

# GENDER AND IDENTITY IN EXTREMISMS

Case Studies on the Role of Gender and Identity in Shaping Positive Alternatives to Extremisms





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# CASE STUDY

## COURAGE IN THE CROSSHAIRS: WOMEN IN CAMEROONIAN PEACE AND CONFLICT NETWORKS

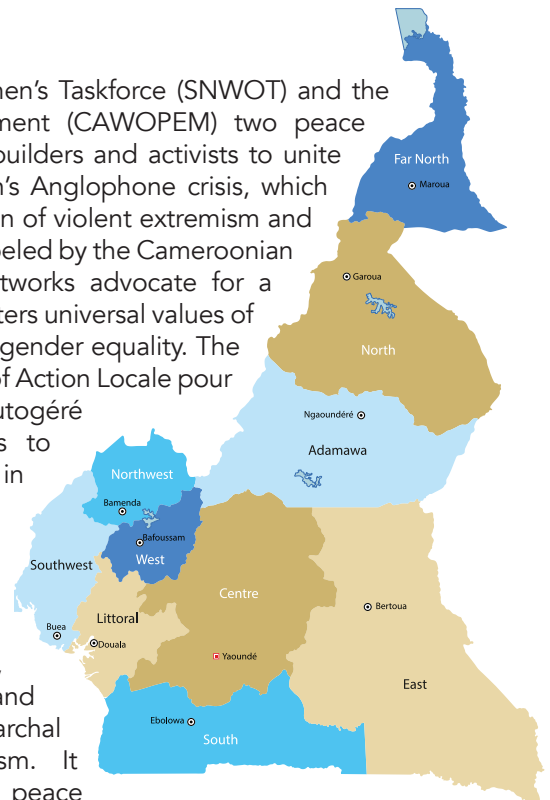
A Case Study on the Role of Gender and Identity in Shaping Positive Alternatives to Extremisms<sup>1</sup>

### SUMMARY

The South West / North West Women's Taskforce (SNWOT) and the Cameroon Women's Peace Movement (CAWOPEM) two peace networks formed by women peacebuilders and activists to unite women in responding to Cameroon's Anglophone crisis, which many of them view as a manifestation of violent extremism and which has been – controversially – labeled by the Cameroonian government as terrorism. The networks advocate for a "third" narrative to the crisis that centers universal values of peace, pluralism, human rights, and gender equality. The case study will also discuss the work of Action Locale pour un Développement Participatif et Autogéré (ALDEPA) in establishing networks to respond to the Boko Haram violence in Cameroon's Far North.

Taking a Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA+) approach,<sup>2</sup> this case study discusses how Cameroonian conflict actors have systematically targeted, excluded, and co-opted women and radicalized men to promote a patriarchal culture of violence and militarism. It considers the role of women-led peace networks as a source for challenging structural inequality, maintaining collective agency, and providing support in the face of risk and threats.

Cameroon is challenged by growing instability and violent extremism in its Far North region, a result of violent Boko Haram activity thought to be spillover from neighboring Nigeria. In the country's North West and South West regions, longstanding socio-economic grievances and perceptions of political marginalization of Cameroon's Anglophone population by the Francophone-dominated government sparked protests in October 2016.<sup>3</sup> The escalation of violence between armed Anglophone separatist groups and government security forces has brought the country to the brink of civil war with devastating social and humanitarian consequences. Conflict actors on both sides use identity-based grievances, hateful speech, and divisive labeling to radicalize primarily young Cameroonian men into joining networks perpetrating extreme violence.



1. The International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) was commissioned by Global Affairs Canada to produce this set of case studies on the role of gender and intersectional identities in countering violent extremism and counterterrorism. For more information or to contact the authors please email [info@icanpeacework.org](mailto:info@icanpeacework.org).  
 2. Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) is an analytical process that provides a rigorous method for the assessment of systemic inequalities, as well as to assess how diverse groups of women, men, and gender diverse people may experience policies, programs and initiatives. More info on the GBA+ approach is accessible [here](#).  
 3. Crisis Group (2017). Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis at the Crossroads. ([access here](#)).

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

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**The root causes of armed group and violent extremist conflict – such as marginalization, identity-driven propaganda, and escalation in response to counterinsurgency interventions – share many commonalities and necessitate similar counterterrorism (CT) and countering violent extremism (CVE), peacebuilding, and development responses** grounded in values of peace, inclusivity, human rights, and pluralism.
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**Hateful and divisive speech entrenches identity-based divisions, creates in-network unity, and escalates cycles of violence.** The term “terrorist” can be used to legitimize use of force against an identity group and may create a self-fulfilling prophecy: the more groups of people are treated like terrorists, the more they are incentivized to upgrade their skills and tactics to mirror those of terrorist groups. Labeling a conflict as terrorism can be counterproductive, as it increases stigma and constrains avenues for dialogue and mediation.
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**Equating masculine identity with violence facilitates the radicalization of men and boys to militant activity.** Militarism and patriarchy go hand in hand, and together create an enabling environment for violence, oppression, and erasure of women.
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**CT and CVE interventions that support women’s peace networks allow for overcoming identity divisions and redirecting focus towards challenging the larger systems of inequality at the root of conflict and violent extremism.** In a conflict environment where women’s voices are unheard and excluded, women’s networks, societies, associations, and protest movements enable them to gain collective power and take up space in the public realm.
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**Members of women’s peace networks draw on their gender identity, strategic communication, and code-switching abilities to gain trust and access to conflict, government, and community spaces.** CT and CVE interventions should consider the primacy of trusted local actors in navigating complex conflict dynamics.
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**Women peacebuilders need protection – they face a high level of risk due to their frontline work and perception of “betraying” both sides of a conflict.** Women’s peace networks, national and transnational, are essential for providing protection, psychosocial support, and motivation to their members. In addition to providing avenues for advocacy and activism, women’s networks act as support systems by offering strength and security in numbers.

## CONTEXT ANALYSIS

For six years, Cameroon has been beset with identity-driven violent conflict between Anglophone militant groups and government security forces. Termed the “Anglophone crisis,” the roots of the conflict date back to 1961 when formerly British Southern Cameroon joined independent French Cameroon to attain independence. Since then, residents of the Anglophone territories say they have suffered economic, cultural, and political marginalization and discrimination at the hands of the majority-Francophone government, blaming its heavy-handed assimilation campaign for provoking deep grievances and instigating a “perpetual political crisis.”<sup>4</sup> <sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, in Cameroon’s Far North, Boko Haram’s growing presence has incited a humanitarian crisis that has forced over 322,000 people from their homes since 2014.<sup>6</sup> The violent extremist group carries out regular attacks of terror including assassinations, kidnappings, bombings, and acts of gender-based violence.

In 2016, Anglophone lawyers’ and teachers’ unions took to the streets in a series of peaceful protests, decrying the appointment of French-speaking judges, teachers, and prosecutors to schools and courts in Anglophone regions.<sup>7</sup> The government took a heavy-handed response to the protests by imposing internet black-outs and deploying armed police to arrest, imprison, and in some cases use deadly force against activists and protestors.<sup>8</sup> This incited an escalating series of violent clashes and resulted in the emergence of armed separatist groups fighting for a new “Republic of Ambazonia.”<sup>9</sup> Today, both sides wage campaigns of terror, committing severe human rights abuses including kidnappings, extra-judicial killings, torture, rape, and gender-based violence.<sup>10</sup> Hundreds of villages have been destroyed, at least 750,000 people have been displaced, and 80% of schools in the Anglophone region are closed due to school boycotts enforced by separatist groups.<sup>11</sup>

4. Mates, R. (2019). Cameroon’s Anglophone Crisis: Analysis of the Political, Socio-Cultural and Economic Impact. *Studia Europaea*, Vol. 64, Issue 2. ([access here](#)).

5. Halle, E. (2014). The Force of Argument’ and the Fight for an Anglophone Identity in Cameroon. ([access here](#)).

6. Reliefweb (2021). Cameroon: Boko Haram Attacks Escalate in Far North. ([access here](#)).

7. Orock, R. (2021). Cameroon’s authoritarianism fuels its Anglophone separatist war. ([access here](#)).

8. Amnesty International (2016). Cameroon: Excessive force that led to deaths of protesters must be urgently investigated. ([access here](#)).

9. Agwanda, B. and Yasin Asal, U. (2021). The Anglophone problem in Cameroon: The change from crisis to conflict, and a possible way forward to resolution. Accord. ([access here](#)).

10. Kewir, J. et al. (2021). Shrinking Civic Space and the Role of Civil Society in Resolution of Conflict in Anglophone Cameroon. ([access here](#)).

11. Ibid.



The Anglophone crisis has had a disproportionate impact on women and girls, who face high levels of structural, physical, and sexual violence.

## “Franco-frogs” and “Anglo-fous”: The Role of Labels in Reinforcing Identity Divisions

Amid the crisis, armed separatist groups – variously referred to as freedom fighters, radicals, or Amba-boys – espouse an ideology grounded in identity-based grievances, a hopeful revolutionary vision, and vengeance that radicalizes primarily young Cameroonian men into networks that perpetrate extreme violence and reinforce in-group identity. They are supported by strong diaspora networks in the United States, United Kingdom, Nigeria, and South Africa, who have played a crucial role in garnering support for the Anglophone cause by mobilizing in protest in their own countries, spreading propaganda on TV, blogs, and social media, and directly commanding and funding separatist groups.<sup>12</sup> In addition to anger around socioeconomic marginalization, separatist ideological narratives and media discourse invoke a sense of alienation and loss of cultural identity. They tap into a desire for belonging and homeland by sketching a hopeful vision of Ambazonia as a utopian place of plenty that Anglophones must commit to protecting.<sup>13</sup> Revenge is another core motivating factor for radicalization to violence, with separatists pointing to atrocities committed by government troops to rally young men to join their cause.

Hateful and divisive speech, including on social media, plays an important role in entrenching identity divisions and in-network unity in the conflict. Separatist groups and their supporters refer to Francophones and government security forces as “animals” or “Franco-frogs.”<sup>14</sup> The term “Black leg” which means sell-out or traitor is used by Anglophone armed groups to refer to fellow Anglophones

Cameroon’s anti-terror law has become a self-fulfilling prophecy: the more the Cameroonian government treated Anglophone protestors as terrorists, the more they upgraded their skills and tactics to mirror those of terrorist groups.

perceived as opposing the separatist vision and has, in some cases, led to kidnappings, maimings, and killings of those labeled as such.<sup>15</sup> Inflammatory speech deployed by supporters of the Francophone military includes the term “Anglo-fous” (“Anglo-crazies”) and stating Anglophones are “a gauche” (“on the left,” not worthy of anything), invoking colonial prejudices against Anglophones as uncivilized, inferior, and primitive. Francophone authorities have called on Anglophone elites to “tame their dogs,” referring to the Anglophone protestors, threatening that they will face the “wrath of the security forces” if they fail to do so.<sup>16</sup> The term with the most far-reaching violent consequences is “terrorist,” used by the government since the start of 2016 to demonize Anglophone activists and legitimize the use of force against them. Under Cameroon’s anti-terror law, government authorities can detain those accused of terrorism without trial, adding an additional element of intimidation and fear to the term. Unfortunately, it has become a self-fulfilling prophecy: the more the Cameroonian government treated Anglophone protestors as terrorists, the more they upgraded their skills and tactics to mirror those of terrorist groups.

12. Orock, R. (2021). Cameroon’s Separatist War: Anglophone Grievances and its Diaspora. ([access here](#)).

13. Doho, G. (2020). From literary concept to self-proclaimed state: three generations of Anglophone-Cameroonians at war. *Journal of the African Literature Association*, 14(2), 216–235. doi:10.1080/21674736.2020.1717

14. PeaceTech Lab (2018). *Social Media and Conflict in Cameroon: A Lexicon of Hate Speech*. ([access here](#)).

15. Ibid.

16. Abah, I. (2017). Yaounde-based Anglophone Elite Fail To Tame Their ‘Dogs.’ Cameroon Post. ([access here](#)).

Unlike the Boko Haram insurgency in Cameroon's Far North, the Anglophone crisis is not typically understood as a violent extremist conflict. While not connected ideologically or operationally, the Boko Haram and Anglophone conflicts share a similar structure: radicalization to violence is facilitated by sentiments of repression and marginalization, fueled by identity-driven propaganda promising a new homeland (or, in Boko Haram's case, restoration of a Caliphate), and escalated in response to government counterinsurgency and anti-terrorism responses.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, members of women-led peace networks in both the Far North and the North West and South West regions view their peacebuilding responses as equally applicable and relevant to the Anglophone crisis and to Boko Haram. The case of Cameroon illustrates how labeling conflicts and conflict actors as "terrorist" and "violent extremist" can be constricting and even harmful, obscuring how the root causes of armed conflict and extremist violence are often interlinked and necessitate similar peacebuilding and development responses.

## Gender Dimensions of the Cameroonian Conflict: Women Unite Across the Divide

The ideology and practices of both Anglophone separatist groups and government security forces in Cameroon are highly male-dominated, militaristic, and patriarchal. Women have largely been excluded from decision-making structures on either side of the conflict. Despite stating that their actions reflect the will of the Anglophone people in Cameroon, separatist groups did not seek the opinion of women in shaping the vision of Ambazonia as a new homeland.<sup>18</sup> Yet, predictably, the crisis has had a disproportionate impact on women and girls, who face high levels of structural, physical, and sexual violence. The majority of the internally displaced person (IDP) population – estimates range from 51 – 68% - are women, who suffer not only displacement but also hostility and stigma from their host communities.<sup>19</sup> <sup>20</sup> Women with intersecting marginalized identities, such as indigenous women, face additional discrimination and degradation based on their ethnicity and economic class.<sup>21</sup> Women have been refused access to their farms, markets, and sources of livelihood. The Cameroonian state and its forces, for their part, also remain overwhelmingly patriarchal. Women have little political power in Cameroon due to misogynistic cultural beliefs about their lack of competency as leaders and decision-makers.<sup>22</sup> State-led attempts at reconciliation, such as the 2019 Cameroon Grand National Dialogue, have been non-inclusive of women's experiences and saw low representation of women from the Anglophone region.

In radicalizing men to participate in militant activity, Cameroonian conflict actors have strengthened the equation

of masculinity with violence and created an environment that encourages treating women as non-human and disposable subjects. For men brought up with patriarchal and misogynistic beliefs, the conflict environment and its weaponization of identity offers an excuse for acting on their impulses. Armed groups have tortured, raped, and killed women accused of having relationships with government soldiers.<sup>23</sup> They have also forced young girls to join their ranks to cook, clean, and provide sex in exchange for protection and sustenance.<sup>24</sup> Government forces have similarly beaten, undressed, and allegedly raped female university students engaging in protests.<sup>25</sup> Although female combatants exist,<sup>26</sup> most women are not actively fighting in the conflict, and their perceived lack of action and allegiance leaves them vulnerable to being termed "black legs," or accused of betrayal by actors on both sides. Similar misperceptions of women's roles in conflict exists in the country's Far North, where Cameroonian women are frequently kidnapped by Boko Haram and forced to marry. One young woman who was kidnapped, married off, and widowed three times was declared an "ill omen" and trained to serve as a suicide bomber.<sup>27</sup> When discovered by the government with explosives on her, she was branded a terrorist and arrested.<sup>28</sup> Her story serves to illustrate that in a male-dominated conflict context the nuances of women's participation in conflict and peacebuilding are not understood, resulting in their instrumentalization by both sides.

The militarization of linguistic identity by separatist groups has led to a breakdown of the core values, practices, and traditions of that identity.

The transition to militarism has led to the breaking of age-old gendered traditions and taboos in Cameroon: the digging of graves, traditionally the exclusive preserve of men in Anglophone culture, is now undertaken by women. Pregnant women, who are subjects of protection in Anglophone culture, have been subject to attacks and violence. The militarization of linguistic identity by separatist groups has led to a breakdown of the core values, practices, and traditions of that identity. The discrimination, subjugation and dehumanization of women is not an explicit component of the ideology of separatist groups and government forces in the same way that it is a part of the ideology of violent extremist groups like Boko Haram in Cameroon's Far North. Yet, by recruiting and radicalizing men into an ever-expanding militant network charged with sharp identity divisions, conflict parties create an enabling environment for violence, oppression, and exclusion of women.

17. Mbowou, C. (2020). The Unbearable Unity of Cameroon: Boko Haram and the Anglophone Secessionism. ([access here](#)).

18. Interview with Esther Omam, January 2022.

19. Atabong, A. (2018). Women and children bear the brunt of Cameroon's conflict. Equal Times. ([access here](#)).

20. GenCap, 2019. Data on Gender Equality in Cameroon. ([access here](#)).

21. Njieassam, EE. (2019). Gender Inequality and Land Rights: The Situation of Indigenous Women in Cameroon. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/1727-3781/2019/v22i0a4907> ([access here](#)).

22. Atanga, L. (2021). Gender Ideologies, Leadership, and Development in Cameroon. Georgetown Journal of International Affairs. ([access here](#)).

23. Mudge, L. (2020). Horrific Video Shows Cameroon Killing. Human Rights Watch. ([access here](#)).

24. Atabong, A. (2018). Women and children bear the brunt of Cameroon's conflict. Equal Times. ([access here](#)).

25. Crisis Group, 2017. Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis at the Crossroads. ([access here](#)).

26. Interview with Caryn Dasah, January 2022.

27. Interview with Marthe Wandou, March 2022

28. Ibid.



Women at a protest in Kumba participate in a public lamentation to following the killing of seven children at a school in October 2022. Lamentations are cultural practices during which women publicly wail to condemn ongoing violence.

## Co-opting Gender Unity

Despite the violence committed against women in Cameroon, their roles in the conflict far exceed that of passive victims. Cameroonian women have a long history of using networks, societies, associations, and protest movements to gain collective power during times of crisis. Their organizing work mirrors and draws on that of women in other African countries, like Nigeria and Liberia, who have banded together in collective acts of resistance, activism, mediation, and brokering to promote peace, development, and gender equality.<sup>29</sup> In 2017, for instance, Anglophone women mobilized Takumbeng, a social movement that uses traditional forms of protest, often incorporating nudity, to intimidate and shame government security forces.<sup>30</sup> These traditional networks of women, together with the contemporary networks discussed later in this case study, demonstrate women's agency and their politics of engagement. In a conflict environment where their voices are erased and suppressed, they actively take up space in the public realm to demand what they deem proper treatment and express their own vision for Cameroon.

Requests for allegiances demand that women sacrifice their gender unity – a shared identity that traverses political, linguistic, and social boundaries – to support male-dominated, militaristic aims.

Cameroonian conflict actors on both sides have recognized the power and value of women's peace networks and attempted to co-opt them for their own objectives. On International Women's Day (IWD) 2017, a significant networking, celebratory, and advocacy event observed by Cameroonian women, Anglophone separatist groups urged them to protest Francophone domination by refraining from participation.<sup>31</sup> Choosing IWD as the date for a "ghost town" protest – a general strike during which every person is required to stay at home - allowed separatist forces to make a bold statement, co-opting the political clout of women's networks. The Cameroonian state has similarly asked women's networks to support its aims. In response to the violent murder of Confort Tumassang by separatist fighters, the government called on women to conquer the separatists by denouncing all fighters in their locality.<sup>32</sup> These requests for allegiances and displays of loyalty demand that women sacrifice their gender unity – a shared identity that traverses political, linguistic, and social boundaries – to support male-dominated, militaristic aims that they have had no say in determining.<sup>33</sup>

## South West / North West Women's Taskforce (SNWOT), Cameroon Women's Peace Movement (CAWOPEM) and Action Locale pour un Développement Participatif et Autogéré (ALDEPA)

Following the exclusion of women's voices from conflict networks and building on Cameroon's rich history of movement-building and peaceful resistance, Cameroonian

29. Steady, F. (2006). Women and Collective Action in Africa. ([access here](#)).

30. Fonchingong, C. (2007). Crossing Rural-Urban Spaces: The Takumbeng and Activism in Cameroon's Democratic Crusade. ([access here](#)).

31. Mougoué, J. (2018). Gender and (Militarized) Secessionist Movements in Africa: An African Feminist's Reflections ([access here](#)).

32. Kindzeka, M. (2020). Cameroon Women Protest Insecurity, Gruesome Murder of Civilians. VOA News. ([access here](#)).

33. Mougoué, J. (2018). Gender and (Militarized) Secessionist Movements in Africa: An African Feminist's Reflections ([access here](#)).

women have formed their own networks for peace. Two such networks and one network-building organizations are covered in this case study: the South West/North West Women's Taskforce (SNWOT), the Cameroon Women's Peace Movement (CAWOPEM) and Action Locale pour un Développement Participatif et Autogéré (ALDEPA).<sup>34</sup> The SWNOT is a coalition of women human rights defenders, peacebuilders, and civil society organizations based in the North and Southwest regions of Cameroon. The SWNOT advocates for peace by providing a "third narrative" to the Anglophone crisis that centers humanity and respect for the human being.<sup>35</sup> The Cameroon Women's Peace Movement (CAWOPEM) initiated the First National Women's Convention for Peace in Cameroon in July 2021, bringing together women from all sectors of society – non-governmental organizations, religious leaders, businesswomen, soldiers, peace activists, and many more – and from all regions of the country to pledge their commitment to peace efforts and issue demands to conflict stakeholders. These demands included the end of fighting, pursuit of dialogue, women's equal participation in the peace process, provision of psychosocial support, and initiation of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) processes.<sup>36</sup> In designing the convention, a decision was made to not address one particular crisis (i.e., Anglophone or Boko Haram), but rather to unite women to stand together for peace across Cameroon.

In stark contrast to the identity-driven and militarized agendas of the conflict parties, these women-led networks transcend linguistic and ethnic divisions and advocate for universal values of peace, pluralism, human rights, and gender equality. Their narratives prioritize human security and welfare: per Clotilda Andiensa Waah of the Center for Advocacy in Gender Equality and Action for Development (CAGEAD), "you can claim you are fighting to separate or unite Cameroon but you cannot claim that you are fighting to give me a brighter future if you cannot protect me." The networks stand in opposition to militarism and protest the use of hateful, extremist, and divisive speech in the conflict by calling for a "linguistic ceasefire," in the words of Nicoline Nwenushi Tumasang Wazeh of Pathways for Women's Empowerment and Development (PaWED).<sup>37</sup> In doing so, they challenge the larger systems of inequality at the roots of conflict and violent extremism. The networks provide a platform for diverse and disparate women's groups to find common ground and maintain gender unity and collective agency in the face of discrimination, exclusion, and co-option. Jointly, they grow their credibility and advocate for greater recognition of the roles and rights of women in peacebuilding and CVE.

Women-led networks transcend linguistic and ethnic divisions and advocate for universal values of peace, pluralism, human rights, and gender equality.



The narratives of women-led networks prioritize human security and welfare and center respect for the human being.

Members of both networks leverage their gender identity to collectively advocate for peace. Their knowledge of and proximity to local communities is essential for navigating the complex dynamics and spaces of the Anglophone crisis. Through skilled communication and trust-building, the SWNOT negotiated with separatist groups and government forces to enter active conflict zones in order to provide medical and psychosocial support, dignity kits, and wash items to internally displaced persons.<sup>38</sup> Since women and their perspectives are largely excluded from the conflict, it was easier for SWNOT members to be perceived as neutral actors. Following the killing of Confort Tumassang in August 2020, and the Kumba school massacre in October 2020, SWNOT initiated a civil society-led women's protest in Kumba.<sup>39</sup> While they expected 300 women, over 3,500 came out and peacefully protested. After the protest, Anglophone diaspora activists began calling from the United States, telling armed leaders to be careful since the presence of Anglophone women protestors showed their struggle had failed.<sup>40</sup> Since the protest and the diaspora response, killings of women have come to a halt, a lockdown was cut short, and separatist fighters have ceased actively targeting and using violence against women. These incidents reinforce the power of women's peace networks to transform extremisms and disrupt radicalization to violence by strategically deploying their gender identity.

By drawing on their identity, SWNOT and CAWOPEM members can strategically navigate both government and community spaces, collectively as well as individually in their own peacebuilding and development work. With the government, they refer to legal instruments such as Cameroon's Constitution and its National Action Plan for the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. In mobilizing Cameroonian women in the nation's capital, the CAWOPEM brought community members to the seat of government to issue their collective call for peace. Working with their communities, network

34. This section is written based on four interviews with female Cameroonian civil society leaders who have participated in one of, or both networks.

35. Interview with Esther Omam, January 2022.

36. International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) (2021). Cameroon's First Women's National Peace Convention: "We Build Peace, Piece by Piece." ([access here](#)).

37. Interview with Nicoline Nwenushi Tumasang Wazeh, January 2022.

38. International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) (2021). "Let us go where the guns are loud": How Esther Omam Builds Peace in Cameroon. ([access here](#)).

39. Human Rights Watch (2020). Cameroon: Gunmen Massacre School Children. ([access here](#)).

40. Interview with Esther Omam, January 2022.

members use less technical language and instead invite discussion on what maintaining peaceful communities might look like and require.<sup>41</sup> Clotilda Andiensa Waah explained that her gender identity and her background as a teacher helps her to communicate with men and boys engaged in the conflict by addressing them as her children and her friends: "I tell them that while anger and grievances might be legitimate, fighting to hurt others and make others suffer is paradoxical (...) I am from the grassroots so I use a language all of them understand, cautioning them to put humanity at the center of their actions."

While their gender identity enables SWNOT and CAWOPEM members to engage in dialogue and mediation, it also exposes them to a high level of risk. Esther Omam of Reach Out Cameroon, a founding member of the SWNOT, has been the subject of a myriad of threats and attacks from both the government and separatist groups, including the kidnapping of family members and staff and the burning of her organization's vehicle. Because they are perceived of being in the middle, network members risk being seen as traitors by those on both sides of the conflict. The need to be constantly alert and aware of their environment, and living in perpetual fear, carries a large psychological cost and in the cases of some network members has led to burnout and depression.<sup>42</sup> Given the physical and psychosocial risks of their work, the networks also have an important function as support systems for protection and encouragement. Working and marching alongside other women provides strength and safety in numbers. Following a threat or attack, network members write messages of support to each other, give advice, and offer motivating words. In a tense and divided conflict environment, networks like the SWNOT and CAWOPEM are critical not only for initiating, but also for sustaining the difficult and risky work of building peace and preventing violent extremism.

