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Women and Countering Violent Extremism

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While the role of women and the importance of gender mainstreaming in peace building is becoming increasingly accepted (most notably through the adoption of and momentum generated by UNSCR 1325, as well as corresponding national action plans created by countries across the globe), the role of women in violent extremism remains an understudied issue. Much of the evidence that demonstrates women's potential to contribute to countering violent extremism is patchy and anecdotal. This Information2Action focuses on some key debates, challenges and opportunities relating to promoting women's participation in countering violent extremism.

Women and familial links to extremism

As in all other realms, women are not monolithic actors in violent extremism. They can be all at once victims, violent actors, and agents of positive change. The first setting in which these roles unfold is in the most intimate and basic structure, through their role in the family. Families and familial community structures play a role in both escalating and preventing involvement in violent extremism. Prior family involvement in terrorist organizations can increase the likelihood of an individual joining radical movements. Mia Bloom documents this well in Chechnya, where she describes terrorism as part of a family business[1]. Similarly, in Northern Ireland she observed that membership of violent movements was matrilineal. Young men were found more likely to join extremist organizations when their mother's families had ties to these movements than when their father's family did.[2] On the flip side, we find women within a family context also have the power to sway their relatives away from terrorism. Hearne quotes a Palestinian woman following a Palestinian-led suicide bombing in which she says, "I don't support this at all. It is also jihad to care about your children and to bring them up well…. women can teach their sons and daughters to become

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[1] Bloom, Mia, Jayne Huckerby, Bruce Hoffman, and Jane Holl Lute. "Women, Terrorism and Counter-terrorism." GIWPS and the McCain Institute: Women, Terrorism and Counter-terrorism. Georgetown University, Washington, DC. 4 Nov. 2013. Panel.

[2] Bloom, Mia. *Bombshell the Many Faces of Women Terrorists*. London: Hurst, 2011.

doctors and engineers and other things. We don't need to be martyrs."[3] One of the primary reasons cited by young men for leaving terrorist life in Bloom's research is finding a romantic partner.

Much of the evidence gathered to date is anecdotal, and while useful, anecdotal evidence is insufficient to form coherent policy. The research that does exist focuses on women as mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters. In other words, much of the research hinges on their roles in relation to others (especially men) and in their ability to influence others – mainly through familial ties. These findings suggest that women can be particularly effective at dissuading their children, siblings, husbands, etc. from being violent actors through dialogue, through the respect they garner as matrons, and through education as the "first teachers." The role of women is central to understanding how to leverage family and family structure's role in promoting positive change, but the family unit and the impact it has on extremist movements is understudied. Other studies on the root causes of violent extremism suggest that social vacuums make joining extremist groups more attractive. It follows that "strengthened family and relationship ties can help facilitate a person's disengagement from a particular cause."[4] "It could be extrapolated from this that women, as central figures in every culture, could hold the key to developing societal answers to a given society's terrorism problem, or at least to grounding each initiative in the appropriate culture."[5]

A European Union (EU) workshop on Effective Programming for Countering Violent Extremism[6] found that women can de-mystify the life of a terrorist by speaking about the hardships involved in living a covert life, such as separation, insecurity, loss of income, and anxiety. This begs the question: to what extent can women who are from families that have produced violent extremists act as agents of peace by doing exactly this at a community or national level? Can women's skills and position in the family be amplified beyond the family setting to serve broader peace and security goals? Women would thus prove integral "in removing children from cultures of extremism – or preventing their falling prey to extremism in the first place, by becoming intelligence officers, and even as spouses involved in the rehabilitation of extremists," making "women… very effective 'counterterrorists'."[7] Evidence needs to be gathered to survey a host of gender indicators and their implications on radicalization in order to make countering violent extremism (CVE) practices more effective.

Gender and Traditional CVE

Approaches to CVE that focus on rule of law and traditional "hard" CVE practices have thus far greatly failed to account for gender in their analysis. Traditional measures

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[3] Hearne, Ellie, *Participants, Enablers, and Preventers: The Roles of Women in Terrorism,* BISA Conference Papers 2012

[4] *Ibid* p.10

[5] Hearne, *Op.Cit.* p.10

[6] "EU Workshop on Countering Violent Extremism." *EU Workshop on Countering Violent Extremism*. European Commission, n.d. Web. 31 Jan. 2014.

[7] Hearne, *Op.Cit.* p.10

to counter violent extremism have focused, according to Jayne Huckerby,[8] on law enforcement mechanisms: criminal justice, intelligence, retention of financial assets and the destruction of networks. Hard CVE, she argues further, sees gender analysis as pertaining to the realm of development and has thus far largely failed to take it seriously as a CVE measure. It follows that most CVE studies focus on the military aspect of violent extremism, and ignore the context that enables the development of extremist behavior[9]. We see some agencies beginning to integrate a gender dimension to their prevention strategy, most notably the United States Department of State, which engages in "soft" CVE by focusing on rule of law, cultural drivers and other diplomatic tools. As a result, the State Department has recently included "Engaging Women" to its CVE arsenal. **"CVE programming places particular emphasis on engaging women, who are uniquely positioned to counter radicalization both at home and in their communities."**[10] However, this attempts fails to recognize the complexity of the role of women in CVE by focusing on the narrative of women as victims. "We seek to amplify the voices of victims of terrorism, who can credibly articulate the destructive consequences of terrorism, thus helping to dissuade those contemplating violent extremism."[11] In order to carve a comprehensive approach to CVE that includes women in its strategy, research much be furthered on the actual impact of the narrative of victimization of women. We also need to expand the realm in which we consider women, and understand the mechanisms that drive women towards violent extremism in order to be able to counter that form of terrorism. We need better data on the role of women in intelligence gathering, and the effect of female leaders – in law enforcement, in the justice system, and in society – in CVE.

