

# WOMEN & VIOLENT EXTREMISM



Photo by Tambriell Caudill

**Women are active agents deterring or engaging in violent extremist movements. Several contemporary violent organizations—the Islamic State, Boko Haram, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)—capitalize on women's efforts and demonstrate keen awareness of the strategic and tactical potential of female extremists.**

While some women serve as supportive wives and mothers to the next generation of extremists, others act as propagandists, fundraisers, and suicide bombers. The apparent proliferation of female actors in extremist groups, often underestimated, calls for strategies that effectively counter their participation in violent extremism.

The field of countering violent extremism (CVE) encompasses a broad spectrum of efforts to mitigate the radicalization and recruitment of extremists. The increasing prevalence of women as active, valuable participants in extremist organizations is spurring greater interest among government leaders and researchers in examining women's roles in CVE. This interest is welcome, as reliable information on the use and intersection of gender in CVE is just emerging and still deficient. Understanding the roles women play in supporting violent extremism will critically inform efforts to create spaces where women can and should participate in countering it.

## HOW DEEPLY HAVE WOMEN BEEN INVOLVED?

Women are not the most common perpetrators of violence, but women are an integral part of many extremist movements. Data on terrorist groups, for example, suggests that women account for approximately 20 to 30 percent of membership.<sup>1</sup>

Women's engagement in violent extremism manifests itself in myriad roles, and these contributions tend to ebb and flow over time and vary between movements. Ultimately, the lines of logic defining women's roles within extremist groups tend to derive from context-specific ideological, religious, logistical, social, and personal considerations.<sup>2</sup>

**Women were participants in terrorist activities long before it became popular to pay attention to them.<sup>3</sup>**

Women's supporting roles in terrorist organizations are often ignored due to the overemphasis on combatants within prevalent literature. In examining overarching trends regarding women in violent extremist movements, it is important to draw from and focus on information and literature regarding women in insurgencies, rebel groups, and terrorist organizations. Women's involvement in violent extremism is not unique to the 21st century; women have historically participated in many insurgent and resistance movements, acting on behalf of a variety of causes worldwide.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the long-standing involvement of women in violent political organizations, documentation of their efforts tends to be inconsistent and somewhat unreliable. The historical distortion of women in conflict is relevant, as it should inform the conduct of present-day analysis and research.

## ROLES OF WOMEN IN VIOLENT EXTREMISM

**Women play different roles when it comes to violent extremism: they can be enablers and actors, or they can play a key role in countering fundamentalism and extremism.<sup>5</sup>**

Women's roles in violent extremist groups fall into three categories: enforcers and informants, leaders and recruiters, and influencers in their communities and families. These categories of engagement mirror those in competing strategies to advance and counter violent extremism.

**Women can be powerful agents of change and can play a crucial role in detecting early signs of radicalization, intervening before individuals become violent, and delegitimizing violent extremist narratives.**

**—Naureen Chowdhury Fink, Sara Zeiger & Rafia Bhulai**  
*A Man's World?*  
*Exploring the Roles of Women in Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism*

I engaged a foreign fighter on Twitter. He never revealed any regrets—until I raised his family, particularly his mother. On Easter I said 'I know you're not a passionate Christian any more, but you may want to reach out to your mother and just let her know you are okay.' In the two months I talked to him, he never showed introspection until that moment. There is a very powerful role for mothers and fathers to reach the people that are drawn to such ideology.

—Seamus Hughes

Deputy Director, Program on Extremism at George Washington University

## WOMEN AS ENFORCERS & INFORMANTS

Organizations often use women to build social cohesion, enforce organizational practices, and monitor those who violate standards imposed by violent extremists. While some groups such as FARC and the PKK regularly integrate women as combatants, intelligence gatherers, and informants, others avoid doing so. In some cases, women work as enforcers and informants alongside men; in others, women work in gender-specific units.

Organizations that adhere to ultraconservative practices, including religious fundamentalism, often designate specific branches and tasks for female members. This is the case, for example, in the sisterhood wing of the Ku Klux Klan.

Within territory held by the Islamic State, a reportedly all-female policing unit called al-Khanssaa Brigade enforces socio-religious practices such as dress codes among women under their self-proclaimed jurisdiction.<sup>6</sup> This cohort, reportedly active in both Iraq and Syria, recruits members and creates propaganda targeted toward female sympathizers.<sup>7</sup> Women in al-Khanssaa Brigade serve as just one example of how women advance the agendas of extremist movements.