In addition to networks such as the SWNOT and CAWOPEM, women-led organizations in Cameroon's Far North region are engaged in their own network-building to strengthen gender-sensitive responses to the Boko Haram crisis. One such organization, ALDEPA focuses on establishing associations and clubs that sensitize Cameroonian communities about Boko Haram's activities to prevent recruitment and support reintegration and rehabilitation. For instance, ALDEPA has founded groups for female survivors of trauma at the hands of Boko Haram. Participants include internally displaced women forced into marriage, victims of gender-based violence, and women whose husbands or children were killed or disappeared. To mitigate stigma and bridge divisions between these women and their host communities, ALDEPA engages them in social cohesion and community service activities. These include cleaning of the host community village by IDP women to build goodwill and a cultural exchange where IDP women and women from host communities prepare and share food from their regions together.<sup>43</sup>

ALDEPA has also founded the Counter-Violence Women's Association (CVWA), a network of female community

leaders who are identified by the respect and status they hold in their communities. These women receive training in negotiation, mediation, the origins and consequences of violent extremism, and peacebuilding strategies – skills they take back to their communities. Due to their close local ties, members of the CVWA are aware of which families have children or relatives who are involved with Boko Haram. Following their training, they speak to these families and provide information on what to do if someone tries to recruit them.<sup>44</sup> CVWA members also engage local actors such as traditional chiefs and the civilian-led vigilance committees created by the government. When a member of the community becomes associated with Boko Haram, CVWA members encourage positive communication with the individuals to encourage them to return to their communities, instead of immediately calling the police. In doing so, they stand against punitive, divisive measures and open the door to peaceful rehabilitation and reintegration. ALDEPA also trains networks of young girls to recognize "red flags" in relationships, to resist recruitment from Boko Haram boys who lure them with expensive gifts.<sup>45</sup>

Labels such as violent extremism and terrorism are not always useful at the grassroots level and may constrain or confuse collaboration on responses.

The gendered responses of women-led peacebuilding and development organizations to the Boko Haram and Anglophone crises share many commonalities: finding unity in organizing and network-building, advocating for core values of peace, inclusivity, and pluralism, and strategic deployment of gender identities and female leadership to bridge divisions. Women peacebuilders and women-led organizations from the Far North, North West and South West regions frequently convene to discuss approaches and share best practices. Their collaboration demonstrates that, while sometimes necessary to distinguish the nature and root causes of different conflicts, labels such as violent extremism and terrorism are not always useful at the grassroots level and may constrain or confuse collaboration on responses. Approaching the conflict through a gendered extremism lens would enable women peace actors to better understand and address the role of identity in the conflict, particularly the role of hate speech and the connection between masculinities, militarism, and radicalization to violence on both sides. Strengthening responses to extreme violence will require them to maintain unity and collaboration in their networks and advocate for a "third" narrative to the conflict that not only promotes shared humanity, but also instills respect for differences, celebrates plural identities, and challenges larger systems of inequality that drive grievances.

41. Interview with Ncoline Nwenushi Tumasang Wazeh, January 2022.

42. Interview with Clotilda Andiensa Waah, January 2022.

43. Interview with Marthe Wandou, March 2022

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.





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## CASE STUDY

# HEIRESSES TO THE PROPHET: WOMEN RELIGIOUS SCHOLARS TRANSFORMING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN INDONESIA

A Case Study on the Role of Gender and Identity in Shaping Positive Alternatives to Extremisms<sup>1</sup>

## SUMMARY



Indonesia has a well-established tradition of female religious leadership, with women ulama (religious scholars) playing significant roles in education, activism and religious legal discourse. The Asian Muslim Action Network (AMAN) in Indonesia co-convened the Indonesian Congress of Women Scholars or Kongres Ulama Perempuan Indonesia (KUPI) to amplify the Islamic narratives of women ulama and work with them to promote gender equality and counter extremist violence.

Taking a Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA+) approach,<sup>2</sup> this case study discusses the narratives promoting and countering violent extremism and terrorism. It focuses on how the women ulama movement's trust-based relationships, gender-sensitive Islamic perspective and consultative process enables them to deconstruct violent narratives as they pursue gender justice in Indonesia.

Violent extremism in Indonesia is framed by gendered narratives that draw on narrow interpretations of Islam and Qur'anic texts, which are further amplified by social media. This includes extremism among Indonesians who traveled to join the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. These narratives use conservative gender roles and familial power structures to promote violent extremist ideology among young men and women.

1. The International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) was commissioned by Global Affairs Canada to produce this set of case studies on the role of gender and intersectional identities in countering violent extremism and counterterrorism. For more information or to contact the authors please email [info@icanpeacework.org](mailto:info@icanpeacework.org).

2. Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) is an analytical process that provides a rigorous method for the assessment of systemic inequalities, as well as to assess how diverse groups of women, men, and gender diverse people may experience policies, programs and initiatives. More info on the GBA+ approach is accessible [here](https://www24.international.gc.ca/gba/gba-eng.aspx).

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ **Narratives are not merely messaging; they are societal responses that attempt to explain complex modern realities.** Promoting the idea of multiple narratives, perspectives, or interpretations, and peaceful disagreements, is as important as the substantive deconstruction of specific narratives.
- ▶ **Women religious leaders such as the women ulama can be authentic messengers** who offer an important perspective vital to fully understanding and contesting the gendered narratives of violent extremist groups. Though they might be less visible, their rootedness in communities, and the related trust and influence they hold should not be overlooked.
- ▶ **Social media has emerged as a new outlet for religious education, particularly for and by young people who use convincing visual and narrative strategies to spread their viewpoints.** Beyond work in educational institutions, contesting violent extremist ideology requires operating in online spaces, and collaborating with the youth leaders and influencers who – due to their digital literacy and popularity – are critical messengers in these spaces.
- ▶ **The process of arriving at new narratives is as important as the narratives themselves.** Employing participatory, consultative methods for discussion and debate that consider a multitude of perspectives challenges the inflexible, binary nature of violent extremist ideology.
- ▶ **The creation and preservation of open, safe, civic spaces for dialogue and debate, and the protection of women who play a visible role in these spaces,** is key to transforming narratives at the nexus of gender and violence.

## CONTEXT ANALYSIS

Indonesia is the largest Muslim-majority nation in the world with 86.7% of Indonesians identifying as Muslim. However, it is also a deliberately pluralist state with a complex religious identity thanks to a history of Buddhist and Hindu rule, colonization by the Christian Dutch, and thousands of animist and syncretic communities spread out over many islands.<sup>3</sup> Indonesian nationalism is a unique and deliberate project that grounds the unity of its geographically, ethnically, and religiously diverse population in a common language and shared set of values called *pancasila*.<sup>4</sup>

Even with this strong national identity and a secular constitution, religion has often been a lightning rod for tensions in Indonesian society. Suharto's three-decade dictatorship used religious rationales to instigate and justify the violent anti-communism campaign that led to the killing of more than a million people.<sup>5</sup> After the Suharto regime fell in 1998, restrictions on establishing Islamist organizations were removed. Radical Indonesian Muslim activists were released from prison or returned from exile abroad.<sup>6</sup> Through their dominance of media, Islamist groups crowded the Indonesian public sphere. The Islamic State and its Indonesian affiliates have used sophisticated communication networks to recruit Indonesian Muslims, including women and children, to travel to Syria and Iraq.<sup>7</sup> In the third largest democracy in the world, this has given conservative Islamists the clear lead in the marketplace of ideas—until very recently.



The decentralized tradition of Islamic education emerged as an alternative educational institution accessible to the vast majority of the population – including women.

3. Amnesty International. (2017). Pluralism and the Struggle for Justice and Equality in Indonesia. ([access here](#)).

4. Pedersen, L. (2016). Religious Pluralism in Indonesia. ([access here](#)).

5. Ibid.

6. Indonesia Investments. (2020). Radical Islam in Indonesia. ([access here](#)).

7. Djelantik, S. (2019). Islamic State and the Social Media in Indonesia. ([access here](#)).

Despite this political trend toward conservative Islamism, support for violent extremism has generally remained low in the country.<sup>8</sup> This is perhaps in part because of the core message of tolerance professed by Indonesia's two largest Islamic movements, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah.<sup>9</sup> Indonesian civil society, however, may be the most significant factor in maintaining pluralism, human rights, and peace. The country's open democratic space enables transformation and advancement of progressive ideas by civil society, which faces no barriers to working directly with the people.<sup>10</sup> In this environment, Indonesian civil society organizations are well-positioned to contribute to countering violent extremism (CVE) as they are highly trusted and often fill service gaps that the government has been unable to address.<sup>11</sup>

While counterterrorism initiatives by security actors have been increasingly successful at preventing violence and deterring individuals from joining violent extremist groups, the threat has remained high.<sup>12</sup> This is in no small part due to the rise and fall of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and related upward trends in the return and domestic radicalization of Indonesians.<sup>13</sup>

## Women as Recognized Sources of Religious Scholarship

Religious literacy, which can be a source of resilience to radicalization, is high in Indonesia thanks to its unique system of Islamic boarding schools called pesantren. During the colonial period, only the elite could attend the formal schools run by the Dutch government.<sup>14</sup> The decentralized tradition of Islamic education, often delivered in teachers' homes in villages across the country, emerged as an alternative educational institution accessible to the vast majority of the population – including women.<sup>15</sup> Expanded and formalized during the colonial era, there are now an estimated one million of these schools run by both independent foundations and the government.<sup>16</sup>

Hundreds of pesantren are run by women, placing them close to the people and making women's religious leadership a lived reality in many communities. Pesantren have been led by and produced female imams, intellectuals, expert Qur'an reciters and activists with expertise in Islamic studies, Islamic law and interpretation of Islamic texts.<sup>17</sup> Over the past two decades, Indonesian women's rights activists have begun collaborating with these Muslim women clerics and educators – referred to as women ulama – to use Islamic tradition to improve the economic, social and psychological condition of women in Indonesian society. Since 2000, for instance, women ulama have been engaged in the prevention of gender-based violence (GBV). With support from the first lady of Indonesia at the time, an activist, women's crisis centers were set up in Islamic boarding schools to handle GBV cases.

”  
Indonesian civil society may be the most significant factor in maintaining pluralism, human rights, and peace.  
”

In contrast to other contexts where efforts to elevate female Islamic leadership have been more of an elite enterprise, in Indonesia the social authority of women ulama is recognized by the population because they are embedded in society through their position in the pesantren. Since ulama is a gender-neutral term designating religious scholars, experts or researchers, the idea of women ulama has faced less conceptual resistance and has been easier to reclaim as a label.<sup>18</sup> Women ulama play an essential role in passing on knowledge of Qur'anic texts to the next generation of women, enabling them to engage men from a position of equal knowledge and use the (re-)interpretation of Islamic narratives as a tool for social activism.<sup>19</sup>

## Gender, Identity, and Violent Extremist Narratives in Indonesia

While educational institutions such as the pesantren serve an important purpose as sites for promoting religious literacy in Indonesia, they must contend with another, more popular platform for spreading discourse and narratives: the internet. Conservative Islamic groups and activists in Indonesia have effectively used online spaces, including social media, to popularize narratives advancing a conservative approach to Islam that restricts gender equality and is grounded in violent extremist ideology.

Due to the powerful role religion plays in Indonesian society, violent extremist narratives in the country are grounded in simplified interpretations of Islamic texts. For instance, radical Islamic groups promote jihad as a core narrative to recruit supporters, using an incorrect translation and interpretation that emphasizes physical struggle rather than the more encompassing and authoritative definition of jihad as an internal spiritual and moral struggle for good. Another common narrative centers around the concept of hijra - meaning to go to a situation where you will do better – to encourage people to change the way they dress, embrace conservative Islamic ideology, and support extremist groups, for example by traveling to join the Islamic State. Violent extremist religious narratives are heavily gendered. They focus on the role and condition of women, including by promoting patriarchy, conservative dress, polygamy, and child marriage.

8. Rhoads, E. (2018). The Role of Women in Violent Extremism in Asia. ([access here](#)).

9. Interview with AMAN Indonesia

10. Interview with AMAN Indonesia

11. Sumpster, C. Countering violent extremism in Indonesia: priorities, practice and the role of civil society. ([access here](#)).

12. Rhoads, E. (2018). The Role of Women in Violent Extremism in Asia. ([access here](#)).

13. Global Center on Cooperative Security. (2018). A Closer Look: Gender Dynamics in Violent Extremism and Countering Violent Extremism in Southeast Asia ([access here](#)).

14. Interview with AMAN Indonesia

15. Interview with AMAN Indonesia

16. Interview with AMAN Indonesia

17. Oxford Islamic Studies. (2007). Women, Islam and the Twenty-first Century. ([access here](#)).

18. Interview with AMAN Indonesia

19. Oxford Islamic Studies. (2007). Women, Islam and the Twenty-first Century. ([access here](#)).

Violent extremist narratives frame the progressive debate on these topics, which challenges conservative, patriarchal interpretations, as attacks on Islamic values and disregard for women's traditional roles: Islam is "under threat" by Indonesia's modernization and pluralism.<sup>20</sup> Indonesia has the fourth largest population of young people, and youth unemployment is high (around 20-30%).<sup>21</sup> For young, disempowered Indonesian men – particularly rural men who struggle with marginalization and resentment around the affluent lifestyles they see their urban peers participating in – Islam holds global significance as a symbol of resistance to Western hegemony.<sup>22</sup> Violent extremist narratives promote Islam as not just a religion, but as a powerful, transnational identity in which they are invited to participate.<sup>23</sup>

Conservative Islamic groups and activists in Indonesia have effectively used online spaces, including social media, to popularize narratives advancing a conservative approach to Islam that restricts gender equality.

In Indonesia, conservative women are active agents in disseminating violent extremist narratives in online spaces, making them attractive to a younger generation.<sup>24</sup> These women and their audience often do not come from pesantren or Islamic-studies backgrounds. Instead, they draw on ideologies and ideas popularized by conservative Islamist groups to promote simplified, patriarchal understandings of Islamic texts. Young Indonesian women use social media platforms such as Instagram as avenues for modern-day da'wa (proselytization), educating others on the best way to become pious Muslim women.<sup>25</sup> Recurring da'wa themes include encouraging women to cover their bodies through veiling and finding a marriage partner in an Islamic way by forgoing dating and getting married at a young age.<sup>26</sup>

Conservative social media posts might display quotes from the Qur'an presented in a visually appealing way but lacking in context, highlighting passages that align with specific ideological objectives.<sup>27</sup> Narratives emphasize the importance of traditional gender roles in maintaining balance and complementarity, and reject gender equality as an imported Western concept.<sup>28</sup> The end goal of hijra is portrayed as the attainment of pious love, happiness and tranquility – attractive prospects for young Indonesian women in search of an identity. By using their graphic design skills, knowledge of social media and connection to



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their personal lives and stories, these young conservative women convincingly reproduce regressive narratives around Islam and gender that may leave them and their audience at risk of recruitment and participation in violent extremism.

By using their graphic design skills, knowledge of social media and connection to their personal lives and stories (...) young conservative women convincingly reproduce regressive narratives around Islam and gender.

## KUPI: Women's Religious Leadership for Gender Justice and Peace

Advocacy for gender equality through religious scholarship and education offers a powerful counter-discourse to extremist religious teachings, including the simplified conservative narratives popularized on Indonesia's social media platforms.<sup>29</sup> A profile of AMAN Indonesia by Move92 summarizes this well:

20. USAID. (2013). Violent Extremism and Insurgency in Indonesia: A Risk Assessment. ([access here](#)).

21. Indonesia Investments. (2018). Unemployment in Indonesia. ([access here](#)).

22. USAID. (2013). Violent Extremism and Insurgency in Indonesia: A Risk Assessment. ([access here](#)).

23. Ibid.

24. Nisa, E. F. (2019). Muslim Women in Contemporary Indonesia: Online Conflicting Narratives behind the Women Ulama Congress. *Asian Studies Review*, 1–21.

25. Nisa, E.F. (2018). Creative and Lucrative Da'wa: The Visual Culture of Instagram amongst Female Muslim Youth in Indonesia. ([access here](#)).

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Nisa, E. F. (2019). Muslim Women in Contemporary Indonesia: Online Conflicting Narratives behind the Women Ulama Congress. *Asian Studies Review*, 1–21.

29. Idris, I. (2019). Preventing/countering violent extremism programming on men, women, boys and girls. ([access here](#)).



KUPI gathers women ulama from diverse institutions and organizations to advocate for gender justice and social justice.

“In Indonesia, the conservative and radical groups tend to dominate Islamic teaching. They also dominate women’s issues—early marriage, niqab, polygamy and the definition of a wife’s obligations. Gender bias and discrimination of women are also shaped by a strong influence of the media, particularly social media and technology. However, women ulama offer an Islamic perspective that promotes gender equality and women empowerment, and their teachings are well-documented.”<sup>30</sup>

**KUPI is a pioneering effort to organize women ulama, as defined by their interpretations of Islam proclaiming gender equality as a foundational basis of Islamic teachings, rather than by their gender identity as women alone.**

The Indonesian Congress of Women Scholars or Kongres Ulama Perempuan Indonesia (KUPI) is a pioneering effort to organize women ulama, defined by their interpretations of Islam proclaiming gender equality as a foundational basis of Islamic teachings, rather than by their gender identity as women alone.<sup>31</sup> KUPI serves as a collective, gathering women ulama from diverse institutions and organizations including scholars, educators, activists, and officials, to advocate for gender justice and social justice. The Asian Muslim Action Network (AMAN Indonesia) is a co-organizer of KUPI and aims to promote gender equality, advocate for the rights of women who have been targets of gender-based violence, and promote the role of women ulama in the prevention of violent extremism.<sup>32</sup>

AMAN Indonesia uses a peacebuilding approach to preventing violent extremism, translating techniques such as Reflective Structured Dialogue (RSD) to create open space for dialogue and, for example, facilitate reintegration of returnees and deportees affiliated with violent extremism. KUPI was identified by AMAN Indonesia as a strategic partner due to their capabilities as transformational agents of change and key stakeholders in the effort to prevent of violent extremism. In collaboration with AMAN, women ulama have been trained to counter extremist narratives with their own peaceful and just interpretations of Islam, to recognize the signs of violent extremism, and to actively engage with the government in dialogue and advocacy at the provincial and national levels.

To date, KUPI’s efforts to prevent violent extremism have focused on addressing the conditions conducive to violent extremism and terrorism. They do this by promoting tolerance using alternative narratives and engagement of the media, and detecting early warning signs.<sup>33</sup> For instance, KUPI is working “to reconstruct the concept of jihad as the work of civilization and humanity, while jihad with the meaning of warfare is only in the context of self-preservation.”<sup>34</sup>

## Contesting Online Space

Contestation of violent extremist narratives on social media is risky and can very quickly turn into a trial-by-mob. Bullying and provocation by radical groups is rife, and conservative voices have successfully captured a wide swath of online spaces. These groups advance a single narrative, often based on narrow interpretations of Islamic texts, and do not allow for multiple perspectives. In online discussions, women’s issues tend to generate a

30. Move92. (2021). Partner profile: AMAN Indonesia. ([access here](#)).

31. Robinson, K. (2017). Female Ulama voice a vision for Indonesia’s future. ([access here](#)); Interview with AMAN Indonesia.

32. Women and Peacebuilding Blog. (2019). Amplifying Women Ulama’s Voices: Training and Dialogue on Gender and Islam. ([access here](#)).

33. Interview with AMAN Indonesia.

34. Congress of Indonesian Women Ulama: Official Documents on Process and Outcome, p. 139.

lot of attention and passion. Zealous, conservative young people use sophisticated storytelling and visual tactics to get people on their side and dominate the Indonesian social media landscape.

Despite the risk of public backlash and retaliation, more and more women ulama feel they need to face the public and amplify their voices in online spaces. They recognize that the current battle is on social media, and that is where they need to win some space in order to educate people about Islamic teachings from their perspective. Rather than fighting in the comments section, they need to lay out their argumentation in articles and other platforms where they can fully explain their reasoning and interpretations. However,<sup>35</sup> due to the norms of consensus in Islamic scholarship, not all women ulama are comfortable directly and publicly countering violent extremist narratives.<sup>36</sup>

## Dialogue and Discourse

2017 saw a marked advance in public recognition of women ulama, as a result of their consolidation through the first official convening of KUPI. In a groundbreaking step, KUPI issued three fatwas<sup>37</sup> focused on priority issues for Indonesian women: Sexual Violence, Child Marriage, and the Destruction of Nature.<sup>38</sup> These first three fatwas also provide a testing ground for the acceptance and impact of this claim to religious authority by women ulama.<sup>39</sup> The Congress also produced extensive recommendations addressing religious radicalism, violence, and conflict. These recommendations emphasize pluralism, critical thinking, supporting the nation-state, minority rights, following the rule of laws against hate speech, support for women and child victims of radicalism through disengagement, and countering the stigmatization of returnees.<sup>40</sup>

KUPI's process of consultation and argumentation is a powerful antidote to the inflexible and binary nature of violent extremist ideologies, and a deliberate rejection of hegemonic power structures that underpin—and are underpinned by—gender inequalities. KUPI's methodology recognizes the experience of victims alongside scientific evidence and Islamic scholarship.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, they have established the necessity of these three components in Islam, arguing that without a gender perspective relevant texts may not be found among the tomes of Islamic scholarship that the traditional ulama rely on exclusively. The preparation for the 2017 convening of KUPI began fifteen years ago. It included participatory dialogue and learning that bridged the grassroots and the academic spheres and laid the groundwork for its decision-making structures.<sup>42</sup>

The incorporation of Reflective Structured Dialogue is thus a natural extension of KUPI's existing approach. Ruby Kholifah, Executive Director of AMAN Indonesia, explains,



Women ulama have been trained to counter extremist narratives with their own peaceful and just interpretations of Islam.

"The dialogue was aimed to create a safe space for women ulama from different ideologies (such as Sunni, Shia, Ahmadiyya, Salafi, and Wahhabi) to share their personal journey in dealing with controversial issues such as the Khilafah (Islamic State), living in co-existence with non-Muslims, polygamy, child marriage, girls' education, etc. We applied Reflective Structured Dialogue (RSD), an approach that teaches women ulama how to conduct a dialogue that makes everyone comfortable to talk and contribute. In collaboration with Mediators Beyond Borders International (MBBI), we were trained on how to use RSD tools over five days including simulations of dialogue. After that, the alumni of the training hosted a series of dialogues to engage other women from different congregations. Nine dialogues engaged 44 selected women ulama from the cities of Malang, Solo and Tasikmalaya."<sup>43</sup>

**KUPI's process of consultation and argumentation is a powerful antidote to the inflexible and binary nature of violent extremist ideologies, and a deliberate rejection of hegemonic power structures that underpin—and are underpinned by—gender inequalities.**

KUPI's members have since been increasingly active in their communities, helping people to understand events and reject narratives justifying violence in the aftermath of attacks. By enhancing the capacity of local members with guidance on deradicalization initiatives, KUPI can enable local women ulama to aid in rehabilitation and reintegration.

35. Interview with AMAN Indonesia.

36. Interview with AMAN Indonesia.

37. Fatwas are a non-binding legal opinions or rulings on points of Islamic law, practice, or convention, issued by an Islamic scholar.

38. Congress of Indonesian Women Ulama: Official Documents on Process and Outcome.

39. AMAN Indonesia is assisting KUPI with a review to assess the adoption of these fatwa in advance of the next congress in 2022.

40. Congress of Indonesian Women Ulama: Official Documents on Process and Outcome, p. 138.

41. Congress of Indonesian Women Ulama: Official Documents on Process and Outcome.

42. Ibid.

43. Interview with AMAN Indonesia.



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# CASE STUDY

## INSTITUTIONALIZING EQUALITY: SHIFTING GENDER ROLES IN JORDANIAN COUNTERTERRORISM RESPONSES

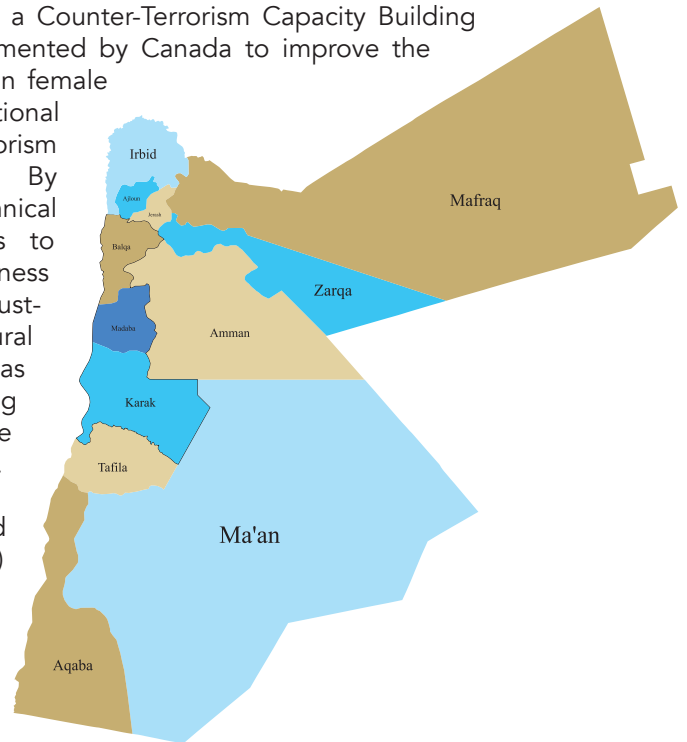
A Case Study on the Role of Gender and Identity in Shaping Positive Alternatives to Extremisms<sup>1</sup>

### SUMMARY

The HASBANI project is a Counter-Terrorism Capacity Building Program (CTCBP) implemented by Canada to improve the participation of Jordanian female police officers in operational roles in counterterrorism (CT) crisis response. By complementing technical training with strategies to promote gender awareness and taking a personal, trust-based approach to cultural change, the project has made inroads in shifting rigid gender roles in the Jordanian security sector.

Taking a Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA+) approach,<sup>2</sup> this case study discusses facilitating factors, barriers, and challenges to expanding the roles of women in CT responses. Drawing on good practices from women-led civil society organizations in other contexts, it considers how combining women's participation with a community policing approach strengthens the ability of the security sector to provide a positive alternative to participation in violent extremist groups.






