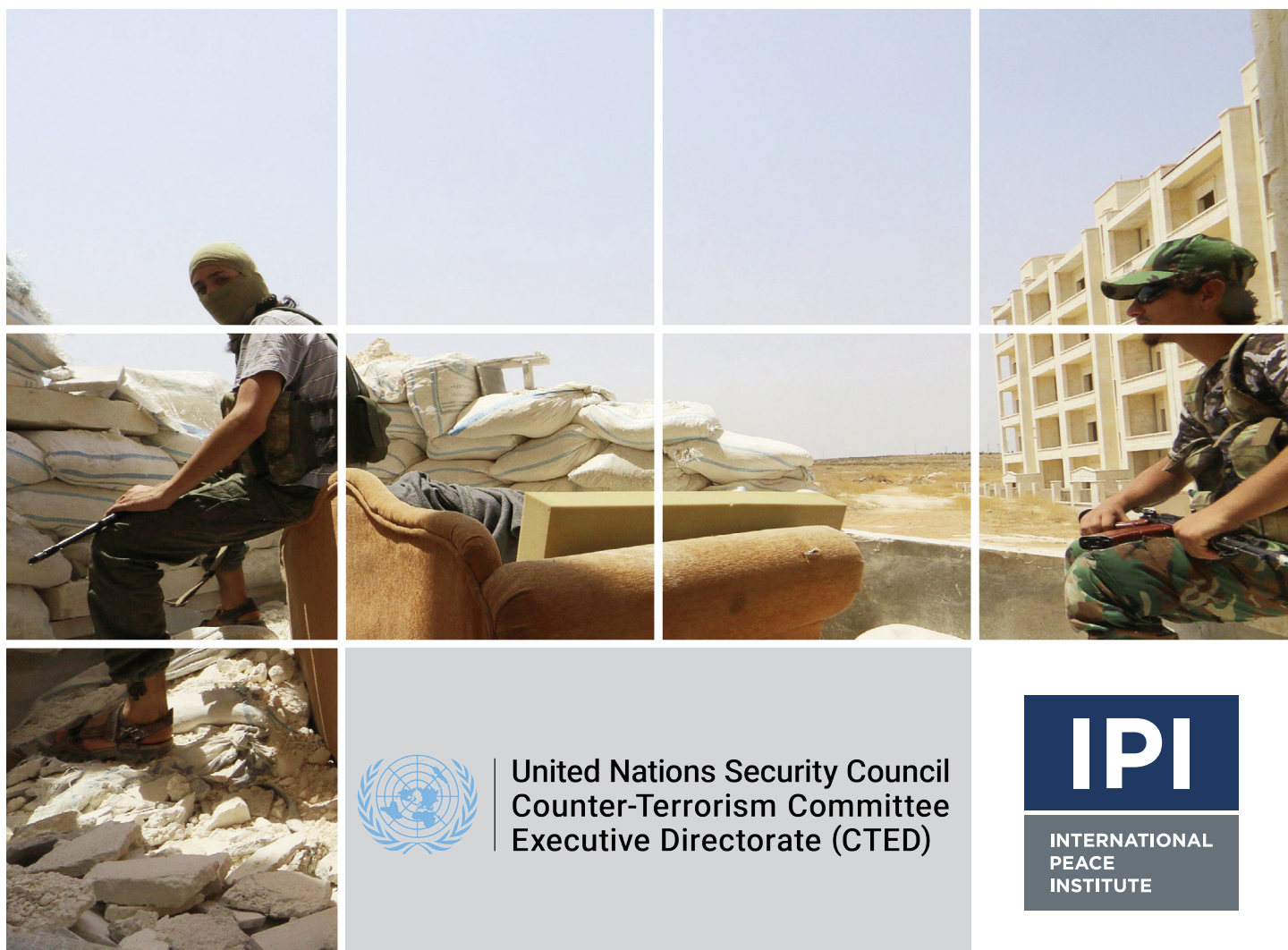


Masculinities and Violent Extremism

ALEKSANDRA DIER AND GRETCHEN BALDWIN



United Nations Security Council
Counter-Terrorism Committee
Executive Directorate (CTED)



Cover Photo: Al-Nusra Front fighters rest with their weapons behind sandbags in the Sheikh Maksoud neighborhood of Aleppo, Syria on August 3, 2015. Reuters/Abdalrhman Ismail.

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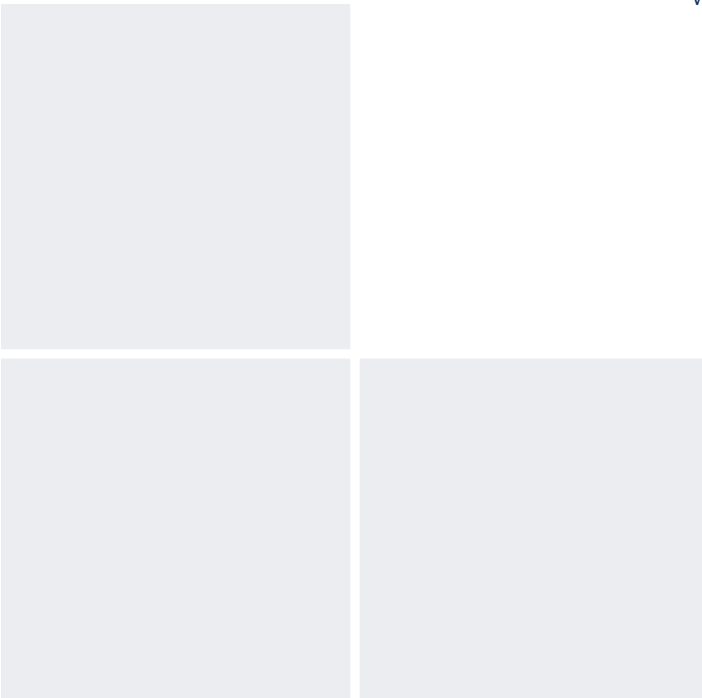
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ABBREVIATIONS

CTED	UN Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate
CVE	Countering violent extremism
ISIL	Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer

Executive Summary

Violent extremist and terrorist groups across the ideological spectrum exploit masculinities in their efforts to recruit and retain members. For example, many so-called “Islamist” violent extremists use a sense of victimization by the state, expectations around masculine roles, pushback against changing gender roles, and idealization of warrior masculinities to drive recruitment, retention, and broader strategic decisions. This may involve constructing masculinities based on violence and the subjugation of women or the protection of the Islamic community from outside “villains.”

Masculinities are also often exploited by right-wing extremists, though these have only recently attracted the attention of counterterrorism policy-makers. Extreme right-wing discourse has traditionally focused on the gendering of spaces and hierarchical boundaries based on assumptions about masculinity and femininity. Right-wing extremists have also increasingly promoted hypermasculine violence as a way to defend against perceived outside threats, including immigrants and the feminist, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+), and racial justice movements. Some right-wing extremists even position themselves as “enlightened” on women’s rights compared to their view of Islam while simultaneously relegating women to traditional, conservative gender roles. In both right-wing and “Islamist” violent extremism groups, masculinities also take the form of homosocial camaraderie, which plays a role in attracting new members and making it harder for them to leave.

The masculinities exploited by violent extremist groups interact with the masculinities perpetuated and actions taken by state actors, especially counterterrorism institutions, which are themselves shaped by masculine norms. In the context of the war on terror, counterterrorism actors often view Muslim masculinity as violent, misogynistic, and homophobic, in contrast with a benevolent, tolerant, and protective Western masculinity. Such narratives affect their decision making, impacting policy priorities, approaches, and resource allocation. This can lead counterterrorism actors to prioritize highly securitized and militarized policies that further radicalize

communities and undermine human rights. The masculinities produced by state actors can also feed into and mutually reinforce those produced by violent extremists.

