

Policy Brief

Gender-responsive approaches to prevent violent extremism & counter-terrorism



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GENDER MAINSTREAMING IN PVE/CT

Gender mainstreaming in PVE/CT requires an understanding of gendered drivers of violence, their pathways to violent extremism and exploring the multiple roles women can play as supporters, participants, recruiters in VE, as well as preventers and peacemakers.¹ In the Albanian context, studies have shown that women's engagement in VE is enabled by multiple factors including, but not limited to: gender inequality, patriarchal norms in society and families, unmet social and economic needs, as well as high levels of corruption.

Among many other drives, women's lack of sufficient income and their economic dependence on their husbands as the family breadwinner made them quite vulnerable to depart in the conflict areas in Syria and Iraq and embrace VE ideologies². In the context of VE, women are often portrayed and referred to as 'trailing wives' or 'tied movers', which means that they were obliged to accompany their husbands as docile and passive followers in conflict areas. Recently, this discourse has shifted from describing women primarily as victims, towards recognizing their agency not only as sympathizers, supporters, and perpetrators of VE but also as preventers and peacebuilders, of violent extremism and terrorism.³ Having in mind the gender-specific motivations and pathways of radicalization to violence and CVE, efforts should be made to mainstream gender in PVE/CT programmes. Based on the needs and relevant challenges women face in local communities, as well as the reasons that influenced women's involvement in conflicted areas in Syria and Iraq, it is important to design programs that address gender issues to prevent and counter radicalization and violent extremism.

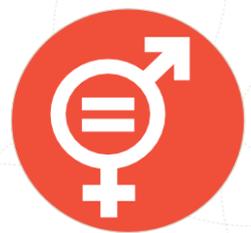
In the Albanian context, analyzing the role of women in preventing and countering radicalization and violent extremism has recently become a priority in the agenda of many civil society activists, including a growing interest from public institutions. As the main public institution on P/CVE issues in Albania, the CVE Center has an active role in coordinating inter-institutional activity within the involvement of the state, in the prevention of the phenomenon of radicalization and violent extremism, including a special focus on women and girls and gender-sensitive CVE practices in countering VE.⁴

¹ Bhulai, R. and Nemr, Ch. (2018). A Closer Look: Gender Dynamics in Violent Extremism and Countering Violent Extremism in Southeast Asia. Global Center on Cooperative Security. Washington, DC.

² Woman Center for Development and Culture, Albania. (2020). Examining Gendered Components of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Albania. Tirana

³ Bhulai, R. and Nemr, Ch. (2018)

⁴ Meantime, there is an increased interest of the Albanian government to repatriate all the women and children who are in the Syria and Iraq. For more information on this issue please refer to the policy paper: CVE Center.



Taking into account the multifaceted and distinct ways that women are involved in VE, supporting local grassroots CSOs and women human rights activists that work in local communities is of great importance to counter and prevent violent extremism. This policy brief describes a variety of gender-responsive approaches that women-led CSOs, local activists and stakeholders, including international organizations, could take into consideration when tailoring gendered-responsive P/CVE and peacebuilding programmes:

WORK WITH LOCAL WOMEN TO INCREASE THEIR LEVEL OF SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS AND AGENCY

Awareness-raising and information is the first step toward agency and empowerment. Agency refers to the ways in which women can take active roles in shaping their life trajectory, generally by making choices about their life, given the patriarchal constraints they face within their largely fixed social context and structural inequalities. The agency triggers empowerment and makes women more resilient in preventing VE in their local communities. However, to “exert power on” or “power over”, women need to have more decision-making power and become economically independent.⁵ But, how to do that? There are a few gender-sensitive approaches to PVE/CT:

CREATE WOMEN-FRIENDLY AND SAFE SPACES FOR A GENDER-SENSITIVE UNDERSTANDING AND COUNTERING OF VE

Evidence shows that women play an important role in countering VE. Given the profound impact, women have over their families/communities they are ideally suited to detect and report signs of violent extremism in a timely fashion. Research has shown that women in their role as mothers, sisters, and partners - can help counter violent extremism within their family circle and community and serve as an ‘early warning’ and ‘early response’ to VE. The role of women as influencers and their unique position in their families and wider communities could be utilized to deter youngsters from VE and counter radical interpretation ideologies⁶. Such events will foster the engagement of women in local communities, enabling them to discuss and exchange experiences on community-wide concerns and threats and helping women to channel their core values into improving their community. Therefore, it is important to empower local grassroots working on women's issues, so that they can promote positive role models of women who are active agents of change.