Despite Jordan's relative stability, the country is one of the highest per-capita contributors of foreign fighters in the world and has suffered several violent extremist attacks on its soil. Islamist extremist groups in the region have taken a dynamic and strategic approach to including women in combat, operations, and propaganda. They skillfully manipulate gender roles to avoid detection, bolster recruitment, and generate attention for their cause.



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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

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**Violent extremist groups dynamically adjust their approach to gender roles according to what best suits their tactical interests.** They manipulate perceptions of women's roles in society to avoid detection and strengthen their operations. Extremist recruitment propaganda plays into the economic and social restrictions women face by offering them purpose, opportunity, and belonging.
- 
**Training and upskilling women in CT roles is most effective when paired with awareness training to reform the dominant patriarchal culture of the police and security sector.** Organizational change around gender is slow and incremental, and awareness training should take a long-term approach that prioritizes trust- and relationship building with local security actors.
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**Positive incentives for shifting gender roles need to be clearly communicated to intervention partners and participants, including to female participants.** Traditional gender roles offer familiarity and comfort and shifting them needs to carry tangible benefits. Demonstrating how entering new roles can instill a sense of duty, honor, and prestige offers one avenue for communicating incentives, but must be paired with structural change that considers women's responsibilities at home and with their families.
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**Community engagement approaches can support trust-building, holistic prevention of violent extremism, and leverage the capacity of female officers to create more open, trusted, and inclusive relationships with their communities.** To provide an effective, positive counterweight to violent extremist groups, policing and CT culture needs to prioritize community needs and human security. Encouraging female participation in CT is important, yet insufficient as a long-term solution for transforming violent extremism. Purely militarized and securitized approaches risk increasing the vulnerability of communities to recruitment and radicalization. Integrating a community engagement approach
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**The experiences of women-led civil society organizations offer critical lessons in building and repairing community-police relationships.** Their interventions center gender equality and enable a joint community-police response to the threat of violent extremism.

## CONTEXT ANALYSIS

Despite Jordan's relative stability and safety compared to its neighbors in the region, the country is known for having one of the highest per capita contributions of foreign fighters in the world.<sup>3</sup> Jordan's geographical positioning, high refugee population, and growing political and economic tensions between the government and its young population leave it vulnerable to radicalization and destabilization.<sup>4</sup> Jordan is furthermore home to the "father of ISIS," Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, whose legacy and ideas live on in Jordanian communities. The country has suffered from a variety of smaller-scale violent extremist attacks such as the 2005 Amman hotel suicide bombings, the Kerak castle incident in 2016, and the Salt and Madaba incidents in 2018.<sup>5</sup>

The Jordanian government has responded to these incidents by building up its police and military presence with the support and funding of international partners, most predominantly the United States.<sup>6</sup> Under its 2006 anti-terrorism law, Jordan also instated the death penalty for terrorist crimes, a move widely criticized by human rights organizations.<sup>7</sup> There is evidence that the government's attempts at reinforced border defenses and improved surveillance capabilities have successfully thwarted terrorist attacks.<sup>8</sup> However, internal structural



During the 2016 Kerak castle attack, suspects escaped police by taking advantage of conservative cultural norms.

3. Klingensmith, A. (2019). The Role of Local Communities in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) in Jordan. ([access here](#)).

4. Milton-Edwards, B. (2018). Marginalized youth: Toward an inclusive Jordan. ([access here](#)).

5. Counter Extremism Project (2021). Jordan: Extremism and Terrorism. ([access here](#)).

6. U.S. Department of State (2021). U.S. Security Cooperation with Jordan. ([access here](#)).

7. Amman Center for Security Studies (2021). The negative effects of terrorism on the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms: The case of Jordan. ([access here](#)).

8. Al-Sharafat, S. (2021). Sustained Counterterrorism Efforts Remain Key to Preventing Attacks in Jordan. Fikra Forum. ([access here](#)).



issues such as economic disparity, austerity measures, and youth unemployment remain, are exacerbated as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and result in growing anti-government sentiment. Jordanian police have taken a securitized approach to responding to civil unrest, using force to break up peaceful protests and arresting political activists and government critics.<sup>9,10</sup> Due to these crackdowns and the government's harsh restrictions on freedom of assembly, the country's status declined from Partly Free to Not Free on the 2021 World Freedom Index.<sup>11</sup>

## Gender Roles in the Jordanian Security Sector

The participation of women in counterterrorism (CT), countering and preventing violent extremism (C/PVE) and peacebuilding in Jordan is constrained by a myriad of cultural barriers. Although Jordanian women are highly literate and educated, traditional attitudes that view women as homemakers limit female participation in public life, politics, and in the labor force.<sup>12</sup> Initial CT and C/PVE efforts in Jordan reflected these traditional gender norms and social roles, focusing on the participation of women as wives and mothers in deradicalizing their partners and children.<sup>13</sup> The release of Jordan's National Action Plan for the Implementation of Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS-NAP) in 2018 widened the scope of women's roles in CT and CVE policy, calling for the creation of roles for women in the security sector, including police, military, and intelligence agencies, and the development of mechanisms for security forces to integrate gender perspectives into their work.<sup>14</sup> In Jordan, inviting women into the security sector carries tangible benefits: women can handcuff and carry out searches of both women and men (whereas men can only search other men), can provide emergency medical aid to both genders without explicit permission, and female survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) feel more comfortable reporting crimes to female officers.

In addition to the perception that women are primarily suited to familial roles as mothers and wives, cultural notions of honor and shame keep women out of the Jordanian public sphere. Female victims of domestic and sexual violence are often blamed for the abuse they face and being victimized carries social stigma and shame for them and their families. As a result, Jordanian society places significant emphasis on "protecting" women. For decades, women who are perceived as being at-risk of domestic violence or honor crimes have been held in "protective custody" by the state, a practice often used as an excuse to detain women who have engaged in behaviors deemed shameful by their families and male guardians, such as having sex outside of marriage.<sup>15</sup> Attitudes that justify excluding women from society under the guise of their protection also extend to the Jordanian security sector.

Keeping women behind the scenes [of the Jordanian security sector] is a deliberate choice: deploying them in front-line capacities risks something happening to them, which would carry shame for them and their families

Women in the security sector and police largely work in administrative, secretarial, and desk-based positions. They rarely occupy crisis response, tactical, operational, or leadership roles. The most visible public presence female officers have is as traffic police. Keeping women behind the scenes is a deliberate choice: deploying them in front-line capacities risks something happening to them, which would carry shame for them and their families and invite negative public perception. Practical considerations also constrain women's participation: women cannot sit in the front seat of a car with a man who is not her husband, and they cannot stay overnight at trainings due to concerns they might face sexual violence.<sup>16</sup> As a result, despite the benefits of women's participation and the high-level policy commitments made by the Jordanian government, Jordan's deep-seated gender roles continue to inhibit implementation of its WPS-NAP objectives.

## Playing with Perception: Manipulation of Gender Roles by Islamist Extremist Groups

While attempts at integrating women in CT and C/PVE responses in Jordan are stifled by rigid gender norms, violent extremist groups in the region are taking increasingly flexible approach towards using women in their combat operations. Islamist extremist groups have a complex relationship with using women in combat roles, as it forces them to reconcile their ideology – which confines women to the private sphere and emphasizes their role as wives and mothers – with the pragmatic need for fighters to carry out attacks. Traditionally, groups like the Islamic State and Hamas did not directly encourage attacks by women but showed willingness to incorporate women in combat in select circumstances, such as when acting in defense ("defensive Jihad").<sup>17, 18</sup> They have also retroactively praised attacks by female shooters and suicide bombers that align with their objectives, for instance when, following the 2015 San Bernardino shooting, the Islamic State referred to the married couple that carried out the attack as "soldiers of the Caliphate."<sup>19</sup> In the face of strategic necessity, such as

9. Nusairat, T. (2020). Jordan protests met with repression as government changes tactics. Atlantic Council. ([access here](#)).  
10. Al-Khalidi, S. (2021). Jordan Police Detain Scores of Activists, Break up Protests. Reuters. ([access here](#)).  
11. Freedom House (2021). Freedom in the World 2021: Jordan. ([access here](#)).  
12. Smith, J. (2019). Jordanian Feminism and Countering Violent Extremism. Brown Political Review. ([access here](#)).  
13. UN Women (2016). Women and Violent Radicalization in Jordan. ([access here](#)).  
14. Government of Jordan (2018). Jordanian National Action Plan (JONAP) for the Implementation of UN Security Council resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, 2018 - 2021 ([access here](#)).

15. Amnesty International (2019). Jordan: Imprisoned women, stolen children: Policing sex, marriage, and pregnancy in Jordan. ([access here](#)).  
16. Interview with Global Affairs Canada Project Officer, January 2022.  
17. George Washington University (2019). Perspectives on the Future of Women, Gender, & Violent Extremism. ([access here](#)).  
18. Tony Blair Institute (2018). ISIS, Women and Jihad: Breaking With Convention. ([access here](#)).  
19. Callimachi, R. (2015). Islamic State Says 'Soldiers of Caliphate' Attacked in San Bernardino. The New York Times. ([access here](#)).

loss of territory, some Islamist extremist groups have been quick to renegotiate traditional gender roles: after the Islamic State lost Mosul to the Iraqi government in 2017, the group released an article explicitly outlining women's obligation to engage in Jihad on behalf of the Caliphate, citing examples of mujahidat who fought alongside Prophet Mohammad to provide role models for aspiring female Jihadis.<sup>20</sup> These examples, though are likely to be temporary strategies, demonstrate how Islamist extremist groups are able to rapidly shift their norms around gender and women's roles based on what approach best serves their tactical interests.

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Islamist extremist groups have also proven adept at playing into, manipulating and co-opting gender roles and cultural norms to strengthen their operations. Jordan's 2016 Kerak castle attacks illustrate this point. Leading up to the attack, Jordanian security forces attempted to enter a suspicious home in a nearby town after receiving complaints from neighbors. Taking advantage of conservative cultural norms, the suspects cried that there were women present in the home who were uncovered, preventing the all-male police from entering. The delay gave the attackers enough time to escape, mobilize weapons and eventually escape to hide out in Kerak castle, taking the lives of 11 members of the security forces and 3 civilians, including a Canadian tourist.<sup>21</sup> The Islamic State later claimed responsibility for the attack. While there were no actual women present in the home, the attackers were able to co-opt traditional gender roles to create the perception of female presence. Similar tactics by Islamist extremist groups include the use female operatives to smuggle weapons and goods under their clothes and avoid detection by security personnel, knowing that women are less likely to be searched. They understand that portraying women in propaganda, especially in combat roles that starkly contrast with traditional cultural norms, will generate shock value and media attention for the violent extremist cause.<sup>22</sup> Islamist extremist groups furthermore recognize the power and influence of women's social roles, particularly the position of women as entry points to their family and community. They draw on women's extensive familial and social networks to facilitate recruitment, intelligence-gathering, proselytization, education, and fundraising.<sup>23</sup> Critically, the operational roles of women in Islamist extremist groups - although naturally bound

by ideological conventions and traditional divisions - are dynamic and appear to evolve with the emergence of new challenges and strategic needs.

Islamist extremist groups, especially the Islamic State, leverage restrictive societal gender roles to encourage radicalization and recruitment. While the ideological rhetoric of the Islamic State is embedded in patriarchy, misogyny and the subjugation of women, the group's narratives highlight opportunities for empowerment though contributions to state-building and position participation in the group as offering a sense of belonging and purpose. Islamic State propaganda has highlighted the availability of educational opportunities for women, their role in teaching children, and their contributions to on-line lectures and other recruitment materials.<sup>24</sup> Disaffected young women who face limited social, economic, and political opportunities may view joining violent extremist groups as an alternate path to empowerment and an escape from the gendered norms of their family and community.<sup>25</sup> Islamist extremist groups also manipulate conservative norms around female honor and purity by using rape and sexual violence as a recruitment tactic that makes women easier to exploit (as they "lost honor anyway") and inhibits their disengagement from extremism due to the heightened social stigma they would face if they were to return to their families and communities.

### The HASBANI Project: Building Technical and Cultural Capacity for Women's Participation in the Jordanian Security Sector

To improve the presence of women in counterterrorism and security responses, Canada, under its Counter-Terrorism Capacity Building Program (CTCBP), began implementation of a project to deliver training and support to female officers in the Jordanian gendarmerie and Public Security Directorate (PSD).<sup>26</sup> The HASBANI CTCBP project was launched in 2018 and designed specifically in response to the 2016 Kerak castle incident, acting on the assumption that if female officers had been involved in the tactical response to the attacks, the suspects could have been apprehended and operational losses may have been avoided. Under the project, Canada and its implementing partners train female officers in firearms, search techniques, and English language skills to prepare them for operational roles and growth within the organization. Both genders are trained on tactical medical skills to provide first-line medical support. An awareness of Jordan's gender dynamics is integrated in the trainings: participants are taught, for example, that when encountering female suspects, female officers should approach them first and that when entering a room where women are

20. Winter, C. and Margolin, D. (2017). The Mujahidat Dilemma: Female Combatants and the Islamic State. ETH Zurich Center for Security Studies. ([access here](#)).

21. Momani, B. (2019). Our feminist foreign policy is not perfect, but in Jordan, it's doing a lot of good. The Globe and Mail. ([access here](#)).

22. George Washington University (2019). Perspectives on the Future of Women, Gender, & Violent Extremism. ([access here](#)).

23. Ibid.

24. Europol, (2019). Women in Islamic State Propaganda: Roles and Incentives. ([access here](#)).

25. International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) and United Nations Development Program (UNDP) (2019). Invisible Women: The Gendered Dimensions of Return, Rehabilitation and Reintegration from Violent Extremism. ([access here](#)).

26. Government of Canada (2021). Security Capacity-Building Programs. ([access here](#)).

27. In 2019, the Gendarmerie and PSD merged and are now jointly referred to as the PSD. The HASBANI project was originally training the Gendarmerie but as a result of the merger has been able to reach a broader range of participants across the PSD.



The HASBANI project trains female police officers to prepare them for operational roles within the Jordanian Public Security Directorate (PSD).

present, female officers should be present. In the tactical medic courses, trainers rectify misconceptions and assumptions around male-on-female medical support, such as that men can be charged with assault if they give CPR to an unconscious woman.<sup>28</sup> Through these technical trainings, the project aims to improve the PSD's capacity to deal with female suspects, victims, and civilians in CT operations.

To complement and strengthen the technical training, the project contains gender awareness training aimed at shifting the organizational culture of the PSD to be more accepting of the presence and leadership of female officers in operational roles, and to institutionalize gender as a component of PSD's strategies, policies, and operations. Gender awareness training initially took the form of workshops and seminars for staff and senior personnel of all genders, and later in the project began taking a training of trainers approach with the Gender Unit team and Gender Focal Points introduced under the PSD's 2021 Gender Mainstreaming Strategy. The content of the training touches on gendered concepts and their relevance to security and counterterrorism and discusses international policy commitments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), UN Security Council Resolution 1325, and Jordan's own WPS-NAP. On a more direct and behavioral level, awareness training required reframing the attitude of male officers towards

their female counterparts. At the start of the project, a male officer would refuse to sit in the front of a police car next to a woman, even though they were police partners.<sup>29</sup> The training taught men and women that they are first and foremost colleagues who need to take a pragmatic, professional approach to collaborating.

The HASBANI project offers important insight about the level of work and attention required to successfully broaden gender roles and dynamics in counterterrorism and policing, especially when a project is implemented by an external, international partner. It highlights that creating cultural change in traditionally patriarchal spaces like the security sector requires more than just imparting knowledge on why women's participation is important, it necessitates time, relationship-building, continuous presence, and constant negotiation with project participants and partners. Project implementers cited their attitude of being there to help rather than criticize, sustained in-country presence throughout the multi-year duration of the project, and the personal approach they took to relationship building with PSD leadership as central to their accomplishments. One project implementer stated that his background as a retired police officer allowed him to build trust with Jordanian partners and relate to them by providing examples of how police in his home country had undergone a similar transformation process to become more inclusive of women.<sup>30</sup> Being able to connect the project objectives

28. Interview with HASBANI implementing partner, January 2022.

29. Interview with Global Affairs Canada Project Officer, January 2022.

30. Interview with HASBANI implementing partner, January 2022.

back to the Kerak castle incident emphasized that the project is not just externally imposed – a common security sector perception of gender-focused projects – but has a clear CT purpose. These trust-building strategies have led to successes in the project, like the acceptance of mixed gender trainings by the PSD – a practice unheard of prior to the project. Canada has also been invited to implement the project for the Jordanian military, a sign that Jordan recognizes that it is not sustainable to exclude women from CT operations.

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Creating cultural change in traditionally patriarchal spaces necessitates time, relationship-building, continuous presence, and constant negotiation.  
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Despite these successes, meaningful change around shifting gender norms in the PSD remains slow and incremental. Jordan has not experienced a critical terrorist incident in recent years that would provide insight into whether the PSD is able to put the training into practice and deploy female officers in its response. While there is rhetorical support by PSD leadership, they maintain a fear of public perception and shame. A PSD General has stated that if one incident happens, or one female officer gets hurt, the project will be over, demonstrating continued perception of women as vulnerable and in need of protection.<sup>31</sup> Resistance to change has also come from the female officers themselves, who in assuming operational roles will have to work farther away from home and from their families, face more risk and work longer hours for the same salary.<sup>32</sup> When traditional responsibilities for Jordanian women as homemakers clash with opportunities for advancement in the police force, women appear to choose the former. Structural concerns like limited access to childcare further limit incentives. The project has begun to address these challenges by setting examples of successful women in operational roles, such as female officers dispatched to UN peacekeeping or as security for the Qatar World Cup, playing into a sense of duty and honor to encourage women to participate in the training. Interestingly, this “role model” approach mirrors some of the tactics used by the Islamic State to sensitize their members to the inclusion of female combatants.

Finally, the HASBANI project, while taking strides towards removing technical and cultural barriers to increasing the proportion of women in frontline roles, does not place as much attention on considering the



Trust-building strategies have led to successes in the HASBANI project, like the acceptance of mixed gender trainings.

psychological and mental health impact on women entering a male-dominated environment and being the target of gender bias. Studies have shown that women in male-dominated work environments face higher stress exposure, isolation, low social support, and high pressure to perform.<sup>33</sup> Facing gender bias in one’s workplace has also been linked to decreasing productivity, poor teamwork and damaged relationships with supervisors, as well as higher withdrawal rates.<sup>34</sup> In project reports, several female trainees indicate that they still face unsupportive attitudes and perceptions around women working in operational duties. In addition to interventions to shift the organizational culture to be more supportive of women in operational roles, the project would do well to include measures to support the female officers, such as ensuring they receive frequent recognition and acknowledgment from their supervisors, have safe spaces to discuss challenges with one another, and have access to reporting mechanisms for incidents of prejudice, unfair treatment, and harassment. Providing such coping mechanisms will be integral to long-term retention of female officers. Broadly, the expectation that women change their skills, behaviors, and attitudes to fit neatly into a masculine CT environment is unfair and unrealistic – the environment must adapt to meet them where they are, ensure they feel safe and welcome, and treat them with support, care, and respect.

31. Interview with Global Affairs Canada Project Officer, January 2022.

32. Interview with HASBANI implementing partner, January 2022.

33. Indiana University. (2015). Women in mostly male workplaces exhibit psychological stress response. ScienceDaily. ([access here](#)).

34. Lekchiri, S., Crowder, C., Schnerre, A. and Eversole, B.A.W. (2019). Perceived workplace gender-bias and psychological impact: The case of women in a Moroccan higher education institution. European Journal of Training and Development, Vol. 43 No. 3/4, pp. 339-353.

The expectation that women change their skills, behaviors, and attitudes to fit neatly into a masculine counterterrorism environment is unfair and unrealistic – the environment must adapt to meet them where they are.

## Beyond Shifting Gender Roles, Towards an Ethos of Community Engagement <sup>35</sup>

While the focus of the HASBANI project is on strengthening the technical skills of female officers and building an organizational culture that welcomes their participation in operational roles, gender-responsive security sector initiatives and efforts to integrate women in policing in other contexts have taken a community engagement approach. In Sri Lanka, the Association for War Affected Women (AWAW) has provided training to personnel in over 400 police stations, using UNSCR 1325 to encourage police to identify community security concerns and develop interventions that created space for dialogue between police and communities.<sup>36</sup> In Somalia, Witness Somalia developed community policing structures that allow communities to share information with the police in a safe environment and report critical incidents. Female officers have an important place in these interventions and providing for their inclusion in field roles, as the HASBANI project does, remains critical. AWAW, for instance, advocated for the deployment of female officers because they instilled less fear than male officers when entering the homes of female civilians. Witness Somalia found that improving the presence of female officers in communities led to women feeling more comfortable to report crimes, especially when GBV-related.<sup>37</sup>

Such community engagement approaches create valuable space for exchange and trust-building between women-led civil society, police, and communities. They also enable a broader focus on prevention of violent extremism, rather than the narrower strategy of incident response. In the context of Jordan, elements of trust-building and prevention are relevant and necessary. The force and repressive tactics used by police against protestors has led to growing mistrust between the Jordanian state and civilians and potentially encouraging further radicalization to violent extremism.<sup>38</sup> Jordan also

has a limited and highly controlled civil society space, resulting in engagement around CVE being more top-down and less independent and locally rooted than in other contexts. While Islamist extremist groups have taken a dynamic, pragmatic approach to women's participation in their operations by renegotiating the deployment of women in combat roles, leveraging the ability of women to go undetected, and playing with gender roles by including women in propaganda, efforts to improve the presence of women in Jordanian security sector responses have evolved at a slower pace, constraining its capacity to keep up and respond. Without attention to holistic prevention efforts, violent extremist groups are likely to continue to expand and shift their operational tactics including their approach to gender roles.

In thinking holistically about the role of police in CVE, interventions must go beyond including female officers in securitized responses and add elements of community engagement that consider how police can provide

Redressing mistrust and damaged [state-citizen] relationships will require a fundamental transformation of policing culture from prioritizing state security interests and state protection towards serving communities.

a meaningful, positive alternative to participation in violent extremist groups. Redressing mistrust and damaged relationships will require a fundamental transformation of policing culture from prioritizing state security interests and state protection, towards serving communities, addressing local security concerns, and upholding human rights.<sup>39</sup> Mirroring the securitized tactics of violent extremist groups within policing, even when they are made gender-sensitive, is unlikely to provide a sustainable counterweight to violent extremism. Community engagement that includes female officers has been shown to be a more effective long-term solution, successfully leveraging the capacity of female police to create more open, trusted, and inclusive relationships with their communities.<sup>40</sup> Civil society, in particular women-led civil society, has a critical role to play in facilitating and monitoring such a transformational shift in Jordan's security sector.

35. The analysis in this section is informed by the experiences and perspectives of the Women's Alliance for Security Leadership (WASL), a network of over 80 women rights and peace practitioners engaged in preventing extremism and promoting peace, and based on ICAN's research on CVE and policing as captured in ICAN (2017). Preventing Violent Extremism, Protecting Rights and Community Policing Why Civil Society and Security Sector Partnerships Matter ([access here](#)) and ICAN (2016). Uncomfortable Truths, Unconventional Wisdoms – WASL Security Brief ([access here](#)).

36. International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) (2017). Preventing Violent Extremism, Protecting Rights and Community Policing Why Civil Society and Security Sector Partnerships Matter ([access here](#)).

37. Schamber, S. and Holmes, M. (2021). Agents of Change: Transforming Gender Roles and Extremism in Somalia, International Civil Society Action Network. ([access here](#)).

38. Evidence from other contexts has pointed to the role of state violence and abuses of power as a "tipping point" for people to join violent extremist groups. See: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2017). Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment. ([access here](#)).

39. International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) (2017). Preventing Violent Extremism, Protecting Rights and Community Policing Why Civil Society and Security Sector Partnerships Matter ([access here](#)).

40. Klingensmith, A. (2019). The Role of Local Communities in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) in Jordan. ([access here](#)).



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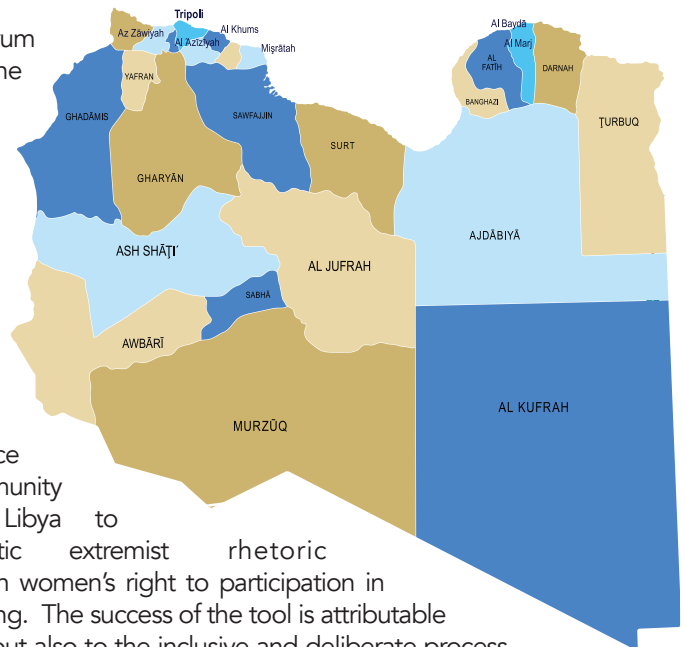
## CASE STUDY

# CHAMPIONS FOR PEACE: THE ROLE OF ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES IN RECLAIMING WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN LIBYA

A Case Study on the Role of Gender and Identity in Shaping Positive Alternatives to Extremisms<sup>1</sup>

## SUMMARY

The Libyan Women's Forum (LWF) has developed the Islamic Peace Tool (IPT), a guidebook which draws on Islamic texts, traditions, and law to deconstruct narratives that create an enabling environment for violent extremism, and affirm the need for peace, pluralism, and gender equality. The IPT is used by peace activists and community leaders throughout Libya to challenge misogynistic extremist rhetoric and advocate for Libyan women's right to participation in politics and peacebuilding. The success of the tool is attributable not only to its content, but also to the inclusive and deliberate process by which it was developed.









Taking a Gender-Based Plus (GBA+) approach,<sup>2</sup> this case study discusses how Libya has become home to extremist narratives justified by conservative interpretations of Islam that position women as weak, belonging in the domestic sphere, and in need of protection. The case analyzes how militant groups have deployed these gendered narratives to systematically curtail women's legal rights and exclude women from reforming Libya's post-war political institutions and promoting a more inclusive, equitable and gender just state.

