



September 2019

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# Integrating Gender into Countering Violent Extremism Programs

Violent extremist groups have long understood how to manipulate gender norms, behaviours and narratives. These groups target women, girls, men and boys for recruitment, retention and spreading support. In response, international and domestic programs have been designed to challenge these dynamics, and donors are increasingly demanding that Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) programs are gender sensitive as a minimum consideration. Meaningfully fulfilling this demand is an area of ongoing work for practitioners and continuing research for the academic community.

In March 2019, Moonshot CVE convened a workshop of international and domestic practitioners in Canada. The objective was to review progress on integrating gender analysis into CVE work, highlight the lessons learned, and identify new and best practices. The workshop was generously funded by the Community Resilience Fund, administered by the Canada Centre for Community Engagement and Violence Prevention at Public Safety Canada.

The following pages summarise findings from the workshop and highlight promising best practices for integrating gender sensitivity into CVE work. The findings represent the views of expert panelists and participants, and do not necessarily represent the views of Moonshot CVE or the Government of Canada.



## 01 Women and violent extremism:

### Insights on evidence and bias



The CVE community and those funding it tend to reinforce inaccurate perceptions about women. Among other things, there is an embedded assumption that women involved in violent extremism are not as violent as men, and this bias manifests in political responses to violent extremism. For instance, women that joined the Islamic State (ISIS) and now live with their children in refugee camps have often fallen outside of government policy responses, in no small part because of a discomfort in addressing women's role in extremist violence and state building.

Across geographic contexts, women are viewed as parts of families and communities, as wives and mothers, but not as individuals with choice and power. Consequently, when women have joined extremist movements or travelled to conflict zones, they have often been perceived - and reported by popular media - as passive, manipulated victims of violent extremist groups, rather than as active participants. This loss of agency at the point of joining groups is compounded by justice systems, where, for example, women fighting with ISIS have received less severe sentences than men for the same types of convictions. Media and the policy community perpetuate these biases, paying lip service to the issue of gender but rarely translating it into editorial reform or definitive policy.

Some of this may be the product of an overly narrow focus on Al Qaeda and ISIS-related violent extremism since 9/11, which has crowded out analysis on other ideologies and groups.

Broadening our perspective of the nature of violent extremism allows us to take a more comparative view of gender in particular. Panelists highlighted, for example, the similarities and differences between the politicisation of motherhood in left-wing extremism in Latin America and right-wing extremism in North America and Europe.



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## 02 Insights from peace-building and stabilisation



The peace-building and stabilisation sectors have embraced and implemented gender-sensitive programming and evaluation, and the CVE community can benefit from the lessons these sectors have already learned. Participants from these sectors highlighted the value of strategically engaging women early in peace-building and stabilisation efforts. Women can provide a vital early warning resource to identify radicalised populations and the drivers of radicalisation at both hyperlocal and global levels. Women often experience the first indicators of local grievances: food scarcity, financial pressures, security issues and gender-based violence. These grievances can manifest later to drive engagement with violent extremist organisations (VEOs).

The International Civil Society Action Network's Women's Alliance for Security Leadership (ICAN WASL) offers a good example of this work. It leverages an innovative multi-donor funding structure to work with local groups that can implement approaches that are both gender and location-sensitive. This approach complements ICAN's global CVE vision to address grievances beyond violence: funded groups focus on local leadership that supports positive values and principles in exposed or vulnerable populations.

Such localised approaches avoid imposing gender distinctions in a way that can be disruptive to local contexts. Many donors have an unhelpfully abstract view of gender and gender-sensitivity that they seek to apply in these contexts. This leads to gender becoming a 'niche' area of work within a portfolio of peace-building programs, rather than part of a holistic approach that meets the specific needs of conflict-affected communities.

Peace-building practitioners have become acutely sensitive to the co-opting of youth, feminist groups and local passions to deliver on the strategic objectives of donors, rather than helping local communities. Communities in East Africa, for example, have experienced inconsistent cycles of donor engagement on development, poverty alleviation, peace-building and now CVE. Many are fatigued and no longer want to engage in a continuation of this cycle of short-funded interventions that securitise particular groups within their community. CVE work is one of the most recent trends in this cycle, and workshop participants reported that interventions using a CVE discourse have closed the space for proactive engagement with wider populations. Multi-donor frameworks help to reduce this disjointed approach and enable practitioners to implement gender-sensitive programming that reflects local needs. Similar frameworks could help the CVE community to effectively integrate gender into programming without adopting a one-size-fits-all approach.

The panel also highlighted the work of local networks in holding their governments to account. Although many of these organisations struggle to meet the contractual requirements of their donors, they demonstrate reach into local communities that is earnest and driven by a desire to provide solutions tailored to their context and needs. Many of these organisations hold the trust of a community but fail to hold the trust of state security organisations. Since many international funders prefer groups who work within the imposed structures of state security, they fail to fund groups capable of providing localised gender and conflict-sensitive programs. Adaptive gender programming is one of many casualties in this funding system and panelists argued that successfully adapting gender considerations to local contexts may require a more activist approach to CVE funding. Such an approach would place local organisations at the centre of the effort, and would de-emphasise traditional compliance requirements and state coordination.