However, masculinities are not adequately considered in existing counterterrorism and countering violent extremism (CVE) efforts. Efforts to mainstream gender have been focused mainly on the roles of women and have not critically examined the structural gendered and racialized hierarchies, inequalities, and assumptions within counterterrorism institutions. To integrate masculinities into policy and programming on counterterrorism and CVE, all state, multilateral, and civil society actors engaged in this area should consider the following recommendations:

- **Conduct more policy-oriented research and analysis on the link between masculinities and violent extremism:** More research is especially needed on how to promote positive or peaceful masculinities, the policy implications of analysis on masculinities, and the links between the harmful gender norms perpetrated by extremists and state actors.
- **Integrate a gender perspective—including a focus on masculinities—across all counterterrorism and CVE policy and programming:** A gender perspective should be included at all stages of counterterrorism and CVE policy and programming, from prevention to rehabilitation and reintegration work.
- **Monitor and evaluate the gendered impact of counterterrorism and CVE interventions using a robust human rights framework:** Monitoring and evaluation are particularly required in new policy areas such as regulating misogynistic hate speech online.
- **Address the harmful role masculinities play within counterterrorism and CVE institutions:** National and international counterterrorism bodies should reflect more systematically on how masculinities affect their activities and assumptions and consider introducing measures to transform their institutional culture, including by addressing the existence of militarized masculinities.

Introduction

While only a small percentage of men become involved in violent extremism, the majority of violent extremists are men. Violent extremist and terrorist groups exploit male sentiments of emasculation and loss of power and appeal to ideas of manhood in their recruitment efforts. Across the ideological spectrum, many of these groups glorify masculine images of violence and the subjugation of women. These are only some of the ways in which masculinities—the socially constructed ideas of what it means to be a man—are relevant to understanding the phenomenon of violent extremism.

Yet policymakers rarely focus on gender to help them understand why some men engage in violence and others do not or what role peaceful notions of masculinity play in preventing radicalization and terrorism. Similarly, male-dominated counterterrorism institutions rarely pose the question of how masculinities shape these institutions and their approaches to counterterrorism and countering violent extremism (CVE). While there are efforts to increase the participation of women in these institutions—from law enforcement to the judiciary to grassroots organizations working on CVE—these efforts are rarely tied to a larger, more transformative effort to achieve qualitatively different, gender-responsive policy outcomes.

A growing body of academic research has explored issues of masculinity in the context of violent extremism, but the policy implications of this research remain underdeveloped. The limited applicability of this research to policy and programming also means that guidance on good practices is not readily available. This policy paper considers the practical implications and benefits of applying a masculinities lens when countering terrorism and violent extremism and advances

recommendations for policymakers. It draws on desk research and a three-day, virtual, closed-door expert workshop co-hosted by IPI and the UN Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) in November 2020.

This policy paper discusses masculinities as they are constructed and used by violent extremist groups, as they exist in and interact with society, and as they interplay with the state. It draws on examples pertaining to both “Islamist” and extreme right-wing terrorism.¹ It considers differences not just between but also within these ideologies, arguing that analysis must be nuanced and context-specific to prescribe meaningful policy.

The report argues that while current efforts to “mainstream gender” in counterterrorism and CVE do not focus on masculinities, a masculinities-focused approach must avoid repeating the shortcomings of existing counterterrorism and CVE approaches aimed at women; be grounded in a robust human rights framework to avoid perpetuating gendered harms; be based on an understanding of the links between extremist violence and gender inequality at the societal level, including harmful gender norms and practices perpetuated by the state; and recognize and address the harmful role masculinities play within counterterrorism and CVE institutions themselves.

Concepts and Definitions

Efforts to include gender perspectives in counterterrorism and CVE policy and programming often treat “gender” as synonymous with “women.” Gender, however, is relational and encompasses social, cultural, and economic power dynamics between and among people of all genders.² Considering masculinities is therefore an essential part of gender mainstreaming.

¹ The UN does not use the term “Islamist” to refer to groups like the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), al-Qaida, and Boko Haram, all of which could be categorized as “Islamist” or “jihadist” groups. Instead, it refers to them as “UN-listed groups.” The UN also does not use the term “extreme right-wing terrorism,” instead referring to it as “terrorism on the basis of xenophobia, racism and other forms of intolerance, or in the name of religion or belief.” While some researchers have highlighted parallels between these two types of violent extremism, the present report is not intended as a comparative analysis; rather, it aims to illustrate the relevance of various forms and facets of masculinities across the ideological spectrum of violent extremism. The focus on these two “types” of violent extremism also in no way implies that there are no other forms of violent extremism, and inquiry into the gender dimensions of these phenomena would be an interesting avenue for further research.

² The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) defines “gender” as follows: “The term ‘gender’ refers to socially constructed identities, attributes and roles for women and men and society’s social and cultural meaning for these biological differences resulting in hierarchical relationships between women and men and in the distribution of power and rights favouring men and disadvantaging women. This social positioning of women and men is affected by political, economic, cultural, social, religious, ideological and environmental factors and can be changed by culture, society and community.” CEDAW, “General Recommendation No. 28 on the Core Obligations of State Parties under Article 2 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women,” 2010, para. 5. This paper uses an adapted definition to incorporate a non-binary definition of gender.

Masculinities can be defined as the norms, practices, social expectations, and power dynamics associated with being a man, though people of any gender can perform masculinities. They are relational, contextual, performed, and varying over time. It is important to acknowledge the multitude of different, overlapping, and sometimes competing notions of masculinity:

- Masculinities operate at multiple levels (individual, social, institutional, etc.). Therefore, it is important to consider masculinities not only at the individual level but also within violent extremist groups and in societies and states.
- Masculinities do not only differ between countries; they can also be articulated differently within each country in relation to other masculinities, femininities, and non-binary articulations of gender.³
- Masculinities often serve to enforce hierarchies and strengthen men's dominance, power, and privilege over other men, as well as over women.⁴
- Masculinities are defined in relation to femininity and women as "the other."
- Homophobia, transphobia, and other discriminatory attitudes against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) people, as well as rigid conceptualizations of "proper" gender roles and male supremacy, are often important components of violent masculinities.
- "Militarized masculinities" connect violence, war, and gender at both the state and non-state levels. They link military service and an idealized warrior image to indicators of "manliness" and can legitimize military power and force.⁵

Masculinities can be defined as the norms, practices, social expectations, and power dynamics associated with being a man, though people of any gender can perform masculinities.

extremist groups use gender dynamics and notions of masculinity. This research highlights the importance of analyzing local contexts and group-specific dynamics not only to gain a fuller appreciation of these issues but also to develop more tailored policy and programming responses.

In many cases, violence is systematically encouraged and reinforced as part of gender-specific processes for socializing men and boys.⁶ However, violence is not an inevitable or inherent feature of masculinities. It is therefore imperative to explore the circumstances under which certain ideas and practices of masculinity lead to violent outcomes.

