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OVERLOOKED AND UNDERRATED? The role of youth and women in preventing violent extremism*

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Violent radicalisation is a process of socialisation in which both youth and women are drawn to violent action through their peers: youngsters mostly decide to join a violent extremist group through friends while most female recruiters initiate a bond with their recruit through a virtual sisterhood.

Youngsters are overrepresented amongst the perpetrators of terrorist attacks carried out in Europe in the past two decades.

Almost one out of five plots carried out in Europe between 2014 and 2017 (142 plots in total) featured women. A similar proportion of women (20%) were arrested in the EU in 2018 on suspicion of terrorism-related offences.

Preventing violent extremism (PVE) strategies tend to consider youngsters and women as victims of violent extremism, and thus as mere beneficiaries of PVE policies. However, there is an urgent need to truly involve youth and women in PVE efforts as they better understand their peer's grievances.

In April 2020, **Associated Press** reported quite unusual, not to say unrealistic, news: a key figure of an international neo-Nazi group linked to plots to attack a Las Vegas synagogue and detonate a car bomb at CNN headquarters has avoided arrest despite of being tracked by the police. Online, he was known as the "Commander" of the Feuerkrieg Division, a group that holds some of the white supremacist movement's most extreme views. In real life, he was a 13-year old boy receptive to neo-Nazi worldviews from a small town in Estonia. Confronted by the authorities in January, he could not be prosecuted under the criminal code because he was a child under the age of 14.

This case underscores a major challenge faced by counterterrorism policymakers and security agencies: the increasing share of young boys and girls amongst violent extremist groups. At the global level, the unprecedented flow of young men and women who joined the self-proclaimed caliphate has evidenced the ability of terrorist groups to develop youth- and women-targeted propaganda. In Europe, teenagers or pre-teens were involved in **just under one-quarter of the terrorist attacks and plots (23%)** registered between January 2014 and May 2017. Just a month later, in June 2017, Europol **warned** that terrorist groups may take advantage of women, young adults and even children, to carry out terrorist attacks in the European Union. Out of 1 056 individuals arrested in the EU in 2018 on suspicion of terrorism-related offences, one fifth were women.

While the role of youth and women in terrorism and violent extremism was often overlooked, it has received

considerable attention in the past few years. The United Nations was amongst the first organisations to step up efforts in that direction. In 2015, two important resolutions - Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security and Resolution 2242 on Women, Peace and Security – emphasised the need to address the factors and conditions pushing youth and women towards violent extremism (e.g., lack of social inclusion, marginalisation, political alienation, etc.), especially by enhancing youth and women’s empowerment. In this vein, the United Nations Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism in 2015 called upon UN member states to substantially involve young people and women in strategies aimed at countering and preventing violent extremism (PVE).

Since then a handful of governments have adopted PVE strategies, with a focus on youth and women. These strategies tend to consider youngsters and women as victims of violent extremism, and thus as mere beneficiaries of PVE policies. But, are youth and women only victims of violent extremism?

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groups, they can also be perpetrators of violent extremism. In this regard, the promise of agency and empowerment offered by violent extremist groups should make us reconsider the role of youth and women in PVE efforts. Apart from passive victims or supporters of violent extremist groups, youngsters and women can also (and do) play a role as active preventers.

Youth: at the intersection of multiple grievances

Young people are disproportionately affected by violent extremism, both as victims and perpetrators. In a study carried out for the **United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism**, the typical profile of foreign fighters who travelled to Syria and Iraq between 2012 and 2016 was described as “most likely to be male, young and disadvantaged economically, educationally, and in terms of the labour market. He is also more likely to come from a marginalized background, both socially and politically. Most were unemployed, or underemployed, and/or said that their life lacked meaning”. This is partly explained by the ability of some violent extremist groups like the Islamic State organisation (IS) to exploit a wide range of individual and collective grievances such as socio-economic exclusion, political alienation and relative deprivation. Although context-specific, these grievances affect large segments of youngsters worldwide (e.g., youth unemployment rates, low rates of political participation, etc.).

