

GENDER AND IDENTITY IN EXTREMISMS

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





Country: Cameroon

Focus: Networks

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Actor:

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CASE SUMMARY

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

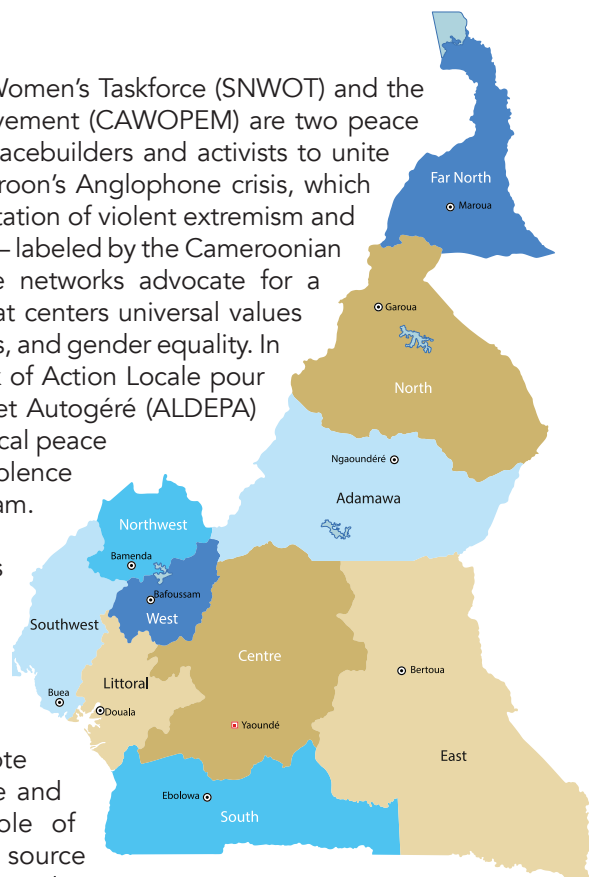
A Case Study on the Role of Gender and Identity in Shaping Positive Alternatives to Extremisms¹

SUMMARY

The South West / North West Women's Taskforce (SNWOT) and the Cameroon Women's Peace Movement (CAWOPEM) are 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. In Cameroon's Far North, the work of Action Locale pour un Développement Participatif et Autogéré (ALDEPA) supports the establishment of local peace networks to respond to the violence and terror inflicted by Boko Haram.

Taking a Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA+) approach,² 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 in its Far North region because of violent extremist 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 political marginalization of Cameroon's Anglophone population by the Francophone-dominated government sparked protests in October 2016. The escalation of violence between armed Anglophone separatist groups and government security forces has had 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 of 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.

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

- Armed group conflict and violent extremist conflict necessitate similar counterterrorism (CT) and countering violent extremism (CVE), peacebuilding, and development responses grounded in values of peace, inclusivity, human rights, and pluralism.** While different in nature, the root causes of these types of conflict share commonalities, such as marginalization, identity-driven propaganda, and escalation in response to counterinsurgency interventions.
- 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, constrains avenues for dialogue and mediation and can harden the position of a group vis-à-vis their external environment.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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

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

In radicalizing men to participate in militant activity, conflict actors in the Anglophone crisis have strengthened the equation of masculinity with violence and created an environment that encourages treating women as non-human and disposable subjects. Armed groups have tortured, raped, and killed women accused of having relationships with government soldiers.³ They have also forced young girls to join their ranks to cook, clean, and provide sex in exchange for protection and sustenance.⁴ Government forces have similarly beaten, undressed, and allegedly raped female university students engaging in protests.⁵ In the country’s Far North, Cameroonian women are frequently kidnapped by Boko Haram and forced to marry. 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.



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

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

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

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



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.⁶ 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.⁷ 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.⁸ These requests for allegiances and displays of loyalty demand that women sacrifice their gender unity to support male-dominated, militaristic aims that they have had no say in determining.⁹

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

Cameroonian women have formed their own networks and network-building organizations for peace. These include the South West/North West Women's Taskforce (SNWOT), a coalition of women human rights defenders, peacebuilders, and civil society organizations based in the North and Southwest regions of Cameroon, that advocates for peace by providing a "third narrative" to the Anglophone crisis that centers humanity and respect for the human being. 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 and from all regions of the country to pledge their commitment to peace efforts and issue demands

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.

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

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

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

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

to conflict stakeholders. 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.

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. 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.¹⁰ While they expected 300 women, 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.¹¹ SNWOT has also negotiated with separatist groups and government forces to enter active conflict zones in order to provide medical, WASH, and psychosocial support to internally displaced persons



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

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

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. Because they are perceived of being in the middle, network members have been targeted and attacked by parties 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.¹² Given these risks, 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.

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 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 and internally displaced (IDP) women. To bridge divisions between these women and their host communities, ALDEPA engages them in social cohesion and community service activities such as cleaning of the host community village to build goodwill and cultural exchanges where IDP women and women from host communities prepare and share food from their regions together.¹³

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 extremists 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.

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

11. Interview with Esther Omam, January 2022.

12. Interview with Clotilda Andiensa Waah, January 2022.

13. Interview with Marthe Wandou, March 2022



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CASE SUMMARY

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 Extremisms¹

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,² 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.

