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Women's Exclusion from Discussions of Violent Extremism: How Imagined Narratives of Womanhood Harm the Fight against Violent Extremism

Gaia Bchara

Introduction

In recent years, extremism has drawn the attention of both governments and non-state actors alike. In 2014, following The Islamic State of Iraq and The Levant's (ISIS) rise and operationality as a global actor, deaths of citizens resulting from violent extremism surged by 172%. In the same year, 32,685 terrorism-related fatalities were recorded compared to 3,392 in 2000. By 2016, at least 34 countries witnessed similar attacks, which resulted in over 25 casualties (Patel and Westermann, 2018). Today, there is no question that countering violent extremism tops the agenda of many states, such as Afghanistan, and international organizations such as the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee. However, women's active participation in fighting against, but also in committing, acts of extremism has been consistently overlooked and undermined for several reasons. The marginalization of women in relation to violent extremism is a result of historical disparities, an absence of gendered analysis during peacebuilding, incorrect patriarchal assumptions that women are "naturally" pacifist or devoid of individual agency, and the constant framing women's roles as mothers and caregivers (Sjoberg, 2017). This has subsequently resulted in women's exclusion from reconciliation and rehabilitation processes, rendering these strategies only partially effective. In fact, there is a long history pertaining to women's active participation in manifestations of terrorist movements and violent extremism, through their strategic roles as ideologists, recruiters, facilitators, campaigners, and planners of extremist groups. To illustrate, the numbers of women—both local and Western—enrolling in the Islamic State of Iraq have reached an estimated 15%, with additional numbers voluntarily occupying supporting functions

such as local law enforcement (Bigio and Vogelstein, 2019). Historically, similar examples exist. For instance, Fusako Shingenobu established Japan's Red Army, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia integrated women militants for years, and the first suicide bombing committed by a woman occurred in Lebanon during the 1985 Israeli occupation of South Lebanon by 17-year-old Sana' Mehdaili (Patel and Westermann, 2018). Still, despite overwhelming evidence of women's roles in militant acts, the international community responds to such occurrences with disbelief. Such a dismissal constitutes a huge barrier in the fight against violent extremism, and prevents the fulfilment of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. As such, this paper aims to identify key documents and initiatives on the matter, detect implementation challenges, and provide an alternative course of action.

It is thus important to highlight the key actors and institutions that actively participate in the fight for women's inclusion in countering extremist violence. First, intergovernmental organizations, the UN in particular, are indispensable because they provide both regional and global perspectives, policy frameworks, and experiences in the fight for women's inclusion in Countering Violent Extremism (CVE). Moreover, the U.N.'s partnerships with government organizations gives them a role in establishing national legal norms and informal practices on the long-term, reflecting core principals of peace, human rights, and equality. Second, civil society organizations hold the power to play a critical role in de-radicalization, given the lack of national, governmental-initiated strategies. This is because they have a clearer insight into real-life societal needs and thus provide much more effective regulatory frameworks for gendered CVE. Third, state actors are the main agents for countering violent extremism. Few governments have taken on this mission, except for Australia. Given that governments' drive to implement CVE includes domestic stability, gender-inclusive approaches are necessary as it is impossible to establish sustainable peace without women's inclusion. Fourth, media such as television, social networks, and radio hold the potential to play the role of information providers and can therefore influence public opinion and raise awareness concerning the severe repercussions stemming from undermining women's role in both violent extremism (VE) and CVE. Finally, academia and the educational sector perhaps have

the most underestimated role in this respect. This is because education, or lack thereof, is considered to be one of the underlying factors contributing to radicalization (de Silva, 2018).

Additionally, more research must be done concerning the relationship between gender and violent extremism. For example, gender can affect the ways that radicalization and recruitment occur, while simultaneously providing a nuanced understanding of women and girls as disproportionate victims and as perpetrators of VE (Zeiger, 2015). Moreover, think tanks, universities, and research centers have the potential to provide gendered policy frameworks to understand the dynamics of women's radicalization and de-radicalization.

Literature Review: Patriarchal Constraints and Ideological Conflict

As interest in women's participation in both VE and CVE has grown, so has the literature. Two main obstacles arise in discussions of women's involvement in extremism. The first obstacle is the assumption that women are, by nature, peaceful and non-violent (True and Eddyono, 2017). The second assumption is that when women do participate in radical acts, they are labeled as mothers, wives, and daughters of radical men, which denies them individual agency (Henty and Eggleston, 2018). For example, Sjoberg (2017) found that much of the literature recreates the false patriarchal narrative that women are driven to commit violence by "[their] loneliness, their desire for men, and by the men who plot to seduce them with promises of love and affection." This is not to say that these explanations, particularly in the context of war, do not hold any truth. However, they often constitute only part of that truth. It is necessary to understand women's reasons for participating in violent extremism beyond the scope of the patriarchal value system that explains this phenomenon exclusively through the lens of gender. First, the enrollment of many European women in terrorist organizations such as ISIS is directly at odds with the explanation of radicalization in the context of war. Second, and most importantly, the lack of a gendered analysis of the factors underlying violent extremism will result in ineffective counter-extremism responses.