Since the 2011 revolution, Libya has been characterized by civil war, a deeply fractal political situation, and rising extremism. Despite the silencing of Libyan women's voices in the aftermath of the uprising, many women have emerged as agents of community change and civil society leaders, advocating for peace and providing essential service to their communities. They have also come under attack, with women activists subject to death threats, smear campaigns, and assassinations.

1. The International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) was commissioned by Global Affairs Canada to produce this set of case studies on the role of gender and intersectional identities in countering violent extremism and counterterrorism. For more information or to contact the authors please email [info@icanpeacework.org](mailto:info@icanpeacework.org).

2. Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) is an analytical process that provides a rigorous method for the assessment of systemic inequalities, as well as to assess how diverse groups of women, men, and gender diverse people may experience policies, programs and initiatives. More info on the GBA+ approach is accessible [here](https://www24.international.gc.ca/gba/gba-eng.aspx).

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

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**Extremist groups manipulate religious narratives to emphasize women's subordination to men in order to exclude women from the public and political sphere, with far-reaching negative consequences for sustainable peace.** In Libya, the erasure of women from the political arena has thwarted the country's transition to an inclusive, peaceful, and democratic state.
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**Online violence, harassment and abuse limit women's ability to participate in public and political life by confining them to private and women-only fora, disrupting their political campaigns, and obstructing their organizing and activism.** Online incitement campaigns perpetuate extremist narratives; these are commonly used to silence and discredit women, including through sexual defamation.
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**Understanding the specific leverage points used by extremist groups enables countering violent extremism (CVE) interventions to be more strategic in targeting their alternative narratives.** In the Libyan context, where extremist narratives seek to undermine women's political participation, alternative narratives that draw on the Qur'an to promote the roles of women in peacebuilding and conflict resolution are particularly effective.
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**Peacebuilding and CVE interventions should strengthen the legal safety net for women and women peacebuilders and take care not to reinforce paternalistic protection narratives.** Impunity for violence against women enables extremist actors to position women as vulnerable, justify containing them to the domestic sphere, and expose women to increased insecurity under the guise of protection.
- 
**The process of developing alternative narratives is of equal importance to the content of the narratives in order to ensure ownership, sustainability, and dissemination across different sectors of society.** This can be achieved by including religious scholars in the conceptualization of narratives, engaging in a deliberate validation process, and initiating a media campaign to reach a wide audience.
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**Creating and maintaining alliances, networks, and spaces for trusted local actors to collaborate on shared advocacy and activism is key to amplifying peaceful discourse and ensuring its sustainability.** Alliances build empowerment, unity, and partnership – all necessary ingredients to keep alternative narratives alive in social consciousness.

## CONTEXT ANALYSIS

Since the 2011 uprising that removed then President Muammar Gaddafi from power, Libya has been characterized by widespread political instability and violent internal conflict exacerbated by the presence of transnational terrorist groups, mercenaries, and criminal organizations. Following the 2020 ceasefire, a failure to hold presidential and parliamentary elections in December 2021 has, once again, left the country to be ruled by two rival administrations and sparked fear of renewed violence and a resurgence of extremist groups.<sup>3</sup> Although the Islamic State was ousted from Libya militarily and politically in 2019, the factors that facilitated its rise - widespread political fragmentation, structural inequalities, and interference by international actors – persist.<sup>4</sup> Various militant groups including militias allied to the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafi militias, and jihadists aligned with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State maintain control over parts of Libyan territory and influence its governing actors. These groups leverage the country's protracted insecurity, poor governance, and factionalism to spread extremist narratives that foster division across political and tribal lines in order to consolidate their influence and recruit mostly young men to their ranks.<sup>5</sup>



Libyan women played a pivotal role in the 2011 uprising - also referred to as the February 17 revolution - yet their voices were rapidly silenced in its aftermath.

3. Wintour, P. (2022). Libya elite told to end game of 'musical chairs and focus on elections.' The Guardian. ([access here](#)).

4. International Crisis Group (2016). How the Islamic State Rose, Fell and Could Rise Again in the Maghreb. ([access here](#)).

5. Council on Foreign Relations (2022). Global Conflict Tracker. ([access here](#)).

Libyan civilians, especially women and girls, have borne the brunt of the violence inflicted by armed actors and their international supporters. The conflict has claimed an estimated 1,000 – 3,000 civilian deaths, and some 160,000 Libyans remain internally displaced, most of them women and children.<sup>6 7</sup> Thousands of people, including many human rights and political activists, have been subjected to enforced disappearance, torture, and prolonged detention at the hands of militias, some of which have been integrated into formal state security institutions.<sup>8</sup> The country houses over 600,000 migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers who are at high risk of exploitation, extortion, and enslavement.<sup>9</sup>

Women played a pivotal role in the 2011 uprising - also referred to as the February 17 revolution - yet their voices were rapidly silenced in its aftermath, and they have experienced a continued situation of insecurity in Libya's post-revolution context. The revolution started when the wives, mothers and children of prisoners killed in the 1996 Abu Salim prison massacre took to the streets in Benghazi to demand freedom for their lawyer who had been arrested by Gaddafi's forces, inspiring Libyan civil society to call for an end to dictatorship.<sup>10</sup> Activists hoped that the shift in political circumstances after the revolution would catalyze women's political, social, and economic empowerment. Instead, when the civil war broke out, Libyan women were ignored and dismissed by both national stakeholders and international actors who blamed the resistance against their participation on Libyan actors.<sup>11</sup> While recognizing the patriarchal structure of Libyan society, Libyan women saw it differently. They argued that the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) failed to include them despite clear mandates to do so under UN Security Council Resolutions 2376 (2017) and UNSCR 2323 (2016), which called for "women's effective, full, and equal participation in all activities related to the government's democratic transition, ending conflict, peace-building, and peace-keeping, as well as [...] facilitating a wider base of women's participation of all the different demographic segments in Libya in the political and public sphere."<sup>12</sup> This systematic erasure of women led to their exclusion from formal peace and political processes.

Despite the persistent silencing of Libyan women's voices in high-level political, peace and security processes, they have continued to play a powerful role in civil society and activism. The country's lack of functional state institutions means that civil society organizations – the majority of which are women-led – play an even more critical role in working for peace, social cohesion, and women's rights while also providing for basic needs and essential services in their communities.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the persistent silencing of Libyan women's voices in high-level political, peace and security processes, they have continued to play a powerful role in civil society and activism.

## From Hope to Exclusion: Gendered Narratives as Tools for Women's Disempowerment

Following the 2011 revolution, the proliferation of gendered extremist narratives directly undermined Libyan women's ability to reform post-war political institutions and build a more inclusive, equal, and peaceful state. Militant groups have deployed extremist narratives on women's rights and Islam as a deliberate strategy to create barriers to women's political participation and exclude them from competing to fill the post-revolution power vacuum. These tactics were identified by Libyan women early on. In October 2011, the Chair of the Transitional National Council declared that a law limiting polygamous marriages would be repealed, stating it was contrary to (their interpretation of) Shariah or Islamic law.<sup>14</sup> Women activists vocally opposed the removal of restrictions on polygamy – which included the need for consent from the first wife - but the repeal went through in 2013.

The reversal of limitations on polygamy constituted a warning sign for a broader conservative shift in Libya's cultural discourse, accompanied by constraints on women's rights. Militant groups popularized patriarchal, regressive narratives, justified by ultra-conservative interpretations of Islam, that framed women as weak, futile, subordinate to men, and belonging in the domestic sphere.<sup>15</sup> These narratives underpin their advocacy for conservative Shariah-based family law, gender segregation and guardianship, which subjects adult women to the authority of their closest male relative and limits their independent access to public spaces and services.<sup>16</sup> In the aftermath of the revolution, extremist gendered narratives – adopted by the general population with "frightening speed"<sup>17</sup> - justified barring women from participating in drafting a new constitution. Their exclusion deprived them from the opportunity to draft a constitution that could enshrine gender equality in Libyan law, remove restrictions to women's political participation, and criminalize violence against women.<sup>18</sup>

6. Imhof, O. (2021). Ten years after the Libyan revolution, victims wait for justice. Airwars. ([access here](#)).  
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13. Ragrag, N. (2021). Libyan Women and Political Participation: Ten Years Since the Revolution. The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy. ([access here](#)).  
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17. International Civil Society Action Network (2013). From Subjects to Citizens: Women in Post-Revolutionary Libya. ([access here](#)).  
18. Human Rights Watch (2013). A Revolution for All. Women's Rights in the New Libya. ([access here](#)).



In 2012, women obtained 33 out of 200 seats (16%) in the General National Congress, a substantial gain from the Gaddafi years. Yet, only two women ministers (of 40) were subsequently appointed to the new Libyan cabinet.<sup>19</sup> Over the following decade, Libyan women were never meaningfully included in national politics. When women have been able to participate, such as when the Government of National Unity (GNU) elected five women ministers to its government in June 2021, they have not been able to act on their revolutionary vision for equality. As a result of women's exclusion from political life and from constitution-drafting, they have been denied the opportunity to participate in shaping Libya's post-war institutions and pass legislation that would create a more inclusive, equitable and rights-based state for all. Consequently, many of the laws implemented under Libya's rival governments continue to restrict women's civil liberties, participation in politics, bodily autonomy, and economic status.<sup>20</sup> Both administrations have used gendered religious discourse to support their agendas, and leading faith figures such as Libya's grand mufti, Sadiq al-Ghariani have had great influence over national politics.<sup>21</sup> While his fatwas on, among other things, the need for female teachers to cover their faces when teaching teenage boys, stirred controversy, the influence of Al-Ghariani and his supporters cannot be underestimated.<sup>22</sup> Patriarchal attitudes, militarism, and machismo have become embedded within all political parties, including progressive leftist parties.<sup>23</sup> In deploying extremist narratives to justify women's subordination and exclusion, religious leaders, politicians, and militant groups strategically maintain and deepen structural and gender-based inequalities.

**In deploying extremist narratives to justify women's subordination and exclusion, religious leaders, politicians, and militant groups deepen structural and gender-based inequalities.**

In addition to confining women's legal and political rights, militant groups and their supporters have used gendered extremist narratives both online and offline to silence women active in the public space, such as female politicians, peacebuilders, human rights defenders, journalists, and activists. Militias, armed groups, and individuals have targeted them with threats, online abuse and smear campaigns that leverage gender stereotypes in order to damage their credibility and force them to retract from the

public sphere.<sup>24</sup> The extremist hate speech and images used to target them are highly gendered in nature, including accusations of immorality and dishonor, depictions of them as prostitutes and adulterers, and suggestions that they go back to the kitchen.<sup>25</sup> A common tactic to discredit women is to portray them as being "divorced," since divorce is perceived as bringing shame to a woman and her family.<sup>26</sup> These narratives have a significant impact on women's political engagement. Female politicians are targeted with online abuse at all stages of their political involvement, including campaigning, running for office, and during their time in office.<sup>27</sup> Online abuse carries the threat of real-life violence in Libya: female activists, journalists and political candidates have been beaten, abducted, tortured, and assassinated.<sup>28</sup> As a result, many women have withdrawn from public life to protect themselves and their families. While online activism offered an important avenue for Libyan women to make their voices heard in the aftermath of the 2011 uprising, online abuse has since curtailed these opportunities. In the face of threats, women are more likely to engage exclusively in private and women-only fora, limiting their ability to participate in democratic discourse.<sup>29</sup>

## The Vicious Cycle of Protection Narratives

While gendered extremist narratives are used to restrict Libyan women's legal and political rights, the absence of those rights is in turn used to create narratives that frame women as vulnerable and in need of protection, further justifying gender discrimination and women's exclusion from the public sphere. Extremist actors have cited the absence of legal accountability for sexual violence as a reason to keep women inside the domestic sphere where it is "safer."<sup>30</sup> Due to fear of sexual violence encountered on the way to school, parents curtail girls' education and restrict their movement.<sup>31</sup> To further protect girls from insecurity and from legal penalties associated with extramarital sex, parents may be more likely to enter them into child marriage.<sup>32 33</sup> Domestic violence is not explicitly prohibited by law in Libya and there is no recourse for online abuse, cyberbullying or death threats. At the regional and city level, women's exposure to online violence has therefore been used as an excuse to prevent them from running for political office, under the pretext of protecting them and their families.<sup>34</sup>

Some Libyan women have chosen to support extremist actors in exchange for protection by affiliated militias, armed groups, or tribal structures.<sup>35</sup> Such "protection bargains" enabled by extremist ideology and restrictive gender norms undermine the agency of women and girls to assert the terms of their protection, leaving them at the mercy of their "protector." They often result in increased or renewed insecurities for women: women may be

19. Johansson-Nogues, E. (2013). Gendering the Arab Spring? Rights and (in)Security of Tunisian, Egyptian and Libyan Women. ([access here](#)).

20. The Borgen Project (2020). Room to Advance Women's Rights in Libya. ([access here](#)).

21. Unites States Institute for Peace (2017). Libya's Religious Sector and Peacebuilding Efforts. ([access here](#)).

22. Ibid.

23. Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (2018). A Roadmap to Sustainable Peace in Libya: A Feminist Approach towards Achieving Peace and Security in the Face of Patriarchy, Militarism, and Fundamentalism. ([access here](#)).

24. Lawyers for Justice in Libya (2021). We Will Not be Silenced: Online Violence Against Women in Libya. ([access here](#)).

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Amnesty International (2018). Silenced Voices: Libyan Women Human Rights Defenders Under Attack. ([access here](#)).

29. Lawyers for Justice in Libya (2021). We Will Not be Silenced: Online Violence Against Women in Libya. ([access here](#)).

30. International Civil Society Action Network (2013). From Subjects to Citizens: Women in Post-Revolutionary Libya. ([access here](#)).

31. Bearat, H. (Working paper). Early Marriages in Middle East and North Africa. ([access here](#)).

32. Ibid.

33. Cordaid (2018). Women's rights in Libya. "We have stamina. Because our struggle is our Life." ([access here](#)).

34. Lawyers for Justice in Libya (2021). We Will Not be Silenced: Online Violence Against Women in Libya. ([access here](#)).

35. Johnston, M. et al (2019). Gender Equality and Violent Extremism: A Research Agenda for Libya. ([access here](#)).

protected within their communities, but unable to safely move in between communities due to their affiliation with a particular armed group or militia, domestic violence is frequently considered to be a private, family matter and thus beyond the scope of protection, and women may have to ask for permission from their protector to exercise basic rights, such as access bank accounts or identity documents.<sup>36 37</sup> Protection is also doled out in an uneven manner, with gender, race, nationality, and class identities intersecting to determine who gets which level of protection.<sup>38</sup> Despite being routinely exposed to sexual abuse and exploitation, for instance, refugee men and boys are not afforded protection by local actors.<sup>39</sup> The invocation of gendered extremist narratives thus sets off a vicious cycle: Libyan women are stereotyped as weak, subservient, and domestic, justifying their exclusion from the public and political spheres. This leads to the preservation of discriminatory laws and proliferation of hate speech that put them in danger, which reinforces that they are weak and in need of protection and further rationalizes their exclusion from public life. In essence, they are treated as objects, rather than as subjects of democracy – a serious impediment to Libya's successful transition to peace.

**A cohesive communal identity that prioritizes connection, non-violence, and gender equality can form a source of resistance to extremist narratives.**

## Tribal Identity as a Source of Resilience

Notably, members of matrilineal tribes in Libya's southwest have demonstrated significant resilience and resistance to recruitment by violent extremist actors and their narratives, despite exhibiting several characteristics that make them more vulnerable to recruitment such as marginalization, high violent extremist activity in their region, limited access to employment opportunities, and lack of government presence. Among the Toubou and Tuareq, two semi-nomadic tribes active across North and Central Africa, cultural gender norms are flexible, men are generally supportive of women's participation in national politics, and masculinities are less identified with dominance and aggression and more with social connectivity to the community.<sup>40</sup> In contrast to the conservative gendered narratives promoted by extremist organizations, Tuareq boys and girls are raised together, education for girls is prioritized, and women can freely choose their husbands.<sup>41</sup> Gender norms play a role in

tribal resilience to recruitment, with rigid gender norms negatively correlated with resistance to recruitment. In addition, tribal association and community offer young men a set social identity that confers meaning and honor, leaving them less likely to find identity from participation in violent extremist movements.<sup>42</sup> The traditions and values of these tribes demonstrate how a cohesive communal identity that prioritizes connection, non-violence, and gender equality can form a source of resistance to extremist narratives.

## Libyan Women Forum: Advocating for Women's Political Participation through Peaceful Islamic Narratives

In November 2011, following the mobilization of Libyan civil society during the revolution, a group of women from diverse age groups and segments of society established the Libyan Women Forum (LWF). LWF's stated vision is to, "empower women to play an effective role and participate in the reconstruction phase, influence the decision-making process and to reach executive positions in the social, economic and political sectors."<sup>43</sup> In the aftermath of the revolution, LWF carried out awareness programs, workshops and training sessions on the electoral process, reconciliation, constitution drafting, and the national disarmament initiative. Leading up to the 2012 and 2014 elections, they worked with women candidates on campaign skills to build their capacity to run for and take office. They developed a weekly radio program entitled Women and Politics which, due to political insecurity, was suspended in 2014.<sup>44</sup>

LWF also recognized the value in using religious scholarship to counter the prevalent extremist interpretations of Shariah, which threaten women's liberties and undermine efforts to reform Libya's post-war political institutions and promote a more inclusive and equal state. In 2015, in direct response to the increased radical religious discourse, LWF began the development of the Islamic Peace Tool (IPT).<sup>45</sup> Published in 2016, the IPT is a guidebook that draws on peaceful, pluralistic interpretations of Islamic to support female inclusion in peacebuilding, politics, policy-making, and CVE, as well as build resilience against narrow and exclusionary extremist thinking more broadly.

## Islamic Peace Tool: Alternative Narratives to Foster Acceptance for Women's Participation

Initially, LWF's programming was framed around the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution

36. Donovan, O. (2021). Trading Freedoms for Protection: Gender and Localised Protection in Libya. ([access here](#)).

37. Donovan, O. (2021). Gendered impacts of the localised protection of civilians: insights from Libya. ([access here](#)).

38. Ibid.

39. Women's Refugee Commission (2019). "More Than One Million Pains": Sexual Violence Against Men and Boys on the Central Mediterranean Route to Italy. ([access here](#)).

40. USIP (2017). Matriarchal and Tribal Identity, Community Resilience, and Vulnerability in South Libya. ([access here](#)).

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid.

43. Euro-Mediterranean Women's Foundation (2016). Libyan Women Forum profile ([access here](#)).

44. LWF internal documents, accessed February 18, 2022

45. Ibid.



LWF initiated a media campaign that prompted public discussions on the ongoing conflict in Libya and its effects on communities and on the role of women in promoting peace.

(UNSCR) 1325, using the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) framework to advocate for women's political participation. UNSCR 1325 reaffirms women's contributions and role in preventing and resolving conflicts, peace negotiations, peacebuilding, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction. It stresses the importance of women's full and equal participation in all efforts to maintain and promote peace and security. However, in framing work on women's participation in the context of UNSCR 1325, LWF was confronted with resistance and skepticism among parts of their target audience. For many Libyans, advocating for the presence of women in the political sphere purely through a UN framework was experienced as foreign and regarded as an extension of a Western agenda.<sup>46</sup>

For many Libyans, advocating for the presence of women in the political sphere purely through a UN framework was experienced as foreign and regarded as an extension of a Western agenda.

Consequently, LWF recognized the importance of anchoring their work on WPS and women's political participation in Islam. In efforts to address the reservations around female participation, LWF turned to the Qur'an to illustrate the public roles and achievements of women throughout Islamic history. LWF worked with a well-respected Libyan Islamic scholar to demonstrate that in Islam, women have the right to participate in public life and

engage in peacebuilding work. The scholar participated in workshops and trainings to provide readings of UNSCR 1325 and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) grounded in Islamic values<sup>47</sup> The idea was to develop peaceful messages based on examples from Islamic texts and traditions that urge tolerance, social cohesion, equality between women and men, peaceful coexistence between communities, and emphasize the individual's responsibility to help ensure peace and harmony.<sup>48</sup> In the words of a Libyan female spiritual guide (locally referred to as Morsheda), "Terrorism has no religious affiliation. Islam as any other divine religion calls for peace and renounces violence and terrorism." The workshops provided the blueprint for the IPT.

In 2016, as part of the validation process of the IPT, LWF leadership decided to bring together scholars from religious schools in Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, and Morocco with Libyan women activists in a series of discussions. The discussions centered on the responsibilities of scholars in supporting the participation of women in the public sphere, the use of culture and education to cultivate community dialogue and peaceful coexistence, and the role of women in fostering peace and social cohesion.<sup>49</sup> The scholars presented on the importance of promoting moderate interpretations of the Qur'an and Islamic law to counter increasingly radical religious discourse across the region and support women's roles in promoting social cohesion and peace.<sup>50</sup> They offered examples from the recorded life of the Prophet Muhammad and from Islamic history that challenge extremist discourse, gender misconceptions and stereotypes. By engaging in a deliberate validation process around the IPT's narratives, LWF gained the backing of a wider community of Islamic scholars on the IPT, strengthened dialogue between Islamic scholars and Libyan women peacebuilders, and built their capacity to jointly advance

46. LWF presentation of at the Tunis Forum on Gender Equality, May 2019

47. Interview with Shahrazad Magrabi, January 2022

48. LWF internal documents, accessed February 18, 2022

49. Libyan Women Forum (2019). Taking the Lead: Promoting Peace, Pluralism, and Inclusion.

LWF final project report to ICAN (internal document).

50. Interview with Shahrazad Magrabi, January 2022

women's participation in peacebuilding.<sup>51</sup> As evidenced by the methodology and process used by LWF, influential scholars can play a key role in advocacy and bringing public awareness to the issue of women's participation.

Building on the recommendations and discussions, the final IPT booklet provides concrete examples from the Qur'an, the Hadith (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) and the Sunnah (the customs and practices of the Prophet Muhammad) which are the sources of Islamic law, to illustrate the harmony between Islamic values, women's and human rights. The handbook provides historical examples of women building peace, resolving conflict, and countering extremism. It deconstructs narratives that enable extremist rhetoric and negates widely spread misconceptions that limit women's participation in politics and the public sphere. Beyond advancing female inclusion, the IPT elevates peaceful and pluralistic interpretations of Islam that encourage critical thinking about new ways of understanding Libyan culture, history, and religion. In doing so, the tool builds resilience against the rigid interpretations of Islamic identity promoted by extremist groups.



"Peace Circles" serve as a mechanism for coordinating peacebuilders to jointly advocate for women's participation in politics and peacebuilding.

”

**“Terrorism has no religious affiliation. Islam as any other divine religion calls for peace and renounces violence and terrorism.”**

- Libyan female spiritual guide

”

## Deliberate Dissemination

To disseminate the knowledge and learnings from the IPT, LWF carried out awareness-raising sessions targeting primarily activists, teachers, civil servants, housewives and female spiritual guides (Morsheda).<sup>52</sup> The aim was to encourage local organizations to develop and implement their own peacebuilding activities that would challenge extremist discourse and promote social cohesion in their communities. To reach larger segments of the population, LWF initiated a media campaign that prompted public discussions on the ongoing conflict in Libya and its effects on communities, as well as on the role of women (including challenges they face) in local mediation efforts and in promoting peace. The campaign was rolled out on national television programs, local radio shows, and in newspaper articles featuring interviews with public figures, activists, politicians, journalists, and working professionals on their perspectives and reflections on the peacebuilding efforts. Bringing the discussion into

the public discourse was a deliberate effort by LWF's Executive Director Shahrazad Magrabi to encourage dialogue and debate, popularize peacebuilding, and inspire others to launch similar initiatives. These efforts bore fruit as the tool became a sought-after instrument, referred to by the Ministry of Culture and mentioned in Parliament.

Building on these initial dissemination strategies, LWF recognized that there was a need for an instrument to localize the IPT and mobilize peacebuilders to promote social cohesion and societal peace.<sup>53</sup> They conceived of "Peace Circles" as a mechanism for coordinating peacebuilders to disseminate the message of the IPT and jointly advocate for women's participation in politics and peacebuilding. By creating and sustaining an alliance of peacebuilders throughout Libya, LWF has been able to capitalize on their work with Islamic scholars and the media campaign, ensuring that the discourse around why women have the right to participate and engage in political life continues and is amplified. The Peace Circles have become an important mechanism for promoting the use of positive, peaceful and gender equal narratives to justify political participation, share strategies on countering extremist rhetoric, and consolidate partnerships among local peacebuilders. They also provide much-needed spaces for Libyan women to unite, coordinate efforts, and amplify their voices. As noted by a regional Peace Circle coordinator: "I see the Peace Circles network as the start of a movement for [Libyan] women to unite and coordinate their efforts and amplify their voices for the mutual benefit of our nation. Women can contest the stereotype for being the weaker link. I believe all women, as they are strong, can be the champions for peace in Libya."

51. Ibid.

52. Libyan Women Forum (2019). Taking the Lead: Promoting Peace, Pluralism, and Inclusion LWF final project report to ICAN (internal document).