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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://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/95-662-x/2016001/article/14861-eng.htm).

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

Gender, Identity, and Violent Extremist Narratives in Indonesia

Even with a strong national identity and a secular constitution, religion has often been a lightning rod for tensions in Indonesian society. Due to the powerful role religion plays in Indonesian society, violent extremist narratives in the country are grounded in simplified interpretations of Islamic texts. They are also heavily gendered, focusing on the role and condition of women, including gender equality, dress, polygamy, and child marriage. These narratives frame the progressive debate on these topics as persecution of Islamic values and disregard for women's traditional roles: Islam is “under threat” by Indonesia’s modernization and pluralism.³

Through their dominance of media, Islamist groups have crowded the Indonesian public sphere. In recent years, 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.⁴ In the third largest democracy in the world, this has given conservative Islamists the clear lead in the marketplace of ideas—until very recently.

Religious literacy, which can be a source of resilience to radicalization, is high in Indonesia thanks to the country’s unique system of Islamic boarding schools called pesantren. Pesantren have been led by and produced female imams, intellectuals, expert Qur’an reciters and



In Indonesia, the social authority of women ulama is recognized by the population because they are embedded in society through the pesantren.

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

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

activists with expertise in Islamic studies, Islamic law and interpretation of Islamic texts.⁵ 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

positions in the pesantren.

Women ulama's 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.⁶

Women ulama's advocacy for gender equality through religious scholarship and education offers a powerful counter-discourse to extremist religious teachings.

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

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.⁷ KUPI serves as a collective, gathering women ulama including scholars, educators, activists, and officials, from diverse institutions and organizations 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.⁸

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 fatwas⁹ focused on priority issues for Indonesian women: Sexual Violence, Child Marriage, and the Destruction of Nature.¹⁰ These first three fatwas also provide a testing ground for the acceptance and impact of this claim to religious authority by women ulama.¹¹ 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.¹²

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

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.¹³ The preparation for the 2017 convening of KUPI goes back around fifteen years, and included participatory dialogue and learning that bridged the grassroots and the academic spheres, and laid the groundwork for its decision-making structures.

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. However, due to the norms of consensus in Islamic scholarship, not all women ulama are comfortable directly and publicly countering violent extremist narratives.¹⁵

KUPI's members are increasingly active in their communities, helping people 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.

5. Oxford Islamic Studies. (2007). Women, Islam and the Twenty-first Century. ([access here](#)).
6. Idris, I. (2019). Preventing/countering violent extremism programming on men, women, boys and girls. ([access here](#)).
7. Robinson, K. (2017). Female Ulama voice a vision for Indonesia's future. ([access here](#)); Interview with AMAN Indonesia.
8. Women and Peacebuilding Blog. (2019). Amplifying Women Ulama's Voices: Training and Dialogue on Gender and Islam. ([access here](#)).
9. Fatwas are a non-binding legal opinions or rulings on points of Islamic law, practice, or convention, issued by an Islamic scholar.

10. Congress of Indonesian Women Ulama: Official Documents on Process and Outcome.
11. AMAN Indonesia is assisting KUPI with a review to assess the adoption of these fatwa in advance of the next congress in 2022.
12. Congress of Indonesian Women Ulama: Official Documents on Process and Outcome, p. 138.
13. Congress of Indonesian Women Ulama: Official Documents on Process and Outcome.
14. Ibid.
15. Interview with AMAN Indonesia.



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CASE SUMMARY

INSTITUTIONALIZING EQUALITY: SHIFTING GENDER ROLES IN JORDANIAN COUNTERTERRORISM RESPONSES

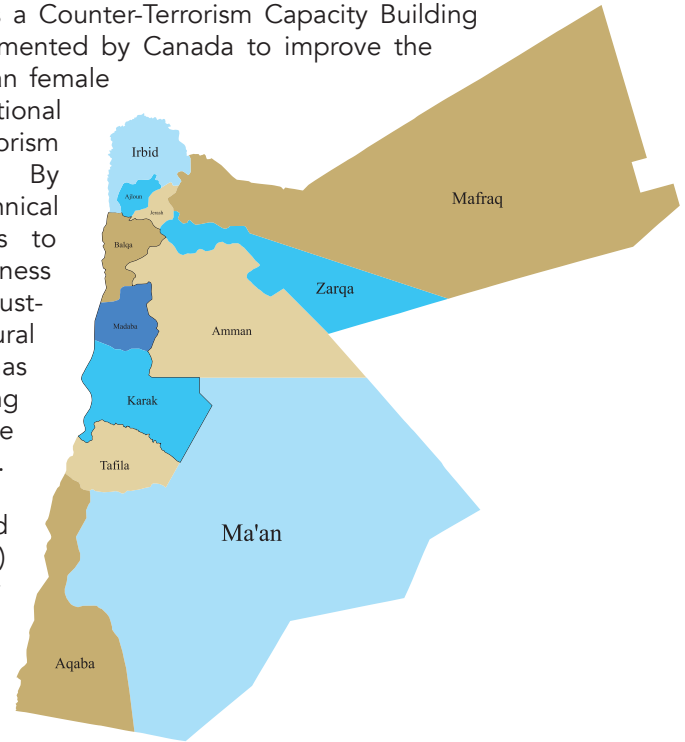
A Case Study on the Role of Gender and Identity in Shaping Positive Alternatives to Extremisms¹