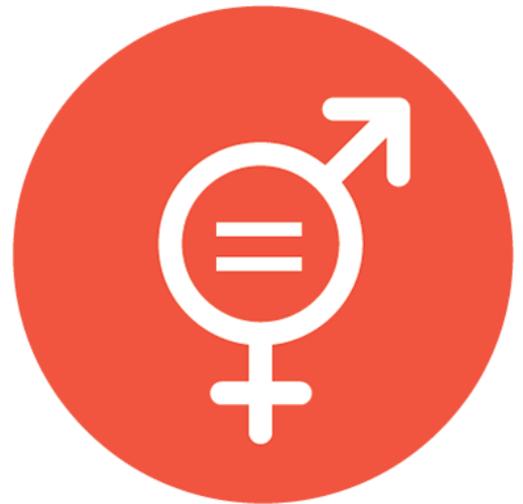
(2020). “Socio-Economic Vulnerabilities and their Impact upon Radicalization of Women in Western Balkans”

⁵ Xhaho, A. (2014). Albania gender inequality in workplace: expectations of femininity and domesticity " *Haemus*, 45-50.

⁶ Idris, I. (2020). Gender and countering violent extremism (CVE) in the Kenya- Mozambique region. GSDRC, University of Birmingham

GENDER-SENSITIVE CVE PRACTICE FROM GCERF-FUNDED PROGRAMME

A good example of a women-friendly and safe space is “Women’s Council”, an initiative carried out by a grassroots women’s organisation in Albania, the Woman’s Centre for Development and Culture-Albania (WCDCA). The Women’s Council aims to strengthen women’s role within the community, promote cooperation among them and foster social cohesion. These events bring together women from different walks of life and guide them to engage proactively and discuss challenges women face in their local communities as well as pathways for peaceful community engagement and cooperation. Specific objectives of these events are to:



- ▶ Reduce the level of stigmatization and increase the level of acceptance for RFTF and their families

- ▶ Enhance women’s awareness regarding their proactive role in local communities

- ▶ Increase women empowerment and resilience by promoting a common understanding and solutions to local safety issues and challenges

- ▶ Engage women in awareness-raising activities and community engagement initiatives to prevent any form of extremism through the mobilisation of women

Women’s direct involvement in the Women’s Council events enables them not only to become key actors in driving forward social cohesion but also positively impacting their civic participation. Women’s personal stories and exchange of experiences among each other reveal their resilience in dealing with social injustices. Sharing stories with other women often makes them agents of change. Women’s councils offer another way of thinking about women’s sense of agency, empowerment and control over their lives and families, thus challenging the patriarchal mentality that prevails in rural areas. In one of the meetings, one of these women said: “You know, the fact that I am here to discuss with you and not in my home doing housework is a revolution- never happened before”. This quote offers insights on how to re-conceptualize women’s agency at the intertwining effect of gender, class, culturally defined practices, social norms, and kinship structures in a particular context. To make sense of women’s agency, it is important to consider how women’s choices and free actions in rural and remote areas are constrained and shaped by the society where they live.

The activity is implemented in the framework of the program "Sustainable community-based reintegration of Albanian nationals returning from Syria". This program is being implemented in Albania by the Institute for Democracy and Mediation in cooperation with the Observatory for the Rights of Children and Youth and the Women's Center for Development and Culture in Albania, under the national coordination of the Coordination Center Against Violent Extremism, with the support of the Global Community Engagement and Sustainability Fund (GCERF).

