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DIFFERENT CITIES, SHARED STORIES

A FIVE-COUNTRY STUDY CHALLENGING ASSUMPTIONS AROUND MUSLIM WOMEN AND CVE INTERVENTIONS

EMILY WINTERBOTHAM AND ELIZABETH PEARSON

In 2015, UN Security Council Resolution 2242 advocated deliberate outreach to women when devising counterterrorism projects. This is based on assumptions of the need to empower women, as well as their particular ability to exert benign influence over young people and stop radicalisation to violence. The approach has been particularly prevalent in Western Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) projects aimed at preventing homegrown Islamist radicalisation. On the basis of fieldwork with Muslim communities in five countries – Canada, the UK, Germany, France and The Netherlands – Emily Winterbotham and Elizabeth Pearson challenge the underlying assumptions of such an approach, and suggest aspects of women's CVE projects may exacerbate existing community tensions, and do not reflect the changing norms of Muslim communities in the West. Alternative modes of engagement could improve the efficacy of CVE and enable it to better appeal to those it is intended to help.

For some years, there has been a longstanding commitment to incorporating 'gender' at the highest institutional levels of international counterterrorism.[1] The latest such guidance is the 2015 UN Security Council Resolution 2242, which calls for the inclusion of women in devising programmes on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE).[2] CVE constitutes a preventative and non-coercive 'soft' approach, designed to work in partnership with communities.[3] There has been a proliferation of such projects since the attacks of 9/11 and, more recently, the rise of the brutal Islamist terror group Daesh (also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, ISIS). Yet, globally, CVE programming demonstrates a lack of coherent strategy, with violent extremism defined differently by different countries. Additionally, CVE programming has been

criticised for being both over-reliant on assumptions regarding both who is 'vulnerable' to radicalisation and why; and for being under-conceptualised.[4] The impact of CVE is notoriously difficult to measure, and there is mixed evidence for the efficacy of CVE programming aimed at engaging women.[5] While gender can also be understood as 'the socially constructed expectation that persons perceived to be members of a biological sex category will have certain characteristics',[6] the majority of CVE work incorporating gender perspective primarily addresses the inclusion of women and/or girls.

In Western countries, CVE programmes are aimed primarily at two perceived security threats: right-wing extremism and Islamist extremism. 'Islamist' is a sensitive and often misused term that broadly refers to a vision in which the political and social order runs

in accordance with Islamic law. The terms 'Islamism' and 'Islamist' in and of themselves do not denote violence.[7] Countries differ in approach, with some interventions aimed at preventing *violent* Islamist extremism, while others address *non-violent* Islamist extremism too.[8] The primary violent Islamist threat is currently Daesh, which is leading an insurgency and whose leader has announced a caliphate in Iraq and Syria, with provinces extending from Africa to Asia.[9] Daesh has both attacked and recruited westerners, with an estimated 3,000 emigrants from Europe, Canada and the US joining as fighters; the group also has supporters in Asia, North Africa and beyond.[10] In 2014, an estimated 18 per cent of the EU-origin migrants to join Daesh were women, though they were largely engaged as non-fighters.[11] This figure is likely to have increased. Some are converts, who are thought to be overrepresented

A member of the TUFF FC anti-radicalisation football club receives a FC Jeunesse Molenbeek club pennon from local youth players in Molenbeek, Belgium, June 2016. *Courtesy of PA Images/Geert Vanden Wijngaert.*

in Western terrorist activity for jihadi groups, with European conversion rates increasing.[12] In 2016, as many as a third of all female recruits to Daesh from France are reportedly converts; in Germany, the figure is 35 per cent.[13] As with male recruits, most women recruits to Daesh are under 30, and many are minors. The reasons for their migration (or *hijrah*) to Syria/Iraq are complex and diverse, including belief in Daesh's ideology, perceived discrimination, desire to raise children in a caliphate, romantic relationships or desire for adventure shared with friends.[14] Often characterised in the media as 'jihadi brides', women are key in Daesh ideology as wives, mothers and propagandists.[15]

UN guidance informs and reflects the increasing global focus on women in CVE programmes.[16] However, the assumptions underlying these programmes have frequently been criticised.[17] For example, despite much research on the role of women as willing agents of violence in movements including the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, Daesh or the Kurdistan Workers' Party PKK, among others, it has often

been assumed that women within the security context are always peaceful.[18] Such assumptions have informed gendered strategies to counter terrorism and violent extremism, shaping understandings of who the actors are in terrorist groups.[19]

This article explores such critiques, and assesses the understudied issue of women in CVE initiatives to counter radicalisation to Daesh, focusing on community responses.[20] It is the result of qualitative research in five countries, including more than 200 participants. One of the key questions underpinning this analysis is how wanted programmes targeting women in the communities they are intended to help are? Despite key differences in the CVE approaches of governments in the various countries researched, and despite their different histories and demographics, a striking research finding was the repetition of the same themes and experiences by research participants. This article focuses on these shared stories from the five research countries to argue for a reappraisal of some core assumptions at the heart of gendered CVE programming,

particularly as the landscape has been changed by the rise of Daesh.