Research also draws attention to the need to understand violent extremism as part of a continuum of violence and to relate masculinities propagated by violent extremist groups to mainstream gender norms in society.⁷ As workshop participants highlighted, focusing on masculinities in particular violent extremist groups—rather than looking at competing and complementary forms of masculinity across societies—can obscure the root causes of terrorist violence. For example, violent extremist movements often serve as an avenue for politically, socially, and economically disenfranchised individuals to seek power. The circumstances that constitute disenfranchisement or marginalization are deeply gendered. The tendency to pathologize certain men without considering the structural and societal circumstances that lead to their sense of exclusion plays into the hands of violent extremist groups. As David Duriesmith has argued, by "considering the relational construction of violent extremist masculinities to mainstream masculine norms, programming can more effectively develop messaging that neither essentializes nor exception-alizes violent extremist masculinities."⁸

A growing body of research has drawn attention to the distinct ways in which different violent

3 Henri Myrntinen, Lana Khattab, and Jana Naujoks, "Re-thinking Hegemonic Masculinities in Conflict-Affected Contexts," *Critical Military Studies* 3, no. 2 (2017).

4 Robert W. Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987).

5 Nicole Wegner, "Helpful Heroes and the Political Utility of Militarized Masculinities," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 23, no. 1 (2021).

6 Abby Fried, Giovanna Lauro, and Gary Barker, "Masculinities and Preventing Violent Extremism: Making the Connections," Promundo-US, 2020.

7 See: Kate Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); and Greta Jasser, Megan Kelly, and Ann-Kathrin Rothermel, "Male Supremacism and the Hanau Terrorist Attack: Between Online Misogyny and Far-Right Violence," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, May 20, 2020.

8 David Duriesmith, "Adaptation of Militarized Masculinity and Violent Extremism in the Southern Philippines," in "Conflicting Identities: The Nexus between Masculinities, Femininities and Violent Extremism in Asia," UN Development Programme and UN Women, 2020.

Approaching violent extremism this way requires giving attention to the structural factors underlying recruitment, mobilization, and retention. Research has highlighted how poor socioeconomic conditions can make it difficult for men to fulfill societal norms and expectations around manhood (i.e., to become providers for their family). This is a potent factor contributing to individuals' vulnerability to violent extremism, particularly in the absence of achievable alternative aspirations.⁹ These aspirations can also be blocked by older men in gerontocratic and patrimonial structures, exacerbating the dearth of economic opportunities. Beyond socioeconomic conditions, conflict and insecurity can put pressure on young men to be “real men” by physically protecting the family, especially in the context of state repression and human rights abuses perpetrated by security institutions. Such abuses, as well as other forms of discrimination, racism, and social marginalization, are among the most powerful drivers of violent extremism.¹⁰

These examples of what drives some men to violent extremist groups illustrate the importance of recognizing how intersecting statuses and identities relate to disenfranchisement, power, and vulnerability. While male identity confers a baseline level of power in most of the world, men can also be disempowered and marginalized on the basis of other identities such as ethnicity, sexuality, age, race, or socioeconomic status.

Violent extremist groups often exploit this marginalization to create a powerful narrative of male victimhood to fuel their recruitment efforts. However, the widespread normalization of misogyny, male privilege, and male entitlement also plays a vital role in recruitment. As discussed in more detail below, men's perceptions of being innately superior and entitled to territory, family, and social power—especially power over women—are a key source of, and justification for, the gendered violence perpetrated by violent extremist groups. Men's perception that they are losing this power and

privilege to women, and especially feminists, has been referred to as the “crisis of masculinity.”¹¹ To address this phenomenon—and, ultimately, to understand and deconstruct violent extremism—it is essential to problematize the patriarchy and its deeply harmful effects on people of all genders.¹²

Masculinities within “Islamist” Violent Extremism

International counterterrorism efforts since the terrorist attacks of 9/11 have focused predominantly on “Islamist terrorists,” also referred to as “jihadists” or, in the UN context, as UN-listed terrorist groups, which include al-Qaida, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and their various affiliates.¹³ Masculinities have been an important part of the narratives used by these groups and by state counterterrorism actors.

Use of Gender in “Islamist” Narratives and Recruitment Efforts

Researchers have explored the use of masculinities by violent extremist groups for propaganda and recruitment purposes.¹⁴ These groups often use hypermasculine imagery that portrays virulent warriors and promises sexual gratification, marriage, and income—all attributes that bestow social status. Such imagery is effective for recruiting men who may see no other avenue for achieving these things because of factors such as racial or ethnic discrimination that can lead to a loss of power and economic disenfranchisement. Rage at this sense of helplessness can cause men to lash out violently against their families or join violent extremist groups to reassert themselves in the hierarchy to which they are accustomed.¹⁵ Likewise, violence or discrimination perpetrated by state or non-state actors or foreign occupation and persecution can mobilize people to join or support

9 Fried, Lauro, and Barker, “Masculinities and Preventing Violent Extremism.”

10 UN Development Programme, “Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment,” 2017.

11 Francis Dupuis-Déri, “The Bogus ‘Crisis’ of Masculinity,” *The Conversation*, May 14, 2018.

12 Elizabeth Pearson, “Extremism and Toxic Masculinity: The Man Question Re-posed,” *International Affairs* 95, no. 6 (November 2019).

13 See Footnote 1.

14 Irene Ndung'u and Mothepa Shadung, “Can a Gendered Approach Improve Responses to Violent Extremism?” Institute for Security Studies (ISS), September 2017; Fried, Lauro, and Barker, “Masculinities and Preventing Violent Extremism.”

15 International Peace Institute—UN Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) virtual series on counterterrorism and masculinities, November 16–18, 2020.

violent extremist groups that may offer solidarity, solace, or vengeance.¹⁶

Many of these tactics can be seen in the recruitment efforts of ISIL. ISIL appealed to male recruits in part by glorifying violence against certain women and offering sex slaves as “spoils of war” under strict rules set by the group’s leadership.¹⁷ In this way, the group tapped into male feelings of resentment and emasculation by constructing an idea of hyper-masculinity based on violence and the subjugation of women.¹⁸ ISIL also frequently used women and children in its propaganda to shame male audiences for not stepping up to protect them and fight for the so-called caliphate.¹⁹ In addition, by returning to a strict hierarchy of gender norms and a god-fearing, patriarchal way of life, the group offered to protect its followers from the sinful decadence of late modernity. The popularity of this turn toward tradition is evidenced by the number of foreign fighters and non-combatants who joined the group.²⁰

“Islamist” violent extremist groups often use hypermasculine imagery that portrays virulent warriors and promises sexual gratification, marriage, and income.

A key theme of the gendered narratives used by ISIL and other violent extremist groups is the relationship between the Global North and South. The “war on terror” and orientalism can trigger the creation of certain images of masculinity, such as an army of warriors responding to existential threats to social and religious norms.²¹ For example, one analysis of Osama bin Laden’s public statements in English between 1994 and 2004 identified a gendered hierarchal narrative constructed around ideas of villains (Americans and Jews), victims (the *ummah*, or Islamic

community), and heroes (the jihadists). Bin Laden used this narrative to call on young Muslim men to fulfill their masculine duty to protect the *ummah*.²² Others have described “a war of masculinities,” whereby the West and “Islamist” violent extremist groups use competing ideas and manifestations of masculinities to prove themselves superior to the other. For example, ISIL used film and other media to communicate visceral, humiliating acts of violence against Western men such as beheadings “to project an image of their organization and their cause as superior to their Western enemies.”²³

“Islamist” violent extremist groups may also use narratives that respond to more local dynamics of masculinity. In the southern Philippines, for example, violent extremists replicate, invert, or exaggerate mainstream militarized masculinities embedded in the state, showing the interconnectedness of state and non-state concepts and exhibitions of masculinities.²⁴ While the details vary by context, violent extremist groups and state institutions worldwide constantly reiterate each other’s gender norms.

