the following themes: *controversy with gender-sensitivity trainings for P/CVE practitioners*, *confusion about the term "gender-responsive" PVE/CVE*, as well as *connections to race, ethnicity, and religion*. These themes were not identified while conducting literature research and only came across as important units of analysis while conducting the interviews and analyzing the obtained responses. Finally, the obtained insights were analysed on two levels: organizational (referring to P/CVE practitioners' personal experiences and work within their organizations), and social (referring to the ways both terrorist organizations, and the wider society, take advantage of and perceive gender identities).

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Level	Themes
Organizational-level analysis	The advantages of including gender perspectives in P/CVE
	Gender equality in P/CVE organizations
	Controversy with gender-sensitivity trainings for PVE/CVE practitioners
	Confusion about the term "gender-responsive" P/CVE
	The future of gender mainstreaming in P/CVE
Social-level analysis	The need to address gender inequality and gendered extremist propaganda
	Gendered perceptions and treatment of male and female convicts
	The impact of gender identity on the rehabilitation and reintegration process of former extremists
	Connections to race, ethnicity, and religion

Table 2: A framework for analysing the interview findings

<u>Organizational level analysis</u>

The advantages of incorporating gender perspectives in P/CVE

Most of the interviewees agreed that considering gender issues while planning, implementing, and monitoring P/CVE programs is important. The most cited reasons for embracing gender mainstreaming were (1) a desire to gain a more holistic view of why, and how an individual became radicalized, (2) a general awareness that violent extremism and terrorism are gendered phenomena, and (3) having previous experiences whereby considering gender perspectives helped with their work. As described by one P/CVE practitioner specializing in counselling for people at risk of radicalization in Austria:

"Gender narratives constitute one element of attraction to extremist groups - radical movements say that they have a clear division of gender roles; they say, "if you join us, you will be accepted and valued for performing your gender role".

This contributes to the process of radicalization; a person at risk gets a clearer picture of where they are in the world, and gender is one aspect of it (...) The extremist groups' narratives say, "there might be confusion regarding gender roles out there, but here we have a clear sense of what gender roles are". This is especially attractive for young people going through puberty and trying to find their identity (...) Usually, ideology is not the main factor attracting people to violent extremist groups; ideology comes later. Before that there are other things; most importantly, a sense of belonging, finding friends"

P/CVE practitioner (Participant F), interview with author, January 2021

This observation was echoed by a P/CVE practitioner from Indonesia, who claimed that they try to be gender-sensitive while working with ex-terrorists because they realize that their reintegration process might look different depending on if they are male or female (Participant D, January 2021). However, one P/CVE expert pointed out the possible risks of over-emphasizing gender, which might make CVE programs less welcoming or inclusive for individuals who do not fully conform to traditional gender roles:

"We must be careful to not overextend the question of gender - it is impossible to say that "women are this and men are that". I have worked with men who wanted to work as nurses for ISIS, and women who wanted to be fighters (...) You can't have a program - let's say, a program on how to approach childcare, and target it towards female ex-radicals, because there might be lots of women who are not mothers, women who do not subscribe to the traditional gender roles. That is why I am sceptic[al] about having gender-specific tools or perspectives in the CVE field. I am not saying that gender equality is not important, but I am not a fan of introducing gender-sensitive tools in this aspect. Everything really is about the individual - the cases you have, the types of terrorism they are engaged in".

P/CVE practitioner (Participant H), interview with author, February 2021

This opinion seems to resonate with critical research on P/CVE, which shows that some deradicalization programs risk entrenching traditional gender roles. By treating women

and men as homogenous groups, certain P/CVE initiatives risk alienating some members of target communities and losing an opportunity to make a positive change. This is especially important given the different gender roles of men and women in various cultural contexts and the fact that some P/CVE initiatives are developed by experts who do not hail from target communities. For instance, a report "Can a gendered approach improve responses to violent extremism?" by the South Africa-based Institute for Security Studies states that P/CVE programs must always consider local nuances to ensure that programs are tailored to the needs of local populations (Ndungu and Shadung, 2017).