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,² 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

- ▶ **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.
- ▶ **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.
- ▶ **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. Purely militarized and securitized approaches risk increasing the vulnerability of communities to recruitment and radicalization. Integrating a community engagement approach
- ▶ **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

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

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.³ In Jordan, inviting women into the security sector carries tangible benefits: women can, for instance, handcuff and carry out searches of both women and men (whereas men can only search other men) and can provide emergency medical aid to both genders without explicit permission. Despite these benefits, Jordan's deep-seated gender roles continue to inhibit Jordanian women's participation in counterterrorism (CT), countering and preventing violent extremism (C/PVE) and peacebuilding.

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. In the face of strategic necessity, such as 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.⁴



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

3. Smith, J. (2019). Jordanian Feminism and Countering Violent Extremism. Brown Political Review. ([access here](#)).

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



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

Islamist extremist groups have proven adept at manipulating gender roles and cultural norms to strengthen their operations. During the Jordan's 2016 Kerak castle attacks, all-male Jordanian security forces attempted to enter a suspicious home. The suspects prevented police from entering by crying that there were women present in the home who were uncovered. The delay gave the attackers enough time to escape, mobilize weapons and eventually take the lives of 15 people.⁵ The attackers co-opted traditional gender roles to create the perception of female presence. Similar tactics by Islamist extremist groups include the use of female operatives to smuggle weapons and goods under their clothes, knowing that women are less likely to be searched. Groups also leverage restrictive gender roles to encourage recruitment. Disaffected young women who

face limited social, economic, and political opportunities may view joining violent extremist groups as an escape from the gendered norms of their family and community.⁶

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 train female officers in firearms, search techniques, and English language skills to prepare them for operational roles within the Jordanian gendarmerie and Public Security Directorate (PSD).^{7 8} 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. The content of the training touches on gendered concepts and their relevance to security and counterterrorism and discusses international policy commitments around gender equality and women, peace, and security.

In the face of strategic necessity, such as loss of territory, some Islamist extremist groups have been quick to renegotiate traditional gender roles.

5. 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](#)).

6. 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](#)).

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

8. 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 experiences from the HASBANI project 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. Being able to connect the project objectives back to the Kerak castle incident emphasized that the project is not just externally imposed but has a clear CT purpose. 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.

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. 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.⁹



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

Beyond Shifting Gender Roles, Towards an Ethos of Community Engagement ¹⁰

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 create space for dialogue between police and communities.¹¹ AWAW also advocated for the deployment of female officers because they instilled less fear than male officers when entering the homes of female civilians.¹²

Such community engagement approaches create valuable space for trust-building between women-led civil society, police, and communities, and enable a

“
Creating cultural change in traditionally patriarchal spaces necessitates time, relationship-building, continuous presence, and constant negotiation.
”

broader focus on prevention of violent extremism rather than the narrower strategy of incident response. Given the mistrust fostered by the repressive tactics Jordanian police have used against protestors and their role in encouraging further radicalization to violent extremism, trust-building and prevention are relevant and necessary in the Jordanian context.¹³ ¹⁴ ¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

9. Interview with HASBANI implementing partner, January 2022.

10. 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](#)).

11. 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](#)).

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

13. 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](#)).

14. Nusairat, T. (2020). Jordan protests met with repression as government changes tactics. Atlantic Council. ([access here](#)).

15. Al-Khalidi, S. (2021). Jordan Police Detain Scores of Activists, Break up Protests. Reuters. ([access here](#)).

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



Country: Libya

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Focus:
Narratives

Actor:
Libyan Women Forum (LWF)

Contributors:
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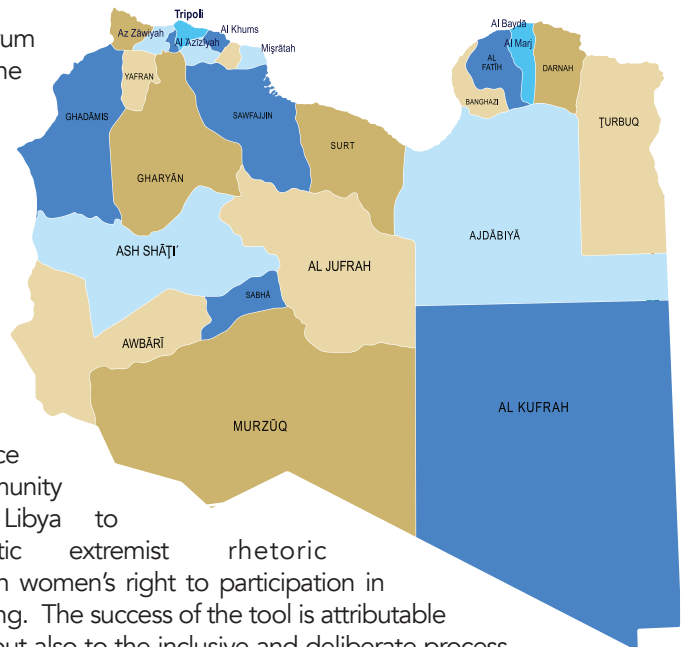
CASE SUMMARY

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 Extremisms¹

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,² 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 fractural 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.