CVE, Women and Gender: Logic and Assumptions

Strategies and recommendations about CVE programming that emphasise gender, such as the OSCE's 2015 guide to good practice on women and CVE, have been implemented in numerous ways.[21] International policymakers advocate the inclusion of women in CVE in ever more diverse roles.[22] A 2014 UN panel on women in CVE outlined key themes: the need to create political space for women's engagement; to treat them as leaders; to resist stereotypes of specific roles and identities; and to amass more primary data.[23] The importance of community, family and partners is also acknowledged in deradicalisation processes, as well as preventative measures.[24]

Much CVE work has specifically involved women precisely because they are believed to represent a peacemaking ally against violence.[25] European CVE models are based on pyramid-type understandings of radicalisation. Violent extremism is considered the result of a

process which sees those in 'vulnerable communities' move progressively towards being part of a 'radical milieu', developing ever more extreme views, possibly culminating in violence.[26]

Violent actors in extreme movements have predominantly been men.[27] Therefore, a key CVE assumption has been that women, as peaceful agents, if empowered, can positively influence violent male actors. Many schemes have also focused on mothers, assuming that they are better able to detect the signs of radicalisation in children.[28] Critics of the approach have challenged these, and related key assumptions. First, as applied to Islamist extremism, Katherine E Brown identifies a 'maternalistic logic' behind such programming – that is, an understanding of Muslim women according to 'their expected gender and racialized role as mothers. This assumes women are guided by a maternal instinct that promotes peace and shuns violence';[29] and that women, particularly Muslim mothers, are more present in the home and can therefore spot the signs of radicalisation in their children. Second, CVE strategies have been criticised for seeking to impose Western understandings of gender equality on Muslim communities, with the aim of empowering women assumed to be oppressed, so that they can more easily challenge violent extremism. Third, the implicit and interlinked assumption behind this is that failed assimilation of Muslim communities in the West contributes to radicalisation, and fourth, that gender equality is an important part of integration processes.[30] The 'failed integration' explanation of radicalisation is however not proved, and extremists have varied widely in background, age, socioeconomic status, literacy levels, occupation and past criminal records.[31]

Gendered CVE programming has taken many forms, often focused on integration and empowerment. These have included: generic programmes of classes to engage women assumed to lack access to public amenities; police or state-sponsored workshops on radicalisation; community outreach through local organisations; and gendered counter-narratives aimed at, for example, mothers, offering advice on the

signs of radicalisation. In the UK, Muslim women have been an explicit focus of the Prevent counter-radicalisation strategy, which, since its public launch in 2006–07, has sought to work with 'Muslim women ... at the heart of communities' as 'untapped potential'.[32] In practice, this saw women invited to a range of activities, from dancing groups, to parenting classes, to workshops on how to spot the signs of radicalisation. The Prevent programme has faced criticism, primarily from Muslim communities themselves. One concern was that it asked Muslim women to spy on their families, an allegation found to be baseless in a subsequent investigation undertaken when the programme was restructured in 2011 to separate integration from security agendas, following criticism from Muslim communities.[33] Community mistrust of the Prevent brand has led to a recent recommendation from the Home Affairs Select Committee for it to be rebranded 'Engage', and for the Muslim Council of Britain to devise its own alternative prevention strategy.[34]

EU funding calls also highlight the role of women (and youth) as a 'vector of community change for peace'.[35] In The Netherlands, well-established CVE programmes have been linked to initiatives aimed at the integration of Muslim women through secularisation processes and have been criticised for seeking to impose a particular understanding of equality on women, which many Dutch Muslim women reject.[36]

Meanwhile, countries that are only beginning to develop national CVE programmes to counter Daesh-related radicalisation, such as Canada, are seeking to understand how to specifically incorporate women into their work. In Germany, which has no integrated national CVE strategy, NGOs have worked for years on countering far-right extremism, and more recently Islamist extremism.[37] At the heart of many projects, such as one of the most successful, 'Hayat', is an engagement with families of radicalised youth, including women and mothers.[38] Hayat has been praised for its individualised approach, engaging with families who ask for help,

and strengthening kinship bonds to convince young people to deradicalise. In France, the government has only recently started to engage in counter-radicalisation, and has specifically aimed messaging at women through, for example, the social media hashtag #StopJihadisme.[39]

Methodology

This article presents one strand of a broader research project exploring two ideologies: right-wing extremism and Islamist extremism, and across two areas – CVE and radicalisation to violent extremism. The methodology was qualitative and participant-focused, the majority of data gathered through focus groups.[40] This approach focused on encouraging conversation and discussion was designed in order to facilitate the production of such sensitive data in a supported environment. Embedded in grounded theory, it limited researcher anticipation of particular responses, allowing for a full range of participant insights to emerge, including unanticipated information.[41] Two types of qualitative method were adopted: focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. The emphasis was on understanding community perceptions of these issues, given the targeting of most CVE initiatives at the community level. Focus groups were used to facilitate discussion, and for researchers to gain an understanding of group opinion through interaction and consensus forming.[42] Semi-structured interview techniques were employed, with as little researcher intervention as possible, enabling a participant-led approach and in which groups were able to highlight issues important to them. These often bore no relation to questions asked, reflecting their different priorities. Pragmatic considerations also shaped these methodological choices, as the budget and timeframe did not enable an additional mass quantitative survey.