Applying Best Practices from Conflict Mitigation

When we look at best practices in the field of conflict mitigation, civil society, and in particular women's organizations, play a central role in managing seemingly intractable conflicts. "Practitioners working on issues associated with Resolution 1325 or gender and armed conflict have few opportunities to interact with counterterrorism officials. At the policy planning and program-design level, this runs the risks of being duplicative or making programs counterproductive, saturating beneficiary communities and repeating mistakes."[12] This overlapping space should be taken advantage of to draw best practices from fourteen years of implementing UNSCR 1325 and CVE. If we know through the experience of 1325 and from anecdotal evidence that women in Northern Ireland and Afghanistan can, and do, get together, and engender change in otherwise intractable conflicts through civil society engagement, we can surmise that

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[8] Satterthwaite, Margaret L., and Jayne C. Huckerby. *Gender, National Security and Counter-terrorism: Human Rights Perspectives*. Oxford: Routledge, 2013. Print.

[9] Chowdury Fink, Naureen, and Peter Romaniuk. "From Input to Impact: Evaluating Terrorism Prevention Programs." *Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation* (2012).

[10] "Programs and Initiatives: Countering Violent Extremism (CVE)." *U.S. Department of State*. U.S. Department of State, n.d. Web. 31 Jan. 2014.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] Chowdhury Fink, Naureen, Rafia Barakat, and Liat Shetret. "The Roles of Women in Terrorism, Conflict and Violent Extremism." *Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation* (2013). page 7

they can play the same role in CVE. In its conclusions, the above-quoted EU workshop on CVE[13] alludes to such a role for women in CVE, but its findings lack empirical grounding.

Meanwhile Pillar 1 of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy[14] calls for the international community to address the enablers of the proliferation of terrorism. However, the strategy document stops short, ignoring the importance of engaging civil society. Conflict mitigation, on the other hand, elevates civil society as an invaluable asset, and seeks to capitalize on the privileged relationships built between civil society initiatives and their communities. More than this, though, governments must identify key women activists and "small women's organizations at [the] grassroots level rather than partner with often self-proclaimed [largely male] community leaders… [as women often have] better access to vulnerable individuals."[15] Yet, being a female peacemaker proves dangerous, and "the relationships of trust between women's groups and local communities may be compromised if their programming is believed to be serving an externally imposed agenda."[16] Thus, practitioners must not only strategically select the actors with whom to engage with on the ground but explore their networks and the best avenues to connect with them, whether openly or covertly.

Engaging and Nurturing Civil Society

If CVE commits to nurturing women's organizations as partners, it is necessary to ensure their access to financial resources as well. If proven to be relevant, those civil society actors face a major challenge, that of financing. Jayne Huckerby describes small civil society organizations as being "squeezed"[17] out of work by strict anti-terrorism laws, who limit flow of funds to small organizations. An additional issue brought about by financial flows being restrictively allowed to large organizations is that the CVE practitioners always partner with the same gatekeepers. As a result, intelligence comes from a monolithic source, which has a financial interest in remaining the guardian of access to the CVE community. This centralization further squeezes out smaller, but at times more effective, women's organizations and leads to groupthink. Thus, practitioners must strategically select the actors with whom to engage on the ground, and for that further research is necessary on the impact of small groups and on women as leaders in their communities. This responsibility is shared with the donor community, which must review its standards. In order to thrive, civil society needs a structurally adequate environment.

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[13] "EU Workshop on Countering Violent Extremism." *EU Workshop on Countering Violent Extremism*. European Commission, n.d. Web. 31 Jan. 2014.

[14] "The Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy | UN Counter-Terrorism Committee." *UN News Center*. UN, n.d. Web. 31 Jan. 2014.

[15] "Women and Terrorist Radicalization, Final Report of the OSCE ODHIR Expert Rountables." OSCE, Feb. 2013. Web. 31 Jan. 2014. p.8

[16] Chowdhury Fink, Naureen, Rafia Barakat, and Liat Shetret. "The Roles of Women in Terrorism, Conflict and Violent Extremism." *Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation* (2013). Page 6

[17] Bloom, Mia, Jayne Huckerby, Bruce Hoffman, and Jane Holl Lute. "Women, Terrorism and Counter-terrorism." GIWPS and the McCain Institute: Women, Terrorism and Counter-terrorism. Georgetown University, Washington, DC. 4 Nov. 2013. Panel.

Any entity seeking to mitigate the proliferation of terrorism needs adequate and sustained resources. For women to curb the spread of terrorism, their roles as preventers, deterrents or community-resiliency builders must be clearly defined. This means merging the structural with the operational, transforming "hard" and "soft" CVE into "smart" CVE. Empowering women can no longer be relegated to the periphery, but elevated as a serious security concern and targeted in both track I and track II approaches to peace. With the research and information gaps outlined here filled, we are likely to be presented with an untapped resource for change.