53. Ibid.



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# CASE STUDY

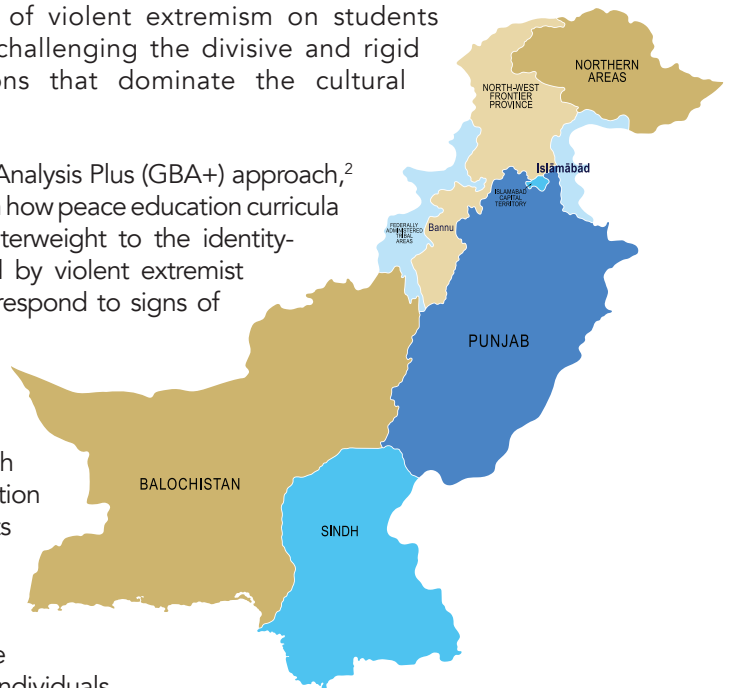
## SIGNS OF THE TIMES: THE ROLE OF EDUCATION AND GENDER IN SHAPING THE CULTURAL MINDSET IN PAKISTAN

A Case Study on the Role of Gender and Identity in Shaping Positive Alternatives to Extremisms<sup>1</sup>

### SUMMARY

Bushra Qadim Hyder, founder and director of the Qadims Lumiere School and College in Peshawar, Pakistan, developed a peace curriculum to promote understanding, acceptance, critical thinking, and open discussion of different ideas. She has partnered with private schools and madrassas to train teachers and integrate peace education into their curricula which has mitigated the impact of violent extremism on students and their parents by challenging the divisive and rigid religious interpretations that dominate the cultural mindset in Pakistan.

Taking a Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) approach,<sup>2</sup> this case study focuses on how peace education curricula provide a positive counterweight to the identity-based divisions fostered by violent extremist groups in Pakistan and respond to signs of violent extremism in the larger Pakistani culture. It discusses how taking a broad educational approach enables direct intervention with students and parents to prevent their joining violent extremist groups, promoting community resilience rather than stigmatizing individuals.



The structure of Pakistan's education sector encourages division and intolerance between students of different genders, religions, and socio-economic classes, leaving them vulnerable to recruitment by violent extremist actors. Increasingly, Pakistani schools – particularly madrassas and public schools – teach a rigid religious and nationalist ideology. By promoting the primacy of conservative religious identity, they undermine other aspects of human identity and foster exclusion and rejection of the "other" as threatening and inferior. This ideology is reinforced by strict gender norms that assert women's subservience to men.

1. The International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) was commissioned by Global Affairs Canada to produce this set of case studies on the role of gender and intersectional identities in countering violent extremism and counterterrorism. For more information or to contact the authors please email [info@icanpeacework.org](mailto:info@icanpeacework.org).  
2. Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) is an analytical process that provides a rigorous method for the assessment of systemic inequalities, as well as to assess how diverse groups of women, men, and gender diverse people may experience policies, programs and initiatives. More info on the GBA+ approach is accessible [here](https://www2.ec.gc.ca/info/nature/eng/eng_gba_plus.html).

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- 
**Education systems that encourage divisions and hierarchies between students of socio-economic, religious, and gender identities create a society vulnerable to capture by violent extremist actors.** Structural siloing of identity groups; curricula that promote patriarchal gender stereotypes, assert a singular religion as central to national identity, and erase the experiences of minorities; and teaching methods that eliminate complexity and critical thinking all foster division, inequality, and intolerance.
- 
**Gender inequality is reproduced and deepened by class and religious divisions.** In conducting a gender analysis, it is important to take an intersectional approach that considers how socioeconomic status and levels of religious tolerance impact attitudes and beliefs on gender equality.
- 
**Signs of rising extremism are not only observable at the individual level, but they also manifest and can be tracked at the societal level,** for instance through changes in fashion, decreased communication and socialization between identity groups, and limited ability to question authority figures. While reacting to individual level changes in dress or religious practice can foment stigma, these indicators should not be disregarded as signs at the societal level.
- 
**Peace education provides a counterweight to identity-based divisions** by teaching universal messages about humanity, exposing students to religious and cultural teachings of other communities, encouraging critical thinking and discussion, and incorporating elements of arts and literature.
- 
**Personal, preventative, and restorative approaches - rather than punitive or securitized methods - are central to ethical and culturally sensitive work on early warning signs.** Addressing signs of extremism in youth requires opening channels of communication with parents and students, providing positive alternatives to concerns about radicalization, and encouraging discussions with mentors, peers, and networks. Rather than labeling and punishing youth for their religious or cultural thought and practices, such approaches serve to build community resilience to violent extremism and resource those who have higher risk factors.
- 
 Transforming signs of radicalization and violent extremism necessitates both interventions targeted at **individual attitudinal and behavioral change**, such as discussions and **direct mentoring, and interventions aimed at broader structural change**, such as integrating peace curricula and teacher training across the education system.

## CONTEXT ANALYSIS

Pakistan's national identity has been intertwined with Islam since its independence from British colonial rule in 1947. While initially the country's diverse linguistic, ethnic, and religious minority groups enjoyed tolerance and freedoms, the ascension to power of General Zia-ul-Haq in the late 1970s and early 1980's marked a turning point for the country. Under his rule, Zia-ul-Haq initiated an Islamization process, invoking orthodox, Wahhabi-inspired interpretations of Islam.<sup>3</sup> The process included the imposition of a new education policy to prioritize the teaching of Islamic thought and ideology, and the introduction of Hudood Ordinances, a set of laws to criminalize adultery and non-marital sex that have led to the imprisonment of thousands of people – primarily women - for "honor" crimes.<sup>4</sup> The 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan brought an influx of funds, weapons and fighters from U.S and Arab allies to the country that further fostered radicalization and extremist activity, resulting in the creation of the Taliban and home-grown Islamist militias.<sup>5</sup>

The proliferation of Islamist groups in Pakistan has led to growing popularity of violent extremist ideology, and marginalization of more moderate voices. In the past two years, Pakistan has seen a resurgence of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a militant extremist organization fighting against the Pakistani state and notorious for its brutal attacks on civilians.<sup>6</sup> The Taliban's return to governance in Afghanistan in August 2021 has energized the TTP's violent insurgency and expanded the potential of the group, deepening links with other militant groups in the region such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Following their return to power, the Taliban released TTP leaders and provided them with continued support including freedom of movement in Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup>

### Markers and Myths of the Pakistani Education Sector

In the Pakistani context, the growth of violent extremism is closely linked to the expansion of religious seminaries –

3. Waterman, D. (2014). Saudi Wahhabi Imperialism in Pakistan: History, Legacy, Contemporary Representations and Debates. ([access here](#))

4. Human Rights Watch (HRW)(2006). Pakistan: Proposed Reforms to Hudood Laws Fall Short. ([access here](#)).

5. International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) (2014). Reclaiming the Progressive Past: Pakistani Women's Struggle Against Violence and Extremism. What the Women Say, Brief 10. ([access here](#)).

6. Jadoon, A (2021). The Evolution and Potential Resurgence of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan. Special Report, the United States Institute of Peace, no 494. ([access here](#)).

7. Mir, A. (2022). After the Taliban's Takeover: Pakistan's TTP Problem. United States Institute of Peace. ([access here](#)).



In the past two years, Pakistan has seen a resurgence of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a militant extremist organization notorious for its brutal attacks on civilians.

or madrassas. Zia-ul-Haq's 1979 education policy offered new economic incentives for opening madrassas, leading to the formation of over 2,000 of them. During the Afghanistan war, madrassas trained terrorist leaders and ideologues, as well as foot soldiers who responded to the call for jihad.<sup>8</sup> They also provided food and clothing, often attracting poorer students, and functioning as orphanages for children who lost their parents to war. Today, radical madrassas are often supported by foreign donations, such as funding from Islamic philanthropists, religious-political parties, sectarian militant organizations, and charities based in Saudi Arabia and Sunni Arab Gulf states.<sup>9</sup> Higher government institutions have limited oversight over madrassas and their activities, allowing extremist perspectives that promote hate speech, sectarianism, and militarism to be integrated in curricula unnoticed.<sup>10</sup>

Since the 9/11 attacks and growing international attention to terrorism, madrassas have gained a controversial reputation in the West as broadly responsible for fostering militancy and Islamic extremism. Only a minority of madrassas, however, teach extreme forms of Islam: of the 45,000 madrassas in Pakistan today, an estimated 10-15% teach are associated with Wahhabi and Deobandi schools of Islam.<sup>11</sup> This number reflects less than 1% of school enrollment in the country as many families send their children to public and private schools, which have expanded in recent decades.<sup>12</sup> There is growing evidence that the notion of a direct link between madrassas and militancy has been largely overstated by the West, and that violent extremist recruits come from a wide variety of educational institutions.<sup>13 14</sup> Recent studies have found that, beyond madrassas, extremist and divisive

rhetoric is embedded in Pakistan's mainstream public education system. One study cited an association between public education expenditure and terrorism, noting the role of public education curriculum and pedagogy as tools for radicalization.<sup>15</sup> Across all school types, Pakistani students indicate moderate-to-high sympathy for the Taliban.<sup>16</sup> As we will see in forthcoming sections, radicalization in the Pakistani school system is less a function of direct connections between specific schools and Islamic militants, and more of the way in which the system at large produces divisions, inequality and intolerance in Pakistani society.

## Divide and Conquer: Education as a Tool for Weaponizing (Gender) Identity

The Pakistani education system, through both its structure and content, drives divisions, inequality, and intolerance between identity groups, creating conditions that leave students vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment by violent extremist actors. Pakistan's primary and secondary education system, which consists of public schools (taught in Urdu), private schools (often taught in English), and madrassas, is structured according to socioeconomic class. Well to-do families send their children to private, English-speaking schools. Children of lower-middle-class families attend state-run public school, and working classes send their children to madrassas, which offer free religious education, meals, and accommodation.<sup>17</sup> While English-speaking schools prepare students for careers and study abroad, madrassa and public-school curricula offer little in the way of valuable economic

8. Khan, A. (2005). The Terrorist Threat and the Policy Response in Pakistan. SIPRI paper 11. Stockholm International Peace and Research Institute. ([access here](#)).  
9. Basit, A. (2015). Countering Violent Extremism: Evaluating Pakistan's Counter-Radicalization and De-radicalization Initiatives. Islamabad Policy Research Initiative (IPRI) Journal XV, no 2, 44-68 ([access here](#)).  
10. Email exchange with Bushra Qadim Hyder, February 2022.  
11. Singer, P. (2021). Pakistan's Madrassahs: Ensuring a System of Education, not Jihad. Brookings Institute. ([access here](#)).  
12. Andrabi, Tahir; Das, Jishnu; Khwaja, Asim Ijaz; and Zajonc, Tristan. Religious School Enrollment in Pakistan: A Look at the Data, World Bank ([access here](#)).  
13. Hanif, S., Ali, M. H., & Shaheen, F. (2019). Religious Extremism, Religiosity and Sympathy toward the Taliban among Students across Madrassas and Worldly Education Schools in Pakistan. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 1-16. doi:10.1080/09546553.2018.154

14. Nazar, Nazia (2021). Physical Punishment, Acceptance of Violence, Tolerance of Diversity, and School Burnout: A Comparative Study of Three Educational Systems in Pakistan, Abo Akademi University, Vasa, Finland ([access here](#)).  
15. Johnston, D, et al. (2016). Countering Violent Religious Extremism in Pakistan: Strategies for Engaging Conservative Muslims. International Center for Religion and Diplomacy.  
16. Hanif, S., Ali, M. H., & Shaheen, F. (2019). Religious Extremism, Religiosity and Sympathy toward the Taliban among Students across Madrassas and Worldly Education Schools in Pakistan. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 1-16. doi:10.1080/09546553.2018.154  
17. Nazar, N. (2021). Physical Punishment, Acceptance of Violence, Tolerance of Diversity, and School Burnout: A Comparative Study of Three Educational Systems in Pakistan, Abo Akademi University, Vasa, Finland ([access here](#)).

skills.<sup>18</sup> At madrassas, curricula often focus only on rote memorization of religious subjects and forgo teaching of basic skills such as science, math, or geography.<sup>19</sup> As a result, the educational system reproduces conditions of socioeconomic inequality, maintaining a vertically stratified status quo that conditions madrassa and public school children to accept their lower status in the class structure.<sup>20</sup> The siloed system leads to children only meeting and socializing with peers that have the same or similar social class, gender, and religious identities and backgrounds, and allows for little exchange or interaction across diverse identity groups and campuses.<sup>21</sup> This has implications for participation in violent extremism, with growing evidence of the correlation between socio-political inequality and radicalization.<sup>22</sup> It also has consequences for gender equality: gender discrimination in Pakistan has been found to be more pronounced in lower socio-economic classes, with higher status women less likely to be discriminated against.<sup>23</sup>

**The sheer variety of religious schools has strengthened perceptions of religious differences and resulted in Muslims not socializing with one another or praying in each other's mosques.**

The educational system also contributes to increased religious intolerance in Pakistani society. The sheer variety of religious schools has strengthened perceptions of religious differences and resulted in Muslims not socializing with one another or praying in each other's mosques. The curricula of the madrassas that teach an ultraconservative version of Islam position Islamic religious identity as superior to other aspects of human identity, generating exclusion and rejection of other religious, national, and ethnic groups as threatening and inferior. The content of some radical madrassa textbooks targets certain ethnic groups, glorifies war against India and other non-Muslim countries, and depicts the creation of Pakistan as a "jihad against the infidels."<sup>24</sup> <sup>25</sup> Divisive rhetoric can also be found in Pakistan's national public school curriculum, which highlights Islam as central to Pakistani identity, contains biases and incendiary language by, for instance, condemning Christianity and other non-Muslim

religions, and despite recent reform efforts does not accurately represent Pakistan's diverse communities.<sup>26</sup> <sup>27</sup> Middle school social studies curricula encouraged students to develop "aspiration for jihad" and sacrifice their lives for it.<sup>28</sup> The potential of religious intolerance to lead to radicalization is exacerbated by students' limited knowledge about religion, lack of critical thinking skills, and personal grievances or experiences of injustice - often as a result of their lower class status. Like with socio-economic class, low religious tolerance, such as beliefs that non-Muslims should have fewer rights than Muslims, correlated with negative views of gender equality, such as believing that boys are more intelligent than girls and that women should follow what their husbands decide.<sup>29</sup> Low religious tolerance and negative attitudes towards gender equality are both more pronounced in madrassas and public schools.<sup>30</sup>

While there are a few co-educational private schools in Pakistan, the majority of schools are segregated by gender and reinforce patriarchal norms in their teaching.<sup>31</sup> The number of female-only madrassas is growing: in 2009, there were already 1,900 registered all-female madrassas, making up 15% of the total madrassas in the country, a marked increase from the 1970s.<sup>32</sup> All-female Deobandi madrassas espouse conservative social values, particularly in terms of gender relations, and emphasize differences between women and men. Curricula teach young women to be mothers, to transmit Islamist values to their children, and to act with subservience to their husbands.<sup>33</sup> A review of Deobandi madrassa curriculum reveals they use rigid and selective interpretations of religious texts to inculcate an ultra-conservative version of Muslim womanhood that enforces traditional gender norms, teaching women that their power lies in their submission to men.<sup>34</sup> Girls are taught their defense of their husband, wealth and property, kindness to their family, and service to their husband will bring them happiness.<sup>35</sup> Deobandi madrassas also impose restrictions on women's movement: girls are prohibited from going for walks outside the madrassa and learn specific physical movements of prayer, teaching female bodies to conform to conservative Islamic, societal expectations. Beyond madrassas, Pakistani public school textbooks are dominated by a male-centric perspective, with the vast majority of historical figures and personalities mentioned being male.<sup>36</sup> Women are shown in a gendered context, portrayed as helpless and pious figures supporting their husbands.<sup>37</sup> By

18. Butt, T. (Jul-Dec 2012). Social and Political Role of Madrassa: Perspectives of Religious Leaders in Pakistan, *South Asian Studies*, vol 27, no 2, 387-407 ([access here](#)).

19. Ibid.

20. Ullah, H. and Ali, J. (July 2018). Schools and Families: Reproduction of Class Hierarchies through Education in Pakistan, *Pakistan Journal of Criminology*, vol 10, issue 3, 86-105 ([access here](#)).

21. United States Institute of Peace (2020). The Current Situation in Pakistan. ([access here](#)).

22. Franc, Renata and Pavlovic, Tomislav (2021). Inequality and Radicalisation - Systematic Review of Quantitative Studies, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2021.1974845 ([access here](#)).

23. Delavande, A. and Basit, Z. (2013). Gender Discrimination and Social Identity: Experimental Evidence from Urban Pakistan, FRB New York Staff Report, No 593 ([access here](#)).

24. Email exchange with Bushra Qadim Hyder, April 2022.

25. Nazar, N. (2021). Physical Punishment, Acceptance of Violence, Tolerance of Diversity, and School Burnout: A Comparative Study of Three Educational Systems in Pakistan, Abo Akademi University, Vasa, Finland ([access here](#)).

26. Syed, S., Saeed, L., and Martin, R.P. (2015). Causes and Incentives for Terrorism in Pakistan, *Journal of Applied Security Research*, vol 10, issue 2, 181-206 ([access here](#)).

27. Irfan, A. (2021). Pakistan Schools to Re-Open Amid a Controversial New Curriculum Rollout: How the new school curriculum in Pakistan may hurt the very things it is trying to fix, *New Lines Magazine* ([access here](#)).

28. Bloom, M. and Horgan, J. (2019). *Small Arms: Children and Terrorism*. Cornell University Press. ([access here](#)).

29. Nazar, N. (2021). Physical Punishment, Acceptance of Violence, Tolerance of Diversity, and School Burnout: A Comparative Study of Three Educational Systems in Pakistan, Abo Akademi University, Vasa, Finland ([access here](#)).

30. Ibid.

31. International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) (2014). *Reclaiming the Progressive Past: Pakistani Women's Struggle Against Violence and Extremism. What the Women Say*, Brief 10. ([access here](#)).

32. Ibid. and Butt, R. All Female Madrassas Boom in Pakistan (2009). *The Guardian*. ([access here](#)).

33. Ibid.

34. Farooq, M. (2016). Disciplining the Feminism: Girls' Madrasa Education in Pakistan ([access here](#)).

35. Ibid.

36. Masud, H. (2017). Curriculum, Textbooks and Gender Stereotypes: The case of Pakistan, *Education International* ([access here](#)).

37. Ibid.



reproducing gender hierarchies, socioeconomic class divisions, and religious intolerance, the Pakistani educational system shapes a society where identity groups and genders are divided and in conflict, rather than one guided by unity, diversity, and equality. This provides fertile ground for activity by violent extremist movements who capitalize on identity-based divisions in their recruitment and retention of members, fostering a sense of “us vs. them” to legitimize acts of violence against their targets.

By reproducing gender hierarchies, socioeconomic class divisions, and religious intolerance, the Pakistani educational system shapes a society where identity groups and genders are divided and in conflict, rather than one guided by unity, diversity, and equality.

The origin of madrasa education reveals a different story about the potential of religious education, one of unity and cross-cultural exchange instead of division. The al-uffah madrasa, the first in the Madinah, offered students from different cultural traditions the opportunity to live near a teacher and learn a variety of skills, knowledge, and practices which they later contributed to shape the religious and political movements of their societies.<sup>38</sup> During medieval times, madrassas facilitated an exchange of cultural knowledge between the European and Islamic worlds. In fact, some early madrassas brought together students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, emphasizing messages of fraternity and unity in Islam. In Pakistan, madrassas also provide spaces of refuge for members of marginalized identity groups. Founded by a transgender woman, Pakistan’s first transgender-only madrasa offers a place for transgender people – a highly stigmatized and impoverished community in Pakistan - to worship and learn about Islam.<sup>39</sup> To give an example from another context, Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia called pesantren are run by both female and male Islamic scholars (ulama), and promote moderate, peaceful, and pluralistic interpretations of Islam that proclaim gender equality as a foundational basis of Islamic teachings.<sup>40</sup> Over the past two decades, women ulama have begun collaborating with Indonesian women’s rights activists to use Islamic tradition to improve the economic, social, and psychological condition of women in Indonesian society.<sup>41</sup> Religious education, thus, can be a significant force for unity and equality, and a tool to challenge extremist interpretations of religious texts.

## Warning Signs of a Divided Society

Signs of divisions and growing extremist ideology are visible in Pakistan’s larger culture, society, and mindset, not only among religious groups but across all social classes including professional, educated elite. Often, these societal signs play out on the terrain of women’s bodies: Pakistani women used to wear the traditional chador of various colors, but the burka emerged around two decades ago and has increasingly become a symbol of religiosity. While religious women, including those who support violent extremist groups wear the burka, many other women have started to wear it as a fashion symbol. In this way, elements from violent extremism seep into the larger culture, blurring the lines for what constitutes radicalization. Religious leaders and teachers are more likely to dress in accordance with their identity group. The dress code for younger children in school has changed as well, with children being asked to wear trousers instead of shorts. Modern textbook illustrations more frequently display girls wearing headscarves. It is essential to note that dressing religiously or conservatively is not inherently extremist, and equating dress with extremism is a fallacy that can lead to stigma at the individual level. However, observing such broad fashion trends at the cultural level can serve as a proxy indicator for tracking rising levels of extremist ideology in a society.

While typical work on early warning signs focuses on individual signs of radicalization, witnessing broader societal changes enables the tracking of rising extremist ideology at the cultural level.

In addition to signs of growing influence of extremist groups manifested in fashion, Pakistan has seen a marked decrease in communication and socialization among different identity groups, with people criticizing others as “un-Islamic.”<sup>42</sup> Distinctions between mosques are sharper and more amplified, and if one makes the mistake of entering the “wrong mosque”, he or she is at risk of being the recipient of threats or attacks.<sup>43</sup> Pakistan’s cultural mindset is increasingly informed by traditional gender norms and religious dictates, which has further entrenched division between identity groups and genders. Today, boys are more likely to be recruited by violent extremist groups than girls, who live with cultural and religious restrictions on their mobility. However, girls raised in a home environment that emphasizes discussion of religious ideology are at elevated risk of recruitment.<sup>44</sup> While typical work on early

38. Butt, M. and Khalid, M. (2017). The Role of Madrasa Education in Inter-Cultural and Cross-Cultural Exchange, Bulletin of Education and Research, vol 39, no 1, 61-74 ([access here](#)).

39. Pakistan’s first transgender-only madrasa breaks barriers (2021). Al Jazeera ([access here](#)).

40. Holmes, M. and Franssen, R. (2021). Heiress to the Prophet: Women Religious Scholars Transforming Violent Extremism in Indonesia. A Case Study on the Role of Gender and Identity in Shaping Positive Alternatives to Extremisms, International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) ([access here](#)).

41. Ibid.

42. Email exchange with Bushra Qadim Hyder, February 2022.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid, April 2022.

warning signs focuses on individual signs of radicalization, witnessing these broader societal changes enables the tracking of rising extremist ideology at the cultural level.<sup>45</sup>

## Qadims Lumiere School and College

Bushra Qadim Hyder is the founder and director of the Qadims Lumiere School and College in Peshawar, Pakistan.<sup>46</sup> She teaches boys and girls from ages 3-16 and works with both male and female teachers. In 2009 she witnessed the impact of violent extremism and trauma on her students. She observed, for instance, how girls in her class began reenacting violence by tearing limbs off of their dolls. In response, Hyder was inspired to develop a peace curriculum.<sup>47</sup> It was designed to address historical prejudices, socio cultural biases and beliefs and celebrates diversity. To provide a positive alternative to the divisions Pakistani violent extremist groups have created between identity groups, Hyder's approach focuses on critical thinking to foster a pluralistic educational environment which promotes questioning and open discussion of ideas. By drawing on examples from history and daily life, she helps students understand how a problem can be perceived in different ways. She encourages them to approach problem solving as a mutual process of analyzing, strategizing, and evaluating different options.

[Hyder's] teaching emphasizes the potential of religion to broaden one's mind, the importance of critical thinking, religious debate, and asking questions.

To transcend the identity and gender-based divisions that strengthen and are reinforced by violent extremist groups, Hyder's teaching incorporates universal messages about humanity. Rather than questioning religious dictates directly, her teaching emphasizes the potential of religion to broaden one's mind, the importance of critical thinking, religious debate, and asking questions, and the focus on a practical application of the Qur'an. She introduces the topic of gender and raises awareness about gender roles.<sup>48</sup> The peace curriculum exposes students to the religious and cultural teachings of other communities. The curriculum includes anger management skills, lessons on developing empathy and managing negative emotions, discussion of human rights and religious freedom, and the topics of diversity, tolerance, and acceptance. It also touches on literature for peace, with renowned writers, poets and columnists reading excerpts from their writings about peace and tolerance to students. A key component of the peace curriculum is the recognition of multiple identities, embracing shared identities as well as differences. The inclusion of diverse perspectives within



A key component of the peace curriculum is the recognition of multiple identities, embracing shared identities as well as differences.

literature, the arts, and religion supports the values of respect, empathy, and critical thinking.<sup>49</sup>

## The Impact of Pluralistic Teaching

Hyder has started partnering with other private schools and madrassas to integrate peace education into the curriculum. Based on her trusted relationships with educators, she has since trained 240 teachers from ten schools and five madrassas in the peace curriculum, reaching out to 3,000 students annually. While she has invited public schools to join them in select activities, the set curriculum of public schools restricts the time and openness of teachers to adopt her curriculum. When students from private schools and madrassas come together, they engage in art competitions, peace theaters, debates, competitions, and sports which foster trust and communication between them.<sup>50</sup>

Teachers who have applied the peace curriculum report more creativity, understanding of religion, responsibility, and friendships among their students.<sup>51</sup> One teacher observed how she taught a student to control his anger and vengeful thoughts through the peace curriculum. When this student was approached by a local terrorist group and given material to persuade him to join, he decided not to do so because he learned that taking revenge was not a solution. Today, he provides scholarships to students who have lost a parent to terrorist attacks.

Hyder maintains close relationships with students and parents and encourages them to take ownership of the process of building social cohesion together. Recognizing the influence of mothers with their children, she engaged them from the beginning, inviting them to speak to her classes on the impact of terrorism so her students could learn how others had been affected by hatred and intolerance.<sup>52</sup> For

45. Interview with Bushra Qadim Hyder, January 2022.

46. Facebook page for Qadims Lumiere School and College ([access here](#)).

47. Hyder, B. (2015). Fear and Hope in Peshawar. Inclusive Security ([access here](#)).

48. Interview with Bushra Qadim Hyder, January 2022.

49. International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) (2017). Education, Identity, and Rising Extremism. From Preventing Violent Extremism to Promoting Peace, Resilience, Equality and Pluralism (PREP). ([access here](#)).