Additionally, the broader research included nine in-depth life history semi-structured interviews that were conducted largely with people who had direct experience of radicalisation. Relatives of five young people specifically affected by radicalisation to

Daesh gave interviews. These accounts provide direct information on how young people become radicalised. These were specifically selected due to their experience of radicalisation and their willingness to talk. Only one self-identifying 'radical' extremist was interviewed, a man supportive of the white supremacist agenda. This reflects the challenge of conducting research in this area across a short timeframe, and the reluctance of people to engage.

Twenty expert interviews were also carried out with professionals who work in the field, including NGO officials, leaders of youth groups, heads of community centres, police officers and local authority coordinators, as well as mosque leaders. They explained the local context and their thoughts on the prevalence of radicalisation, and detailed actions to counter it, as well as responses.

The research took place in two cities in five countries: Canada; France; Germany; The Netherlands; and the UK. These countries were selected due to key differences in CVE approaches addressing the same primary perceived threats. In countering Islamist extremism, for example, the UK government has a well-developed counter-radicalisation strategy which has tended to target Muslim (religious and cultural) communities, understood as the broad base of the radicalisation 'pyramid'.[43] The Netherlands and Canada have taken a similar approach; CVE in France is less well-developed, and in Germany, more focused on families in need.[44] A decision was made to focus research on two cities in each country, in order to better understand how 'place' mattered in radicalisation. Looking at place enabled researchers to recognise any relationship between communities in which the far right has support, and Muslim communities seen as 'vulnerable' to radicalisation.

The responses of 217 men, women and young people (aged over sixteen due to issues of consent) were collected across the 41 focus groups. In order to elicit the most relevant answers, the intention was to engage primarily with those who had no specialist or professional knowledge of radicalisation but might realistically be (or have been)

the subject of CVE projects. This broad inclusion criterion was based on the 'milieu' and 'pyramid' models used to understand radicalisation, which suggest that the broad communities from which support emerges are an important foundation of radicalisation.[45] In each city, two ideologies were addressed: white-supremacist and violent Islamist groups. Homogenous focus groups in respect of age, gender and ethnicity/religion were conducted, as far as possible, with six to eight people. Focus group participants were identified according to stratified sampling, meaning that the research aimed at a minimum number of focus groups based on the agreed criteria. This included at least two focus groups per agreed key criteria, which included: gender (man/woman); age ('young people': 16–29 years old; 'middle aged': 30–59; 'old': 60–79); religion (Muslim and non-Muslim communities); and location (some groups were conducted in areas that had previously reported the presence of extreme-right or neo-Nazi activities).

Although gatekeepers – such as mosques, community groups and women's groups – were primarily used to identify participants, all were selected on the basis of their willingness to participate and engage in research on the subject area, no matter what their views. Some groups, for example, explicitly wished to participate in order to criticise narratives around CVE. The nature of sampling means self-selection bias cannot be ruled out, although all gatekeepers were asked to select participants likely to represent the broader community.

Limitations

The methodology had limitations. In particular, 'research fatigue',[46] and frustration with continued focus on issues of extremism led to difficulty in attracting participants in some locations. The aims of the research were therefore clearly explained, along with benefits to participants and protections afforded to them.

Due to difficulties in assembling groups – often due to this research fatigue – homogeneity of groups stratified according to age and gender was not always possible. Additionally,

some communities resisted the need for gender segregation. Therefore, 10 per cent of focus groups were mixed: men and women. Notwithstanding these limitations, the intention to canvass the views of a range of ages, of both genders, and on the subject of how to counter both extreme Islamist and right-wing ideologies was met in all five countries, except The Netherlands, where only Muslim community focus groups were conducted. This failure to conduct focus groups with non-Muslims was due to time restrictions and the difficulty for the researcher in locating the correct gatekeepers, given perceptions that the far right is not an issue. Another limitation was the lack of research with those supportive of 'extreme' groups. Those supportive of Daesh were hard to access due to intense government and media focus on this group, suspicion of the research aims, criminalisation of support (in the UK) and stigma. Gatekeepers working with such youth also did not want to expose them to research, in case it jeopardised their work. A similar stigma surrounded those involved in extremist right-wing groups. Other challenges included requests for payment for interview, as in the case of one white supremacist group approached. This was refused.

It was also difficult to know exact numbers of people who had been exposed to CVE already, versus those who had not. Some had attended CVE interventions in their local community. Others had not. Some were unsure, as not all CVE interventions are explicitly presented as such. Others knew about CVE through peers, or the media. However, even where participants had not themselves experienced CVE interventions, their contribution was not purely 'theoretical' – all participants expressed being affected by discourses surrounding CVE, extremism and terrorism, now a part of their everyday life. Additionally, as members of the 'target' communities of CVE, they were able to offer informed opinions on what is likely to work (or not). Indeed, almost half of the Muslim community focus groups (thirteen groups) included participants with some experience of radicalisation in their family or community.