On gender equality in P/CVE organizations

The interviews revealed that basic gender equality practices are usually present in the organizations represented by the interviewed P/CVE practitioners. However, the problem of gender-based microaggressions seems to persist within the P/CVE field.

It remains difficult to precisely define what are the gender equality levels among P/CVE organizations. However, one can rely on common indicators of gender equality in the workplace such as gender ratio, percentage of women in management roles, and the presence of a paid maternal leave policy. A proxy for gender equality within the P/CVE area applied in this paper is the gender ratio, defined as the ratio of female employees to male employees. This indicator was used because it is a quantifiable factor, and it has been already recognized as an important element of any gender-responsive P/CVE program. According to the Global Counterterrorism Forum, women should be included at all stages of P/CVE program planning, implementation, and monitoring (Global Counterterrorism Forum, 2014). Therefore, each interviewee was first asked about gender ratios in their respective work teams and organizations, which served as a starting point for wider discussions on gender equality in P/CVE.

Most interviewees said that there was an equal or roughly equal female-to-male ratio in their teams. Two P/CVE practitioners stated that the number of female employees exceeded the number of males. Nearly all interviewees said that such an outcome was not a result of a specific affirmative action policy, but rather open recruitment based on merit. Moreover, one P/CVE practitioner mentioned that their organization's recruitment process looks at the candidates' previous experiences with working in gender-diverse teams (Participant F,

January 2021). One P/CVE practitioner said that they have a policy of only taking up these P/CVE programs which have at least one female team member (Participant D, January 2021). Another P/CVE expert based in the Middle East identified a similar way of ensuring equal gender dynamics within their initiatives:

> "I haven't seen any significant differences in the way men and women engage in our trainings. We often make sure that everyone is involved, and we don't let one person speak all the time. Moreover, we are trying to ensure that there is an equal gender ratio in our groups of participants (...) If let's say, I saw that a group of women participating in our training would not speak up, we would react (in our capacity as facilitators). However, we are working with CVE practitioners, not with the actual radicalized individuals".
> P/CVE practitioner (Participant A), interview with author, December 2021

Nevertheless, several interviewees acknowledged that P/CVE in many ways remains a male-dominated field. Two practitioners admitted observing gender-based discrimination in their P/CVE practice. One of the interviewed practitioners voiced a concern that some of their male colleagues tend to dominate discussions during work meetings. Another interviewed P/CVE practitioner closely working within the immigrant community recalled how their male program partners had trouble with working under a female team leader:

> "Some men from my target community are not OK with having women who are project or team leaders. I once had a female on my team, and it felt as if she was invisible - they would not understand that she was a leader. I would get annoyed and angry - I would not lash out, but I would make some rushed statement which would not help. So nowadays, I would ask a female member of my team what she had to say, or I would say that I do not agree if somebody said something inappropriate."
> Participant B, interview with author, January 2021

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In sum, gender-based microaggressions seem to persist within the P/CVE field. However, all interviewed individuals understood the need for gender diversity in a P/CVE workplace. Those who admitted seeing cases of gender-based discrimination also shared how they try to support their colleagues in such situations. These findings give hope for increased gender equality in the P/CVE sector, albeit gender mainstreaming tools still seem to be needed to achieve greater progress.

Controversy with gender-sensitivity trainings for PVE/CVE practitioners

Gender-sensitivity trainings are often regarded as a crucial tool for improving the quality of gender-responsive PVE/CVE work. For instance, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime recommends gender-sensitivity trainings as a key tool for heightening security professionals' understanding of the gendered nature of violent extremism (UNODC, 2020). However, the interviews revealed that even participating in such trainings sometimes carries certain risks for some P/CVE professionals:

"When organizing gender-sensitivity trainings for P/CVE staff in Indonesia, the risk is that if such trainings are published about, which a lot of donors do, the recipients of the training could lose credibility among target audiences. Many among them view gender as a construct of the West. We of course don't disagree on the need to be gender-responsive but would strongly advise gender-sensitive trainings to be subtle. Donors better not publish names or photos of people participating in such trainings, to prevent negative fallout for those CVE practitioners in the field".