50. International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) (2017). Bushra Qadeem Hyder on Fighting Extremism with Education in Pakistan. ([access here](#)).

51. Interview with Bushra Qadim Hyder, January 2022.

52. Ibid.

example, one mother lost her son who served as a doctor in the Pakistan army and was killed by extremists. She wanted to share her story of trauma with the students to illustrate the negative effects of violent extremism.

## The Role of Trust and Networks in Detecting Extremism

In 2017 Hyder heard reports from older students in her school that several boys wanted to join the call for jihad to support the Rohingya in Myanmar. She asked their mothers if they had observed any of these signs, as they are often well positioned to detect changes in their children including emotions, withdrawal, or attending mosque more regularly with a new group of friends.<sup>53</sup> and when they had, Hyder invited the mothers and youth to a meeting. They discussed the Rohingya crisis at length and the meaning of words like "martyr" and "jihad." Hyder reviewed the different stages of jihad in Islam, using examples from the Prophet Muhammad's life, and verses from the Qur'an.<sup>54</sup> She argued that becoming a martyr may be an easy path but results in death, whereas staying alive and doing good work is the true jihad; it's difficult but more beneficial to Islam. The students stayed. Building capacity for critical thinking and reasoning and illustrating a positive alternative to masculine concepts of duty and honor, helped the boys to hold discussions with their peers.<sup>55</sup>

[Hyder] argued that becoming a martyr may be an easy path but results in death, whereas staying alive and doing good work is the true jihad; it's difficult but more beneficial to Islam.

International counterterrorism (CT) and countering violent extremism (CVE) interventions focused on early warning signs have, in some cases, asked local actors to collect and report information on fellow community members or family members to prevent their participation in violent extremist groups. Such interventions have been subject to growing criticism, particularly regarding their engagement of women in securitized roles and as intelligence-gatherers.<sup>56</sup> As a backlash to this approach, critics have characterized women-led civil society's engagement with violent extremism as top-down and "instrumentalized" by the global CT and CVE agenda.<sup>57</sup> Hyder's approach to early warning signs, however, is much different: through her knowledge of the local context she operates in, she has established trusted relationships with students, teachers, and parents, who approach her with their concerns. She can then engage them in ways that introduce and harness positive approaches to extremism, rooted in culture and religious traditions. Her approach prioritizes the creation of networks of parents and students, equipped



The peace curriculum builds capacity for critical thinking and reasoning among students and illustrates a positive alternative to masculine concepts of duty and honor.

to raise their voices against violent extremism. The peace curriculum is intended to build bridges and open channels of communication among students of public, private schools and madrassas as well as schools belonging to minority groups. People who understand the curriculum and the role it can play are now asking to join the network. Hyder's initiatives which originate from her own assessment of her community's needs demonstrate that work on signs can be both locally-driven and avoid securitizing and stereotyping women's roles.

Hyder's affiliation with PAIMAN Alumni Trust provides another example of the role of women's networks in noticing and addressing signs. Using the format of mothers' peace groups, they have educated and sensitized 15,000 female community members on the Quran and signs of violent extremism, building trust and connections between the women. Many of the teachers with whom she has worked have joined as well. The peace groups are able to contribute to community reconciliation, trauma-healing and stabilization during difficult and uncertain times in their area, due to the trust that they build within their communities. They work with school management committees, teachers, and parents in disseminating peaceful messages and organizing student peace groups in madrassas and schools.<sup>58</sup> Rather than stigmatizing individual youth for displaying "at-risk" behavior, Hyder and the women's networks take a broad educational approach, akin to public health preventive models, to resource students with knowledge and skills and increase their resilience to violent extremism.

Combatting violent extremism in the education sector requires not only increased resources but broader reform through peace curricula which teaches the knowledge and skills of peace, resilience, equal rights, and pluralism (PREP).<sup>59</sup> Hyder's approach demonstrates the impact of individual attitudinal and behavioral change through discussions and direct mentoring of students, as well as the need for structural change through the integration of peace curriculum and teacher training across various schools. Funding and the support of international donors can sustain advocacy for the inclusion of peace education, while local community networks underpin and strengthen the need for such education to shape cultural change.

53. Qadeem, M. (2018). Engendering Extremism: Women Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in Pakistan ([access here](#))

54. Interview with Bushra Qadim Hyder, January 2022.

55. International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) (2017). Pakistani peacebuilder, Bushra Hyder, fighting off call for jihad for Rohingya. ([access here](#)).

56. Donnelly, P. (2021). Women Aren't Your Informants: Evaluating True Participation for Women in CVE. IPI Global Observatory ([access here](#)).

57. Möller-Loswick, A. (2017). The countering violent extremism agenda risks undermining women who need greater support. ([access here](#)).

58. Qadeem, M. (2016). Women's Participation in Transforming Conflict and Violent Extremism. UN Chronicle, Volume 52, Issue 4. ([access here](#)).

59. Anderlini, S. (2018). Challenging Conventional Wisdom, Transforming Current Practices: A Gendered Lens on PVE. Berghof Handbook Dialogue Series No. 13. ([access here](#)).



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CASE STUDY

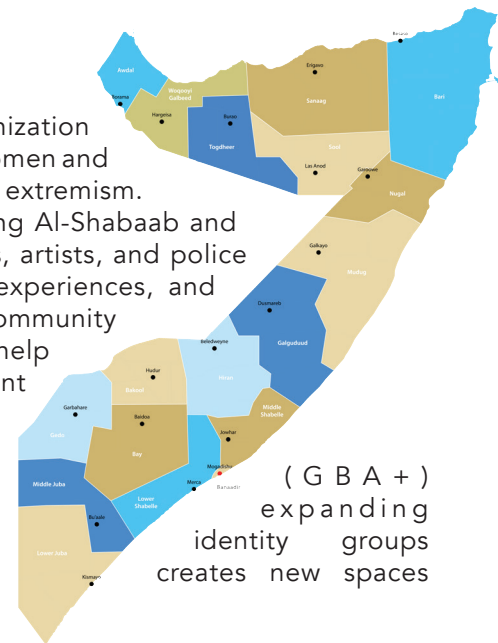
AGENTS OF CHANGE:  
TRANSFORMING GENDER ROLES  
AND EXTREMISM IN SOMALIA

A Case Study on the Role of Gender and Identity in Shaping Positive Alternatives to Extremisms<sup>1</sup>

SUMMARY

Witness Somalia is a human rights organization that engages and promotes the roles of women and youth in preventing/countering violent extremism. They have broken the secrecy surrounding Al-Shabaab and enabled women, youth, religious leaders, artists, and police officers to come together, share their experiences, and develop messages, campaigns, and community systems that prevent recruitment and help people heal from the impact of violent extremism.

Taking a Gender-based Analysis Plus approach,<sup>2</sup> this case study focuses on how socially accepted gender roles for all challenges violent extremist rhetoric and for engaging in prevention work.



In the 1990s, Somalia endured state collapse and war, caused by post-colonial governance and international economic policies. Somalia's traditional, clan-based culture suffered severe blows. The resulting corruption and chaos allowed several Islamist extremist groups to gain a foothold, providing alternative governance systems and applying strict Shariah law. The resulting marginalization, lack of opportunity, and exposure to violence for youth and women helped push them to join extremist groups. Since women and youth experience some of the most severe impacts of violent extremism, there is a growing recognition of their critical roles in its prevention.

1. The International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) was commissioned by Global Affairs Canada to produce this set of case studies on the role of gender and intersectional identities in countering violent extremism and counterterrorism. For more information or to contact the authors please email [info@icanpeacework.org](mailto:info@icanpeacework.org).  
2. Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) is an analytical process that provides a rigorous method for the assessment of systemic inequalities, as well as to assess how diverse groups of women, men, and gender diverse people may experience policies, programs and initiatives. More info on the GBA+ approach is accessible [here](#).

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Expanding the socially accepted roles for all groups -- women, men, and those with marginalized identities -- challenges the rigid, narrowly defined gender roles maintained by violent extremist groups** and creates new spaces and actors to engage in countering and preventing violent extremism. Gender-responsive approaches to counterterrorism (CT) and countering violent extremism (CVE) should engage women, men, and those from marginalized identity groups comprehensively and with consideration for evolving gender roles.
- Violent extremist groups leverage traditional gender roles centering around familial relationships and economic functions to help recruit people and run their campaigns.** While engaging traditional gender roles can be effective for CT and CVE, this approach is risky as it can reinforce the same social norms that violent extremist groups play on, thus constraining prevention efforts. Considering the multiple dimensions of individuals' identities can provide new openings for engagement. For example, a woman may be a mother and a wife but also a journalist or entrepreneur.
- Gendered gaps in security responses, from failure to address gender-based violence to the lack of access to women in communities, undermine the relationship between the police and the public.** As the police represent the state, relationships with them are critical, both for CT and CVE efforts to succeed, and as indicators of and avenues to build trust in government and respect for the rule of law.
- Gender is intertwined with other marginalized identities.** Young women, for example, are particularly vulnerable to exclusion, recruitment, and victimization by violent extremist groups due to "double marginalization". Along with gender and age, being internally displaced or from a minority clan can reinforce this dynamic.
- People can also draw strength from their identities.** Claiming civic space by organizing groups and networks of people with different identities and affected by violent extremism in different ways is an effective strategy for prevention. With adequate protection measures, the solidarity within such groups encourages individuals to reclaim their agency, often by speaking out against violent extremism and becoming agents for change and peace. Interaction among these groups helps create a safe space to address conflicts and build social cohesion.
- Artistic expression, especially public art, is a powerful mechanism for healing and change.** Art reflecting the voices of women, children, and men impacted by violent extremism and conflict can reveal the cost of violence to the society, challenge extremist narratives, and expand gender roles to reclaim civic space for women, youth and those with marginalized identities.

## CONTEXT ANALYSIS

Somalia, despite its long history of conflict, need not have become a seedbed of violent extremism. As a traditional clan-based society, since gaining independence in 1960 Somalis have struggled to establish a shared national identity and inclusive governance encompassing people within and across national borders. The military coup and dictatorship of Mohamed Siad Barre (1969-1991) ushered in a socialist and increasingly authoritarian regime that inhibited clan culture.<sup>3</sup> Political Islam developed in Somalia in the 1970s in reaction to growing corruption and poverty under the Barre regime. Young men migrated to the Gulf states where they encountered Islamic ideas.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1980s Islamic study groups and Muslim Brotherhood cells appeared throughout Somalia.<sup>5</sup> One contributing



With the increase in women-headed households in Somalia due to ongoing conflict, and the limited economic opportunities for women, some become suuqley or "market women."

3. "Somalia". Encyclopedia Britannica. ([access here](#)).

4. Menkhaus. K. (2002). "Political Islam in Somalia." Middle East Policy Council. ([access here](#)).

5. Ibid.

factor may have been the structural adjustment programs initiated by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund in the 1980s.<sup>6</sup> These programs eradicated public spending on essential services, precipitating state collapse and creating a vacuum for other political movements to take root.<sup>7</sup> Civil war broke out in Somalia after Barre's overthrow in 1991, with clans vying for power and territorial control. Local Islamic clerics strove to administer justice through Shariah courts that reflected communities' attempt to secure rule of law more than Islamic ideology.<sup>8</sup> However, the Salafist group al-Itihaad al-Islaami infiltrated some of the courts.<sup>9</sup>

Historically, the majority of Somalis have adhered to a Shafi'i version of Islam, governed by apolitical Sufi orders.<sup>10</sup> With a pastoral lifestyle and coexistence of Islam with traditional clan practices, the political scientist Ken Menkhaus describes the Somali interpretation of Islam as "a veil lightly worn".<sup>11</sup> Al-Itihaad made several attempts to take over territory, which established a measure of security while introducing strict Shariah punishments, restrictions and violations against women.<sup>12</sup> In addition to exerting influence through the courts, they also spread Islamic education and established ties with Somali businesses in order to prepare Somalia for their version of Islamic rule.<sup>13</sup> The Islamic Courts Union (ICU), which formed as a loose association of these courts in 2000, later took control of Mogadishu and southern Somalia from June 2006 until their defeat in December 2006.<sup>14</sup>

Al-Shabaab, the predominantly young military wing of the ICU, broke off after 2006 to affiliate itself with global jihadist movements such as Al Qaeda. It included Somalis who had fought in Afghanistan and upheld a strict interpretation of Shariah law.<sup>16</sup> Similar to the ICU, Al-Shabaab provided social services and access to justice to local communities who had been abandoned by government institutions. Through Islamic family law, it also facilitated some protection for women, granting inheritance and addressing incidents of gender-based violence.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, it imposed severe restrictions on women in the public space. Women were forbidden to leave their homes without a male guardian, forced to attend Islamic lectures, and made to wear the niqab.<sup>18</sup>

Weak government institutions, rampant corruption, unemployment and poverty have all been cited as drivers of extremism in Somalia.<sup>19</sup> Al-Shabaab has focused its recruitment on youth, who experience

75% unemployment and cite limited access to education, employment, perceptions of corruption and police harassment as motivating factors to join the movement.<sup>20</sup>

Women, including young women, experience lower levels of literacy and are removed from school in order to help with domestic care and marry early.<sup>21</sup> In addition, they experience high levels of violence, exacerbated by widespread impunity.<sup>22</sup> Despite an electoral quota of 30% for women, the numbers of female politicians do not reflect this standard. Women have long been marginalized in political life and the public sphere through the rigid gender norms of clan-based traditions and the formulation of political power division along clan lines.<sup>23</sup> But the years of war have thrown women into the public space as family breadwinners and as those who hold communities together. As the conflict worsens, 70% of Somali households are headed by women. They have strong economic incentives along with other reasons to affiliate with Al-Shabaab.<sup>24</sup>

## Markets and Marriage: The Diversity of Gender Roles in Violent Extremism

Women have a long history of actively participating in terrorist activity, as perpetrators of violence, supporters of a movement, wives, and bystanders in territory controlled by extremist groups.<sup>25</sup> Women in Al-Shabaab fulfill several roles that are not clearly delineated to define their level of agency and allegiance to the group. In fact, many women provide support from their own homes as opposed to relocating with men.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, women are often well positioned to mitigate the dangers of violent extremism because they often detect the early warning signs. As they witness and experience the impact of extremism in their communities, they understand the need for a holistic, whole-of-society approach to prevent and counter violent extremism. The Somali National Strategy and Action Plan for CVE also acknowledges the role of civil society organizations, religious leaders, youth, and women as stakeholders in prevention efforts.<sup>27</sup> Their work can involve research on the drivers of extremism, developing counter-narratives, working with survivors of terrorist attacks, and facilitating the rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees from violent extremist groups.

6. Ramadane, Z. O. (2014). "Somalia: State Failure, Poverty and Terrorism". Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses. Vol. 6, No. 7, pp. 13-16. International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research. ([access here](#)).  
7. Ibid.  
8. Menkhaus, K. (2002). "Political Islam in Somalia." Middle East Policy Council.  
9. Ibid and Elliot, A. and Holzer G. (2009). The invention of 'terrorism' in Somalia: paradigms and policy in US foreign relations. South African Journal of International Affairs. 16:2, 215-244. ([access here](#)).  
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19. Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in Somalia: A Mapping Report. (2020). Life and Peace Institute. ([access here](#)).  
20. Youth as Agents of Peace, Somalia. (2018). World Bank. ([access here](#)).  
21. Ibid.  
22. Ibid and Supporting Civil Society and Women's Rights Organisations in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Contexts Somalia Report. (2020). Saferworld and Gender Action for Peace and Security UK. ([access here](#)).  
23. Now and the Future: Gender Equality, Peace and Security in a COVID-19 World. (2020). Saferworld. ([access here](#)).  
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25. Fink, N. et al. (2016). A Man's World? Exploring the Roles of Women in Counter Terrorism and Violent Extremism. Hedayah and the Global Center on Cooperative Security. ([access here](#)).  
26. Stern, O.M. (2019). The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab. Adam Smith International. ([access here](#)).  
27. Federal Government of Somalia. (2016). National Strategy and Action Plan for Countering Violent Extremism. ([access here](#)).

Women's extensive social networks facilitate their ability to fundraise and proselytize, for instance by talking with other women in local communities and organizing lectures to share Al-Shabaab's values and ideology.

Women play a role in recruitment, proselytization, fundraising, providing food, medical care, policing, weapons storing and transport, and intelligence. Their ability to recruit other women supports Al-Shabaab's gendered narrative of arranging brides for young male recruits. Since marrying girls into Al-Shabaab often offers a financial incentive for families, women reinforce economic support for families as well as an ideological cause. Women's extensive social networks facilitate their ability to fundraise and proselytize, for instance by talking with other women in local communities and organizing lectures to share Al-Shabaab's values and ideology.<sup>28</sup>

In its capacity as an alternate state, Al-Shabaab has extorted money from the Somali business community to support the movement. With the increase in women-headed households in Somalia due to ongoing conflict, and the limited economic opportunities for women, some become *suuqley* or "market women." However, Al-Shabaab has co-opted their role as breadwinners to take their profits and compel them to transport goods for the movement. In some cases women may agree to cooperate to retain a share of their profits, while others are coerced. Al-Shabaab has demonstrated increased tolerance for the *suuqley*, and women participating in the economy and public space, as circumstances have led to the need for more financial support.<sup>29</sup>

In addition, because the *suuqley* move freely through local communities, they are well positioned to engage government and armed actors and gather intelligence that they share with Al-Shabaab. One government interviewee posited that as much as 85% of Al-Shabaab's intelligence was gathered by women.<sup>30</sup> Recognizing this role, Al-Shabaab has a practice of "wife inheritance", remarrying widows in order to keep the intelligence within the group.<sup>31</sup> As a result of gender norms, most men and community leaders would not suspect a woman gathering information and speaking with other community members. Their traditional gender roles also facilitate the logistics of Al-Shabaab. For instance, women may use their homes to hide members of Al-Shabaab and convene them for strategic planning.<sup>32</sup> In addition, Islamic dress can facilitate the transport of weapons and movement through security checkpoints



Witness Somalia selects women to form small groups called "Circles of Peace" where they can discuss their role in preventing extremism and promoting peace and security

without raising concerns. With a lack of female security guards, women are rarely searched.

Some women also embrace their role as wives and mothers by providing marital counseling within the group, preparing their husbands psychologically for suicide missions, and getting pregnant prior to such missions so their husbands leave another soldier behind.<sup>33</sup> Women's kinship ties work both ways, however. They can use the same skill set to engage husbands and sons to disengage from violent extremist groups or prevent them from joining in the first place. Somalia's National Strategy and Action Plan for CVE explains that "mothers, sisters and daughters are often the bread winners of Somalia and are uniquely positioned in homes and communities to understand changes in the behaviors of children and in their respective locales, and to provide powerful countervailing incentives."<sup>34</sup> Some literature indicates that mothers in particular play a critical role in their sons' disengagement from violent extremist groups.<sup>35</sup> While many women, including peacebuilders, draw upon their kinship relations, it is also critical to recognize the multitude of roles that women embrace as agents of change. The local organization Witness Somalia exemplifies this approach of expanding civil society roles to prevent and counter violent extremism.

28. Invisible Women: The Gendered Dimensions of Return, Rehabilitation and Reintegration from Violent Extremism (2019), International Civil Society Action Network and United Nations Development Program. ([access here](#))

29. Ibid.

30. Federal Government of Somalia. (2016). National Strategy and Action Plan for Countering Violent Extremism.

31. Ibid and Women and Al-Shabaab's Insurgency. (2019) International Crisis Group.

32. Women and Al-Shabaab's Insurgency. (2019). International Crisis Group.

33. Women and Al-Shabaab's Insurgency. (2019) International Crisis Group.

34. Federal Government of Somalia. (2016). National Strategy and Action Plan for Countering Violent Extremism.

35. Schlaffer, E. and Kroppnigg, U. "A New Security Architecture: Mothers Included!" cited in Fink, N. et al. (2016). A Man's World? Exploring the Roles of Women in Counter Terrorism and Violent Extremism.

While many women, including peacebuilders, draw upon their kinship relations, it is also critical to recognize the multitude of roles that women embrace as agents of change.

## Witness Somalia: Breaking the Silence and Reclaiming Civic Space for Social Change

Established in 2015, Witness Somalia is a human rights organization working to promote peaceful alternatives to rebuild a society free from violence. They document and report human rights violations, demand accountability, and protect the rights of vulnerable groups. They envision a society free from violence that promotes peace, equality, and social justice across all communities. They work closely with civil society to amplify its role in raising awareness, public messaging, counter-narratives, promoting safety and security, preventing recruitment, and healing from the impact of violent extremism.

Recognizing the complex identities of gender, age, ethnicity/clan, religion, and economic status among others, Witness Somalia draws upon this diversity to enable people to assume leadership to resolve conflicts, solve problems, and transform their communities. Spurred by Al-Shabaab's devastating impact, Witness Somalia seized opportunities to work with students, religious leaders, police officers, journalist, artists, elders, and other community activists to prevent violent extremism.

### Gender, Kinship, and Healing

In a society where the entire political landscape is dominated by men, including elders, politicians, and religious leaders, Witness Somalia expands roles for women in peacebuilding, civic life, and the prevention of violent extremism. Given the secrecy surrounding Al-Shabaab and the severe impact of violent extremism, Witness Somalia initiated their community work with women through a series of roundtable discussions to provide a safe space where participants could share their experiences. They introduced concepts of violent extremism and later selected women to form small groups called "Circles of Peace" where they could discuss their role in preventing extremism and promoting peace and security.

Witness Somalia recognized that with increased awareness of violent extremism, the women would use their relationships with families, neighbors, and each other to connect and promote alternatives. Over the last three years, they have trained more than 200 women from diverse ethnic and economic backgrounds who work in

small groups to discuss safety and security concerns in their communities. In their community engagement, they pay particular attention to including women from minority clans and internally displaced persons (IDPs), to understand how they have been affected and emphasize everyone's role in countering extremism.

The women leaders have drawn upon traditional Abaay Abaay gatherings where women in local villages gather to address social issues and challenges such as marriage and domestic violence. They decided to use this platform to discuss the recruitment of children and sensitize women to the early warning signs of violent extremism. This has provided a space to engage women in reintegration. As one woman explains,

"...these families are stigmatized and hated by the community even though they are victims themselves. There are stories behind their silence, most of their children were recruited forcibly by the terrorists or they were misused and misguided. Therefore, we need to bring those families to our side so that we can start bringing their boys back as well."<sup>36</sup>

They remain in contact via WhatsApp during the COVID pandemic. In addition, the national government invited some of the women trained as part of Circles of Peace to participate in the P/CVE consultation meetings and two of them joined the national reconciliation forums led by the Ministry of Internal Security.

### Gender, Security and Prevention

Civil society builds a bridge between the state and local communities and often strengthens security through community policing programs.<sup>37</sup> Witness Somalia engaged local police officers through monthly meetings and developed community policing structures to enhance safety and security, training 60 police officers and 120 community members (including 95 women). They established contact and built trust, which is critical to preventing extremism, and supported cooperation between the local police officers and community. Through regular meetings, they share information, report critical incidents, and organize community events. Men and women tend to have different information about community members and events. For instance, because women usually do not work outside the home, they have closer connections with each other and more information about their communities, including knowledge about sensitive topics such as sexual and gender-based violence. The number of female police officers has also increased, fostering greater and closer relationships with women in local communities. As one participant reflected,

"I just thought the whole conflict in Somalia was like any other clan conflict we experienced. Now I realize there is a bigger crisis than ever facing this country and this

36. Correspondence with Witness Somalia.

37. Preventing Violent Extremism, Protecting Rights, and Community Policing. (2017). International Civil Society Action Network. ([access here](#)).



generation. Women should be at the center of every decision-making level in all peacebuilding processes. That is why having gendered community policing is vital to ensure that all are involved.<sup>38</sup>

As a result of women reporting incidents to the female police officers, the police were able to prevent 26 security incidents including some related to violent extremism.<sup>39</sup>

Witness Somalia recognized that with increased awareness of violent extremism, women would use their relationships with families, neighbors, and each other to connect and promote alternatives.

Youth also play a critical role in promoting security and preventing violent extremism. Before the formation of community policing structures, local police officers and youth from the same community did not communicate with each other. Now they have trusting relationships. Witness Somalia has worked with youth, who are often targeted by Al-Shabaab, on how to challenge religious militancy and violent extremism. Their training addressed how to document and report terrorist incidents as well as how to develop advocacy skills and campaigns to influence local actors. This experience broke the silence about violent extremism. Some youth organized their own small inner circle meetings in different locations to discuss critical issues such as preventing recruitment by Al-Shabaab, deradicalization and other alternative paths for youth in Somalia. They implemented some peace campaigns on social media and in person.

With increased understanding of violent extremism and solidarity and support against potential reprisals, they also mobilize themselves to respond to their communities in the aftermath of terrorist attacks. For instance, youth might donate blood or food. They respond to serve the needs of their communities and experience a sense of purpose and agency through activities that promote peace instead of violence. In a larger society that does not offer many educational, economic, or leadership opportunities for youth, Witness Somalia's work suggests that youth not only have an opportunity but a responsibility to prevent extremism and transform their societies. This is particularly so for young women who face exclusion from decision-making spaces and suffer from gender-based violence such as FGM and early marriage.<sup>40</sup>

Witness Somalia also recently reached out to university students to discuss peace and security including the role of women and youth in peacebuilding. Because

universities are more open spaces, these topics provide an opening to engage this population and build trust before addressing more sensitive issues like violent extremism. Witness Somalia's experience in discussing gender equality, human rights, and violent extremism enables them to assess the degree of safety community members need and how to approach challenging their thinking around more sensitive issues. Through building this trust, Witness Somalia opens up the space to discuss gender and other aspects of one's identity, and how experiences of personal security connect with political security.

## Public Messaging, Counternarratives, and Religious Interpretation

Witness Somalia has broken a barrier by providing increased awareness about violent extremism, giving people permission to speak about it, and engaging women and other groups in its prevention. In order to reach the greater public, they launched a radio program to discuss gender equality, women's rights, and their role in peacebuilding. In time they were able to discuss violent extremism and the role of youth. For instance, a female journalist interviewed a female university student and male lawyer/human rights defender in one program highlighting how youth groups were excluded from the national strategy to counter violent extremism.