This article deals only with the findings relating to Muslim communities and CVE programming engaging women. The intention of this aspect of the research was to provide answers to key research questions. First, how wanted are CVE programmes targeting women in the Muslim communities they are intended to help? Second, should CVE specifically target women and, if so, how?

In order to ensure uniformity of approach across the five countries studied, research training took place in London, with additional training for the lead researcher who managed the research in Quebec, Canada. The importance of a consistent methodology was stressed, with emphasis on uniform sampling methods, an area frequently critiqued in terrorism studies.[47] All efforts were made to ensure a rigorous methodology, with a clear concept of the purpose of research, group size, inclusion criteria and themes around which questions should be asked.

Fieldwork was undertaken between October 2015 and January 2016 inclusively. Every participant response was then coded and analysed in ATLAS.ti. Needless to say, our participants expressed a range of opinions, and none should be read as 'speaking for' any group in its entirety. It should also be noted that a longer period of field research would have yielded more interviews.

Challenging Assumptions

Research participants across countries voiced a number of strong and shared challenges to the assumptions underlying CVE programming aimed at Muslim women. This section outlines research findings on the nature of those challenges, and why they are perceived as an obstacle to successful CVE implementation.

Understanding of Extremism, Radicalisation and CVE

In order to clarify participant understanding of CVE, and the issues of radicalisation, each focus group began with the question, 'what do you understand by the terms "extremism" and "radicalisation"?' Nearly all research participants said these terms were now solely associated with Islam, leading to feelings of mistrust and discrimination. Answers to the first question tended to frame the resulting discussion. All groups felt the terms could, in theory, apply to any type of ideology or belief, but in the current political climate specifically referred to Daesh, and more generally to Muslims. This was seen as unfair and disproportionate:

> Extremist – mmm – for me, to be honest, for me, I see only one thing … Today it's … a bearded man with a Kalashnikov in his hands.
> – Young Muslim man, France

> Objectively I know 'Violent Extremism' could include anyone, but I am aware – through media and conversations – that whenever it comes up, even I would pause and hope the word 'Islam' doesn't come after that. I know that this is what is associated with it.
> – Young Muslim woman, Canada

> Look at the groups who are against the arrival of refugees. They set fire to everything … Do you hear someone from the media say that they are 'radicalised'? No. But if a Muslim boy does something then he is immediately 'radicalised'.
> – Middle aged Muslim man, The Netherlands

These themes – media bias and societal Islamophobia – tended to dominate focus group discussion, framing understandings of CVE as 'targeting' rather than 'partnering' Muslim communities. Participant preoccupation with this perception often challenged the core research aim of interrogating the concept of women, gender and CVE. Research questions around women's role in CVE were frequently regarded as peripheral issues and, in some groups, irrelevant.

CVE Fatigue: An Obstacle to Working with Muslim Women

Willingness to engage with the idea of gendered CVE programming depended on these attitudes towards CVE in general. The chart which follows is based on the findings in this research, and depicts numbers of positive and negative responses per country to the question about whether women should specifically be targeted in CVE interventions. A response indicating a need for women's CVE or any benefit it might bring was coded positive; any response suggesting this had no advantages, or might bring harm in other ways was coded negative.

Muslim communities expressed hostility to the logic of CVE interventions targeting them, or women within them. Most believed it was not relevant to them or their families as only a tiny minority have travelled to Daesh from any country. However, scepticism was not related solely to need, but trust in institutions. Of the 27 focus groups conducted among Muslim communities – distinct from interviews with families of those radicalised – fourteen included participants who had experience of radicalisation to Daesh in their milieu. Groups reported young people leaving for Syria and Iraq; participants personally approached by recruiters; or the targeting of children, or friends. This concerned them.

For participants in all countries, scepticism about women's role in CVE appeared to be part of a broader concern about the entire concept of CVE, existing approaches and the prospect of future success. Young Muslims – men and women in their twenties, and teenagers – demonstrated the strongest scepticism, associating CVE with Islamophobia, which clearly has implications for their receptivity to preventative approaches. This group is the so-called 'post-9/11 generation', which has known only negative narratives and security practices surrounding Muslims and Islam since the 2001 attacks. This is also the group identified as most vulnerable to radicalisation in current theory. Perceptions of Western media exaggeration around Daesh and the stigmatisation of Muslims in all countries have also had an impact on willingness to engage.

CVE and Muslim Women: Empowerment or Disempowerment?