Scholars have highlighted several factors that help to understand the reasons why youth constitute a vulnerable group. In his essay *Les enfants du chaos*, the French anthropologist Alain Bertho observes that youngsters have been overrepresented in several hundreds of violent mobilisations that took place in European, African and Asian countries in the past two decades. He concludes that the appeal for violence amongst the youth is intrinsically linked to their lack of prospects, and that the success of jihadist-Salafism amongst youngsters is only but one expression of it. In the same vein, Rik Coolsaet considers that contemporary jihadism is anchored in a “no future youth subculture”. Both authors subscribe to what Olivier Roy has called a “**generational revolt**”, which particularly affects second generation youngsters in Europe. According to the sociologist, the problem is not terrorist organisations themselves: “The problem is the revolt of these youth. And the real challenge is to understand what these youth represent: whether they are the vanguard of an approaching war or, on the contrary, are just a rumbling of history.”

Research in the field of psychology showed that the lack of experience and the difficulty met by youngsters when it comes to find a settled place in society partly explains why they act more impulsively, are prone to take greater risks and to experiment with new values and identities. In this regard, Lorne L. Dawson underlined

that three main factors explain why youth are more likely to be affected by violent extremism than their elders: the searching for meaning in life to compensate for real and perceived humiliations; concerns with moral issues (need for a higher or transcendent authority) and the strong orientation towards action, adventure and risk. Last but not least important, young people’s propensity to join violent extremist groups can also be explained by their biographical availability, i.e. the fact that they have fewer commitments than adults (job, family obligations, children, etc.). This way, they benefit from a greater independence from their family and community when it comes to join a violent extremism.

In the European context, as of 2016, the fastest-growing age group amongst the radicalised individuals in Europe was 12- to 17-year-olds. Youngsters are also overrepresented amongst the perpetrators of terrorist attacks carried out in Europe in the past two decades as **most of them were aged between 18 and 30**. In the MENA region, there is **evidence** that young people’s propensity to join violent extremist views was closely linked to interconnected processes of social, economic and political marginalisation which result in a delayed transition into adulthood. In this region, as economic independence is often a pre-condition for marriage, transition into adulthood mostly depends on employment. Yet, not only the MENA region has the world’s highest youth unemployment rates (between 25% and 60%) but also highly

qualified and educated youth suffer more from unemployment than any other group. Such a situation feeds in many ways the feeling of relative deprivation – i.e. the gap between expectations and reality -, which can eventually push individuals towards violent extremist. For instance, Gambetta and Hertog's book *Engineers of Jihad* evidences that engineers are overrepresented in the ranks of violent extremist groups because of their initial career outcome expectations. Likewise, a **recent study** showed that unemployment amongst educated young dramatically increases the probability to adopt radical ideas in the 8 Arab countries of study.

Women: from victims to perpetrators of violent extremism

Although women have taken active roles in **60 percent** of armed rebel groups over the past decades, terrorism continues to be seen as a man's world. In such a world, women appear first and foremost as victims. Like most clichés, this one is doomed to inaccuracy. Whilst women have been among the **leaders and key figures** of several terrorist organisations (e.g., nationalist, far-left, faith-based) throughout the twentieth century, this issue has become a subject of interest to scholars and policy-makers only in the past few years. Two elements may explain this sudden interest: the greater involvement of women in the preparation and execution of terrorist attacks in Europe, Africa and the MENA region, and the presence of women amongst the so-called foreign fighters under IS.

On the one hand, women seem to take a greater part in attempted and executed terrorist attacks. Almost **one out of five plots** carried out in Europe between 2014 and 2017 (142 plots in total) featured women. A similar proportion of women (20%) were arrested in the EU in 2018 on suspicion of terrorism-related offences. In some instances, security bodies have dismantled all-female terrorist cells. In August 2014, French police dismantled a terrorist cell made of three female teenagers who planned suicide bombing in a synagogue in Lyon. Although similar data is not available for the MENA region, women also took an active role in terrorist groups both in and outside of conflict zones. In October 2016, Moroccan police dismantled an all-female IS terrorist cell – made of ten women aged between 15 and 30 who had planned suicide bombings across the country. Two years later, a woman suicide bomber blew herself up in Tunis (October 2018), wounding 9 people. Besides, there is **evidence** that violent extremist groups have developed specific mechanisms to engage women into violent extremist groups in refugee camps.