Likewise, al-Shabaab draws not only on global gendered narratives of brotherhood, a return to morality, and the need to reclaim lost Islamic honor but also, more importantly, local gender dynamics related to Somalia’s clan system. Under this system, manhood is associated with becoming an elder, and younger men can become elders through respectable personal conduct and socially valued achievements such as marriage, children, and employment. In a context of widespread unemploy-

16 See, for example: Maleeha Aslam, *Gender-Based Explosions: The Nexus between Muslim Masculinities, Jihadist Islamism and Terrorism* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2012); and Anand Gopal, *No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban, and the War through Afghan Eyes* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2014).

17 See: Mara Redlich Revkin and Elisabeth Jean Wood, “The Islamic State’s Pattern of Sexual Violence: Ideology and Institutions, Policies and Practices,” *Journal of Global Security Studies* 6, no. 2 (June 2021).

18 CTED, “Gender Dimensions of the Response to Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Research Perspectives,” February 2019.

19 Alejandro Beutel and Krystina Perez, “From WWI to ISIS, Using Shame and Masculinity in Recruitment Narratives,” National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), June 2016.

20 The authors thank Henri Myrntinen for nuancing this point during the review process.

21 Academic expert on violent extremism at IPI-CTED virtual workshop on counterterrorism and masculinities, November 16–18, 2020.

22 James W. Messerschmidt and Achim Rohde, “Osama bin Laden and His Jihadist Global Hegemonic Masculinity,” *Gender & Society* 32, no. 5 (October 2018).

23 Christiana Spens, “Shock and Awe: Performativity, Machismo and ISIS,” *E-International Relations*, November 2, 2014.

24 “Replication” occurs when a group “adopts narratives or norms of mainstream militarized masculinity without substantial alteration.” “Inversion” occurs when a group “defines some aspect of its masculinity in direct opposition to mainstream militarized masculinity while replicating its overall form.” “Exaggeration” occurs when a group adopts a mainstream narrative or norm but takes it “substantially further in its brutality or intensity.” Durie Smith, “Adaptation of Militarized Masculinity and Violent Extremism in the Southern Philippines.”

ment and insecurity, joining al-Shabaab can offer better prospects of economic livelihood and power, providing an alternative pathway to manhood.²⁵

Masculinities play a critical role not only in attracting men to violent extremist groups but also in keeping them in these groups.²⁶ Initiation or bonding rituals may provide a sense of belonging or pride that encourages men to join, remain in, or escalate violent behaviors within extremist groups. For many, the sense of identity and belonging or of being valued as a senior member, teacher, mentor, or mentee makes it difficult to break away. In Indonesia, for example, male friendship plays an important role in the recruitment of violent extremists.²⁷

While the details differ across contexts, these examples reveal broad patterns in how “Islamist” violent extremist groups exploit masculinities. They typically use a sense of victimization by the state, expectations around masculine roles, pushback against changing gender roles, and idealization of warrior masculinities to drive recruitment, retention, and broader strategic decisions. Narratives around masculinity can also serve as an “important point of commonality” to “bridge” between different extremist groups.²⁸

Narratives about “Islamist” and Muslim Masculinities Constructed by Counterterrorism Actors and States

The masculinities exploited by “Islamist” violent extremist groups interact with the narratives perpetuated and actions taken by state actors,

especially counterterrorism institutions. Counterterrorism actors often view Muslim masculinity as violent, misogynistic, and homophobic, in contrast with a purportedly benevolent, tolerant, and protective Western masculinity—a characterization that is as racialized and anti-Muslim as it is gendered.²⁹ These stereotypes have a far-reaching and discriminatory impact on policies and public discourse. For example, the perception of an omnipresent male “terrorist” threat and the “everyday” risk of terrorist violence (“if you see something, say something”) has given rise to the surveillance state, excessive media coverage, and the widespread normalization of Islamophobia. In the worst cases, it has led state counterterrorism actors to commit human rights abuses against civilian populations, including extrajudicial killings and ethnic cleansing.³⁰

Gendered stereotypes of Muslims are particularly damaging for young people. Young men and boys are often seen as the demographic group most at risk of violent extremism, while girls are often stereotyped as victims. Both categorizations reinforce young people’s feelings of alienation and marginalization.³¹ These stereotypes have shaped states’ responses to their own child nationals being detained in camps in northeastern Syria. The UN special rapporteur on counterterrorism and human rights noted that certain male children are “being considered inherently unworthy of the status of civilian, child or victim, and presumed by virtue of gender (male), religious affiliation (Muslim) and geography (Syria) to be ‘non-child’ for the purposes of international law protection.”³² Others have pointed to the dangers of counterterrorism policies—particularly related to drone strikes in South Asia—that label all

25 Judith Gardner and Judy El-Bushra, “Somalia: A State of Male Power, Insecurity and Inequality: Findings from the Inception Study on the Impact of War on Somali Men,” Rift Valley Institute, 2017, p. 2.

26 IPI-CTED virtual workshop on counterterrorism and masculinities.

27 UN Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee, “Security Council Holds Arria-Formula Meeting on ‘Preventing Terrorism and Violent Extremism through Tackling Gender Stereotypes, Masculinities, and Structural Gender Inequality,’” July 28, 2021.

28 David Meiering, Aziz Dziri, and Naika Foroutan, “Connecting Structures: Resistance, Heroic Masculinity and Anti-Feminism as Bridging Narratives within Group Radicalization,” *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 14, no. 2 (2020).

29 See, for example: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds. (London: Macmillan, 1988); Zinnab Attai and Sabrina Karim, “When Militarism Meets Gender Reform: Fixing the Contradictory Legacy of the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda in Afghanistan,” *IPI Global Observatory*, October 27, 2021; Kim Berry, “The Symbolic Use of Afghan Women in the War on Terror,” *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 27, no. 2 (2003); Maya Mikdashi, “Can Palestinian Men Be Victims? Gendering Israel’s War on Gaza,” *Jadaliyya*, July 23, 2014; and Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, “Gendering the Boy Child in the Context of Counterterrorism: The Situation of Boys in Northeast Syria,” *Just Security*, June 8, 2021.

30 Amarnath Amarasingam, “IntelBrief: Human Rights Abuses and the War on Terror in South Asia,” Soufan Center, August 13, 2021; Ann-Kathrin Rothermel, “Gender at the Crossroads: The Role of Gender in the UN’s Global Counterterrorism Reform at the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* (2021).

31 UN General Assembly and Security Council, *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth and Peace and Security*, UN Doc. A/72/761-S/2018/86, March 2, 2018.

32 Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, “Position of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms while Countering Terrorism on the Human Rights of Adolescents/Juveniles Being Detained in North-East Syria,” Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, May 2021.

men and boys of a certain age as combatants based on the belief that “people in an area of known terrorist activity, or found with a top [al-Qaida] operative, are probably up to no good.”³³

These stereotypes that all Muslim men or boys share a homogenous, dangerous masculinity can perpetuate their exclusion and marginalization, including through discriminatory practices that violate the rights of individuals and stigmatize entire communities. Such practices are ultimately counterproductive, leading to new cycles of radicalization and violent extremism. They also reinforce the political legitimacy of Western violent masculinities, which are often deemed necessary to protect society from “Muslim” masculinities.³⁴

Masculinities within the Extreme Right

While “Islamist” terrorism has dominated international counterterrorism efforts since the 9/11 attacks, the international community has more recently started to pay greater attention to the rising threat of extreme right-wing terrorism. As noted in a CTED report,

Experts have identified extreme right-wing terrorism—also referred to as ‘far-right’ or racially and ethnically motivated terrorism—as a unique form of political violence with often fluid boundaries between hate crime and organized terrorism. It is not a coherent or easily defined movement, but rather a shifting, complex and overlapping milieu of individuals, groups and movements (online and offline) espousing different but related ideologies.³⁵

These ideologies are often linked by racism and hatred toward minorities, xenophobia, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, white supremacy, and different types of misogyny.³⁶

Right-wing extremist groups are typically not treated the same by Western states as “Islamist” extremist groups. Many have pointed out that this difference is linked to the differing racial and religious dynamics between the two forms of extremism.³⁷ Counterterrorism actors have sometimes been slow to label right-wing violent extremist groups a threat, and acts of far-right violence have previously tended to be thought of as “isolated incidents” or “lone-wolf attacks.” More recently however, there has been growing recognition of the transnational nature of this phenomenon and the need to address it at the international level.