Participant C, interview with author, December 2020

However, other P/CVE practitioners based in Indonesia did not report facing problems with holding gender-sensitivity trainings. Another P/CVE practitioner from Indonesia described their practice of organizing a two-day gender analysis workshop for new team members, consisting of lectures, talks with women's rights activists, and readings about gender relations. However, the same P/CVE interviewee acknowledged that organizing such trainings is not a particularly common practice among other Indonesian organizations

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specializing in preventing violent extremism (Participant D, interview with author, January 2020).

Outside of Indonesia, none of the interviewed P/CVE practitioners reported facing any risks or controversies with holding gender-sensitivity trainings. Nevertheless, many of them did not attend such trainings themselves. Only one interviewee, a P/CVE practitioner from the United Kingdom recalled the experience of attending such a workshop at his workplace and gaining substantial knowledge. P/CVE practitioners from Austria and Sweden observed that gender-sensitivity trainings are already common in the local educational institutions which they attended. The interviewee based in the Middle East admitted that they did not attend gender-sensitivity training but participated in a roundtable on gender issues (Participant A, December 2020).

Confusion about the term "gender-responsive" PVE/CVE

Many P/CVE practitioners interviewed for this paper were not entirely aware of the concept of a "gender-responsive" P/CVE program. That is not to say that they were not considering the gender factor in their practice. On the contrary, practically all interviewees acknowledged the need for including gender perspectives in P/CVE. As explained by a practitioner based in Singapore:

> "The term "gender-responsive" is new to me, but then when I looked at the details, it made lots of sense to me (...) I read about the term "gender-responsive CVE" and I realized that we already do that. We see a need to be gender-sensitive, but we didn't know about this concept before. But that is especially important now because the terrorist propaganda is no longer subtle, it became more specific when it comes to attracting women. So, the question is, how do we make CVE a safe space for women. The issue of gender has been woven within the thought process, but we did not know that there was a term for that".
> Participant K, interview with author, February 2021

Many other P/CVE practitioners interviewed for this article voiced similar opinions. While there was a general understanding that gender-sensitive approaches are needed to

prevent and counter violent extremism, there was general confusion about the terminology used to describe such practices. Consequently, there appears to be a gap between the policymakers and academics formulating recommendations on countering the extremist threats, and the P/CVE practitioners working on the ground. While many P/CVE experts recognize the need for being gender-sensitive, they are not always aware of the debates on this topic. This suggests that global security organizations should improve the knowledge-sharing mechanisms to help P/CVE practitioners gain a better understanding of gender in P/CVE.

The future of gender mainstreaming in PVE/CVE

This paper set out to explore how professionals working in the field of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) conceptualize gender mainstreaming and its utility for achieving counterterrorist initiatives' outcomes. In doing so, this article also asks: what are the prospects of gender mainstreaming in P/CVE based on current experiences? Are P/CVE practitioners satisfied with the current pace of reforms or do they think the gender mainstreaming agenda should be introduced in a faster or more gradual manner?

Most interviewees held neutral to positive views about the prospects for gender equality practices in P/CVE. An interviewee based in the United Kingdom said, "We are definitely heading in the right direction," while a P/CVE practitioner from Austria expressed satisfaction with the state of baseline gender equality education in his country (Participants B and F, February 2021). However, the interviewed experts pointed out that there remain several areas for improvement. One P/CVE practitioner from Indonesia admitted that full gender representation in the planning, monitoring, and implementing of P/CVE programs is yet to be achieved. An interviewee from Germany stated that many counterterrorist professionals do not have substantial P/CVE training, despite working in the field for a long time (Participant H, February 2021).