A key theoretical criticism of CVE interventions aimed at Muslim women is that its 'maternalist logic' engages

Figure 1: Views on the Specific Engagement of Mothers in CVE Expressed in the Muslim Focus Groups.
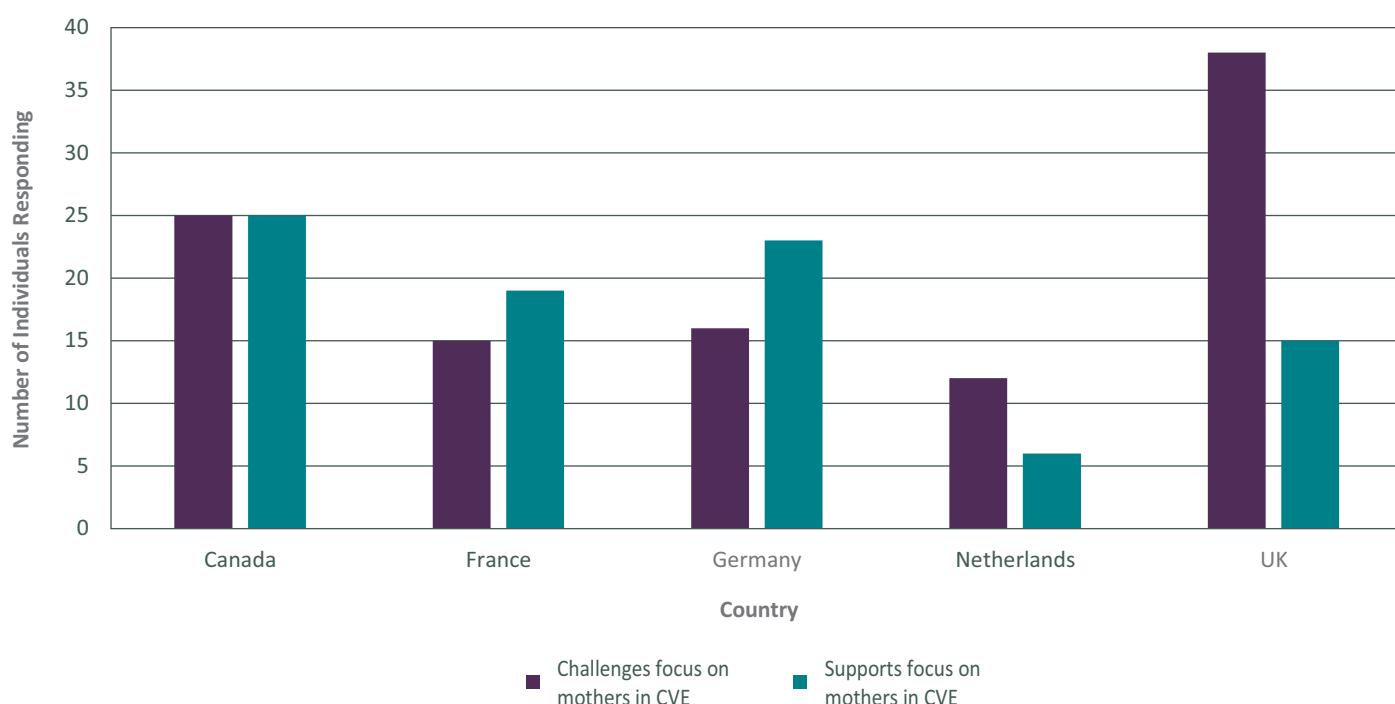
women only as peacemakers and mothers, effectively removing their agency.[48] This view was reflected in focus group research, with around one quarter of women in all countries making some reference to the disempowering effect of CVE engaging them primarily as mothers. Female Muslim participants suggested this approach failed to challenge existing negative gender relations and entrenched stereotypical ideas about women within Muslim communities. This objection was raised even when participants stressed the importance of motherhood and expressed a need for more information on radicalisation. Portrayals of women as 'more caring by nature', and as primary childcare providers, even if accepted as accurate descriptors of family dynamics, were felt by Muslim women to entrench patriarchy when applied to Muslim communities by non-Muslims and by Muslim men. While mothers certainly believe they can influence children, they outlined more public roles for engagement in a variety of professional and leadership roles. In contrast, Muslim men identified 'motherhood' as the only role for women in CVE. This was actively resisted by many women, who felt such

assumptions undermined other efforts to empower them.

'Empowerment' was, however, regarded as positive per se, and desired by female participants, but on their own terms. Muslim participants suggested CVE interventions with a focus on Muslim women, and the ensuing implication that they require specific 'empowerment', did not help them resist 'Islamophobic stereotypes'. All Muslim participants were sensitive to the fact that oppression of Muslim women in Islam is a key theme in Islamophobic discourse and extreme right-wing recruitment narratives. Muslim focus groups across countries noted that right-wing politics portrays Islam as oppressive, the veil and scarf as symbols of that oppression and Muslim men as a threat to non-Muslim women. Muslim participants also considered this understanding of Islam to be a mainstream public perception. Indeed non-Muslim focus group participants, none of whom was Islamophobic, did believe Muslim women had more traditional roles than those in non-Muslim cultures, and were more likely to be 'oppressed' and in need of empowerment. These participants also accepted the link between failed

integration and radicalisation even though this has not been proved. This meant the majority of non-Muslims interviewed broadly supported government interventions promoting the need for better integration of Muslim women into Western society in order to tackle radicalisation.

This view, that there is a link between failed integration and vulnerability to radicalisation, was also accepted by Muslim focus groups. More than half of the Muslim women's focus groups, particularly in the UK and Germany, identified first-generation immigrant mothers as requiring specific intervention and empowerment, and suggested their children were more likely to be 'at risk'. Risk was associated with a greater cultural gap between them and their children, language barriers and a failure to understand Western societies. One Muslim youth referred to this as a 'back home mentality'.