Hudson and Cohen (2016) reflect over decades of research that shows the positive impact that women's inclusion into the public sphere has on CVE. More specifically, True and Eddyono (2018) assert the effectiveness of women's leadership and women-led organizations in preventing violent extremism by incorporating a gendered-analysis of counter-extremism. In contrast, Laura Shepherd's (2017) analysis of Australia's state-level initiatives to promote the WPS agenda in the field of CVE shows that these initiatives have been less successful than grassroots initiatives. She identifies the absence of gender training for practitioners, ambiguity around WPS programs, and a lack of trust between governments and local communities as the main factors hindering the policy implementation of Australia's gendered CVE agenda. Moreover, Allen (2020) identifies three key advantages resulting from the inclusion of gendered analysis in fighting extremism: broadening analysis to surpass terrorist attacks and consider everyday forms of violence, offering insights into violent dynamics within the private sphere that predisposes women to radicalism, and deep-dive exploration of power structures revealing implicit warning signs less visible within the scope of current CVE analysis.

Resolutions and Limitations

Although gendered CVE has been severely overlooked, a handful of landmark United Nations Resolutions have set the tone for the integration of women in the fight against violent extremism. Similarly, some governments have embraced women's role in CVE. However, the implementation phase has faced several challenges, many of which are a direct result of values discussed in the previous sections of this paper.

International Resolutions

The UN General Assembly (UNGA) and the UN Security Council (UNSC) have been the two most active bodies in respect to the WPS agenda and women in CVE. In the UNGA, a 2014 review of the 2006 Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy marked the UNGA's first acknowledgement of women's valuable role in counterterrorism and CVE. The review urged member states to integrate women

in counter-terrorism strategies to produce better outcomes (Bhulai et al., 2016). Moreover, the 2015 resolution “A World against Violence Extremism” particularly emphasized the necessity to understand women and youth’s drives toward violent extremism, and accordingly identified gender mainstreaming and participation within governments and security sectors as a key deterrent for radicalization. Although UNSC Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) and the subsequent Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda were the first international frameworks to include gender in peacebuilding, they made no mention of extremism or terrorism. In the UNSC, the most significant resolution passed to date is the UNSCR 2242, sponsored by over 70 countries, which calls for incorporating counterterrorism and combatting violent extremism into the already-established Women, Peace and Security agenda (Bhulai et al., 2016). Similarly, Resolutions 2129 and 2122 seek to further incorporate the CVE within the WPS framework. Importantly, on the issue of foreign fighters, resolution 2178 urges states to engage with non-state actors and local communities through women’s empowerment (Bhulai et al., 2016).

Limitations

Many of these resolutions have been heavily criticized for being inefficient for several reasons. First, women are solely referenced within the context of sexual violence and as victims of abuse, while completely disregarding and subsequently failing to tackle the issue of women’s voluntary involvement in violent extremism. Second, these resolutions lack any mention of human rights or development, and therefore miss key opportunities to strengthen their agenda through cooperation with bodies such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), which are increasingly focused on CVE. In fact, in 2015, the UNHCR adopted a resolution whose sole focus was combatting extremism and terrorism. Likewise, the UNDP launched a series of gender-specific projects throughout Africa in a bid to fight extremism by emphasizing engagement, security, and human development. Third, the lack of collaboration with member state governments to implement recommendations on a national scale has rendered them ineffective.

Case Study: The Jordanian Experience

The Jordanian National Commission for Women, jointly with public sector bodies, the national security sector, civil society organizations, as well as UN Women, designed and issued Jordan's first Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan (JONAP) in 2018, which was then adopted by the Cabinet (Hassan et al., 2019). JONAP seeks to acknowledge UNSCR 2242 by highlighting the centrality of women in combatting and preventing extremism. The plan recognizes two key areas: extremism's disparate effects on women and the key role women play in countering VE (Hassan et al., 2019). JONAP marked significant breakthroughs for Jordan. First, it represents the first participatory project that explicitly tackles the prevention and combatting of violent extremism. Second, JONAP's CVE component allocated a special focus on women's roles in preventing and combatting violent extremism, making it the first of its kind. For example, the project includes special programs that target mothers by training them to identify early signs of radicalization, presents them with guidance on approaching national security apparatuses, and contributes to the alleviation of the sensitivity and fear local communities exhibit surrounding the violent extremism and radicalization of its youth (Hassan et al., 2019). Third, JONAP established a women's unit within the Jordanian Armed Forces, thus encouraging the integration of women in security apparatuses combatting extremism.