It appears that many of these reflections have to do with a general sense of uncertainty regarding how exactly being gender-specific helps in preventing violent extremism. Despite the existence of many tools, the act of measuring and evaluating P/CVE programs remains difficult. While it helps to assess the recidivism rates and life outcomes among the individuals participating in P/CVE programs, monitoring the efficacy of P/CVE initiatives remains

challenging. To this day there has been no universal agreement among the P/CVE experts on what it means for P/CVE initiatives to be effective, and what are the best tools for measuring their success. Practically all interviewed P/CVE practitioners agreed that evaluating P/CVE efforts is a highly complex task (Participants A-K, December 2020 – February 2021)

Similarly, the main rationale behind recommending gender mainstreaming policies in P/CVE is not based on any objectively measurable frameworks. The evaluations of P/CVE programs have been rather subjective in nature, and dependent on cultural contexts. Rather, evaluating P/CVE efforts results from empirical observations. Hence, it remains difficult to make concrete predictions on the future of gender mainstreaming in preventing and countering violent extremism. However, it is worthwhile to gather qualitative evidence, examine best practices, and formulate recommendations on how P/CVE programs could be improved in their gender-sensitivity aspects.

Social level analysis

The need to address gender inequality and gendered extremist propaganda

One of the main arguments for including gender mainstreaming tools is that many extremist movements apply gendered messages in their recruitment communication (Johnston et al. 2020, Observer Research Foundation 2020). Hence, many P/CVE experts hope that by helping people realize that many gender roles and identities are socially constructed, extremist propaganda will lose its appeal. Additionally, there is growing research on the possible causal link between misogyny, domestic violence, and violent extremism worldwide (Johnston and True, 2019; Castillo Diaz and Valji, 2019). Consequently. it is argued that preventing and countering violent extremism should be strongly linked to gender equality policies and initiatives.

The conducted interviews suggest that gender as a factor pushing people into violent extremism seems to be particularly visible in European countries with large Muslim immigrant populations, who often experience religious and ethnic discrimination. It has been shown that women from these communities have been particularly vulnerable to violence and discrimination due to their more visible markers of identity, such as wearing headscarf (Rahmath et al. 2016; Ahmed and Gorey, 2021). Additionally, many of them face tensions

between their more conservative home environments, where their position as women is more restricted, and the outside world of school and work. Several interviewees pointed to gender-based discrimination as a key factor motivating many women from immigrant backgrounds to leave for ISIS-controlled territories in Syria and Iraq. This was especially emphasized by a P/CVE practitioner from Sweden:

> "Let's be honest - even when we speak about non-radical people, Muslim women are already treated worse than men by many people in Sweden. They think that Muslim women are far behind, they don't see them as equal. There are cases of people making comments about women wearing hijabs or spitting on them. And that is the experience everywhere in Sweden (...) There was strong propaganda telling them that a caliphate is being built, that it was going to be a peaceful and well-off place, that the earlier you go, the better jobs and accommodation you get. The ISIS propaganda was showing big houses, lots of food available in Raqqa. Compared to these people's situation in Sweden - unemployment, racism, Islamophobia - it seemed like a better choice".
>
> Participant G, interview with author, January 2021

Such insights correspond to research examining the reasons why around 40,000 foreign nationals from around the world decided to join the Islamic State-controlled territories. The experience of Islamophobia, sense of isolation, and economic problems have been regarded as some of the push factors leading some members of the Muslim communities in Europe to develop extremist beliefs. According to the 2018 data, around 13% of these people were women (Vale and Cook, 2018). Hence, the experience of gender inequality along with other factors appears to be a common element of the radicalization path.