Women's roles as enforcers and informants position them to become a valuable, more integral part of law enforcement efforts to reduce violent extremism as well. This growing area of investigation has identified ways that women are engaging in critical areas of CVE and has underscored the importance of gender dynamics within CVE strategy.

Women are uniquely skilled in building trust with local communities and networks, leading to a more collaborative environment between locals and officials. Formed in the early 2000s, the U.S. Female Engagement Teams in Iraq and Afghanistan serve as a useful example of how female-centric strategies might be designed.<sup>8</sup>

**Female law enforcement officers are often better at building trust with the community and community-oriented policing, which are crucial elements of CVE strategies.<sup>9</sup>**

In some cases, women are believed to be more efficient because they are perceived as more approachable than their male counterparts, especially in dealing with grievances such as domestic abuse and sexual violence. Lastly, in some conservative communities, female security officers may have better access to the population, especially in instances where men are unable to inspect women due to gender-based social practices. Women also are highly valuable in the design of CVE interventions.

## WOMEN AS LEADERS & RECRUITERS

In some organizations, women act as leaders and recruiters, advancing extremist agendas by organizing, inciting, and directing both violent and nonviolent activity. Karla Cunningham expands on the nature of women's efforts, noting that women across a range of extremist organizations "have been leaders in organization, recruitment, and fundraising."<sup>10</sup>

**Even though the nature of 'leadership' varies, one study suggests that women assumed leadership roles in over one-quarter of rebel movements between 1990 and 2008.<sup>11</sup>**

Organizational management occurs on many levels, whether it is top-down or grassroots initiatives. Over time, globalization and the rise of the internet have made it easier and more feasible for women to take on organizing, recruiting, and fundraising roles.

Wherever women advance extremist agendas, women must serve as partners in the effort to formulate and effective response. In this manner, women can become integral stakeholders within the field of countering violent extremism.

It is critical that women be fully integrated and empowered in government efforts to shape international, national, and local CVE strategies. Once women are included in the development of CVE programming, they can incorporate gendered perspectives into government agendas for CVE and promote programs specifically geared toward women's roles in CVE.<sup>12</sup>

Gender blindness misinforms policy-making and planning.<sup>13</sup> It tends to ignore rather than recognize distinctly gendered factors. Women have become significant leaders in model community-centric CVE organizations. For example, Soad Begdouri Elkhammal created the Moroccan Association of Victims of Terrorism (AMVT), an organization that travels to regional schools to raise awareness on violent extremism, specifically in areas with poorer populations. Cherifa Kheddar created Djazaïrouna, an Algerian organization with similar goals, to support families and youth who have lost loved ones to violence.<sup>14</sup>

The success of these women's efforts at the local level can translate to efforts on a larger scale. By applying the same skills beyond their immediate communities, women can expand



Photo by Alberto Abouganem Stephens



the important work of educating younger populations and help prevent recruitment to violent extremist groups.

On both a local and national level, ensuring female leadership positions in policy development is crucial to developing gender-informed CVE initiatives. On an international level, the United Nations has provided a platform for women to contribute to CVE policy development through U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace, and security. The resolution highlights women's important role and perspectives in government-led conflict resolution, security, and peacebuilding efforts.

## WOMEN AS SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITY & FAMILY MEMBERS

Because the status of women varies between societies, in some cases they serve as powerful extremist leaders and recruiters, and in other cases they serve as equally powerful agents in the private sphere as community members, mothers, wives, and sisters. Women are uniquely effective in influencing and educating their communities and in encouraging or discouraging people to embrace the merits of violent extremism.

Erin Saltman and Melanie Smith note that the Western women of ISIS "are aware that they are key actors in ensuring there is a next generation to this Caliphate," noting "as agents of state-building these women contribute to ISIS's expansion efforts as wives and mothers."<sup>15</sup>

Joby Warrick describes Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's path to notoriety as the vicious leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, noting the man's weakness for his mother. Ultimately, "it was his mother who nudged Zarqawi into joining the Islamists."<sup>16</sup> Warrick explains that she "signed [Zarqawi] up for religion classes at the local al-Husayn Ben Ali Mosque, hoping he would find better models among the imams and pious youth, with their theological debates and fundraising drives to benefit Muslim holy warriors in Afghanistan."