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### ***US Institute for Peace Gender Inclusive Framework and Theory (GIFT)***

The GIFT integrates gender into all aspects of CVE work by asking simple questions about gender roles to shape research and shift mindsets to understanding the norms about gender roles. GIFT offers three approaches to gender analysis: the Women, Peace and Security Approach; the Peaceful Masculinities Approach; and the Intersecting Identities Approach. Each approach illuminates the gender dynamics in a given environment to better shape peace-building projects.

GIFT also provides a framework for integrating gender at the project design stage. It provides a simple but thorough approach to integrating gender analysis into project design by a) defining gender within the context; b) describing the relationship between gender and conflict dynamics and importance to peace-building; c) a theory of change and analysis framework for gender inclusion; and d) specific guidance on integrating gender into project design.

GIFT provides a simple, rigorous framework that could be readily adapted to suit gender-informed CVE programming.

For more information, see <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2018-08/gender-inclusive-framework-and-theory-guide.pdf>

### ***Trauma Inspired CVE: Greenstring Network, Kenya***

The Green String network leverages a trauma-informed approach to CVE interventions. Green String research considers how exposure to violence influences identity, attitudes, perceptions and behaviour. This experience varies according to gender and can heighten feelings of victimisation, lowering resilience to reactionary/extremist forces. Green String interventions are built on the premise that acts of violence, exclusion or bigotry begin with a thought, which are formed in environments where beliefs and attitudes are shaped by traumatic events and trauma symptoms. Consequently, the path to violent extremism is gendered. Notions of masculinity in East Africa are rooted in traditions of agricultural and pastoralist societies. These ideas of masculinity affect responses to violent extremist recruitment, which manipulates the sense of responsibility men feel to their families and communities. In turn, participation in violent extremism leads to trauma through perpetration, which is exceptionally difficult to address. Green String programs use art and storytelling as tools for deconstructing issues of identity as related to violent extremism and the cycle of violence. Trauma-awareness is leveraged for healing, building a sense of empowerment and cultivating discernment.

For more information, see <https://www.green-string.org/>

Scholars of violent extremism have long appreciated the role of media in amplifying acts of terrorism and violent extremism. If extremist violence is understood to be a form of political communication, then the media's portrayal of it plays a decisive role in either promoting or countering violent extremism. Standards for reporting on incidents of terrorism remain fluid and are a subject of ongoing debate.

Media portrayals of gender are similarly controversial, though for different reasons. Folding together media representations of gender and violent extremism is a complex task, and intersectionality provides a potentially powerful interpretive lens. An intersectional approach to media identifies and examines where different categories of oppression such as gender, race, class and locality meet. In so doing, it uncovers deep biases and politicisation in media representation and the production of knowledge.

Analysing media coverage of extremism through an intersectional lens helps to identify implicit gender roles that can both help and hinder CVE efforts. For example, the perceived role of men in Tunisia as mediators and negotiators in their communities may help to support their work countering extremist violence at the local level. By contrast, German media representation of radicalised Muslim toxic masculinities may have served to reinforce a radical right-wing discourse.

National Action Plans (NAPs) on Women, Peace and Security have been successful at addressing gendered representations in media. For example, the NAP Germany stresses the role of media and advertising in building a less violent image of masculinity, the NAP Estonia encourages increased media coverage of women in military and security positions, and the NAP Kenya encourages gender-responsive media reporting. Taken together, these NAPs provide useful guidance to media bodies in covering extremism in a gender-sensitive fashion.



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The security sector in Canada and internationally is on the front line of CVE work, and consequently plays an indispensable role in integrating gender sensitivity. Members of the security sector are not always able or willing to publicly participate in discussions on this subject, and a degree of mutual suspicion between gender advocates and security actors tends to stifle collaboration. Yet security sector professionals can provide practical perspectives on a topic that can become overly abstract.

Panelists highlighted, for example, common gender dynamics of gangs and violent extremist groups, a point often overlooked by policymakers. Hyper-masculinity is common to both groups, as are entrenched and unequal views of gender roles. Feminism tends to be co-opted by both groups, who imbue women's inferior roles with a false sense of agency – women are “in charge of” procreating and supporting men. In light of these and other commonalities, CVE practitioners should consider reviewing and reapplying gang studies literature as they develop gender-inclusive programming.