Ability to speak the national language was regarded as a key component of integration, particularly in Muslim and non-Muslim focus groups in the UK, where the government launched a 2016 scheme to teach migrant spouses

English or risk losing their right to remain in the UK.[49] One Muslim woman in the UK criticised immigrant mothers for failing to learn English:

> I think mothers nowadays have to be well informed and know English because they cannot communicate well with their children who have been born or raised here, who go to English schools. If your kid comes home with some idea and you don't know how to deal with it, this is a problem.

A German Muslim mother expressed a similar view: 'If this mother or woman is educated, is integrated, or isn't cut off from wider society, then something like this [radicalisation] just shouldn't be able to happen'.

Muslim women in at least eight focus groups, but particularly in Canada and Germany, said that CVE is part of a narrative implying Muslim cultural values harmed women and Western values did not. This was resisted, as this German participant, a convert mother in her 40s, noted:

> Obviously you want women to be strong and independent and choose their own path in life, but you have to accept which path they choose. It's not empowering women to want them to give up on being good Muslims ... To empower them to be great go-go dancers, that's not right. [laughs] It has to be up to them to choose how they live, so give them the power to do that.

The issue of the headscarf and veil was an important and sensitive one in the empowerment debate. Women felt a tension between the vision of empowerment, and their own commitment to their faith, as this female Canadian student explained:

> Muslim women are not OK with the white feminist agenda, with the idea that Muslim women who have cloths on their heads can't help themselves; 'we must save them'. No, Muslim women actually want to cover up and no one is forcing us. If you want to take off the hijab, you can take it off, but the narrative is that Muslim women want to

be saved. It's 'white saviours' – we want none of that.

Male Muslim participants were aware of the debates and government activities around women's empowerment, and the majority were also suspicious. One young Canadian man told the researchers:

> Usually, the 'empowerment' I see these days is that women are 'empowered' ... in a way that brings them out of their culture. This is abuse by people that are trying to empower them.

Such suspicion was associated with a rejection by men of the concept of CVE targeting women.

Why Women, Why Us? Roles for Government, Roles for Fathers

Significantly, an emphasis on Muslim women as the core actors in counter-radicalisation was also rejected on the grounds that this obscured the role of other, more important agents, such as the government. A focus on mothers was perceived by some as a way of 'letting the government off the hook'. As one young Muslim father in Germany said: 'Separating women and men [in CVE] – I don't find it really appropriate. Because it's a problem that affects both sexes, and also states need to be involved'.

Instead, many Muslim participants advocated shared social responsibility, not confined to Muslim communities. This sentiment frequently led to frustration with, and resistance to, the research question and its focus on women.[50]

It was also perceived as permitting governments to deflect attention away from more pressing issues in Muslim communities, such as violence against Muslim women. The vast majority of women had experienced abuse of some form by non-Muslims, but it was most reported in groups in Canada, where research took place in the week after the Paris attacks. Many women were nervous of lone travel, and men also expressed anxiety over the safety of female relatives.

Research also suggested a growing inapplicability of assumptions about traditional gender dynamics in

Muslim families. Many Muslim women participants had jobs, as well as having a family. While they recognised their role as primary caregivers, they highlighted the limitations to this assumption, due to the competing pressures they faced. Some female Muslim research participants questioned why mothers should play a different role to men in CVE, and why the onus of the responsibility of countering radicalisation should be placed on them. As one young Muslim woman in Canada queried: 'Why is it only the mother's role to pick up on these signs? It takes two to parent'. This view was widely echoed, by male as well as female participants, and shared by young people, who frequently described close relationships with fathers as well as mothers.

One important neglected actor identified in discussions on CVE was the father. All participants suggested that the family played an important role in instilling values in young children. Participants also acknowledged that mothers have a different relationship with children than fathers. However, one of the clearest research findings from all countries, but particularly from France and The Netherlands, was that participants desire specific engagement with fathers in CVE programming – for example, through parenting classes. Muslim women described how they bear the brunt of childcare in families and have little time. They suggested including fathers could be advantageous to mothers. Parents, who made up more than 75 per cent of the research participants, were nearly two times more likely than non-parents to challenge any specific role in CVE for mothers alone, reflecting a desire for shared parenting. The need for both parents to be involved was voiced by the majority of mothers participating in the research. A few mothers suggested that a focus on fathers could also help prevent mothers being blamed if children joined Daesh. Many Muslim and non-Muslim participants, including young people, expressed the view that both parents need to be engaged in CVE, each with their own role.

Men interviewed in all countries also expressed suspicion of CVE programmes in general and what they seem to imply about Muslim men – that is, that they

are potential terrorists. They wanted CVE programmes to engage with them in a way that would help them act as positive role models, to engender change. A focus on men acting as positive role models would, first, help to counteract negative but widespread stereotypical representations of Muslim men as potential 'jihadis'; instead such programming would reinforce positive images of men as carers and role models. Second, such programming would allow men to emphasise their specific skill sets. Many of the Muslim men who participated in the research felt that a role for fathers was particularly desirable in order to influence sons. Many believed male authority could carry more weight with young men. In some families, women also expected fathers to exercise particular kinds of masculine authority and possess deeper theological knowledge. In the words of one Muslim mother in the UK: 'Women are quite weak … Like you [to another female participant] didn't know about ISIS. I think it is more relevant to engage men'.