On the other hand, the foreign fighters' phenomenon provides a telling example of the increasing role of women in violent extremist groups: according to the **International Centre for Counter-Terrorism at The Hague**, around 17 percent of European foreign fighters who joined militant groups in Syria and Iraq between 2011 and 2016 were women. At global level, between 2016 and 2017, the flow of women travelling to Syria and Iraq increased – especially from Western countries – while the flow of men declined.

In this regard, the ambition of IS to become a proto-State is a key element that helps to understand the recruitment of hundreds of women from dozens of countries to become part of their utopian project. Indeed, when the so-called Caliphate was proclaimed in June 2014, IS shifted its focus to state-building. This shift resulted in the deployment of propaganda messages calling for immigration, especially of women and families, in order to fulfil the promise of a Caliphate. IS propaganda relied on constant attacks to both Western and Islamic feminism in favour of a strict gender segregation and gender-based assignation of roles and responsibilities.

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In practice, women were not exclusively the bearers and carers of the future jihadist generations. Although a few of them have been involved into actual fighting, others played active roles as police and religious enforcement officials (e.g. the Al-Khansaa Brigade) and as agents of state-building (e.g., teachers). More importantly, their role was key in terms of recruitment: once the first women joined the territory, they started **recruiting other women** such as female friends, family members and “virtual sisters” through the internet. As a result, the proportion of European women who joined IS increased from one in seven European foreign fighters in 2014 to one in three in 2016. This evolution does not necessarily mean that women suddenly became more vulnerable to violent extremism. While the group's patriarchal ideology and territorial project could appeal to some women, there is also evidence that IS used **gender-based recruiting strategies** to further involve women in its organisation.

As we can see, women are not only victims but also perpetrators of violent extremism. In fact, their growing visibility in the self-proclaimed caliphate is, to a great extent, linked to recruitment and propaganda strategies deployed by the terrorist organisation. De-

spite that, women are often depicted as passive victims. In the case of those women who travelled to Syria and Iraq, **until recently** many have been portrayed in the media as naïve, tricked by recruiters promising them the “glamour of jihad”, or, in the case of married women, coerced by their husband to join a given violent extremist group. This bias explains why, until recently, some European countries treated women returning from Syria and Iraq with **more compassion** than men.

Approaching women only as victims of violent extremism not only ignores the myriad roles played by

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women within these groups, but also overlooks the broad spectrum of motivations behind their decisions to join such groups. Such a perspective reinforces gender stereotypes and subsequently leads to inadequate policy responses to female radicalisation. As in the case of youth, research on women-specific drivers is thus essential to better understand female radicalisation. Without this, there is the risk that PVE efforts keep looking at women and youth as mere “target groups” of PVE efforts.

From Perpetrators to Preventers of Violent Extremism

Violent radicalisation is a process in which ideology plays a key role: it provides the explanation for the perceived or real grievances experienced by individuals through a specific frame (e.g., the “war on Islam”); helps to put the blame on specific targets (e.g., the West) and eventually legitimises the use of violence against the designated enemy. Violent radicalisation is also a process of socialisation in which both youth and women are drawn to violent action through their peers: youngsters mostly decide to join a violent extremist group through friends while most female recruiters initiate a bond with their recruit through a virtual sisterhood. From this perspective, youth and women can make the difference in prevention efforts.

Youth grievances are mostly rooted in interconnected processes of social, economic and political exclusion.

Violent extremist groups take advantage of these grievances by posing themselves as empowering agents: they are successful in providing them with personal (defending a cause), material (employment) and psychological (status- and adventure-seeking) rewards. Bearing this in mind, youngsters are valuable partners to advance on violence prevention as they are aware of their peers’ grievances, which they often share (push factors). Under this perspective, they are well situated to figure out what makes violent extremism a seducing option to some of them. In addition to that, they are more likely to constitute credible voices in their local communities than other actors (e.g., political and religious figures).