Gender has always influenced the rhetoric of right-wing extremists. As noted in a recent CTED report, “Extreme right-wing discourse has traditionally focused on the gendering of spaces and hierarchical boundaries based on assumptions about masculinity and femininity. These assumptions are reflected in narratives that emphasize ‘the survival of the nation.’”³⁸ These pro-natalist narratives focus on the subjugation of women, including through forced marriage, and on women’s roles as mothers and housewives and men’s roles as protectors.³⁹

The 2008 economic recession is often seen as an inflection point for contemporary white male anger and resentment. According to Alan Greig, “Deindustrialization (in the global North) and the growing feminization of waged labor (especially in the global South) have undermined some traditional bases of male gender identity.”⁴⁰ Far-right discourse links this

33 Jo Becker and Scott Shane, “Secret ‘Kill List’ Proves a Test of Obama’s Principles and Will,” *New York Times*, May 29, 2012.

34 The authors thank David Durie-Smith for nuancing this point during the review process. See also: Julia Welland, “Liberal Warriors and the Violent Colonial Logics of ‘Partnering and Advising,’” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 17, no. 2 (2015).

35 CTED, “Member States Concerned by the Growing and Increasingly Transnational Threat of Extreme Right-Wing Terrorism,” April 2020.

36 Michael S. Kimmel and Abby L. Ferber, “‘White Men Are This Nation’: Right-Wing Militias and the Restoration of Rural American Masculinity,” *Rural Sociology* 65, no. 4 (2009). Misogyny, like masculinity, is not monolithic, though it is a hallmark of many of these groups. Misogyny takes many forms, including hatred of all women (e.g., “incels”); the desire to protect “our” women from “them” (e.g., vigilante groups like the Soldiers of Odin, which somewhat reflect ISIL messages of protecting women of the *ummah*); or hatred of particular women, women’s rights activism and feminism, or gender equality (like ISIL, this may include ideas of returning to a patriarchal “golden age”). These forms may overlap, but they are fundamentally different and require different counterarguments and responses. The authors thank Henri Myrntinen for nuancing this point during the review process.

37 See, for example: Kris Millett and Amy Swiffen, “Right-Wing Extremism as Terrorism and the Law’s Relation to Violence,” *Surveillance and Society* 19, no. 3 (2021); Anna Meier, “Identity, Law, and How Political Elites Define Terrorism,” *Political Violence at a Glance*, October 18, 2019; Tina G. Patel, “It’s Not About Security, It’s About Racism: Counter-Terror Strategies, Civilizing Processes, and the Post-Race Fiction,” *Palgrave Communications* 3 (2017).

38 CTED, “Member States Concerned by the Growing and Increasingly Transnational Threat of Extreme Right-Wing Terrorism.”

39 Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).

40 “Feminization of waged labor” refers to women joining the broader workforce and diversifying industries that have traditionally been male-dominated. Alan Greig, “Masculinities and the Rise of the Far-Right: Implications for Oxfam’s Work on Gender Justice,” Oxfam, October 2019.

perceived wounding of masculinity to anti-immigrant conspiracy theories such as the “Great Replacement,” which postulates that white men are losing power in an ever-changing, multicultural landscape. This wounding of masculinity is also linked to the perceived threat that feminist, LGBTQ+, and racial justice movements pose to what extremist groups consider the “natural” gender and racial order.⁴¹

In reaction to these perceived threats, right-wing violent extremists promote hypermasculine violence as an acceptable “defensive” strategy. This allows them to construct a narrative that they are “protecting” white women, the family, and the nation from the dangerous masculinity of the racialized “other”—a narrative echoed in Islamist discourse.⁴² Right-wing extremist groups often use this “protector” narrative to target propaganda and recruitment strategies at certain men, responding to their fears of powerlessness and replacement. This extremist rhetoric is frequently accompanied by violence, including incitement of rape, against certain women, such as feminists or women who espouse non-conservative political views.⁴³

These notions of masculinity are often disseminated through media, the Internet, and family and other social networks, which can create an enabling environment for the growth of far-right violent extremism.⁴⁴ A growing body of scholarship has investigated the links between violent extremist movements—particularly (though not exclusively)

Many right-wing extremists construct a narrative that they are “protecting” white women, the family, and the nation from the dangerous masculinity of the racialized “other.”

right-wing violent extremists—and the so-called “manosphere,” an online ecology of websites, memes, and message boards focused on male insecurities and resentment whose content is deeply misogynistic.⁴⁵ Members of such platforms have been responsible for several gender-based, anti-Muslim, and anti-Semitic mass killings.⁴⁶ Though there is no robust evidence that the manosphere is a gateway to other extremist right-wing online spaces, there is significant overlap in users.⁴⁷

While the majority of right-wing violent extremists are men, right-wing masculinities are not performed exclusively by men. For example, Anne Marie Waters, who has been active in anti-Islam far-right groups in the UK, reproduces these groups’ hypermasculine ideals despite being a gay woman. Under her leadership, several right-wing groups have connected gender with

Islamophobia and white supremacy by positioning themselves as “enlightened” on women’s (and sometimes LGBTQ+) rights compared to Muslims while simultaneously relegating women to traditional, conservative gender roles and reinforcing misogynistic notions of their lesser intelligence.⁴⁸ Likewise, there are numerous examples of white women across the United States advancing these notions of gender and traditional masculinity in the service of right-wing political movements.⁴⁹

Far-right groups also often claim a traditional, heteronormative, working-class identity that is purportedly fundamental to white culture in a

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 CTED, “Member States Concerned by the Growing and Increasingly Transnational Threat of Extreme Right-Wing Terrorism.”

44 Ov Cristian Norocel, Tuija Saresma, Tuuli Lähdesmäki, and Maria Ruotsalainen, “Discursive Constructions of White Nordic Masculinities in Right-Wing Populist Media,” *Men and Masculinities* 23, nos. 3–4 (2018); Ashley Mattheis, “Manifesto Memes: The Radical Right’s New Dangerous Visual Rhetorics,” openDemocracy Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right, September 16, 2019.

45 Emily K. Carian, Alex DiBranco, and Chelsea Ebin, eds., *Male Supremacism in the United States: From Patriarchal Traditionalism to Misogynist Incels and the Alt-Right* (New York: Routledge, 2022).

46 Gender-based mass killings linked to the “incel” subculture have included the 2014 killings in Isla Vista, California; the 2015 Umpqua Community College shooting; and the 2018 Toronto van attack. Perpetrators of the 2019 Christchurch mosque shootings and the 2020 Hanau synagogue shooting had also frequented manosphere platforms. Jasser, Kelly, and Rothermel, “Male Supremacism and the Hanau Terrorist Attack.”