Even where this narrative was resisted, and women described equal status in domestic relationships, many participants emphasised a lack of equality in access to the public realm. They felt that if the primary objective of CVE was to tackle radicalisation – not female empowerment – the roles of women and mothers may be limited due to less frequent mosque attendance, which limited their access to information. This was a strong observation among Muslim men and women in the UK, where women pointed to less frequent attendance of mosques in part due to the fact that some did not admit women.[51] It was, however, also referenced in other countries.

The Mother Paradox

Putting the onus of CVE on women was also perceived to risk securitising the role of mothers. A small number of participants highlighted that mothers would inevitably prioritise the *actual* family dynamic over a *potential* security threat and that for some Muslim participants the risk that reporting children might pose to family stability was a greater threat than radicalisation itself. Men and women suggested

reporting your own child would represent a complete breakdown of trust and pointed to parents' moral struggles in this area. Instead, it was felt family stability was needed to stop radicalisation, and engagement aimed at encouraging mothers to report crime could backfire. A Muslim father in Germany explained:

> If you're looking at the mother–son relationship, what [CVE] does is take something positive and make it negative … if mothers … go to the police, and say 'my son has these tendencies, maybe he'll go to ISIS or something like that', that will just destroy the whole family! Then what they achieve is the opposite of what they want. Because then the son is just going to leave the family, and live somewhere else, where he can't be controlled … It's actually counter-productive.

In effect, these participants outlined how the core assumption of engaging women in CVE – that they are the primary caregiver, with an influential relationship with children – was also the reason this strategy was unlikely to work. The same relationship that justified the maternal logic of gendered CVE programming would also deter mothers from going to the police, other officials or support groups, a key aim of many CVE programmes. A parallel conversation and reasoning about a lack of trust in the police was evident in non-Muslim, as well as Muslim, groups. All parents, across race and gender, doubted their own ability, should it come to it, to inform on their children.

A more fundamental scepticism about mothers' roles in CVE was often simply based on the perception that however powerful women's influence, all parents lose the ability to have an impact on children after a certain age, when peers and other influences matter more. This was particularly emphasised by those participants with personal experience of radicalisation among family members, such as this Dutch woman, whose brother died in Syria: 'Nobody could stop my brother … Nobody could do anything. You could talk with him for hours. And when he saw images from Syria and Iraq on TV,

everything would start all over again. It was very difficult'.

Daesh and the Changing Gender Landscape of CVE

Research found that the current security landscape has also had an impact on perceptions of the relevance of CVE interventions with Muslim women, in two major ways. First, the rise of female radicalisation means assumptions about women's 'natural' propensity for peace are challenged. Second, the prevalence of convert recruits casts doubt on the focus on Muslim communities of an immigrant background and narratives linking radicalisation to failed integration.

Female Radicalisation

The vast majority of participants were aware of the recruitment of young women, mothers and families to Daesh. Several Muslim focus groups included members with personal experience of male and female radicalisation in their communities, and people who had travelled to Syria to join Daesh. This led a minority of participants to challenge the core CVE assumption that women are peaceful moderates, and will naturally wish to tackle the violence (of men). Across countries, Muslim participants, male and female, asserted that only a tiny minority supported Daesh. Yet they also suggested that it would be wrong to assume that these were always men, or that mothers would either naturally agree with governments, or ally with the state.

The Challenge of Converts

Muslim participants across countries acknowledged that the term 'extremism' is now most frequently associated with Islamist actors such as Daesh or Al-Qa'ida. However, they rejected the idea that Muslim communities were explicitly vulnerable, pointing to convert radicalisation as a neglected issue. Muslim participants said that the inability of government to widen perceptions of who is 'vulnerable' beyond immigrant populations of Muslim heritage means that the government is blind to the risk of radicalisation among converts. Muslim participants therefore argued that Muslim heritage communities should not

be the sole focus of counter-radicalisation programmes.

Convert radicalisation has particular gendered implications. First, while convert radicalisation has been a feature of European jihadi recruitment for some years, Daesh radicalisation has increased its incidence,[52] particularly among women. Indeed, Daesh propaganda explicitly targets women.[53] In France and Germany this has been associated with radicalisation to Daesh. In Germany, 35 per cent of female recruits are more likely to be converts (versus 18 per cent of men),[54] while in France the figures vary from 25–33 per cent.[55]

Second, convert radicalisation has particular implications for families, with non-Muslim mothers of convert recruits left isolated; Muslim communities receive information via CVE interventions that do not reach these families. The research included interviews with the mothers of three converts to Daesh – two German men who were prevented from leaving for Syria and one young Dutch woman currently there – who emphasised their need for greater support. These families communicated their experiences of neglect by systems focused on immigrant-heritage communities. A German mother explained:

> We are basically the mothers of the first generation … there was nothing, no one to talk to, no provision for counselling, nothing … I looked for an imam, I couldn't find one. This just isn't a topic you really expected to be confronted with. Drugs sure, [but] converting to Islam [and ISIS] – that's just different – we were alone, an alien.