Panelists from the security sector observed that the pressure of handling emergent threats often leads security services to lean on entrenched views of women as homemakers, wives and girlfriends, but not as people with agency. Many women around the world were able to elude state security measures to join ISIS, but little has been asked about why this was the case. Similarly, the justice system in Canada and elsewhere has struggled with how to prosecute female participation in violent extremism, leading to disproportionately light sentences for serious offences. Security sector responses are also indirectly influenced by media portrayals of female extremists as passive, sexualised objects ('Babes of the BNP', 'Angels of the EDL'), which colour public opinion and narrow the range of outcomes that the public will accept.

Former extremists could play a valuable, if complex, role in integrating gender sensitivity into security and justice systems. While not members of those sectors, many formers have transited through these systems and can provide unique, first-person perspectives on the gender dynamics of both extremism and government responses to extremism. Duty of care issues must nevertheless be front of mind when working with former extremists; several formers who participated in the workshop emphasised that they needed to be seen and appreciated as whole people, and not just as prior members of extremist organisations. CVE practitioners should take full advantage of the insights that former extremists can provide, while also appreciating them as individuals.



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### ***Fighters for Peace (FFP)***

Fighters for Peace (FFP) is the only organisation in Lebanon and the Arab world that unites former fighters from different gender, political, religious and social backgrounds in their quest for a more peaceful region. Each member was once an extremist and each person underwent a long and painful process of inner change. The organisation approaches recent fighters from Lebanon, Syria, other Arab countries and even Europe in their journey of reintegrating into civil society. FFP builds peace, community cohesion and reconciliation by conducting dialogue sessions, building an online museum of testimonials, public outreach activities, training, and creating a safe space for reflection and psycho-social support.

For more information, see: <http://fightersforpeace.org/>

### ***Rescue Me***

Rescue Me, Beirut is a young non-profit organisation with a vision of a society with safer homes, schools and communities. Rescue Me has a mission to undertake crime prevention in Lebanon through social development by providing educational workshops in schools, prisons and community centres. The main focus of work is on social crime prevention that addresses factors that influence an individual's likelihood of committing a crime, such as poverty, absence of a father figure and sense of belonging, and low educational performance. Additionally, Rescue Me directly intervenes in prisons with known offenders in an attempt to prevent them re-offending. Deconstructing gender norms and expectations is an essential part of Rescue Me's work with imprisoned extremists.

For more, see: <https://www.peaceinsight.org/conflicts/lebanon/peacebuilding-organisations/rescue-me-crime-prevention/>



## Data, segmentation and intersectionality

Integrating gender into CVE should not lead to the exclusion of other important, intersecting factors. **Acknowledgement of class, race, locality and other aspects of identity, opportunity and oppression are essential** to a comprehensive understanding of radicalisation and extremism.

Both the study of violent extremism and CVE programming should therefore **analyse and support vulnerable populations based on a range of variables, including gender.**

Finally, CVE practitioners should **examine the integration of gender into other related disciplines**, such as gang studies and serious organised crime, in order to learn from their methods and findings.

## Programming and participation

Engaging populations beyond policymakers and civil society is essential. **Religious and community leaders, media, and the private sector all play a vital role** in developing and delivering gender-inclusive CVE services.

In order to sustainably integrate gender into CVE programming at the local level, **the appetite for risk needs to change to an appetite for building trust with smaller organisations.** Donors should work with local organisations and take risks to empower smaller entities who understand how to fold gender considerations into their local context.

Practitioners working in both gender and CVE should understand **the risks and benefits of the online environment.** While the internet and social media can aggravate gender bias and amplify extremism, they also provide opportunities for upstream prevention. The internet can act as **a powerful platform to expand awareness and deepen empathy** related to the gender dimensions of violent extremism and efforts to counter it.

## Widening the gender lens

For too long, violent extremism and terrorism has been characterised as a “young man’s problem.” Gender-inclusive CVE programming must recognise that **women are not just passive victims, but as active participants, in violent extremism.**

Previous discussions of gender have focused all but exclusively on the role of women and girls. Yet a full understanding of gender’s role in violent extremism must also include men and boys. Consequently, gender-inclusive CVE programming should include **a focus on harmful masculinity’s role in violent extremism, as well as healthy masculinity’s role in countering violent extremism.**

## Funding and evaluation

Sustainably integrating and evaluating the integration of gender into CVE efforts will take longer than most funding cycles allow. Funders cannot realistically expect changes to social and behavioural patterns within a typical 12 to 18 month funding cycle. Funders should therefore **consider funding multi-phase projects over extended periods**, with regular accountability checks.

Given CVE’s historical focus on male extremism, **funders should evaluate implementers on how often and how well they work with women and non-binary gender identities.**

Funders should **question with more scrutiny whether they wish to label approaches as CVE.** While disciplinary and funding boundaries may prove insurmountable, funders should encourage practitioners to **work with evidence and tools from peace-building and stabilisation work**, which embeds conflict-sensitive approaches to community engagement.

Programming that does no harm must rely on **strong and continuous gender and conflict analysis**, to ensure that efforts adapt to changing conditions and vulnerabilities on the ground.