Despite such milestones, the completion and implementation of the JONAP has faced several constraints hindering its progress. First, a significant lack of trust between governmental institutions and civil society organizations (CSOs), as well as between local communities and security apparatuses, were identified as key limitations (Hassan et al., 2019). Consequently, establishing trust between groups who held rigid stereotypical views of each other was demanding and time consuming. Second, the weakness and limited capacity of Jordan's CSO sector, a key project stakeholder, restrained the successful implementation of JONAP. Third, the tumultuous political climate that existed during the time when the plan was drafted and implemented resulted in delays, as a change in political leadership required the re-introduction of the project and additional bureaucratic procedures. Finally, despite the representation of a number of feminist

grassroots organizations, women affected by conflict themselves were only represented through CSOs. They were not, however, invited to directly participate in the local and national consultations (Hassan et al., 2019). The challenges of implementation thus jeopardize the gender-specific agenda of combatting violent extremism.

General Shortcomings

Jordan's case study sheds light on two of several constraints faced by states working to integrate and implement CVE agendas. Some of the most significant challenges include lack of access to gender-sensitive data and research, lack of technical and material support, restricted representation of women in law enforcement agencies, and the potentially negative effects on women's groups and women's rights organizations that can occur when they choose to work with political actors. First, quantitative and qualitative research on the specific role of women in CVE is still lacking, especially compared to the abundant resources available for studies pertaining to women and peacebuilding. Moreover, it is often the case that when this information does exist, the organizations that need it the most—notably civil society and international organizations—face the hardest time obtaining it (Bhulai et al., 2016). This hinders such organizations from devising effective plans to counter violent extremism and crafting well-researched arguments pertaining to the positive impact of women's involvement.

Second, women-led organizations are often the target of government repression, which in turn provides states with grounds to diminish the scope of their operations and discourage public engagement with their agenda (Bhulai et al., 2016). Lastly, a lack of state commitment to financing CVE organizations has limited their impact.

Policy Recommendations

States must revise their national security strategies to explicitly target women's involvement in both VE and CVE. In line with the findings of the previous sections of this paper and taking into

account the various kinds of constraints highlighted, the stakeholders, and existing frameworks, this section aims to propose a cohesive and comprehensive strategy consisting of several critical steps to tackle women's involvement in violent extremism and their integration in combatting extremism. First, states must revise their WPS strategies to advance CVE policies. They must do this through consultations with a large range of civil society organizations working on issues concerning women's security; measuring and analyzing the level of women's representation in CVE; recognizing institutional disparities and committing resources to remedy possible gaps; and investing in localizing CVE efforts. For instance, community-based dialogues are more effective in identifying needs and threats and thus catering national approaches to local needs.

Second, counter-extremism and counterterrorism bodies within the UN and national entities alike must ensure the representation of women in their staff. They must also ensure that women staff members feel safe and supported in their workplaces. Further, these organizations must include staff who are considered gendered experts; these gender experts must play a role in the integration of CVE strategies into WPS agenda.

Third, international donors should establish funding streams for civil society organizations, possibly in the form of small grant financing, to assist in schemes such as providing medical and psychological care to victims of radicalism, building women's capacity, campaigning and awareness-raising, establishing safe houses for counter-terrorists, and establishing mechanisms such as hotlines to report threats.

Fourth, states must increase efforts to produce high-quality gender-sensitive research about CVE and terrorism policies, drivers of CVE, and the impacts of women's radicalization, as well as long-term societal repercussions of conflict-related trauma. Moreover, making such information publicly available is necessary.

Fifth, women should be included in security forces in order to strengthen their CVE work. Moreover, agencies should facilitate communication between UN peacekeeping forces, local law

enforcement, and civil society organizations for effective collaboration on the ground. Finally, reconfiguring traditional archetypes of violence and masculinity as well as empowering women through knowledge can play a huge role in combatting violent extremism. Consequently, it is important for states to strengthen their education systems, and to ensure that all children have access to high-quality education.

Conclusion

The marginalization of women as both victims and perpetrators of violent extremism has serious implications for CVE strategies. An issue of equal concern is the lack of women in organizations that work on CVE. In order to strengthen women's representation in CVE, key stakeholders, including educational institutions and the media, must take on central roles in CVE.

In attempts to implement CVE strategies based on existing documents and guidelines such as UNSC Resolutions (namely UNSCR 2242), challenges arise. These include the lack of appropriate financing, the lack of cooperation between governmental and non-state entities, and the unavailability of data and research pertaining to CVE efforts. This paper suggests a number of potential remedies, including engaging the educational sector, states, international organizations, media outlets, and security forces, among others, to challenge the marginalization and exclusion of women in CVE. Centering women in CVE—including their experiences in relation to CVE, and as key players in developing and implementing CVE strategies—can strengthen CVE over the long-term.

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