Just as the government integrated women into consultations, Witness Somalia's programming lays the groundwork for more inclusive processes in national policymaking. They also integrated public messaging to broadcast through other programs and reach local communities. Examples include "work with female police officers," "know who's coming to your village," and "know your children and the symptoms of early radicalization." These messages reach women and are gender-responsive because they recognize the knowledge women hold about their local communities, as well as the role of women in addressing security concerns, such as violent extremism.

Clan identity remains an integral part of Somali society, with the majority of leaders focusing on the political and social interests of their clans. Al-Shabaab has exacerbated some inter-clan conflict as select clans ally with Al-Shabaab to retaliate for minority grievances.<sup>41</sup> Al-Shabaab replicates majority/minority dynamics through their own hierarchical relationships. Witness Somalia trained some majority and minority clan elders to recognize the problem of violent extremism and prevent youth recruitment by talking with parents and youth. They also discussed promoting social cohesion among the various clans to mitigate against the rise and presence of violent extremism. Due to traditional gender roles, clan elders are men and only a few could accept women's participation in preventing violent extremism. Witness Somalia has started to broker conversations about gender equality with clan elders.

38. Correspondence with Witness Somalia.

39. Correspondence with Witness Somalia.

40. Now and the Future: Gender Equality, Peace and Security in a COVID-19 World. (2020). Saferworld.

41. Hansen, S.J. et al. (2019). Countering violent extremism in Somalia and Kenya: Actors and approaches. Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research. ([access here](#)).



Witness Somalia recognizes art as a form of expression and understands the role of artists in raising public awareness around complex issues and seeking creative solutions.

Witness Somalia understands religious leaders' crucial role as interpreters of Islamic texts and traditions. One influential religious leader participated in the radio program to discuss the rise of Wahhabi ideology in Somalia from the 1970s and 80s, which fueled the establishment of radical extremist groups. This program raised awareness about the psychosocial impact of violent extremism and introduced civil society voices with alternative perspectives, such as the ways in which Islam promotes the values of peace and tolerance.

Traditionally women have limited opportunities to study religion, and this has benefitted Al-Shabaab's gendered narratives and recruitment of women. While a few madrassahs are led by women, the majority of religious leaders are men. Witness Somalia organized a workshop for 15 religious leaders who formed a small, trusted group to discuss their concerns. These leaders have convened closed discussion groups in their congregations to broach the subject of violent extremism and discuss its negative impact on Muslims and the image of Islam. Three of the religious leaders who live in relatively safe areas have preached on countering violent extremism in their Friday sermons.

Witness Somalia has used a gender-responsive approach to expand the role of women in Somali society and thereby the range of human experience, including values of tolerance, peace, and equality. For instance, one female Islamic scholar who met with women at one of the roundtable discussions stated: "It is clear that we need to reclaim our spaces in our religion and use it to educate the proper teachings, we must teach our communities the peace, tolerance, and the pluralism in the Islamic view. In short, we should be preaching opposite of what Al-Shabaab is preaching."

## Public Expressions of Mourning and Resistance

Despite the taboos surrounding art in the larger culture, Witness Somalia recognizes art as a form of expression and understands the role of artists in raising public

awareness around complex issues and seeking creative solutions. They identified a small group of men and women artists and trained them in advocacy, freedom of expression, and the intersection of the arts and peacebuilding. Through discussions, the artists created pieces addressing violent extremism.

One artist painted a memorial tribute to the terrorist attack of October 14th, 2017, and most of the art reflected the human face of terrorism and the devastation of loss. Another drawing depicted a group of women holding a big poster with slogans like "Terrorism has no place in our religion." Such art not only expresses the vision or message of the artist but also holds a mirror up to society, reflecting the voices of women, children, and men impacted by violent extremism and conflict.

While there have been some public art exhibitions since 2019, this initiative marked the first time that men and women used their art to counter violent extremism. They held small exhibitions and shared the artwork on social media. Some of the art remains on public display in hotels and at local NGOs. The artists all gained regional and international exposure and recognition, including among the Somali diaspora in London. Two women artists participated in an artist exchange that promotes peacebuilding.

With limited opportunities in the larger society and Al-Shabaab's lure of power and privilege, Witness Somalia has capitalized on the arts, as well as music, drama, and sports, to engage youth in alternative forms of expression and self-development. Through such programs, Witness Somalia has reached 32 youth groups and NGOs, and 218 youth (including 135 women). The Minister of Youth also supports alternative recreational programs to mitigate against potential recruitment by Al-Shabaab. The arts not only give voice and recognition to marginalized groups but reflect a shared language across differences, which strengthens human connection. Through such public, artistic expressions, Witness Somalia reveals how people can coalesce into a movement to mourn, resist violent extremism, and transform their society.



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**Actor:** EXIT Sweden (Fryshuset)

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**RECONSTRUCTING IDENTITY:  
THE ROLE OF GENDER IN DRIVING AND  
DISMANTLING WHITE SUPREMACY IN  
SWEDEN**

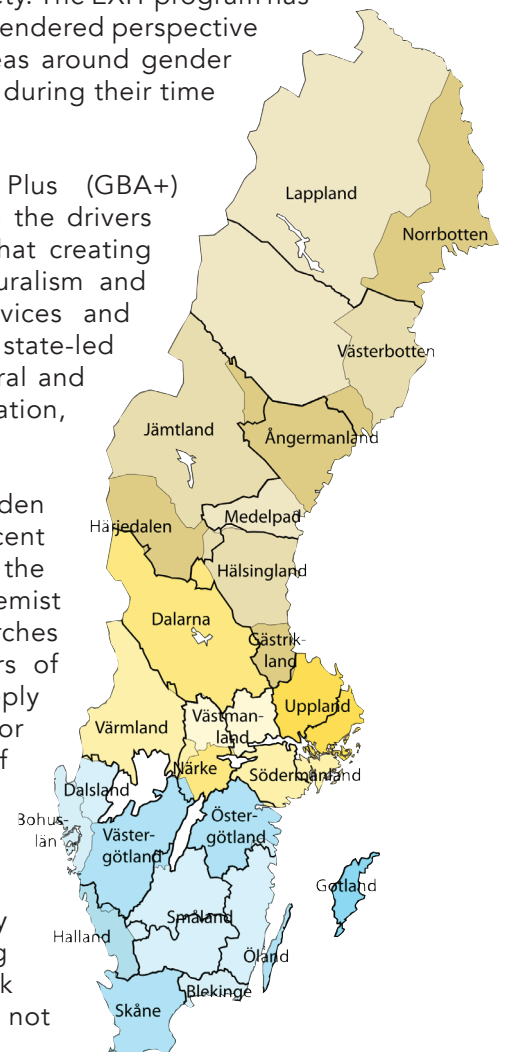
A Case Study on the Role of Gender and Identity in Shaping Positive Alternatives to Extremisms<sup>1</sup>

**SUMMARY**

Through its EXIT program, the Swedish Fryshuset Foundation has pioneered a relational and psychological approach to disengagement from white extremist groups. In EXIT's approach, coaches support clients to build a stable identity outside of extremist ideology and practice, facilitating their reintegration into society. The EXIT program has expanded its impact by integrating a gendered perspective that breaks down the constricting ideas around gender and masculinity internalized by clients during their time in the white extremist movement.

Taking a Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA+) approach,<sup>2</sup> the case study focuses on the drivers of violent extremism and proposes that creating a society that guarantees peace, pluralism and justice will require both social services and relational support, and complementary state-led interventions that address the structural and political drivers of racism, discrimination, and inequality.

White extremist groups in Sweden have re-entered the spotlight in recent years, encouraged and inspired by the international expansion of white extremist ideology. They continue to organize marches and commit acts of violence. Drivers of violent extremism in Sweden are deeply gendered, as they are everywhere. For men, these may include a sense of "aggrieved entitlement" that draws them to the ideological superiority, camaraderie, and simplified belief systems offered by white extremist groups. Age considerations are equally important: while Swedish young people are perceived as most at-risk of recruitment, this assumption does not hold up to scrutiny.



1. The International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) was commissioned by Global Affairs Canada to produce this set of case studies on the role of gender and intersectional identities in countering violent extremism and counterterrorism. For more information or to contact the authors please email [melinda.holmes@icanpeacework.org](mailto:melinda.holmes@icanpeacework.org).

2. Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) is an analytical process that provides a rigorous method for the assessment of systemic inequalities, as well as to assess how diverse groups of women, men, and gender diverse people may experience policies, programs and initiatives. More info on the GBA+ approach is accessible [here](https://www24.international.gc.ca/gba/gba-eng.aspx).

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Gendered approaches to counterterrorism (CT) and countering violent extremism (CVE) need to address all genders, not just women.** Men, women, and others join violent extremist groups for different reasons. It is imperative to detect these motives and use specific approaches, including ones that recognize the role of masculinities.
- **Men may be drawn to violent extremist groups out of a sense of “aggrieved entitlement”:** a gendered sense of entitlement thwarted by an experience of emasculation such as being isolated or bullied in school or experiencing economic distress.
- **Leaving white extremist groups requires rebuilding one’s entire world and network of relationships** with friends, family, and society. For older men, who are often more isolated and solitary, it may be particularly difficult to find community, thus strengthening the attraction of the “brotherhood” offered by white supremacist movements and making disengagement more challenging.
- Although violent extremist movements and groups may share similarities in their drivers, narratives and recruitment strategies, **CT and CVE approaches cannot take a broad-brush approach and should take into account identity considerations specific to each group**, such as the age and gender of its participants.
- To reach all groups vulnerable to recruitment into white extremist movements, **CT and CVE interventions that utilize a range of entry points should be considered, looking beyond work only in schools or churches.** Voluntary disengagement programs, such as EXIT Sweden, offer a potential access point for engaging an older demographic of (primarily) men.
- **Providing alternative ideas of masculinity can be a crucial part of men’s disengagement from violent extremist groups and their ability to rebuild a social identity separate from extremist thought.** This includes addressing social expectations (perceived or real) of behavior or looks, encouraging reflection on internalized norms, and modeling alternative behaviors and attitudes.
- To holistically address violent extremism, **social and psychological approaches to CT and CVE need to be paired with interventions that recognize and address the structural and political drivers of violent extremism.** Such interventions will require governments recognizing their own role in promoting violent extremism, taking accountability for racism and discrimination, and constructing economies and societies that enable peace, pluralism, equity, and justice for all citizens.

## CONTEXT ANALYSIS

The white extremist, or white supremacist movement has a long history of spreading its ideology and committing acts of extremist violence in Sweden. Unlike many other European countries, Sweden did not ban fascist organizations after World War II, and the country had no mechanism for accountability to prosecute those who collaborated with the Nazi regime. Nazi-aligned organizations continued their activities. In the 1980s, an influx of refugees from Lebanon inspired a surge in xenophobic sentiment among Swedish youth, who questioned why Sweden should receive immigrants when young people were lacking housing and employment.<sup>3</sup> In the 1990s and 2000s, “White Power” and “Viking Rock” groups reached new audiences of young people.<sup>4</sup> Several new white supremacist groups were established, such as the White Aryan Resistance (“Vitt Ariskt Motstånd” or “VAM”), which carried out repeated acts of terrorism and racial violence, burglaries, bank robberies, police murders and car bombings of perceived opponents.



Although the self-image of Sweden is one of a pro-human rights, open, and tolerant country, racial segregation and discrimination persist.

3. Institute of Race Relations (IRR) (2014). Sweden’s counter-extremism model and the stigmatizing of anti-racism. ([access here](#)).

4. Corte, U. and Edwards, B. (2008). White Power music and the mobilization of racist social movements. ([access here](#)).

The strength of the white supremacist movement in the late 20th century established a foundation for organized anti-immigrant sentiment that persists in modern-day Sweden. It has been embedded in mainstream political discourse by far-right populist political parties, particularly the Sweden Democrats.<sup>5</sup> Anti-immigrant sentiment has been fueled by the growing pluralism of Swedish society (the percentage of migrants as a share of the Swedish population has grown from 9% in 1990 to 20% in 2019<sup>6</sup>), as well as social media, which has enabled circulation and normalization of xenophobic discourse and spreading of “junk news” and disinformation.<sup>7 8</sup>

The number of incidents of racist and xenophobic hate speech, primarily targeting migrants, Muslims and Roma people, has risen over recent years.<sup>9</sup> Contemporary white extremist groups in Sweden continue to organize marches and commit acts of violence: in 2017, members of the Nordic Resistance Movement bombed a left-wing bookstore and an asylum center.<sup>10</sup> There has been an upsurge of attacks on mosques, desecration of Jewish cemeteries, and a rise in racist and homophobic incidents.<sup>11</sup> In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, general opposition to immigration has changed into a more specific opposition to Islam and Muslim immigration, although violence against other identity groups persists.<sup>12</sup>

The Swedish white extremist movement is increasingly integrated with the global white extremist movement, which has expanded in recent years and is responsible for a surge in xenophobic and far-right violence worldwide, particularly in Europe.<sup>13</sup> The New York Times identified nearly 350 white extremist terrorist attacks across the globe between 2011 and 2017 and found that at least a third of white extremist killers were inspired by others who committed similar attacks.<sup>14</sup> White extremists in the United States have looked to Sweden for inspiration for building their own white supremacist networks; in 2017, American white nationalist Richard Spencer formed a media platform, the AltRight Corporation, in partnership with two far-right Swedish media outfits, calling Sweden “the most alt-right” country in all of Europe.<sup>15 16</sup> The growing internationalization and unification of the white extremist movement underscores the global significance of Swedish white extremist activity and rhetoric.

Beyond acts of violence committed by white extremist actors and encouraged by the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020, the past year has seen a growing discussion of structural drivers of racism and inequality in Sweden. The protests have highlighted that although the self-image of Sweden is one of a pro-human rights, open,

”  
Racism cannot only be framed as a product of white extremist fringe groups—rather, its presence and impact on marginalized identity groups must be analyzed across all facets of society.  
”

and tolerant country, racial segregation and discrimination persist. Studies on policing have shown that racial profiling remains an issue in Sweden.<sup>17</sup> National minorities such as the Saami and Roma are highly marginalized and discriminated against in housing and job markets, and Sweden’s urban areas are visibly segregated along racial lines with people of color concentrated in low-income areas.<sup>18 19</sup> People of African descent are exposed to the highest number of hate crimes.<sup>20</sup>

To holistically understand drivers of violent extremism in Sweden and to design effective policies to counter it, racism cannot be framed only as a product of white extremist fringe groups—rather, its presence and impact on marginalized identity groups must be analyzed across all facets of society.

## The Lure of Viking Brotherhood: Gendered Drivers of White Supremacy in Sweden

What motivates people to join white extremist groups? One can consider individual grievances and psychological processes through a gender lens, for example. The vast majority of members of these groups are male. Notions of masculinity play a central role in recruitment and participation. In Sweden, these groups promote a specific image of maleness, omnipresent in their propaganda: a large, muscular, warrior archetype, often heavily tattooed with white extremist or Viking symbols. Michael Kimmel, an American sociologist who conducted extensive research with members of white extremist groups in Europe, has found that men are attracted to such an image because it represents a solution to their sense of “aggrieved entitlement”: a gendered sense of entitlement thwarted by an experience of emasculation.<sup>21</sup> Men may feel emasculated due to several push factors including victimization, for instance from being isolated or bullied in school, or because they have experienced economic distress that blocks them from assuming traditional male “provider” roles.<sup>22</sup>

5. Widfeldt, A. (2009). Party change as a necessity – the case of the Sweden Democrats. ([access here](#)).  
6. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs – Population Division. (2019). International migrant stock 2019: country profiles. ([access here](#)).  
7. Ekman, M. (2019). Anti-immigration and racist discourse in social media. ([access here](#)).  
8. Reuters. (2018). Exclusive: Right-wing sites swamp Sweden with ‘junk news’ in tight election race. ([access here](#)).  
9. Equinet. (2019). Sweden: Racist and Xenophobic Hate Speech on the Rise Despite Considerable Preventive Efforts. ([access here](#)).  
10. Reuters. (2017). Three Swedish men get jail for bomb attacks on asylum centers. ([access here](#)).  
11. Institute of Race Relations (IRR) (2014). Sweden’s counter-extremism model and the stigmatizing of anti-racism. ([access here](#)).  
12. Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX). (2019). Right-wing extremism in Norway: changes and challenges. University of Oslo. ([access here](#)).  
13. New York Times. (2019). Attacks by White Extremists Are Growing. So Are Their Connections. ([access here](#)).

14. Ibid.  
15. BuzzFeed News. (2017). How Sweden Became the Most Alt-Right Country in Europe. ([access here](#)).  
16. Spencer’s Swedish co-founder Daniel Friberg who runs the far-right publishing company Arktos Media has since left the AltRight corporation.  
17. Etc. (2020). Experten: Finns rasism även bland svenska polis. ([access here](#)).  
18. Equinet. (2019). Sweden: Racist and Xenophobic Hate Speech on the Rise Despite Considerable Preventive Efforts. ([access here](#)).  
19. Amnesty International. (2018). Sweden: Homeless Roma and other EU migrants face widespread discrimination and dangerous conditions. ([access here](#)).  
20. Multicultural Centre (Mångkulturellt centrum) (2014). Afrophobia - A overview of the situation for Afro-Swedes in contemporary Sweden (Afrofobi - En kunskapsöversikt över afrosvenskar situation i dagens Sverige) commissioned by the Ministry of Labour (Arbetsmarknadsdepartementet). ([access here](#)).  
21. The Guardian. (2018). Almost all violent extremists share one thing: their gender. ([access here](#)).  
22. Ibid.

Participation in white supremacist groups offers men a feeling of ideological superiority and moral authority over others—specifically, other races and women, support from and camaraderie with other men, and a predefined masculine identity and simplified belief system to fit into. Kimmel posits that the recruitment process to white extremist groups, during which new members are often asked to prove themselves by starting fights or committing acts of violence, serves a “rite of passage,” a way to reclaim their manhood and restore their sense of entitlement.<sup>23</sup> The image of a Viking—a common symbolic trope among Nordic white supremacist groups—encapsulates these pull factors, representing untamed masculinity and connection to an armed brotherhood of fighters and heroes.<sup>24</sup> Once men become members, they are able to continuously affirm their masculine identity by emasculating the “other.”

The image of a Viking—a common symbolic trope among Nordic white supremacist groups—encapsulates these pull factors, representing untamed masculinity and connection to an armed brotherhood.

Women form a substantial minority in the Swedish white supremacist movement. Their role may be less central and active than that played by women in American groups on the extreme right. They often enter the movement as girlfriends of white extremist men.<sup>25</sup> Roles and expectations for women oscillate between two contrasting models of femininity: the conservative “holy mother” of the nation who assumes a familial, housewife role, and the skinhead (or “skinbyrd,” as the female term goes) who fights alongside men and adopts traditionally masculine traits.<sup>26</sup> Women might also act as a symbol, a “Valkyrie” to inspire men to fight battles for the future of the white race.<sup>27</sup> In any of these roles, their agency is removed: they are reduced to their ability to produce children, expected to act like men, or elevated to a mythical icon of the white nationalist cause.

Motivations for women to join white extremist groups are less easily explained by psychological drivers alone, although some may be attracted to the same pull factors that facilitate recruitment of men: a sense of belonging, a clearly delineated identity, and social rewards from conforming to expected roles. Adjacency to power can also offer women a protective space, in which they are shielded from external threats.

## A Youth Problem? Challenging the Vulnerability Myth

Young people, particularly young men, are typically, and mistakenly, portrayed as the group most vulnerable to recruitment into violent extremism. Swedish counter-extremism policy, including its 2015 communication “Actions to Make Society More Resilient to Violent Extremism” and 2016 “National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism” targets most of its recommendations to groups working with young people and their parents and relatives, for instance by providing guidance to social services who “come into contact with girls, boys, young women and young men... involved in violent extremism.”<sup>28</sup> The perception is that young people from difficult social situations are prone to recruitment by violent extremist groups, including white extremism, and that schools can act as recruiting grounds.

However, while white extremism was clearly linked to youth culture in the 1990s and early 2000s, these days members of white supremacist groups in Sweden are primarily adults, typically older white men.<sup>29</sup> <sup>30</sup> Studies have shown that young people in Sweden, who have grown up in a multicultural society, are less xenophobic than older generations.<sup>31</sup> These identity considerations challenge prevailing assumptions about vulnerability to recruitment by extremist groups and are important to consider in the design of counterterrorism and countering violent extremism programming.

## EXIT Sweden: Disengagement through Rebuilding (Gender) Identity

The EXIT program, established in 1998 as part of the non-profit organization, Fryshuset, offers a social and relational approach to disengaging members of white supremacist groups (referred to as “clients” in the model). EXIT’s founder Ken Lindahl is himself a former member of a neo-Nazi group, and in the earlier years of the program EXIT staff (referred to as “coaches”) was largely composed of former white extremists. This helped to establish trust with clients and understand their needs.

Women’s agency is removed: they are either reduced to their ability to produce children, expected to act like men, or elevated to a mythical icon of the white nationalist cause.

23. Kimmel, M. (2007). Racism as Adolescent Male Rite of Passage: Ex-Nazis in Scandinavia. ([access here](#)).

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Teitelbaum. (2014). Saga’s Sorrow: Femininities of Despair in the Music of Radical White Nationalism. *Ethnomusicology*, 58(3), 405.

27. Darby, S. (2019). The Rise of the Valkyries. *Harper’s Magazine*. ([access here](#)).

28. Government of Sweden. (2014). Actions to Make Society More Resilient to Violent Extremism. 2014/15:144. ([access here](#)).

29. Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX). (2019). Right-wing extremism in Norway: changes and challenges. University of Oslo. ([access here](#)).

30. Institute of Race Relations (IRR) (2014). Sweden’s counter-extremism model and the stigmatizing of anti-racism. ([access here](#)).

31. Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX). (2019). Right-wing extremism in Norway: changes and challenges. University of Oslo. ([access here](#)).



In Sweden, white extremist groups promote a specific image of maleness: a large, muscular, warrior archetype.

Currently, the staff is a mixture of social workers, academics and former white supremacists. EXIT's model has been adopted by other countries such as Norway, Germany, Sweden, Denmark and the United States to disengage right-wing extremists and gang members, and the program has been expanded to support de-radicalization of Islamic extremists. Available data indicates EXIT Sweden has a high success rate in addressing deradicalization and disengagement for its target population, although the data is limited due to Sweden's personal data protection laws.<sup>32</sup>

supremacist or totalitarian ideologies. The rationale for taking a non-judgmental, relational approach rather than seeking to change ideological and political perceptions is that the individual will eventually change their perception when they integrate into alternative social settings.<sup>34</sup> A basic tenet of the organization is not to condemn the clients, but to condemn their actions. Transformation of political views is seen as secondary—a consequence of a transformation in lifestyle. In other countries, such as Germany, the EXIT program does address its clients' ideological orientations, addressing their extremist attitudes and ideological perceptions directly. This is tied to Germany being the center of origin for the Nazi ideology, as well as to the profile of EXIT Germany's clients: several clients are fourth generation Nazis, to whom ideology might emerge from their family setting and lifestyle and is a more integral part of their motives for participating in white supremacist groups.<sup>35</sup>

By encouraging critical thinking around gendered issues, clients were able to break down some of the constricting ideas around masculinity that they had internalized during their participation in the movement.

The EXIT program is self-help based, relying on the client's personal choice to disengage from the movement. A coach's primary objective is to support clients to alter and rebuild their social identity so that they may reintegrate into Swedish society and find a renewed sense of purpose and belonging. This is no simple task, as clients are used to having their identities dictated and circumscribed by the white extremist group they belonged to, and most of their social interactions and relationships exist within the movement. EXIT places a heavy emphasis on educational and emotional support, providing group meetings, individual therapy, advice on social lives and practical support in searching for a job or returning to school.<sup>33</sup>

Notably, the Swedish EXIT model takes a non-ideological approach, steering away from directly challenging white

Following Kimmel's research on the role of masculinities in white extremism, which included research on and with EXIT Sweden, EXIT coaches began informally implementing a gendered perspective in their work. An important component of the program's work with clients is "modeling" behavior, with staff acting as role models to challenge client self-perception and guide them towards a different identity and way of being. Consequently, staff reflected on how they modeled masculinities and how they could engage with male clients in a way that challenged the version of masculinity promoted by the white supremacist movement. For instance, they would give fellow staff members and clients a hug rather than a handshake to demonstrate a different level of comfort with physical touch between men.

Staff noticed that through modeling such behavior with an awareness of masculinity, clients adapted and opened up in a different way. To make sure the approach extended to all genders, EXIT Sweden eventually had a female former neo-Nazi join the team. Female clients found it easier to talk with her.

32. Daugherty, C. (2019). Deradicalization and Disengagement: Exit Programs in Norway and Sweden and Addressing Neo-Nazi Extremism. *Journal for Deradicalization*, Winter 2019/20. Nr 21. <https://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/287/195>

33. Ibid.

34. Christensen, T. (2015). A Question of Participation – Disengagement from the Extremist Right. A case study from Sweden. PhD Dissertation. Department of Psychology and Educational Studies. Roskilde University.

35. Ibid.

EXIT staff members also encouraged reflection on masculinity in the movement, talking generally about how clients relate to topics such as pressure for men to look a certain way, what it means to be a man in the movement and the treatment of women in the movement. For instance, one male client, who was from a family situation with severe trauma and had spent a large part of his life in prisons, talked about how it was important to him to be extremely big and muscled, visibly superior, and always in control during his time in the movement. Following prompting by a staff member, he was able to reflect on how this stance had affected him and hindered him from constructively dealing with conflict and managing his emotions.

By encouraging critical thinking around gendered issues, clients were able to break down some of the constricting ideas around gender and masculinity that they had internalized during their participation in the movement. The gender perspective organically complemented and enhanced EXIT's existing work around altering and rebuilding social identity.

In addition to providing insight about integrating gender into deradicalization and disengagement programs, EXIT Sweden also offers a model of CVE programming that reaches an older demographic. This is especially important given the recruitment trends described above. In Sweden, the program works primarily with the country's older neo-Nazi population. Schools and churches are considered typical entry points for deradicalization and off-ramping interventions, as they allow for engaging young people and religious leaders in CT and CVE. EXIT's approach - inviting individuals who voluntarily disaffiliated themselves from white extremist groups - may provide an alternative entry point, particularly for forms of violent extremism that are not tied to religion, or that have older participants.