47 Debbie Ging, “Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere,” *Men and Masculinities* 22, no. 4 (October 2019); Rachel M. Schmitz and Emily Kazyak, “Masculinities in Cyberspace: An Analysis of Portrayals of Manhood in Men’s Rights Activist Websites,” *Social Sciences* 5, no. 2 (2016); Alex DiBranco, “Mobilizing Misogyny,” Political Research Associates, March 8, 2017; Robin Mamié, Manoel Horta Ribeiro, and Robert West, “Are Anti-Feminist Communities Gateways to the Far Right? Evidence from Reddit and YouTube,” *arXiv* 2 (May 2021).

48 See: Elizabeth Pearson, “Gendered Reflections? Extremism in the UK’s Radical Right and al-Muhajiroun Networks,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2020); Eviane Leidig, “From Love Jihad to Grooming Gangs: Tracing Flows of the Hypersexual Muslim Male through Far-Right Female Influencers,” *Religions* 12 (2021); and Sara R. Farris, *In the Name of Women’s Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

49 See, for example: Belew, *Bring the War Home*; and Elizabeth Gillespie Macrae, *Mothers of Massive Resistance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

given country. For example, the English Defence League in the UK sees football hooliganism, drinking, and masculine fighting as quintessential parts of white, British culture. In the US, right-wing and white-supremacist groups frequently associate white working-class identity with traditional gender roles, as well as with military and law enforcement experience and—paradoxically—extreme distrust of government institutions.

As in “Islamist” violent extremist groups, homosocial camaraderie, solidarity, and belonging both attract many men to right-wing violent extremist groups and make it harder for them to leave. As Kathleen Blee points out, masculinities manifest themselves not only in the form of aggression, anger, or domination but also in “male expressions of close bonding with other men, fear, performative displays, and submission.”⁵⁰ This means that deep, long-lasting engagement with communities and individuals should be an essential part of the disengagement, rehabilitation, and reintegration process for members of these groups and needs to be considered by policymakers and practitioners.

Militarized Masculinities in National and International Counterterrorism Institutions

Counterterrorism actors and institutions—particularly those that take a militarized approach—are themselves shaped by masculine norms. Global security institutions like militaries, international defense alliances, and private security firms are mostly male and thus, like many violent extremist groups, built on masculine principles and traditional male-dominated power structures.⁵¹ As Fionnuala Ní Aoláin has noted,

Counter-terrorism institutions and policy-makers not only suffer from an acute “diversity crisis” along gender and race lines, especially at the highest levels of decision-making, but also function within institutionalized cultures of discrimination, misogyny and gender bias that perpetuate gender inequality and cultures of impunity, while rewarding a very particular set of traditionally “masculine” traits and behaviours, including technocratic knowledge, justification of the use of force, decisiveness over moral considerations and masculinist protection narratives.⁵²

These highly militarized institutions also exhibit hypocrisy in the manifestation of their masculine norms: despite a focus on nobility and protection, they are rife with sexual violence.⁵³

The masculine norms embedded in security institutions affect their decision making about counterterrorism, impacting policy priorities, approaches, and resource allocation. Counterterrorism is frequently characterized as militarized, “hard,” active, or masculine compared to the “fluffy,” “soft,” passive, or feminine characterization of preventive, nonviolent work.⁵⁴ Male-dominated state security institutions thus tend to favor militarized, offensive approaches and to set their budgetary allocations and policy priorities accordingly. This means that shifting away from hypermasculine, militarized approaches to counterterrorism toward a human security-centered approach will be an uphill battle.

These masculinities produced by state actors can feed into and mutually reinforce those produced by violent extremists. In the context of the war on terror, terrorist narratives and foreign policy discourse have both amplified a hero-villain binary to mobilize violence, essentially mirroring each other.⁵⁵ Likewise, violent extremist groups are

50 Kathleen Blee, “Similarities/Differences in Gender and Far-Right Politics in Europe and the USA,” in *Gender and Far Right Politics in Europe*, Michaela Köttig, Renate Bitzan, and Andrea Petö, eds. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 201.

51 Academic participant in IPI-CTED virtual workshop on counterterrorism and masculinities.

52 UN Human Rights Council, *Human Rights Impact of Counter-terrorism and Countering (Violent) Extremism Policies and Practices on the Rights of Women, Girls and the Family: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms while Countering Terrorism*, Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, UN Doc. A/HRC/46/36, January 22, 2021, para. 6.

53 Melinda Wenner Moyer, “‘A Poison in the System’: The Epidemic of Military Sexual Assault,” *New York Times*, October 11, 2021; Quratulain Fatima, “Across the World, Militaries Have a Sexual Violence Problem,” *Al Jazeera*, May 4, 2018; Luke Ryan, “A Look at Sexual Assault in Militaries Around the World,” *Special Operations Forces Report*, May 24, 2018; “Serious Misconduct, Sexual Abuse Alleged against UN Peacekeepers in Mali,” *UN News*, September 23, 2013.

54 IPI-CTED virtual workshop on counterterrorism and masculinities; Ann-Kathrin Rothermel, “Gender in the United Nations’ Agenda on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 22, no. 5 (2020).

55 Messerschmidt and Rohde, “Osama bin Laden and His Jihadist Global Hegemonic Masculinity.”

sensitive to states' hypocritical condemnation of extremist violence while themselves employing "legitimate" violence that often has a high civilian toll.

Highly securitized and militarized counterterrorism policies can have a radicalizing effect on communities that may not have previously been susceptible to recruitment and mobilization by violent extremists. These include policies that consider all military-age men within a drone strike zone as combatants, as well as discriminatory policing and profiling practices in migrant communities and prison overcrowding.⁵⁶ Such violent and discriminatory state policies can alienate young men, antagonize local populations, and shore up support for and recruitment to terrorist groups.⁵⁷

Counterterrorism policies can also have a detrimental effect on civil society and human rights defenders. Without an agreed definition of terrorism or violent extremism, many states have increasingly used the "terrorist" label to target political dissenters, including journalists and other civil society actors. This is often accompanied by the suppression of free speech and other civil liberties and the centralization of power in militaries or paramilitary forces.⁵⁸ Such state

actions are not only a tipping point for radicalization but can also undermine the work of grassroots civil society organizations in preventing violent extremism and fostering social cohesion at the local level.⁵⁹

Another manifestation of the relationship between violent extremism and the state is the infiltration of state security forces by white supremacist extremists in several Western countries. In Germany, a recent investigation found widespread right-wing infiltration of police and military forces.⁶⁰ Experts

The masculine norms embedded in security institutions affect their decision making about counterterrorism, impacting policy priorities, approaches, and resource allocation.

estimate that in the US, veterans "may now make up at least 25 percent of militia rosters."⁶¹ Indeed, non-state right-wing violent extremist groups have often been found to have "active links" to state security institutions, which can mean that right-wing

terrorism is not sufficiently investigated or addressed because of intergroup connections or sympathies.⁶² These examples point to the need to more closely analyze service in security institutions as a possible factor in extreme right-wing radicalization. More generally, a growing number of practitioners and researchers have pushed for counterterrorism institutions to turn their gendered analysis inward to examine the relationship between the production of masculinities by terrorist groups and security institutions.⁶³

56 Practitioner comments, IPI-CTED virtual workshop on counterterrorism and masculinities; Anouar Boukhars, "The Geographic Trajectory of Conflict and Militancy in Tunisia," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 20, 2017; Inga Kristina Trauthig, "Counterterrorism in North Africa: From Police State to Militia Rule and the Quagmire of 'CVE,'" International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, King's College London, 2021.

57 Amanda Sperber, "The 'Collateral Damage' of the U.S.'s Unofficial War in Somalia," *In These Times*, December 16, 2019; Gopal, *No Good Men Among the Living*; Nick Turse, "America's Lethal Profiling of Afghan Men," *The Nation*, September 18, 2013; Rachel Neild et al., "Ethnic Profiling in the European Union: Pervasive, Ineffective, and Discriminatory," Open Society Institute Justice Initiative, 2009.