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/).

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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

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. The reversal of limitations on polygamy in 2011 constituted a warning sign for a broader conservative shift in Libya's cultural discourse, accompanied by constraints on women's rights. Militant groups popularized regressive narratives, justified by ultra-conservative interpretations of Islam, that framed women as weak, futile, subordinate to men, and belonging in the domestic sphere.³ These narratives underpin their advocacy for conservative Shariah-based family law, gender segregation and guardianship laws.⁴

In the aftermath of the revolution, extremist gendered narratives justified barring women from participating



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

4. International Crisis Group (2019). Addressing the Rise of Libya's Madkhali-Salafis. ([access here](#)).

in drafting a new constitution, depriving them of the opportunity to enshrine gender equality in Libyan law.⁵ 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. 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.⁶

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 female politicians, peacebuilders, human rights defenders, journalists, and activists, targeting 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.⁷ The extremist hate speech and images used to target them are highly gendered in nature, including accusations of immorality and dishonor.⁸ Online abuse carries the threat of real-life violence in Libya: women with a prominent political and public presence have been beaten, abducted, tortured, and assassinated.⁹

The Vicious Cycle of Protection Narratives

In a vicious cycle, the absence of Libyan women's legal and political rights is 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 lack of legal accountability for sexual violence as a reason to keep women inside the domestic sphere where it is "safer."¹⁰ Due to fear of sexual violence encountered on the way to school, parents curtail girls' education and restrict their

Extremist actors have cited the lack of legal accountability for sexual violence as a reason to keep women inside the domestic sphere where it is 'safer.'

movement.¹¹ To further protect girls from insecurity, parents may be more likely to enter them into child marriage.¹² ¹³ Some Libyan women have chosen to support extremist actors in exchange for protection by affiliated militias, armed groups, or tribal structures.¹⁴ Such "protection bargains" often result in increased or renewed insecurities for women.¹⁵ ¹⁶

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. 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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ Gender norms play a role in tribal resilience to recruitment, with rigid gender norms negatively correlated with resistance to recruitment.

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) with the aim to empower women to participate in reconstruction, phase and national decision-making processes¹⁹ Although their initial work focused on advocating for women's participation using the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) framework, they soon recognized the importance of anchoring their work in Islamic scholarship. In 2015, in direct response to the increased extremist and misogynistic religious discourse in Libya, LWF began the development of the Islamic Peace Tool (IPT).²⁰ 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.

5. Human Rights Watch (2013). A Revolution for All. Women's Rights in the New Libya. ([access here](#)).
6. The Borgen Project (2020). Room to Advance Women's Rights in Libya. ([access here](#)).
7. Lawyers for Justice in Libya (2021). We Will Not be Silenced: Online Violence Against Women in Libya. ([access here](#)).
8. Ibid.
9. Amnesty International (2018). Silenced Voices: Libyan Women Human Rights Defenders Under Attack. ([access here](#)).
10. International Civil Society Action Network (2013). From Subjects to Citizens: Women in Post Revolutionary Libya. ([access here](#)).
11. Bearat, H. (Working paper). Early Marriages in Middle East and North Africa. ([access here](#)).
12. Ibid.
13. Cordaid (2018). Women's rights in Libya. "We have stamina. Because our struggle is our Life." ([access here](#)).

14. Johnston, M. et al (2019). Gender Equality and Violent Extremism: A Research Agenda for Libya. ([access here](#)).
15. Donovan, O. (2021). Trading Freedoms for Protection: Gender and Localised Protection in Libya. ([access here](#)).
16. Donovan, O. (2021). Gendered impacts of the localised protection of civilians: insights from Libya. ([access here](#)).
17. USIP (2017). Matriarchal and Tribal Identity, Community Resilience, and Vulnerability in South Libya. ([access here](#)).
18. Ibid.
19. Euro-Mediterranean Women's Foundation (2016). Libyan Women Forum profile ([access here](#)).
20. LWF internal documents, accessed February 18, 2022



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.

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

To develop the IPT, LWF worked with a well-respected Libyan Islamic scholar who 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 values²¹. 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.²² 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 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.²³ They offered examples from the recorded life of the Prophet Muhammad and from Islamic history that challenge extremist discourse, gender misconceptions and stereotypes.

Deliberate Dissemination

To disseminate the IPT and encourage local organizations to develop and implement their own activities to challenge extremist discourse, LWF carried out awareness-raising sessions targeting primarily activists, teachers, civil servants, housewives and female spiritual guides (Morsheda).²⁴ To reach larger segments of the population, LWF also initiated a media campaign that prompted public discussions on the ongoing conflict in Libya and on the role of women in promoting peace. Building on these initial strategies, LWF conceived of "Peace Circles" as a mechanism to coordinate peacebuilders to advocate for women's participation in politics, peacebuilding, and CVE. By creating alliances throughout Libya, LWF has been able to sustain dissemination of the IPT's alternative narratives and integrate them in peacebuilding work. 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."