## A Nexus of Drivers for Peace

Sweden's approach to countering and preventing violent extremism is largely focused on the provision of a toolkit of social services and relational support. The government funds programs like EXIT Sweden and the Tolerance Project, a project practiced in 60 Swedish schools that works with teenagers in schools to promote tolerance, facilitate democratic dialogue and prevent "at-risk" youth from being drawn into violent extremist groups.<sup>36</sup>

The purely social and relational approach taken in Sweden has been the subject of growing criticism by organizations such as the Institute for Race Relations, who view it as trivializing the political and ideological aspects of the problem, arguing that drivers to violent extremism cannot be properly addressed by an extension of social services alone.<sup>37</sup> Their critique posits that taking this approach allows the governance to maintain neutrality and a façade of tolerance, framing white extremists as

victims or "lost sheep" who need to be brought back into mainstream Swedish society, thus normalizing fascism as a developmental stage.<sup>38</sup> They argue that government tolerance of white extremists stands in contrast to the treatment of ethnic minorities by Swedish police and limited access to justice for victims of hate crimes.<sup>39</sup>

Devising new drivers for peace, rights and pluralism will require operating at the nexus of psychological processes, historical legacies, cultural values and economic, and social and political forces.

The philosophy behind Sweden's approach to combating racism may be rooted in the country's relationship to white identity, which some researchers theorize can be defined by "dueling nostalgias": one mourning the loss of a racially homogenous "old Sweden" that has disappeared due to the growing presence of immigrants, and the other mourning the loss of a morally superior "good Sweden" as tolerant attitudes have dissipated amid new waves of anti-immigrant sentiment.<sup>40</sup> Per this theory, a melancholic longing for a whiter past defines both racism and responses to racism in Sweden with the latter emphasizing a return to tolerance, rather than institutionalizing an explicit anti-racist ideology.

In terms of drivers of peace in Sweden, programs like EXIT and the Tolerance Project, which engage people at the prevention and disengagement stage to build or rebuild a stable identity outside of extremist thought and practice, occupy an important niche. Pairing social and relational approaches with interventions that target the structural and political drivers of violent extremism and racism offers a new challenge for the Swedish context.

The demands of young people, who have been at the forefront of demanding accountability for structural racism in the Black Lives Matter movement and in leading other anti-racist activism, illustrate what these interventions might require: a recognition of Sweden's role in colonialism and scientific racism, addressing discrimination and exclusion of national minorities, redressing racial profiling in the police and criminal justice system, and closing the income inequality gap between white Swedes and racial minorities—to name a few.<sup>41</sup> Devising new drivers of peace, rights and pluralism will require operating at the nexus of psychological processes, historical legacies, cultural values and economic, social and political forces. Gender and identity are key considerations in such an approach, not only to analyze what motivates people to join extremist groups, but also to capture the differences between white extremism and Islamic extremism, and the specific tools required to combat each.

36. Skiple, A. (2020). The Importance of Significant Others in Preventing Extremism: The Philosophy and Practice of the Swedish Tolerance Project. ([access here](#)).

37. Institute of Race Relations (IRR) (2014). Sweden's counter-extremism model and the stigmatizing of anti-racism. ([access here](#)).

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid.

40. Lundstrom, C. and Teitelbaum, B. (2017). Nordic Whiteness: an introduction. *Scandinavian Studies*, Vol. 89, No. 2, Nordic Whiteness (Summer 2017), pp. 151- 158. ([access here](#)).

41. Daily Beast. (2021). Racism is Challenging Sweden's Myth of a Post-Racial Paradise. ([access here](#)).





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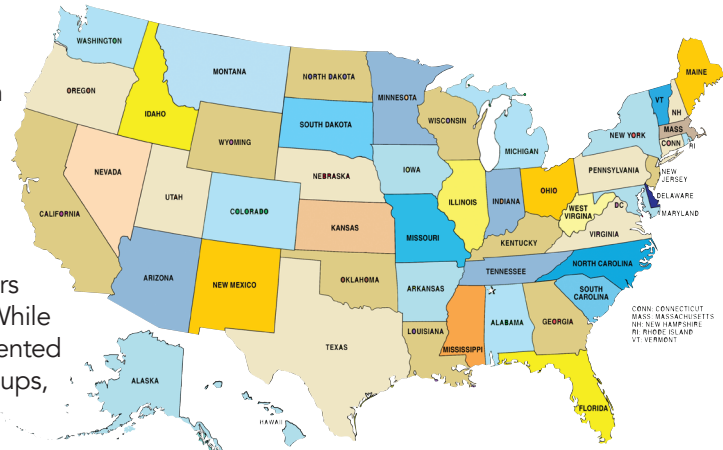
CASE STUDY

**ADJACENCY TO POWER:  
GENDER, TRAUMA, AND VIOLENCE IN  
WHITE SUPREMACIST EXTREMISM IN  
THE UNITED STATES**

A Case Study on the Role of Gender and Identity in Shaping Positive Alternatives to Extremisms<sup>1</sup>

**SUMMARY**

As a former white supremacist, Shannon Foley Martinez has unique insight into the draw of the far-right and uses her experience and knowledge to help others leave the movement. While women are underrepresented in far-right extremist groups, they have always played critical roles<sup>2</sup> and are becoming increasingly visible. The rationale of women who join clearly misogynist movements—whether the Islamic State or the Alt-Right—has often perplexed experts. However, Foley Martinez's experience illustrates that the complex and gendered power dynamics within these groups can benefit individual women.



Taking a Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) approach,<sup>3</sup> this case study is partially autoethnographic, co-authored by Foley Martinez herself. It focuses on the drivers to violent extremism and terrorism, and the importance of addressing trauma and building interpersonal skills to successfully reintegrate into society after leaving a violent extremist group.

Foley Martinez grew up with no sense of belonging in her family, and experienced sexual violence at a young age. The self-hatred that stemmed from that unresolved trauma found a home in Neo-Nazis' rhetoric and violence. During her days as a white supremacist, Foley Martinez's relationships were abusive, and she was exposed to violence by leaders of the group. At the same time, her adjacency to power provided a sense of safety from outsiders. In her current work mentoring people leaving violent white supremacist groups, she emphasizes the importance of identifying and addressing trauma, and developing interpersonal and emotional skills to positively engage with the complex modern world.

1. ICAN was commissioned by Global Affairs Canada to produce this set of case studies on the role of gender and intersectional identities in countering violent extremism and counterterrorism. For more information or to contact the authors please email melinda.holmes@icanpeacework.org.  
2. Ebner, J. and Davey J. (2019). "How Women Advance the Internationalization of the Far-Right". GW Program on Extremism, Perspectives on the Future of Women, Gender & Violent Extremism. ([access here](#)).  
3. Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) is an analytical process that provides a rigorous method for the assessment of systemic inequalities, as well as to assess how diverse groups of women, men, and gender diverse people may experience policies, programs and initiatives. More info on the GBA+ approach is accessible [here](#).

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ **Trauma plays an inherent role in radicalization to violence**, for all ages, genders, sexualities, and socio-economic demographics. Trauma takes many forms, as do toxic responses to unprocessed trauma.
- ▶ **People with marginalized identities (such as women, people of color, low-income people, immigrants) may experience a heightened sense of empowerment in violent white supremacist groups** through the fear their words and actions evoke in others and their adjacency to power.
- ▶ **Women are often simultaneously perpetrators and victims of violence.** Seeing women as active agents in their radicalization who derive benefit from their participation in violent white supremacy helps to offset the “victim trope” often assigned to women in violent extremism, and supports them in acting as agents in their own rehabilitation.
- ▶ **Whole person approaches to rehabilitation and reintegration are more successful** and likely to generate pro-social good than approaches dealing only with transforming belief systems and/or ideologies.
- ▶ **Inability to successfully navigate social complexity often leads people to embrace dogmatic belief systems** through which they can interact with the world more simplistically. Developing interpersonal communication and emotional skills are crucial to empower people disengaging from such groups to adapt to changing ideas about the “ideal man” and about women’s roles in society, and to embrace greater complexity surrounding roles and expressions of gender and sexuality.
- ▶ **Throughout rehabilitation and reintegration, men often require greater assistance in building healthy networks**, while women often require greater assistance finding and sustaining economic opportunities.

## CONTEXT ANALYSIS

White supremacy is endemic to the United States, dating back to chattel slavery and the practice and policies of removal, relocation, and disenfranchisement of Indigenous peoples. The Ku Klux Klan, which emerged after the American Civil War, was the first American white supremacist group to use vigilante tactics to preserve white supremacy. In the 1980s, spurred by a sense of betrayal from the United States government’s withdrawal from the Vietnam War, the American white power movement consolidated and transitioned from seeking to preserve the historical racial hierarchy towards actively aiming to overthrow the government with the goal to create an all-white ethno-state. The new white power movement unified anti-government militia groups, white supremacist groups such as the Klan, Neo-Nazis and skinheads, and religious fundamentalist groups.<sup>4</sup>

White supremacist violence also intersects with antisemitism, anti-immigration beliefs, and male supremacy. Periods of increased white supremacist-motivated violence ebb and flow cyclically. The United States is currently experiencing an intensifying period of white supremacist violence. This violence is spread across all age demographics, from teenagers to baby boomers, and spans all economic demographics. However, those under 25 are overrepresented in online-driven, accelerationist, neo-Nazi affiliated groups. Militia and separatist groups tend to attract 25- to 50-year-olds, and adherents to conspiracy-driven affiliations such as QAnon tend to be heavily populated by those 35 and over.



White women have historically played an integral part in white supremacy in the United States.

4. Belew, Kathleen. (2018). The History of White Power. New York Times ([access here](#)).

Real or fabricated violence against white women has often been used effectively to mobilize people to white supremacist violence.

The most recent United States Department of State Bureau of Counterterrorism report indicates that “racially or ethnically motivated terrorism (REMT), particularly white supremacist terrorism” has increased in the last five years.<sup>5</sup> The United States Department of Homeland Security reports in the most recent Homeland Threat Assessment that 2019 was the most lethal year for domestic violent extremism in the United States since the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, and states, “Among DVEs [domestic violent extremists], racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists—specifically white supremacist extremists (WSEs)—will remain the most persistent and lethal threat in the Homeland.”<sup>6</sup> Though it remains unclear at this point, there is much concern over lockdown measures and COVID-19-driven isolation amplifying future white supremacist violence.<sup>7</sup>

Women have historically played an integral part in white supremacy in the United States; from slavery<sup>8</sup>, through segregation<sup>9</sup>, and into the present day.<sup>10</sup> Real or fabricated violence against white women has often been used very effectively to mobilize people to commit white supremacist violence.

## Gender, Identity, and Drivers to White Supremacist Violent Extremism

Women often functionally work towards amplifying, marketing, and mainstreaming the messaging of white supremacist ideology. This outward-facing role and dissemination of propaganda is often made the purview of women, who, by virtue of their femininity, are presumed to have a certain distance from explicit hate and violence. Since women are discounted as coequal threats to their male counterparts, they can engage in violence or capacity building for violence undetected.

In practice, women are often not allowed to operate in leadership roles other than in relation to other women. For example, women are often not permitted to moderate forums other than all-women forums, which preserves the space for men. Women are encouraged to enhance their knowledge and ability to converse intelligently, but never to contradict or outshine their male counterparts. While women are largely outside of the decision-making structures, they play influential roles and can be leaders and organizers within these movements, as we saw with

the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia and during the events at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021.

One of the cornerstones of preventing violent extremist engagement is understanding the motivations, reasons, and conditions in which someone finds resonance with the messaging offered by violent extremist actors and communities. These motivations, reasons, and conditions are sometimes referred to collectively as “drivers”. Individuals radicalizing to violence usually have intensely personal stories explaining why they entrenched themselves in these ideologies, worldviews, and/or communities. However, these individual stories are always happening within larger societal and cultural realities. Though not all interventions will focus on these overlapping realities, effective prevention must address both personal and cultural aspects of this dynamic. Drivers can be grouped into personal and cultural categories.

Personal drivers include such things as unresolved trauma, including experiences of violence during childhood or youth, a perceived lack of agency, disconnection from a sense of belonging, a desire to feel a meaningful connection to something greater than oneself, struggles expressing and developing one’s identity, revenge for real or perceived wrongdoing, separation from a sense of meaningful empowerment, and unfulfillment of desires to engage in thoughtful and meaningful discussions or dialogue about philosophical and/or political ideas. Cultural drivers include such things as shifting demographics, war, widespread corruption, real or perceived economic, social, and cultural inequalities, lack of access to quality social services and safety nets, social unrest, and changing power and economic structures.

The dynamics of violent white supremacy in the United States are heavily gendered. Messaging and propaganda are imbued with themes of male supremacy, traditional gender roles, and nostalgia hearkening back to idealized visions of the past based on this gendered hierarchy. Women are often billed as sanctified keepers of the home, bearers of the future of the white race, and the conduit for passing on traditions to younger generations. At the same time, intimate partner and gender-based violence (GBV) are rife within white supremacist circles.

Shifting cultural ideas about the “ideal man” away from exhibiting physical strength and serving as the primary financial earner, towards broader emotional support and fluency in domestic skills can exacerbate feelings of disempowerment and a lack of agency in men. White supremacy offers simplicity. Men’s roles in the movement are often very structured, hierarchical, and clear, whereas in the rest of society those roles are ambiguous and evolving. Male strength and leadership are emphasized. For people who feel disempowered in their lives, this gives them dignity by attributing an inherent value to their lives, opinions, and aspirations.

5. Country Reports on Terrorism 2019. US Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism. ([access here](#)).

6. Homeland Threat Assessment. (2020). US Department of Homeland Security. ([access here](#)).

7. Ibid.

8. Jones-Rogers, S. (2019). *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South*. Yale University Press.

9. McRae, E.G. (2018). *Mothers of Massive Resistance: White Women and the Politics of White Supremacy*. Oxford University Press.

10. Darby, S. (2020). *Sisters in Hate: American Women on the Front Lines of White Nationalism*. Little, Brown and Company.

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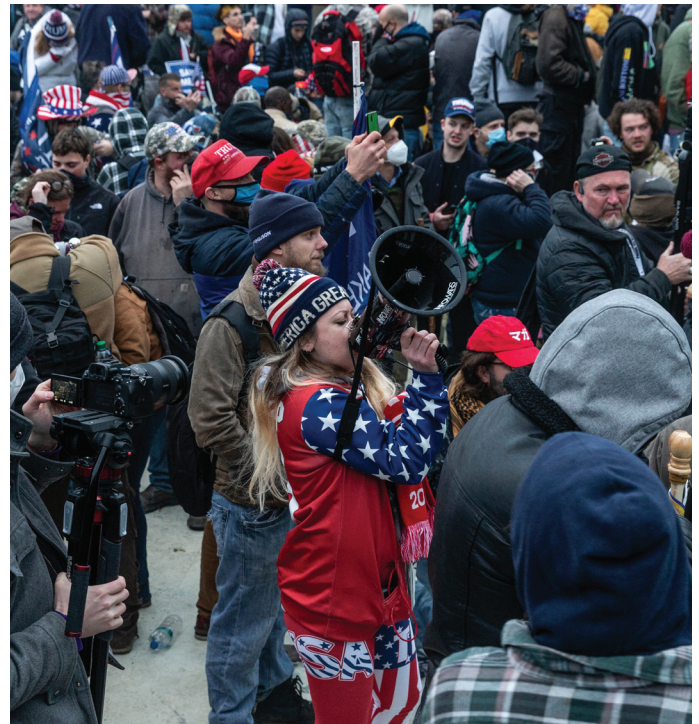
The movement's goal of racial protection, racial purity, and racial advancement becomes the predominant concern; all else becomes superfluous. The communication skills and emotional intelligence that many of those who join these groups lack are viewed as weaknesses and often equated with femininity. Landing in a place where the things you lack are seen as weak, unnecessary to hold power, and even as the antithesis of being valuable, frees men from the challenge of navigating the world without these capacities.

Likewise, women face increasing social complexity as their roles expand beyond home, while they still carry most of the domestic labor load. The gendered messaging of white supremacy offers a framework that eases the burden of navigating the complexity of modern life, roles, and identities. The gendered burden of care and an inadequate social safety net lead some women to find solace and support in these groups that emphasize traditional gender roles. The isolation of atomized family units leaves an unfulfilled desire for the extended family and "village" to help raise their children and provide broader meaning to their role as mothers.

## The Gendered Interplay of Trauma and Agency

Many women and men in these groups have experienced trauma in some form, and often in multiple forms. They have not developed healthy communication skills, interpersonal skills, and emotional intelligence to navigate our complex modern society. With unresolved trauma, the brain protects itself to prioritize space given to survival mechanisms. People exist suspended in these realities with no capacity to add extra layers, thus making navigating complexity impossible as the brain is hyper-vigilantly working to detect threats. Simplistic, binary worldviews with clear groups of "others" who are seen as threats can become the default response, because the brain is in a "safe or threat" mode with the question "Should I hide/run/fight?" always front of mind.

Abused people often become abusers. Research shows that the highest indicator that someone will act out violently is a history of experiencing violence to effectively solve problems earlier in life, as a victim, witness, or perpetrator.<sup>11</sup> Most mass shooters have a history of violence



Women often functionally work towards amplifying, marketing, and mainstreaming the messaging of white supremacist ideology.

against women: among the ten deadliest mass shootings in U.S. history, nine were committed by individuals with histories of violence against women.<sup>12</sup>

Why would women engage and entrench themselves in spaces where male supremacy is so dominant? Women can derive a sense of agency through adjacency to power from which they otherwise feel disconnected. Since fewer women are represented inside these groups, a dynamic exists of empowerment or heightened worth, filling that huge gap in sense of self-worth, because they are "big fish in a small pond". Straight white women also experience a sense of heightened power over the targets of their hate and violence: non-white groups, Jewish people, and marginalized sexualities. Women derive real benefits from their participation in white supremacy; it allows them to maintain and expand social, political, and economic power.

Male infighting and struggles for power are inherent and never-ending within these spaces. Women can offer cohesion and build peace within groups plagued by internal conflict. Their efforts can help mitigate and counterbalance the endemic splintering of groups. They often play the role of filling the emotional labor gap, since groups are comprised mostly of men without the capacity to do so, and emotional skills have been largely devalued. Even though these roles are being played out in very negative spaces and to perpetuate white supremacy, it often gives women a sense of purpose and meaning they did not experience outside the movement. While they might come from fractured homes and marginalized social spaces where they felt worthless, inside the movement their input is vital and sought after.

11. Athens, L. (2017). "Applying Violentization: From Theory to Praxis". *Victims & Offenders*. Vol. 12:4, pp. 497-522. ([access here](#)).

12. Nicholson, J. and DeVoe, E. (2020). "Violence Against Women and Public Mass Shootings". Boston University Institute for Health System Innovation & Policy. ([access here](#)).

Interpersonal relationships within the white supremacist groups are often incredibly violent. A large percentage of women who leave have reported GBV before and during their participation in these spaces. Previous experiences of GBV often means these women have a sense of personal worthlessness as a baseline. Violence within a group simply reinforces that baseline view. The violence directed towards them may also be justified by perpetrators as a form of protection from others who are perceived as threats—threats that may be real or imagined due to the hyper-vigilance often exhibited by those who have unresolved trauma.

## Creating Stability

For positive transformation to take place, this model initially prioritizes improving conditions of stability. Disengagement is a process just as much as engagement and entrenchment, but some baselines must be met first in order to make progress. Without a sense of stability, people find it very difficult to focus on healing. People need a safe place to live, a predictable, livable income, access to healthcare, and nurturing relationships. Some people disaffiliate (they no longer hold white supremacist beliefs and don't

Generating financial and housing stability for women allows them to decrease their dependency on toxic relationships. Connecting women with GBV support groups and services offers them a chance to create new relationship dynamics, which emphasize safety and nurturing care

## Shannon Foley Martinez: Embracing the Complexity of Identity and Society

Shannon Foley Martinez, a former white supremacist from the United States, mentors people leaving extremist groups. She uses a holistic and pluralistic approach to help former extremists reintegrate and develop skills to engage with the wider society. Foley Martinez was active in the white power movement during the late 1980s and early 1990s and has been engaged in rehabilitative mentorship for over twenty years. Her work includes developing community resource platforms to inoculate individuals against violence-based ideologies, teaching resiliency skills to at-risk communities, building programs for educators, collaborating with tech platforms on countering extremism, and organizing trainings for law enforcement officials.

Foley Martinez's peer-to-peer mentorship is informed by her own journey into and out of violent extremism. She recognizes that rehabilitation and reintegration require consistent stability, mental wellness building, a healthy processing of shame, and a pathway to integrate past actions healthfully into the present in order to begin building a future. She emphasizes identifying and addressing traumatizing environments and events in a mentee's life, improving interpersonal communications skills, gaining emotional skills, developing self-care and employment skills, and growing pro-social community building skills. She understands that people must be active agents in their own transformation for it to be effective and long-lasting.



Shannon Foley Martinez's peer-to-peer mentorship is informed by her own journey into and out of violent extremism.

identify with the group), but they don't necessarily leave or disengage because their whole world is wrapped up in the movement. Their relationships, support for their children, friendships, and support systems all still exist inside the hate- and violence-based spaces. They no longer believe in what they are doing, but stay because it is the only family, community, and reality they know, and they have learned to navigate it over an extended period of time.

A large percentage of women have reported GBV before entering violent white supremacy, as well as while engaged inside these spaces. People who have experienced GBV often remain in unsafe relationships, citing a lack of resources, difficulty identifying what has happened as violence, feelings of having nowhere else to go, and conflating the cycle of abuse with love. Many times, women who have left violent extremism continue to engage in emotionally chaotic, tumultuous, unsafe, and abusive intimate partner relationships. There are many reasons for this, but much of women's identity building has often been based on their relationships with the men who are still inside, and that does not simply end once they disengage. Women struggle to engage consistently in holistic, nontoxic relationships and also seem to have more difficulty developing financial stability outside the movement. Because of this, special consideration must be given to addressing some of the underlying factors to break this cycle. Generating financial and housing stability for women allows them to decrease their dependency on toxic relationships. Connecting women with GBV support groups and services offers them a chance to create new relationship dynamics, which emphasize safety and nurturing care.

## Transforming Trauma

As Foley Martinez says, "No one's story into violence and hate begins: 'So everything was totally awesome in my life, and then...'" There are nearly always multitudinous layers of trauma interwoven into someone's life before they entrench themselves in violent extremism. While they are engaged, new layers of trauma are added. Helping someone disengage from hate and violence is inseparable from helping them disentangle their trauma in order to begin to healthfully process and learn to integrate these harmful experiences into their lives in a more holistic way. The more layers of trauma

that exist in a person's life, the more they are likely to engage in behaviors harmful to themselves and/or others. Increased childhood experiences of trauma are correlated with higher levels of both domestic violence and sexual assault.<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, as mentioned above, people whose lives have been impacted by trauma often have difficulty identifying what they have experienced as traumatic. Adding an additional layer of complexity to this, many people engaged in violence experience Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress (PITS) in response to the hurt and harm they have perpetuated.

For women, this often entails working through the trauma of GBV both before and during engagement in violent extremism. Men who have disengaged also have often reported emotional, physical, and sexual abuse in childhood. Connecting people with resources, information, and mental health care professionals to better identify, understand, and process their trauma is a cornerstone of rehabilitation and reintegration for those leaving violent extremism. The goal should be for people to learn to thrive, not just to cease to engage in one harmful set of actions.

## Embracing Empathy, Complexity and Non-Violent Communication Skills

Because so many people disengaging from white supremacy have been immersed in toxic and violence-imbued spaces for long periods, it is essential to help them develop healthy communication and emotional skills. Research suggests that even just learning how to name the emotion one is feeling helps with healthier processing of emotions.<sup>14</sup> Broadening men's emotional skills and tools empowers them to build healthier relationships and non-destructive means of expressing their fears and struggles. This can also help expand men's ability to engage in the world where far more emotional competency is required of them. Women gaining emotional proficiency are better empowered to identify toxic relationships and potentially break cycles of abuse.

**Non-Violent Communication:** It can be greatly beneficial to learn non-violent communication (NVC) skills and tools, where the focus is placed on identifying one's emotions and needs, empathetic listening, and non-coercive requests for engagement. Many people leaving white supremacy have never encountered a healthy model of communication. Learning necessary, healthy boundary-setting skills assists women in developing healthier relationships and beginning the process of cultivating an identity of their own, outside of their interpersonal relationships. Men benefit from learning how to respect boundaries, as well as how to seek and honor consent in their interactions and relationships.

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13. "What ACEs/PCEs do you have?". Aces Too High News. Last accessed 31 March 2021. ([access here](#)).

14. "Putting Feelings Into Words Produces Therapeutic Effects In The Brain." (2007). ScienceDaily. ([access here](#)).



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**Mindfulness:** There is much evidence that developing the practice of mindfulness- broadly defined as the practice of focusing awareness on the present moment and accepting one's feelings, thoughts, and physical sensations - promotes both psychological and physical health.<sup>15</sup> For those leaving violence and hate, cultivating mindfulness seems to enhance their ability to re-engage with the world and other people in healthier ways. Mindfulness also seems to help in the development of self-compassion, which is a necessary part of holistically processing the shame that most former violent extremists feel about their engagement in white supremacy. For women who have experienced GBV, the development of mind-body

integration seems especially important for processing that violence. It also seems very important for women to learn that self-care doesn't equate to selfishness, because so much of their time and identity in the white power movement involved messaging about their subservience to their male counterparts.

**Critical and Complex Thinking and Empathy:** The final piece of this puzzle is improving the capacity for complexity in thought, solution generation, and identity building. After the intense, inward focus of previous healing, the goal is for people to holistically reintegrate back into society at large. In order to do this, they need to embrace the complexity of navigating through the world. Encouraging engagement in pluralistic philosophical and political discourse can help people have a wider view and greater empathy for the struggles of many communities and populations around the world. Women learn that there are no prescriptive roles which they must inherently fulfill; they can seek meaningful education, recreation, and employment. Improving domestic-work skills can help men more successfully navigate a broader view of masculinity, through gaining capacity to more equitably share household workloads.

15. Murphy, M. et al. (2012). "The Benefits of Dispositional Mindfulness in Physical Health: A Longitudinal Study of Female College Students". Journal of American College Health. Vol. 60:5, pp. 341-348. ([access here](#)).