58 See, for example: Lana Baydas and Shannon N. Green, "Counterterrorism Measures: Pretext for Closing the Space for Civil Society," Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), March 24, 2017; UN Human Rights Council, *Impact of Measures to Address Terrorism and Violent Extremism on Civic Space and the Rights of Civil Society Actors and Human Rights Defenders—Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms while Countering Terrorism*, UN Doc. A/HRC/40/52, March 1, 2019; Anne Charbord and Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, "The Role of Measures to Address Terrorism and Violent Extremism on Closing Civic Space," University of Minnesota Law School, April 2019; Saskia Brechenmacher, "Civil Society Under Assault: Repression and Responses in Russia, Egypt, and Ethiopia," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2017.

59 UN Development Programme, "Journey to Extremism in Africa."

60 Matthias Bartsch et al., "Exploring Right-Wing Extremism in Germany's Police and Military," *Der Spiegel*, August 18, 2020; Florian Flade, "The Insider Threat: Far-Right Extremism in the German Military and Police," *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel* 14, no. 5 (June 2021).

61 Jennifer Steinhauer, "Veterans Fortify the Ranks of Militias Aligned With Trump's Views," *New York Times*, September 11, 2020. See also: Seth G. Jones, Catrina Doxsee, Grace Hwang, and Jared Thompson, "The Military, Police, and the Rise of Terrorism in the United States," CSIS, April 12, 2021; Interview with Kathleen Belew, "Throughline: The Rise of the Modern White Power Movement," produced by Ramtin Arablouei, Rund Abdelfatah, and Sarah McCammon, NPR, December 3, 2020; and Belew, *Bring the War Home*, chapters 2, 6.

62 Michael German, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Racism, White Supremacy, and Far-Right Militancy in Law Enforcement," Brennan Center for Justice, August 27, 2020.

63 See, for example: Hannah Wright, "Masculinities Perspectives: Advancing a Radical Women, Peace and Security Agenda?" *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 22, no. 5 (2020).

Addressing Masculinities in National and International Counterterrorism and CVE Efforts

Despite the multiple ways in which masculinities are relevant to both terrorism and counterterrorism, they are not adequately considered in existing counterterrorism and CVE efforts. Efforts to mainstream gender have been focused mainly on women and their roles in both propagating and countering violent extremism. They have not critically examined the structural gendered and racialized hierarchies, inequalities, and assumptions within counterterrorism institutions.⁶⁴ This shortcoming was recognized by policymakers at a 2021 Security Council Arria-formula meeting on preventing terrorism and violent extremism by tackling gender stereotypes, masculinities, and structural gender inequalities.⁶⁵ This marked the first time the Security Council engaged on the issue of masculinities in the context of violent extremism despite more than five years of mandating “gender mainstreaming” in counterterrorism resolutions.

The Limitations of Gender Mainstreaming in Counterterrorism and CVE

Security Council Resolution 2242, adopted in 2015, was the first resolution to call on member states and the UN system to integrate the women, peace, and security agenda into the counterterrorism and CVE agendas. While this resolution has been instrumental in galvanizing efforts to mainstream gender in relevant policy and programming, the

predominant focus of these efforts has been on increasing the participation of women in CVE.⁶⁶ Less attention has been paid to the gendered impacts both of violent extremism and of counterterrorism and CVE policies, while the gendered drivers of violent extremism have been largely ignored. There has also been little analysis of how gender norms may fuel violent extremism or promote peace.

Despite good intentions, existing efforts to integrate gender into counterterrorism and CVE often rely on harmful gender stereotypes.⁶⁷ For example, they are often rooted in the belief that women are inherently more peaceful than men. Similarly, they are often based on the questionable assumption that women are guided by a maternal instinct and that mothers—especially Muslim mothers—are more present in the home and are thus uniquely positioned to detect signs of radicalization in their children.⁶⁸ CVE programs rarely engage fathers, and interventions and research focused on the specific roles of men in CVE are scarce. More generally, there is little evidence-based research on the gendered impact of CVE policies, which is critical to ensuring that these policies are gender-responsive, human rights-compliant, sustainable, and effective.⁶⁹

Gender mainstreaming in CVE has also often been externally driven and top-down. While many CVE initiatives have focused on the role of women in addressing radicalization at the community level, they have often failed to realize women’s full potential as agents of change. Rather, it has been alleged that the CVE agenda has often been imposed on women’s groups, thus instrumentalizing and securitizing their local-level work on

64 The UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) has defined gender mainstreaming as “the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, 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 programmes... so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality.” UN General Assembly, *Report of the Economic and Social Council for the Year 1997*, UN Doc. A/52/3/Rev. 1, September 18, 1997.

65 UN Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee, “Security Council Holds Arria-Formula Meeting on ‘Preventing Terrorism and Violent Extremism through Tackling Gender Stereotypes, Masculinities, and Structural Gender Inequality.’”

66 Resolution 2242 “urges Member States and the United Nations system to ensure the participation and leadership of women and women’s organizations in developing strategies to counter terrorism and violent extremism... including through countering incitement to commit terrorist acts, creating counter narratives and other appropriate interventions, and building [women’s] capacity to do so effectively.” UN Security Council Resolution 2242 (2015), UN Doc. S/RES/2242, para. 13. Likewise, the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy and former Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism emphasize the importance of including women in efforts to counter and prevent terrorism and violent extremism. UN General Assembly, *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism—Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. A/70/674, December 24, 2015.

67 See, for example: Fionnuala Ni Aoláin and Jayne Huckerby, “Gendering Counterterrorism: How To, and How Not To—Part II,” *Just Security*, May 3, 2018.

68 Emily Winterbotham, “Do Mothers Know Best? How Assumptions Harm CVE,” Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, September 2018.

69 Emily Winterbotham, “What Can Work (and What Has Not Worked) in Women-Centric P/CVE Initiatives: Assessing the Evidence Base for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism,” Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), May 2020.

peacebuilding and gender equality.⁷⁰

Gender mainstreaming has also often been confined to CVE rather than the full counterterrorism spectrum despite the fact that “hard” security measures can have the most severe gendered impacts. For example, measures to counter terrorism financing can adversely affect grassroots-level women’s rights organizations, which are often nascent, relatively small, and financially precarious.⁷¹ Gender bias is also prevalent in the application of counterterrorism measures through the criminal justice system. For example, many countries’ broad interpretation of the criminal offense of “membership in a terrorist organization” has allowed courts to convict women—in some cases instituting severe penalties—simply for being family members of alleged ISIL fighters or for performing basic tasks such as household chores for them.⁷² In many of these cases, whether a woman’s association with ISIL was voluntary or coerced was also not taken into account.

While CVE policy and programming have largely overlooked masculinities, useful lessons could be drawn from efforts to address this issue within work on gender-based violence and peacebuilding.⁷³ For example, peacebuilding programs focused on masculinities have highlighted the importance of understanding how some men are able to develop and sustain nonviolent masculinities in militarized or conflict-prone contexts and to use this knowledge to inform strategies for enabling others to do the same. They have also pointed to the need not only to encourage men to change at the individual level but also to

Despite good intentions, existing efforts to integrate gender into counterterrorism and CVE often rely on harmful gender stereotypes.

address the structures that may penalize them for nonconformity.⁷⁴ Addressing these structural barriers will be a particular challenge for counterterrorism institutions. Changing a harmful, masculine, and militaristic institutional culture is a complex and long-term undertaking that cannot rely on promoting gender parity alone.