The importance of emphasizing gender equality as a way of preventing and countering extremist propaganda was also mentioned by another practitioner from Sweden – this time, in the context of far-right extremism:

> "The Swedish right-wing extremist movement has a strong macho culture. Of course, there are women in such movements but most of the time they are there

because their partners or family members are also involved. Our organization is trying to work around the topic of toxic masculinity. When we go to school, we talk about the importance of gender equality (...) Within these movements, many women call themselves 'anti-feminists'. They embrace traditional gender roles. So, in our PVE practice, we try to strengthen a sense of self-confidence among girls, so that later in life, they can make their own life choices".

Participant I, interview with author, February 2021

While the overall rate of women's participation in ISIS and right-wing extremist movements activity remains relatively low as compared to men, the cases discussed above indicate that P/CVE practitioners must be aware of the gender equality issues in the communities they serve. To effectively prevent people from joining extremist movements, the programs should recognize how gender discrimination often pushes individuals to join extremist groups, and work to alleviate these patterns.

Gendered perceptions and treatment of male and female convicts

Conducting full, transparent, and just court trials of people involved with violent networks is necessary to identify and address the remaining threats. Moreover, participating in a trial should ideally mark the beginning of the rehabilitation process of a radicalized individual. However, research suggests that there exists a gender bias in the way law enforcement systems approach people accused of terrorist-related offences (Jones, 2019). For instance, a 2020 research project conducted in the United Kingdom suggested the presence of gender biases among British court officials working on the cases of terrorist offenders. Based on interviews conducted with British counterterrorism experts, the research showed that females were less likely to be charged with terrorist-related crimes and received comparably lower sentences than their male counterparts (Schmidt, 2020; Jones, 2019). Hence, it remains unclear whether the legal system effectively plays its part in the wider process of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). Therefore, this article set out to ask P/CVE practitioners about their views on gender bias in the treatment and sentencing of individuals prosecuted for terrorist-related offences. Consequently, this paper aimed to corroborate

existing research about patterns of gender bias among court officials prosecuting terrorist offenders.

The interviewed P/CVE practitioners had experience in at least one of the following activities: (1) providing counselling or other forms of reintegration support to individuals former members or active supporters of terrorist networks (2) conducting interventions in the cases of individuals who have planned to engage or support violent extremism (3) providing help to communities at risk of radicalization (4) monitoring the trends in prosecuting terrorist offenders and rehabilitating them.

The conducted interviews generated evidence which somewhat support patterns visible in current research, albeit not to a great extent. Moreover, the interview findings varied between countries and regions. In sum, there was a varying degree of agreement regarding the attitudes towards men and women who were involved with terrorist offences. P/CVE practitioners from Singapore observed that local female terrorist suspects tend to receive generally lighter sentences than men. One suggested explanation of that trend was the consideration of female offenders' family responsibilities such as the provision of childcare (Participant K, February 2021). These insights seem to correspond with official data. In Singapore, all individuals suspected of terrorist-related offences have been detained under the local Internal Security Act (ISA). Between 2001 and 2020, a total of 159 people were detained. 8 of them were females, with the first case of pro-ISIS activity happening in 2017 (The Straits Times, 2017). It remains unclear whether the rise in the number of female detainees since the late 2010s results from increased female participation in terrorism or state agencies devoting more attention to female suspects. Moreover, the Singapore-based P/CVE practitioners also emphasized that many individuals investigated under the Internal Security Act are not detained, but rather given a restriction order (Participant K, February 2021). The Singapore-based P/CVE experts pointed to the recent case of three female domestic workers who were charged under the Terrorism (Suppression of Financing) Act for transmitting money to the Islamic State and the Indonesian ISIS-affiliated group Jemaah Anshorut Daulah (The Straits Times, 2019). According to the interviewees, the sentences received by female domestic workers do not differ much from those already received by male convicts for similar offences (Participant J, February 2021). Consequently, it remains unclear to what extent gender bias against terrorist-related convicts exists in Singapore.