In this context, youth focused PVE programmes and initiatives aim at engaging youth in PVE through different means. One of them consists in offering youth platforms and spaces to express their grievances and voice their concerns. Another approach, explored by governments and international organisations (such as the United Nations Development Programme or United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) consists in fund-

ing specific projects led by youth grassroots organisations and NGOs to raise awareness on violent extremism amongst their peers. For instance, the ‘**Young Men Initiative**’ in Bosnia and Herzegovina consisted in a series of educational workshops targeting young students (aged between 14 and 18) to promote critical thinking, with a focus on violence prevention. Other funding initiatives can be categorised as youth-focused PVE efforts such as funding research on youth drivers of violent extremism, funding youth-led **alternative narrative campaigns**. All in all, these initiatives aim at better understanding what makes violent extremism a viable option to some youngsters and subsequently adjust public policies to prevent youth marginalisation (education, employment, youth political participation, etc.).

Women’s contribution to PVE has often been framed in their role as mothers. Two recurrent arguments are used to justify that: on the one hand, they are well situated to identify early warning signs of (violent) radicalisation of their children and family members while, on the other hand, they have an emotional pull on their children and a considerable influence in teaching them the values of tolerance and acceptance. Yet, this approach lacks publicly available evidence that supports it (Chowdhury Fink et al., 2016). In addition to that, by confining women’s role in PVE to the private sphere (as mothers, wives and sisters), there is a risk of overlooking women’s capacity to prevent violent extremism far beyond their family roles. As explained earlier, the role of women should also be considered when it comes to addressing female radicalisation. In this respect, there

is a **variety of ways** in which women can be - individually and collectively - engaged in PVE efforts targeting both men and women: as actors of security enforcement agencies (e.g., police officers collaborating with local communities), as teachers, as policy shapers, as community members and as female preachers, to mention only a few examples.

This suggests the need for gender-sensitive approaches to PVE to benefit from complementary perspectives and experiences on violent extremism and ways to counter it; to better understand the gendered recruitment strategies used by violent extremists; and to refine PVE strategies in the light of the differences between men and women in terms of motivations (push and pull factors), roles (women as mothers and wives of jihadists) and needs (i.e., grievances). The **Women and Extremism Network** is an interesting initiative in this respect. This platform brings together scholars, policymakers and activists to study the patterns' of women engagement within terrorist groups and subsequently suggest policy recommendations and initiatives to address the presence of women in these groups.

Several ways have been explored to involve women in PVE efforts. Some initiatives, such as **PAIMAN Trust** in Pakistan, were launched to involve women in counter-messaging given the lack of alternative narratives that specifically address female radicalisation issues. In other instances, information channels and support to families, especially mothers, were provided to better understand the vulnerabilities around radicalisation and help them to prevent their children from embracing violent extremist views (e.g., HAYAT programme in Germany). Finally, some projects involve women, whether as mothers of radicalised individuals or as former members of violent extremist groups, to develop peer-to-peer narratives that specifically address the propaganda discourses targeting women (e.g., association IMAD in France). In this vein, the global network "Mothers for Life" brings together mothers who have experienced violent radicalisation in their own families to share their stories and experiences, to help one another and to give a strong voice to their messages. Other initiatives in this field are focused on religious-oriented PVE efforts. For example, Morocco launched a programme of female preachers (Morchidat) in 2005. Between 2005 and 2014, this programme trained over 500 female preachers to provide religious education to women in mosques, prisons and families of those affected by radicalisation (e.g., relatives of terrorists, families of foreign fighters, etc.).

Although evidence is needed to assess their effectiveness, these youth- and women-led initiatives seem promising as they rely on actors who are aware of their peers' grievances and who are more likely to benefit from trust and legitimacy within their communities than other actors (e.g., local authorities).

In conclusion, apart from constituting vulnerable groups, young people and women are also perpetrators of violent extremism. In both cases, there are specific needs and grievances that violent extremist groups seek to exploit, by portraying themselves as agents of change and by offering them a wide range of psychological and material rewards. Further research on youth and female radicalisation is thus needed to better understand what draws them in the hands of such groups, and what role they play in furthering the means and goals of these groups. More importantly, there is an urgent need to truly involve youth and women in PVE efforts: that is to say, not contemplating youth and women solely as beneficiaries of PVE strategies – as is usually the case. Both categories are rather strategic for the success of PVE strategies as they better understand their peer's grievances. As credible voices, as role models or as local leaders, youth and women can contribute to make PVE legitimate and effective in some communities. For these changes to happen, youth and women must be part of all stages of such strategies: from their design, to their implementation and, fundamentally, their evaluation. This seems to be the only way to truly enhance their empowerment in the field of prevention.

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