Policy Implications for Counterterrorism Institutions

If experts in counterterrorism and CVE policy and programming do not confront the masculinities embedded within their institutions, policies, and programming, then, as one workshop participant bluntly stated, the exercise of analyzing violent masculinities is pointless.⁷⁵ The state is often deeply

involved in shaping the push and pull factors that drive membership in terrorist and violent extremist groups, yet the state is rarely the focus of policy and programming.

Another workshop participant compared this to “only working with the topsoil”—without a holistic approach that includes the state, counterterrorism and CVE interventions are unlikely to be effective.

The importance of the Internet as a space for radicalization and recruitment to violent extremist groups has led to calls for greater surveillance of expressions of violent masculinity and misogyny as precursors to terrorist activity.⁷⁶ Yet devising policies to do so has proven challenging. For example, it has been suggested that technology companies could agree on an industrywide approach to categorizing misogynistic online content and monitoring cross-platform posting of harmful content.⁷⁷ Governments could also agree to legally categorize misogynistic and male suprema-

70 International Crisis Group, “A Course Correction for the Women, Peace and Security Agenda,” December 9, 2020; Phoebe Donnelly, “Improving the Relationship Between WPS and CVE Policies,” *IPI Global Observatory*, October 20, 2020.

71 Duke Law International Human Rights Clinic and Women Peacemakers Program, “Tightening the Purse Strings: What Countering Terrorism Financing Costs Gender Equality and Security,” March 2017.

72 CTED, “CTED Analytical Brief: The Prosecution of ISIL-Associated Women,” January 2021.

73 On gender-based violence, see, for example: Alan Greig, “Self Learning Booklet: Understanding Masculinities and Violence Against Women and Girls,” UN Women Training Centre, 2016; and Irish Joint Consortium on Gender Based Violence, “Learning Brief on Engaging Men and Boys to Address Gender Based Violence,” February 2016. On peacebuilding, see: Hannah Wright, “Masculinities, Conflict and Peacebuilding: Perspectives on Men through a Gender Lens,” *Saferworld*, October 2014.

74 Wright, “Masculinities, Conflict and Peacebuilding.”

75 IPI-CTED virtual workshop on counterterrorism and masculinities.

76 It has also been discussed whether misogyny-driven violence should be considered terrorism. See, for example: Lois Beckett, “The Misogynist Incel Movement Is Spreading. Should It Be Classified as a Terror Threat?” *The Guardian*, March 3, 2021.

77 Eviane Leidig, “Why Terrorism Studies Miss the Mark When It Comes to Incels,” International Center for Counter-Terrorism, August 2021.

cist rhetoric as hate speech, which many countries currently do not. Such a legal change would require government-led national and transnational counterterrorism institutions to look inward at the male supremacy that remains the norm in many of these spaces.⁷⁸

Expansive state surveillance systems also create serious concerns, however. The prevalence of misogynistic views within societies means that treating misogyny as an indicator of potential violent extremism could lead to mass surveillance and censorship. Moreover, the causal relationship between manifestations of misogyny and violent extremism is far from clear.⁷⁹ Harmful masculinities and their manifestations via online harassment and abuse should thus be addressed as a problem in and of themselves, not simply because of their potential link to terrorism. This means that counterterrorism and CVE policy may not be the most appropriate avenue for exploring the linkages between violent masculinities and the political, societal, and cultural contexts in which they emerge. Many interventions should instead take place in the context of wider gender equality work.

It is also important to note that some of the structures that influence or reinforce gender norms are transnational. UN counterterrorism bodies, as well as CVE programs run by international NGOs, can play a role in constructing masculinities and femininities in positive or negative ways. It is therefore vital not to assume that structures that reinforce harmful gender norms are restricted to the local or national level, and further research on this issue would be welcome.⁸⁰

Conclusion and Recommendations

The need to apply a gender lens is increasingly recognized in the counterterrorism and CVE fields. Masculinities are an important but neglected element of such an approach. However, focusing on harmful masculinities is not a panacea for preventing and countering violent extremism.

Counterterrorism and CVE responses can reproduce and reinforce harmful gender norms that contribute to conflict and violence. It is therefore important to avoid mainstreaming gender and masculinities in a way that reinforces gender stereotypes and gender essentialism and to monitor the human rights and gendered impacts of counterterrorism and CVE policies and programs.

Violent masculinities should be addressed as part of a comprehensive approach to understanding conflict drivers and promoting peace. Mainstreaming gender is relevant to all stages of policy and programming, from prevention to rehabilitation and reintegration, and across the full counterterrorism spectrum, from “hard” security to “softer” CVE interventions. Considering masculinities as part of counterterrorism and CVE interventions should also be pursued in addition to, not at the expense of, increasing resources and political will to implement commitments under the women, peace, and security agenda. In fact, these efforts are inseparable, as masculinities and femininities are constructed in relation to one another and are both shaped by the prevailing gender norms within a given context. Dismantling patriarchal structures and attaining gender equality therefore require addressing the role of masculinities and their relation to violence.

To integrate masculinities into policy and programming on counterterrorism and CVE, all state, multilateral, and civil society actors engaged in this area should consider the following recommendations:

- **Conduct more policy-oriented research and analysis on the link between masculinities and violent extremism:** A stronger evidence base is needed to better understand the myriad ways in which masculinities are relevant to violent extremism and efforts to prevent and counter it. More research is especially needed on how to promote positive or peaceful masculinities, which have so far received less attention in the context of counterterrorism and CVE; the policy implications of analysis on masculinities in relation to violent extremism;

⁷⁸ The authors thank Ann-Kathrin Rothermel for nuancing this point during the review process.

⁷⁹ Any monocausal explanations of radicalization or assumptions of a straightforward path into violent extremism are not supported by empirical evidence.

⁸⁰ Wright, “Masculinities, Conflict and Peacebuilding.”

and the links between extremist violence and gender inequality at the societal level, including harmful gender norms and practices perpetuated by the state.

- **Integrate a gender perspective—including a focus on masculinities—across all counterterrorism and CVE policy and programming:**

A gender perspective should be included at all stages of counterterrorism and CVE policy and programming, from prevention to rehabilitation and reintegration work.

Violent masculinities should be addressed as part of a comprehensive approach to understanding conflict drivers and promoting peace.

This requires adopting definitions of gender and gender mainstreaming that focus not only on women but also on masculinities. Both national and international counterterrorism and CVE actors also need to draw lessons from the gendered harms caused by their policies. In particular, they should avoid stigmatizing men and boys (especially of a particular age, ethnicity, or social class) as inherently “dangerous” or at risk of radicalization. They should also acknowledge the sense of camaraderie, solidarity, and belonging that violent extremist groups can offer and consider what alternatives they could provide through rehabilitation and reintegration programs.

- **Monitor and evaluate the gendered impact of**

counterterrorism and CVE interventions using a robust human rights framework:

All counterterrorism and CVE policies and programs should be monitored and evaluated for their gendered and human rights–related impact. Monitoring and evaluation are also required in new policy areas such as regulating misogynistic hate speech online, where a careful assessment should be made of where a counterterrorism lens is appropriate and how to avoid adverse impacts on human rights.

- **Address the harmful role masculinities play within counterterrorism and CVE institutions:** National and international counterterrorism bodies should reflect more systematically on how masculinities affect their activities and assumptions and consider introducing measures to transform their institutional culture, including by addressing the existence of militarized masculinities. This could include, but should not be limited to, promoting greater diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic and professional background, and expertise among staff in these institutions at the national and international levels. These institutions also require independent human rights oversight and more gender expertise.

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