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

- Libyan female spiritual guide

21. Interview with Shahrazad Magrabi, January 2022

22. LWF internal documents, accessed February 18, 2022

23. Interview with Shahrazad Magrabi, January 2022

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



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Focus: Signs

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CASE SUMMARY

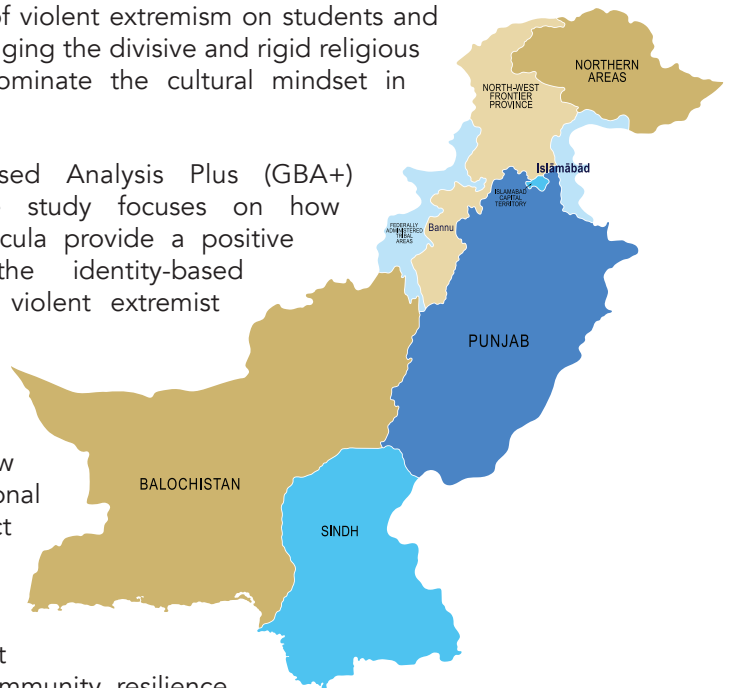
SIGNS OF THE TIMES: THE ROLE OF EDUCATION AND GENDER IN SHAPING THE CULTURAL MINDSET IN PAKISTAN

A Case Study on the Role of Gender and Identity in Shaping Positive Alternatives to Extremisms¹

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,² 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.
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-plus).

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

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. 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.³ 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.⁴ 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. Divisive rhetoric can be found both in the textbooks of some ultra-conservative madrassas in Pakistan, which 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,"^{5 6} and in public school curricula, which condemn Christianity and other non-Muslim religions, and do not accurately represent Pakistan's diverse communities.^{7 8}

While there are a few co-educational private schools, the majority are segregated by Islamic sect as well as by gender and reinforce patriarchal norms in their teaching.⁹ 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

3. 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](#)).
 4. United States Institute of Peace (2020). The Current Situation in Pakistan. ([access here](#)).
 5. Email exchange with Bushra Qadim Hyder, April 2022.
 6. 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 Univeristy, Vasa, Finland* ([access here](#)).

7. 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](#)).
 8. 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](#)).
 9. International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) (2014). Reclaiming the Progressive Past: Pakistani Women's Struggle Against Violence and Extremism. What the Women Say, Brief ([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.

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.

values to their children, and to act with subservience to their husbands.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ Women are shown in a gendered context, portrayed as helpless and pious figures supporting their husbands.¹² 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. 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.

Warning Signs of a Divided Society

Signs of divisions and growing extremist ideology are visible in Pakistan's larger culture, society, and mindset.

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 with children being asked to wear trousers instead of shorts. Modern textbook illustrations more frequently display girls wearing headscarves. 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 trends at the cultural level can serve as a proxy indicator for tracking rising levels of extremist ideology in a society.

Qadims Lumiere School and College

Bushra Qadim Hyder is the founder and director of the Qadims Lumiere School and College in Peshawar, Pakistan.¹³ 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 and was inspired to develop a peace curriculum to provide a positive alternative to the divisions Pakistani violent extremist groups have created.¹⁴ 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 peace curriculum emphasizes the potential of religion to

10.Ibid.

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

12.Ibid.

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

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

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.¹⁵ A key component of the curriculum is the inclusion of diverse perspectives within literature, the arts, and religion to support values of respect, empathy, and critical thinking.¹⁶

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 teachers from eight schools in the peace curriculum. 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.¹⁷ Recognizing the influence of mothers with their children, Hyder engaged them from the beginning, inviting them to speak to her classes so her students could learn how others had been affected by hatred and intolerance.¹⁸



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

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

The Role of Trust and Networks in Detecting Extremism

Hyder's initiatives originate from her own assessment of her community's needs and demonstrate that work addressing signs of violent extremism can be both locally-driven and avoid securitizing and stereotyping women's roles. 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 and when they had, Hyder invited the mothers and youth to a meeting. Hyder reviewed the different stages of jihad in Islam with them, using examples from the Prophet Muhammad's life, and

verses from the Qur'an.¹⁹ 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.

