

# Policy Brief N° 8

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## Gender in P/CVE approaches: Pathways from theory to practice<sup>1</sup>

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Violent extremist ideologies continue to challenge social cohesion and democratic values, and terrorist action is used to destabilise societies. The degree to which the global COVID-19 pandemic will fuel extremist ideologies has yet to be fully examined. Domestic and gender-based violence have been exacerbated by the lockdowns, leaving women and children locked in their homes with their abusers and without access to support services (United Nations, 2020). These spikes in violence are a grave threat not only for women, but for the security of our societies.

Extremist groups have historically undermined gender equality and human rights and continue to exploit rigid concepts of gender and adapt narratives to context-specific grievances of men and women. The last 30 years have seen major efforts in forming expertise on women and gender in war and violent conflict. With the landmark 1325 Resolution of the Security Council of Women, Peace and Security in 2000 this agenda has seen global recognition. Nevertheless, the role of women as agents of peace and gender as a cross-cutting attribute is still neglected in P/CVE and has only recently gained interest.

If P/CVE policies are to be practised sensibly and sustainably, approaches to increase gender equality need to be emphasised, in line with the notion that societies with higher gender equality are more resilient to violent extremism (General Assembly United Nations, 2015).

### Key debates about gender in P/CVE

Three main foci of interest in gender and P/CVE have been dominant in recent years:

1) **Gendered pathways to radicalisation and the role of men and women in extremist groups.** Violent extremist groups exploit context-specific gender grievances to recruit both male and female members. An understanding of these mechanism is

crucial for the impact of P/CVE programming (Brown et al, 2019: 20f).

- 2) **Toxic masculinities and the role of power relations.** Questions on gender have focused on women's victimhood and their role in violent extremist groups. Masculinities within such groups have been frequently referred to as toxic masculinities (Pearson, 2019: p.1256). Recent discussion warns that the notion of toxic masculinity as a singular set of problematic ideas, may lead to the ignorance of power relations and could prevent from understanding the complexities of masculinities in the light of local context and situation (Pearson, 2019:1270).
- 3) **The role of women in P/CVE.** The positive effects of women participating in security and processes remain unquestioned. Women at all levels are seen as uniquely placed to challenge extremist narratives. As decision makers, community leaders, professionals but also within families where they are best positioned to detect early warning signs of radicalisation (Schlaffer et al, 2019). At the same time women are often the first targets of violent extremists and therefore the first to notice negative trends in their surroundings (OSCE, 2019: 51), as in cases of domestic violence that has the potential to develop into violent extremism, if undetected and unreported (Anderlini, 2018: 34). Women in the police forces tend to have a more specific focus on human rights violations and can de-escalate tension more efficiently. This in turn allows them to establish trust within communities (Fink et al, 2016: p.45). Finally, women-led organisations are key actors in P/CVE. They are locally rooted and trusted in their communities. They are able to recognise and respond to changes within the local context quickly (Anderlini, 2018: 31).

## Policy Recommendations

The following aspects are recommended to be taken into account when developing and implementing P/CVE policies:

- Gender, as a cross-cutting perspective within P/CVE efforts, should be an integral part in whole-of-community approaches. Gender identities and gender relations are sensitive issues. Tackling harmful gender norms requires safe spaces and trust, which can best be created by civil society.
- Policies should support the empowerment and equality of women both in the public and the private spheres. Women can only exert their power in P/CVE when their voices are heard. One grassroots project targeting the empowerment of women is the MotherSchools Parenting for Peace Model.
- Policymakers and donors need to take into account that gender norms are manipulated and exploited by violent extremists and that they have developed over space and time. Deconstructing existing norms implies that a project lifecycle may not suffice to achieve sustainable impact.
- Gender in P/CVE programming needs to consider the perspectives of women, men, girls and boys alike as well as underlying dynamics, relations and hierarchies between them. These considerations should as well include other social attributes such as age, class, religion and ethnicity.
- Programmes should include both women and men as agents of change to support alliances and foster partnerships between men and women in promoting transformative masculinities and femininities.

## Consulted & Recommended Sources

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