But where women can inspire and actively promote extremism, as al-Zarqawi's mother did, they may also be able to counter it. Mothers' keen understanding of their children's motives and the substantial weight their voices carry in their children's lives present tremendous potential. Mothers have reduced violence in the context of gang involvement, a form of organized violence that shares similarities with violent extremism.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, case studies of mothers' and sisters' contributions to CVE efforts in Yemen, Pakistan, and Afghanistan underscore the efficacy of women in CVE projects.<sup>18</sup>

Out of more than one thousand women interviewed throughout the Middle East, Africa, and Europe, more than 80 percent said that what they needed most was education in how to detect warning signs and training in how to react appropriately.<sup>19</sup> Culturally sensitive capacity-building efforts are vital to maximizing women's potential in detecting and preventing violent extremism.

It is imperative that policymakers and program developers pair women-inclusive initiatives with capacity-building efforts that account for local norms and traditions. Under these circumstances, women act effectively and play a significant role within their families and communities to counter violent extremism.

Women's efforts in CVE movements can counterbalance the efforts of their extremist counterparts. While women may assume diverse roles to counter violent extremism, they present specific potential in roles as enforcers and informants, leaders and recruiters, and supportive community and family members.

## WOMEN AS FULL AGENTS IN CVE

Moving forward, policymakers, law enforcement officials, and civil society must consider any inherent limitations to women's full participation in CVE efforts. CVE policies and programs must take into account the environment in which they seek to prevent or counter violent extremism. The strategies that integrate women into CVE practices in places such as Canada or the United Kingdom will not necessarily work with women in Afghanistan or Pakistan.

Persons tasked with designing CVE programs should be wary of relegating women to support roles and exploiting women to achieve their aims. Instead, women should be included as full partners in developing and designing CVE approaches, and women's multiple roles as crucial agents in CVE should be understood appropriately. Female viewpoints and skills, like those of their male counterparts, must be integrated into the push against violent extremism.

Violent extremists give women a role in their ranks and a voice in their communities. The CVE community must take into account the variety of roles that women play in extremist organizations in order to counterbalance them. Women can and do fill an increasingly critical role in meeting this challenge.

To more effectively counteract the rising power of women in extremist and other violent organizations, CVE policies and practices must integrate women fully into their efforts and encourage the inclusion of women in the field of CVE more generally.



**U.S. Army and Air Force leaders of regional female engagement teams stand with female Afghan police members near Kabul, Afghanistan.** (Photo by Private Andreka Johnson, U.S. Army, 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division Public Affairs)

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In recent years, the complex nature of women's involvement in extremist groups has become increasingly apparent to policymakers, law enforcement officials, and academics. The escalation of attacks perpetrated by violent extremists, including women, creates urgency for gender-conscious strategies to deescalate violent extremists and dissuade their sympathizers from engaging in violent action. In response, there is heightened demand for investigating and designing gender-conscious CVE strategies that could, for example, explore gender identity as a component in radicalization and recruitment or employ gender-specific strategies to address the grievances of men and women.

Equally important is the need to improve knowledge about the intersection of gender and CVE. Gender-conscious CVE approaches may include both men and women, but there is evidence that women have a role in CVE that differs from that of men.<sup>20</sup>

**CVE policies and programs** should account for the environment in which they seek to prevent or counter violent extremism. Gender inequality is an important context to understand in developing interventions.

**Women must be involved** as equal partners in developing interventions to push against, counter, and prevent violent extremism. The inclusion and integration of women in the CVE field is essential to counteract the rising power of women in extremist organizations.

**Policies and interventions** to counter violent extremism should be informed by research about the variety of roles women play and the ways in which they can be change agents. For example, women participate in extremist movements as enforcers, as in the al-Khanssaa brigade; as leaders, including recruiters and fundraisers; and as community members and mothers who support their children and raise the next generation of extremists.

**Considering the variety of roles of women** within extremist groups, efforts to counter violent extremism must consider how best to present a counterbalance in which women are empowered as change agents, leaders, and community members who are determined to prevent and combat extremism.



**Women from Indonesia, Myanmar, and Nepal met in Thailand for an advocacy and mobilization workshop.**

The workshop involved 19 women who are active in peace processes, including members of Myanmar's parliament, Nepalese police officers, and Indonesian leaders, working to bridge the divide between Muslims and Christians.

Photo by Inclusive Security (2014)

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## ENDNOTES

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