Several P/CVE interviewees from Europe agreed that male convicts prosecuted for terrorism-related offences tend to receive harsher sentences. When asked what the reasons for this difference might be, most interviewees cited three factors. Firstly, the gendered division of labour within extremist groups often makes men engage in direct physical violence (such as organizing murder and bombings) as compared to women's tasks (such as recruiting new members and disseminating propaganda), which are punished with longer sentences. Secondly, many interviewed P/CVE practitioners agreed that security and court officials sometimes tend to underestimate women's contribution to terrorist movements. Thirdly, it is not just the length of sentencing, but also the number of male and female convicts who are prosecuted for terrorist-related offences which influences the perceptions of violent extremists. Men statistically outnumber women in most extremist groups, which leads to a higher profile of male convicts (Participants F, J, D, H and K, January-February 2021). Therefore, it appears that female convicts receiving lighter sentences may result from a gender bias within the state security system. However, it could also be an outcome of the gendered nature of extremist groups, where men usually have more influence.

Finally, one P/CVE practitioner working in Indonesia admitted observing that female returnees from ISIS tend to receive less attention from state security as compared to their male counterparts. However, they acknowledged that information about the process of prosecuting and tracking such individuals is not publicly available in their country. This makes the task of investigating gender bias in the sentencing of terrorist offenders particularly difficult.

How gender identity impacts the rehabilitation and reintegration process of former extremists

Many interviewees agreed that one's gender identity might influence the process of leaving a violent extremist movement, but there was no consensus on how exactly this looks in practice. Is it socially constructed gender roles or psychological differences between men and women that ultimately decide whether someone leaves a terrorist organization? The interviews showed that many P/CVE practitioners reflect on these questions rather intuitively or by relying on their personal observations. For instance, an interviewee from Sweden hypothesized that leaving a radical movement might be easier for females as they are "less violent than men" (Participant I, January 2021). Such reasoning seems to hold at least to the extent that women are statistically less probable to engage in the direct use of violence while

being in a terrorist movement (Carter, 2013). Therefore, the interviewed practitioners were not entirely sure how applying gender sensitivity in P/CVE might help those individuals leaving violent extremist networks.

However, gender identity appears to play a more significant role in the process of reintegration, especially for women. As females leave extremist movements and gradually re-enter society, they might face some hostility from their community. This was pointed out by one P/CVE practitioner from Germany:

"The women who joined violent extremist groups redefined the common understanding of womanhood by participating in terrorism. When they de-radicalize [and might want to return home], their home communities often expect them to return to the traditional notions of womanhood. As a result, a female ex-radical might not want to return to their previous lives".
P/CVE practitioner (Participant H), interview with author, February 2021

Given that women's participation in violent extremism has been sensationalized and regarded as more "unnatural" than violence perpetrated by men (Schmidt, 2020), such 'double standards' could seriously hinder the reintegration of former female extremists. Hence, it could be seen that the gender factor plays a subtle yet important role in the process of rehabilitating radicalized individuals. This element must be widely acknowledged by the P/CVE experts who work with individuals wishing to leave extremist groups.

Connections to race, ethnicity, and religion

The conducted interviews revealed at least one unexpected finding about racial dynamics within the P/CVE field. Since many initiatives target immigrant communities in Western countries – many of whom are also ethnic and religious minorities – it is important that P/CVE efforts remain inclusive and do not stigmatize such communities. While this study initially did not aim to explore this problem, the issue of ethnic marginalization in P/CVE was brought up by several interviewees. One practitioner based in the United Kingdom, who is from an ethnic minority background themselves, observed that many P/CVE initiatives are chaired mainly by people of Western background and include very few representatives from

immigrant communities. They emphasized the need for ethnic diversity within P/CVE steering boards and said that hailing from the immigrant community helps them in their work (Participant B, January 2021

Another interviewee from Sweden expressed their frustration with meeting many P/CVE professionals who lacked the willingness to gain contextual knowledge about Islam:

"If I go to a conference and I ask a crowd of 100 people who Bin Laden was, everyone knows. If I ask if they know about ISIS, of course, everyone knows. But when I ask what the words "Muslim" or "Islam" literally mean, maybe 10 people know (...) You go to these conferences about radicalization, see clouds of middle-aged White people and not a single imam. They eat good food and talk, talk, talk about deradicalization, while in fact, they don't know much".