Conclusions

This article has set out some of the key problems with CVE interventions targeting women in Muslim communities, focusing on the surprising number of shared stories from different cities across all five research countries. It revealed significant challenges to adopting a specific CVE focus on Muslim women, and the assumptions that underpin this. While women and men recognise that mothers have an important role in families, and women want support to influence CVE in the public space, there

was much suspicion about the nature of current interventions.

First, it was clear that women did desire support, and even empowerment, but in ways they themselves could define. Women did not discount attempts to stop recruitment to Daesh; over half of the focus groups conducted with Muslim communities, particularly in The Netherlands but also in Germany, France and Canada, discussed radicalisation in their own communities, which was of concern. Engagement, however, should not be aimed at imposing Western cultural values; it should not be limited only to Muslim heritage communities; and it should also genuinely address related issues such as Islamophobia. Focusing on women as 'mothers only' should be avoided and, instead, women's roles as leaders and workers need to be promoted and supported. This should ensure CVE aimed at 'empowering' does not have other effects which might actually prove disempowering, such as entrenching stereotypes about women's roles being restricted to the home. Ultimately, women's empowerment was perceived as counterproductive if it asked them to prioritise state security over family life, or cast them as oppressed by Islam, or somehow responsible for the radicalisation of their youth.

Second, CVE interventions need to target mothers *and* fathers. Participants suggested that targeting both mothers and fathers would better reflect family dynamics and acknowledge the important roles fathers can play in educating and supporting children. Of particular relevance for Muslim communities is the widely accepted fact that men are more likely to attend the local mosque and therefore have access to different sources of information. However, the limitations of all parents need to be recognised, in a world in which friends, youth culture and social media strongly influence young people, with some calling for more CVE work with youth peers.

Third, CVE should be directed not only at communities of religion, but also at communities of need. Young Muslim communities are targeted by Daesh recruiters, but so too are converts. Daesh radicalisation in a Western context has changed the CVE landscape.

It involves increasing numbers of converts, who, as stated earlier in this article, are disproportionately female. This has particular implications for government interventions, with a need to acknowledge that it is not only Muslim heritage communities of immigrant background that are susceptible to radicalisation. It is also important to narrow the focus of CVE programmes to those who need help, effectively targeting resources. The research also suggests that there should be a reappraisal of the widely held view that integration is the key to countering radicalisation. This is particularly important, as both Muslim and non-Muslim communities appear to have internalised to some degree government narratives regarding the association of integration and radicalisation, despite the absence of a proven link.[56] This leads to perceptions of particular groups as 'the problem', when this may not be the case. Similarly, perceptions of the validity of CVE aimed at 'empowering oppressed Muslim women' also differed between Muslims and non-Muslims. Commitment to integration as a foundation of CVE programmes with Muslim women is therefore likely to contribute to further tension between communities.

Another key perception among Muslim participants is that CVE blanket targets them. This is resented, in all countries, and potentially undermines positive attempts to specifically engage women through CVE work. Indeed, in countries such as the UK and The Netherlands, with a decade-long history of national CVE programmes, scepticism among Muslims was high. The tentative research conclusion is that participants' opposition to CVE programmes engaging women was, in some part, driven by the automatic resistance to CVE programming in any form. Muslim community suspicion of CVE programming meant that CVE interventions focused on any one area, such as women, would also be opposed. To provide further validation of this conclusion, it would be useful to conduct further research specifically focused on comparing groups which have received CVE programming with those that have not. If governments do not have the

confidence of communities on issues of extremism generally, it appears likely that CVE interventions targeted at specific groups will also be resisted. Our research participants reported the problem of radicalisation in their communities. They reported a desire for help, but they also resisted broader agendas they felt targeted Muslim communities. For this reason, CVE for women, as currently formulated, was neither wanted nor likely to succeed.

The findings are not straightforward. There are clear tensions in responses, which are frequently contradictory. Narratives of empowerment to Western ideals were resisted; and yet some focus group participants suggested that radicalisation was a particular problem in those communities comprising recent immigrants, or where individuals did not speak the national language, which the evidence demonstrates is not necessarily the case. Fathers' engagement was sought, yet even working women suggested mothers had most contact with children. Participants sought to distance themselves from issues of extremism, while also expressing anxiety about them, and often describing personal knowledge of them. Such complex feelings are generated by CVE programming, by government responses to terror, by society via the media and from within communities themselves. Further research is needed to explore these tensions, which reflect ambivalence towards CVE programming and resistance to it, even where its aims are acknowledged as potentially beneficial.

Gendered CVE interventions are in their infancy. Future programmes should challenge the 'maternal logic' of the assumptions contained within them, or links between integration and radicalisation, assessing their relevance as the landscape of extremism changes. Understanding the gender dynamics of countering extremism entails shifting the focus from what the state thinks women can give and do, to acknowledging what women – and men – across communities can actually do in preventing Daesh from recruiting from their families, and in reshaping the discourse of the War on Terror and their own futures. ∎

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