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. The peace groups are able to contribute to community reconciliation, trauma-healing and stabilization during difficult and uncertain times in their area. They work with school management committees, teachers, and parents in disseminating peaceful messages and organizing student peace groups in madrassas and schools.²⁰ 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.

15. Interview with Bushra Qadim Hyder, January 2022.

16. 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](#)).

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

18. Ibid.

19. Interview with Bushra Qadim Hyder, January 2022.

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

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CASE SUMMARY

AGENTS OF CHANGE: TRANSFORMING GENDER ROLES AND EXTREMISM IN SOMALIA

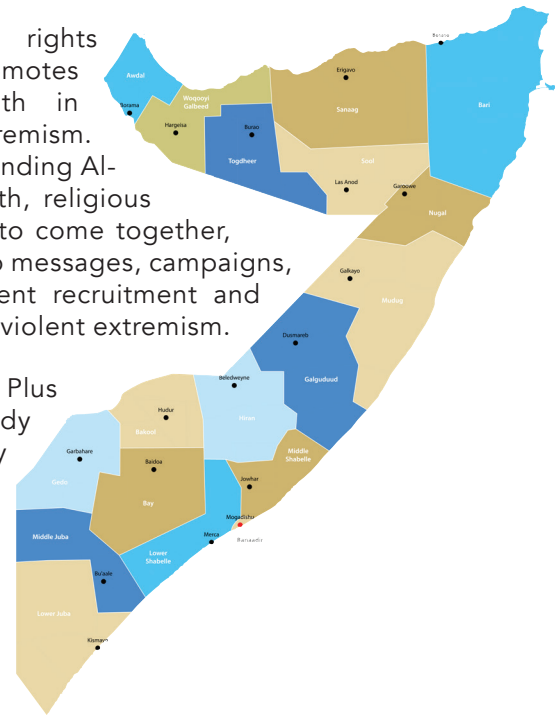
A Case Study on the Role of Gender and Identity in Shaping Positive Alternatives to Extremisms¹

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 (GBA+) approach,² this case study focuses on how expanding socially accepted gender roles for all identity groups challenges violent extremist rhetoric and creates new spaces 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.
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

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

Weak government institutions, corruption, unemployment, and poverty are all drivers of extremism in Somalia.³ Women experience high levels of violence, exacerbated by widespread impunity throughout the larger society.⁴ Women have long been marginalized from political life and the public sphere through the rigid gender norms of cultural, religious, and clan-based traditions.⁵ With worsening conditions of ongoing conflict, the economic incentive among other gendered experiences in Somalia can lead women to join Al-Shabaab.⁶



Witness Somalia provides safe spaces for women to share their experiences with the impact of violent extremism and discuss their roles in promoting peace and security

3. Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in Somalia: A Mapping Report. (2020). Life and Peace Institute. ([access here](#)).

4. 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](#)).

5. Now and the Future: Gender Equality, Peace and Security in a COVID-19 World. (2020). Saferworld. ([access here](#)).

6. Stern, O.M. (2019). The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab. Adam Smith International. ([access here](#))

In Al-Shabaab, women fulfill several roles, including recruitment, fundraising, weapons storing and transport, and intelligence.⁷ However, women also are often well positioned to mitigate the dangers of violent extremism because they can detect 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.⁸

Women's roles within Al-Shabaab support their gendered narrative of arranging brides for young male recruits and

enforcing "wife inheritance" where in the case of a man's death, any Al-Shabaab member can inherit his wife.⁹ 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. 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.

Women's kinship ties work both ways (...) 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.

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

Witness Somalia works 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 focus on expanding civil society's role to resolve conflicts and transform local 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.

Witness Somalia provides a safe space for women to share their experiences with Al-Shabaab and the impact of violent extremism, and discuss their roles in preventing extremism and promoting peace and security. In their community engagement, they pay particular attention to including women from minority clans and internally displaced persons. Witness Somalia understands the importance of women's inclusion in the security sector and their capability to mitigate violent extremist incidents. The group established contact, built trust, and supported cooperation between local police officers and the community, who now meet regularly to share information, report critical incidents, and organize community events.

Witness Somalia has capitalized on art, music, drama, and sports to engage youth in alternative forms of expression and self-development.



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

Witness Somalia increases awareness around violent extremism through public messaging and religious interpretation. They recognize the religious leaders' crucial role as interpreters of Islamic texts and traditions, and include such leaders in their work. They use a gender-responsive approach to expand the role of women in society. They train youth to challenge religious militancy and violent extremism. As a result, young people have mobilized to respond to their communities after terrorist attacks. To reach the public, Witness Somalia launched a radio program to discuss gender equality, women's rights, and their role in peacebuilding.

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. They trained a small group of artists in advocacy, freedom of expression, and the intersection of the arts and peacebuilding. They have capitalized on art, 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 arts have enabled people to resist extremism and raise their voices to transform their society.