Participant G, interview with author, January 2021

The above observation applies mostly to the issue of certain P/CVE initiatives in Western countries which lead to the local Muslim communities becoming stigmatised by public opinion and state security forces (Fekete, 2004). However, the overarching pattern of trying to address the issue of extremism without paying enough attention to contextual factors (such as the religious or ethnic identities of target groups) could be observed in many cases of controversial P/CVE programs, which have been criticised for stigmatising certain communities – such as religious minority, or immigrant groups (Ndung'u and Shadung, 2017).

Policy Recommendations

Improving communication between academics and P/CVE professionals globally

Overall, the conducted interviews suggest that there is a gap between institutional policies recommending the inclusion of gender mainstreaming in P/CVE and the situation on the ground. All the interviewed P/CVE professionals agreed that applying the gender perspective adds value to programs aiming to prevent radicalization and reintegrate former members of extremist groups. There were differing opinions on why the gender factor matters

and to what extent it should be incorporated into P/CVE practice, but none of the interviewed experts openly denied the importance of gender sensitivity.

However, many practitioners were either not aware of the term "gender mainstreaming," did not receive gender-sensitivity training at their respective workplaces or did not consult academic sources on gendered responses in P/CVE. It seems that P/CVE practitioners intuitively realize the importance of gender and apply gender sensitivity in planning and executing programs, but do not receive enough assistance in this matter from the most powerful organizations in this field. At the same time, there seem to be other structural factors preventing P/CVE practitioners from gaining more knowledge about gender mainstreaming in preventing and countering violent extremism. Based on the conducted interviews, these structural factors might include different societal approaches to the issue of gender equality, lack of publications about gender in P/CVE published in languages other than English, and the kind of P/CVE training received so far.

Thus, it seems that the problem lies in the way international organizations and academic centres communicate with P/CVE practitioners working on the ground. A multitude of research papers, policy briefs, and guides on gender mainstreaming is frequently produced. However, they do not seem to reach all members of their target audience. While the conversations on gender in P/CVE continue, this knowledge is not equally distributed globally. Therefore, the key policymakers responsible for trendsetting in preventing and countering violent extremism, such as the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT), should put more effort into helping P/CVE practitioners gain knowledge about gender sensitivity. Simply publishing research papers or holding online webinars is not enough.

Addressing 'gender ghettos' in both policymaking and academia

One of the most significant obstacles to advancing gender mainstreaming in P/CVE is the widespread tendency to conflate the term "gender" with "women". That is because many gender equality practices focus on empowering women, who have historically been the more discriminated gender. Thus, the issue of gender has become understood as a "women's issue" in the public sphere. However, the contemporary definition of gender equality adopts a broader perspective, whereby gender equality aims to eradicate not only violence against

women but also the problems of toxic masculinity and discrimination against non-binary people. As pointed out by several interviewees, there has been increased scholarly and media attention to problems of sexual violence against males, mental health problems caused by toxic masculinity standards, and violence against non-binary individuals (Participants A-K, December 2020 – February 2021). Therefore, the understanding of gender in P/CVE should be extended to include not only the lived experiences and struggles of women but also those of men and non-binary people.