7. Ibid and Women and Al-Shabaab's Insurgency. (2019) International Crisis Group. ([access here](#)).

8. 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](#))

9. Ibid.



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CASE SUMMARY

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

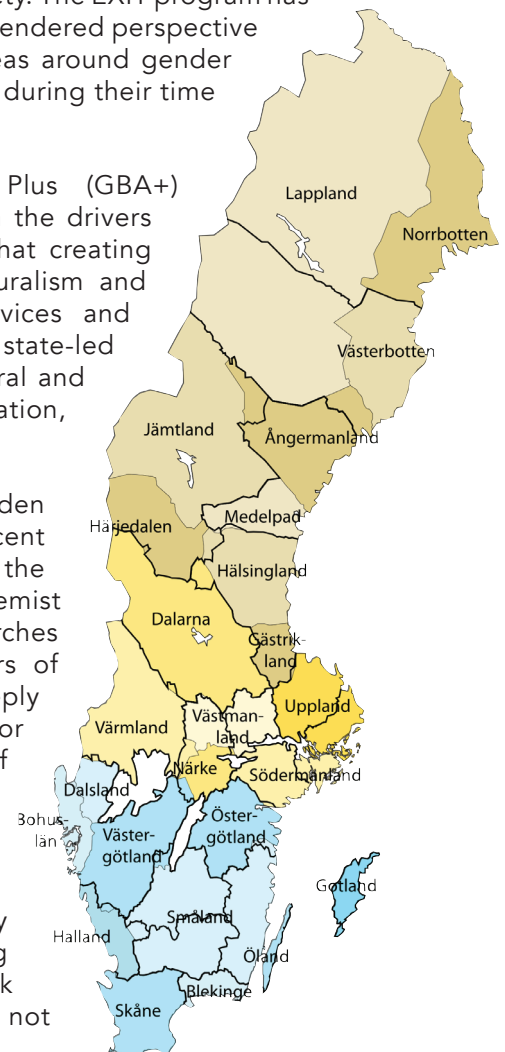
A Case Study on the Role of Gender and Identity in Shaping Positive Alternatives to Extremisms¹

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,² 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.

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

- **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 supremacist 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 supremacist movements, **CT and CVE interventions that utilize a range of entry points should be considered, looking beyond work only in schools or churches** as the sole avenues for intervention. 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, and more, 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 Lure of Viking Brotherhood: Gendered Drivers of White Supremacy in Sweden

What motivates people to join white supremacist groups? One can consider individual grievances and psychological processes through a gender lens, for example. Notions of masculinity play a central role in recruitment to Sweden white supremacist groups. They promote a specific image of maleness: a large, muscular, warrior archetype, often heavily tattooed. Such an image might be attractive to men experiencing “aggrieved entitlement”: a gendered sense of entitlement thwarted by an experience of emasculation, which can stem from push factors such as being victimized or experiencing economic distress.^{3 4} The image of a Viking is a common symbolic trope among Nordic white supremacist groups, representing untamed masculinity and connection to an armed brotherhood. Participation in white power groups offers these men a solution: a feeling of ideological superiority and moral authority over others,



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

3. The Guardian. (2018). Almost all violent extremists share one thing: their gender. ([access here](#)).

4. Ibid.

support from and camaraderie with “brothers in arms”, and a predefined masculine identity and simplified belief system to fit into.

Women form a substantial minority in the Swedish white supremacist movement, and their motivations for joining are less easily explained, 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.

Young people, particularly young men, are typically portrayed as the group most vulnerable to recruitment into violent extremism. Today, however, members of white power groups in Sweden are primarily adults, usually older white men. These identity considerations challenge prevailing assumptions about vulnerability to recruitment by extremist groups and are vital to consider when designing counterterrorism (CT) and countering violent extremism (CVE) programming.

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

EXIT Sweden: Disengagement through Rebuilding (Gender) Identity

The EXIT program, established in 1998 as part of Fryshuset, a broader Swedish non-profit youth program, offers a social and relational approach to disengaging members of white power groups. The EXIT program relies on the client’s personal choice to disengage from the movement. Staff’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. The Swedish EXIT model takes a non-ideological approach, steering away from directly challenging white supremacist or totalitarian ideologies.⁴ EXIT Sweden offers a model of CVE programming that reaches an older demographic, working primarily with Sweden’s older neo-Nazi population. In considering entry points to deradicalization and off-ramping outside of schools or churches, EXIT’s approach to inviting individuals who voluntarily disaffiliated themselves from white extremist groups may provide an alternative.

“Modeling” behavior is an important component of the program’s work with clients. Staff members act as role models to challenge client self-perception and guide them towards a different identity and way of being. A gendered perspective is crucial here, as staff noticed that through modeling behavior with an awareness of masculinity, clients adapted. EXIT staff members also prompted client reflection on masculinity in the movement. As a result,

EXIT staff members (...) prompted client reflection on masculinity in the movement. As a result, clients were able to break down some of the constricting ideas around gender and masculinity that they had internalized.



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.

clients were able to break down some of the constricting ideas around gender and masculinity that they had internalized in the movement.

The purely social and relational approach in Sweden has been the subject of growing criticism by some organizations, who view it as trivializing the political and ideological aspects of the problem.⁵ 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, and will require operating at the nexus of psychological processes; historical legacies; cultural values; and economic, social, and political forces.



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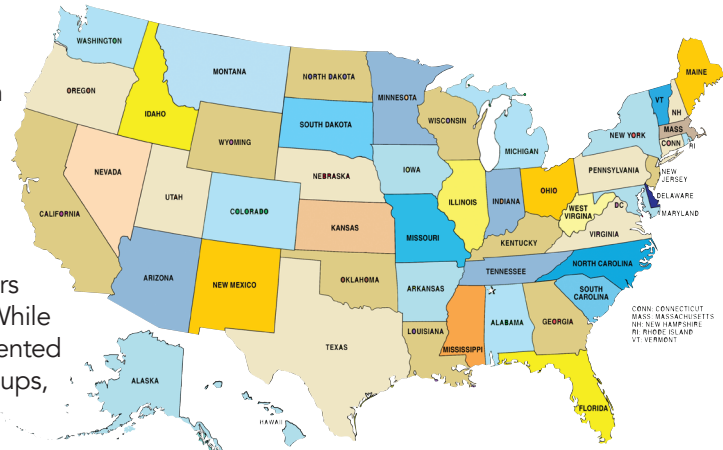
CASE SUMMARY

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 Extremisms¹

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 roles² 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,³ 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

Gender, Identity and Drivers to White Supremacist Violent Extremism

White supremacy is endemic to the United States, dating back to chattel slavery and the removal, relocation, and disenfranchisement of Indigenous peoples. White supremacist ideological violence and terrorism originated in the late 19th century post-Civil War and continues today. White supremacist violence intersects with antisemitism, anti-immigration beliefs, and male supremacy. The U.S. is currently experiencing an intensifying period of white supremacist violence, and there is concern over lockdown measures and COVID-19-driven isolation amplifying future white supremacist violence in the coming years.⁴ Women have often been present inside such movements, but in smaller numbers than men. Just as some of the dynamics of white supremacy have changed through the years, so too have women’s roles inside these spaces.

White supremacy in the U.S. is heavily gendered, and its messaging and propaganda are imbued with themes of male supremacy and traditional gender roles, which offer simplicity. Such simplicity is appealing amid a changing and increasingly complex world that can exacerbate feelings of disempowerment, a lack of agency in men, and uncertainty of societal roles. This simplicity is also seen in the movement’s goals, which typically focus on racial protection, purity, and advancement. Women often functionally work towards amplifying white supremacist



Women often functionally work towards amplifying white supremacist ideology and messaging.

4. Wallner, C. and White, J. (2020). “The Far-Right and Coronavirus: Extreme Voices Amplified by the Global Crisis”. RUSI. ([access here](#)).

ideology and messaging. They are often not allowed to operate in leadership roles other than in relation to other women, but they can be influential in other ways, including as organizers. Women can engage undetected in violence or capacity building for violence because they are discounted as coequal threats to men.

People in the movement often have histories of trauma but lack the necessary healthy skills needed to heal. Abused people often become

the abuser, and interpersonal relationships within white supremacist groups are often extremely violent. Intimate partner and gender-based violence (GBV) are rife within white supremacist circles. In addition, male infighting is inherent in these spaces. Women can offer cohesion and build peace within groups, which often gives them a sense of purpose and meaning they did not previously experience. In addition, women can derive a sense of agency through adjacency to power.

White supremacy in the U.S. is heavily gendered, and its messaging and propaganda are imbued with themes of male supremacy and traditional gender roles, which offer simplicity.

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 them reintegrate and develop skills to engage with the wider society. 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 trainings for law enforcement officials.

Rehabilitation and reintegration require stability, mental wellness building, a healthy processing of shame and trauma, and a pathway to integrate past actions healthfully into the present in order to begin building a future. The initial priority in this model is improving conditions of stability, because it is difficult to focus on healing without it. Stability includes a safe place to live; a predictable, livable income; access to healthcare; and nurturing relationships. A large percentage of women report GBV before and during their time in VE groups, and they seem to have more difficulty developing financial stability and engaging in holistic, nontoxic relationships. Special consideration must be given to addressing the underlying factors to break this cycle.

Helping someone disengage from hate and violence is inseparable from helping them disentangle and heal from their trauma. For women, this often entails working through the trauma of GBV. Men often report childhood abuse. Connecting people with resources and mental health care professionals to better identify, understand, and process their trauma is a cornerstone of rehabilitation and reintegration of those leaving violent extremism.

Healthy communication and emotional skills are essential. With these skills, men can build healthier relationships and non-destructive means of expressing their fears and struggles, and women can better identify toxic relationships and break cycles of abuse. It can be greatly beneficial to learn non-violent communication skills, where the focus is on identifying one's emotions and needs, empathetic



Shannon Foley Martinez uses a holistic and pluralistic approach to help people leaving extremist groups to reintegrate and develop skills to engage with the wider society.

listening, and non-coercive requests for engagement. In addition, cultivating mindfulness seems to enhance the ability to re-engage with the world and other people in healthier ways. It helps develop self-compassion, which is necessary to holistically process the shame that most former violent extremists feel about their engagement in violent white supremacy. Mind-body integration seems especially important for processing GBV.

The final piece of this puzzle is improving the capacity for complexity in thought, solution generation, and identity building. People 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.