This broader view on gender has also appeared in the literature on P/CVE efforts, albeit only recently. For instance, in an article on racial biases in Canadian counterterrorism policies, Rachel Schmidt shows that many P/CVE experts equate the issue of gender mainstreaming in P/CVE with having female participation. Several P/CVE practitioners interviewed for the study explicitly interpreted the term gender as synonymous with women (Schmidt, 2020). Official reports about gender in P/CVE programs discuss only women and applying gender perspectives in P/CVE is regarded as women's area of expertise by their fellow colleagues (Schmidt 2020). Such reasoning is problematic as it does not recognize that gender dynamics also affect men's participation in violent movements. The problem appears to lie in the way knowledge about gender in P/CVE is produced; a review of existing literature on this topic shows that it is mostly female scholars and experts who write about gender dynamics in P/CVE. Considering the evidence above, there is a need to educate the wider P/CVE community about the complex nature of gender as a social concept. "Gender" does not mean only women; it refers to the socially constructed roles of women, men, and non-binary individuals. Therefore, learning about how people of different genders engage and disengage from violent extremism is the responsibility of all P/CVE practitioners, no matter what their gender identity is. Such reforms will not happen overnight and require close cooperation among both international and local P/CVE actors.

Recognizing intersectionality: ensuring other forms of diversity in P/CVE

Proponents of intersectionality theory claim that one holds multiple identities, which collectively decide one's position in society – especially the amount of power one has. The most commonly identified identity categories include race, class, and gender (Crenshaw, 2017). On a basic level, applying the concept of intersectionality to preventing and countering

violent extremism means that people of various overlapping racial, gender and class identities are differently impacted by terrorist violence. For example, violent extremism is experienced differently by men from poor communities compared to men from more affluent segments of society. Hence, applying the concept of gender should be treated as a door to a wider analysis examining how violent extremism and P/CVE efforts contribute to entrenching existing forms of oppression worldwide. As pointed out by two interviewees, some P/CVE programs still fail to consider the perspectives of marginalized and minority communities, such as immigrants and ethnic minority groups. Therefore, both international and local P/CVE organizations should pay close attention to the multiple factors affecting one's experience of engaging in and being affected by political violence.

Limitations and Ethical Considerations

A great part of this research study was devoted to analysing gender perspectives in P/CVE programs aimed at Muslim-majority audiences, including female populations. By discussing women's involvement in radical Islamic terrorism, one risks securitizing Muslim women and contributing to already high social pressure placed upon them.

It is acknowledged that the author's positionality has a profound impact on the way research is conducted and interpreted. One way in which the author tried to minimize potential bias was by asking each interviewee what their advice on ethical research practices would be while examining the topic of gender in P/CVE. The most commonly cited pieces of advice were applying critical thinking and cross-checking sources on terrorism studies between various media and authors.

As there is practically no scholarship on non-binary people's experience of participating in violent extremism, this paper relies on a binary approach to gender, interpreted as men and women. More research is required to determine whether and, if yes, how non-binary people participate in contemporary terrorist organizations. However, such pursuits could be controversial, as they could stigmatise the non-binary community.

From the methodological side, there remains a possibility of selection bias, whereby those practitioners who do not know about or oppose gender mainstreaming tools in P/CVE did not reply to the interview invitation. Thus, a self-selection of research participants could

have taken place, whereby only those practitioners who already knew about gender mainstreaming in P/CVE chose to participate in this study. The author aimed to mitigate this challenge by (1) actively reaching out to P/CVE practitioners from various fields, not just those experts working on gender issues and (2) sending a Participant Information Sheet along with the invitation email, which clarified all aspects of this study and offered to provide more information.

Conclusion

This paper provides several theoretical and practical implications. Firstly, it provides a robust theoretical framework for demonstrating why gender should be treated as a separate unit of analysis while examining the phenomena of participating and disengaging from violent extremism. Such information could prove helpful for P/CVE practitioners, government officials, and all other individuals interested in the issue of preventing and countering violent extremism. Secondly, this paper contributes to the existing literature on preventing and countering violent extremism initiatives, with a focus on gender sensitivity. By investigating how well P/CVE practitioners understand gender perspectives, and to what extent they integrate such approaches in their work, this paper demonstrates the scale of the progress of this field. Thirdly, this paper helps in understanding how socio-cultural contexts and other factors result in different approaches to tackling global problems, such as violent extremism and terrorism.

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ISSN: 2363-9849

Editor in Chief: Daniel Koehler

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