Therefore, the practice of coming together and sharing common problems, ideas, and solutions to community threats in these social gatherings is empowering for women. But the Women's Council is not only about sharing personal stories of resilience, but rather advocating for women's rights, community safety and access to better services. The main takeaways of these meetings are the list of recommendations and priorities about the challenges women face at the local level. All these sets of recommendations and priorities will be addressed to local stakeholders, through a set of advocacy initiatives.

STRENGTHEN INITIATIVES THAT PROMOTE WOMEN'S ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE

It is often the case that economic factors such as women's dependency over household finances are a crucial incentive for joining armed conflicts⁷. This shows that oftentimes, women's mobility and the sense of agency are often restricted by men, as the head of the family albeit exuberated by women's economic dependence on their husbands and unequal participation in all spheres of life. Women are more likely to undermine the oppressive norms of patriarchy and become more self-sufficient if they are given the means to become economically independent. Women's employment outside of the home enables them to take on more liberal gender roles. Access to paid labor has provided these women not only with economic independence but with emotional and psychological autonomy. Therefore, local grassroots should focus on the impediments women face in entering the labor market. Economic empowerment initiatives that increase women's access to the labor market can also help in shrinking the enabling conditions conducive to violent extremism. Emphasis should be placed on the initiatives that improve the livelihoods and conditions via for example entrepreneurship or programmes that stimulate employability. Studies have shown that women's economic empowerment can alleviate family and community tensions, thus contributing to more resilient communities⁸

⁷ Bhulai, R. and Nemr, Ch. (2018)

⁸ Monash University Gender, Peace and Security Centre (2018) "Empowering women for peaceful communities: Evidence from Indonesia and Bangladesh", research brief, New York: UN Women

INCREASE THE DECISION-MAKING POWER OF WOMEN AND DESIGN GENDER-SENSITIVE CVE POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES

Inequal access of women to the labor market, low opportunities for education, and low levels of participation in decision-making are frequently correlated to support for violent extremism. Often, women perceive involvement in terrorism as a way to gain back freedom, emancipation, respect, and equality⁹, as well as a “revenge against the injustices”, misogyny and liberation from constrained environments.¹⁰ Entrenched gender norms and systematic gender inequality and discrimination can serve as a fertile ground for the proliferation of violent extremism.¹¹

It has been shown that countries that are ranked low in the Women, Peace and Security Index¹² perform poorly in gender equality indicators, which can be traced largely to high levels of organized violence and structural inequalities that disempower women. These countries are at the same time those who are most impacted by terrorism in the Global Terrorism Index. This indicates a possible correlation between VE and women’s oppression, inequality and discrimination. As such, societies that perform well in the gender equality indicators are less vulnerable to violent extremism. These findings suggest the importance of promoting women’s participation, leadership and empowerment in society.¹³

Having in mind this, participation of women in decision-making is one of the key indicators of gender equality and inclusion in society. The lack of women’s involvement in decision-making means they often do not have a voice or a choice in addressing their own needs and demands. Often local policies fail to take into account reproductive roles of child-bearing and rearing, caring responsibilities, gender division of labor, and gender gap, which limit access to income, capital, credit, land and other productive resources and restrict women from fully participating in local decision-making and planning. Initiatives like the Women’s Council aim to bring forth the invisible voice of women to influence local decision-makers and prepare informed policies using a gender lens analysis. Such initiatives should foremost aim to: increase the capacities of women activists to better advocate for gender-sensitive policies; fight women’s sense of alienation, isolation, and exclusion; increase knowledge of local decision-makers in gender responsiveness on information, consultation and delivery of services; improve rural access to information and resources.



9 Orav, A., Shreeves, R., Radjenovic, A., 2018. Radicalization and counter-radicalization: A gender perspective, s.l.: EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service.

¹⁰ Orav, A., Shreeves, R., Radjenovic, A., 2018. *Radicalization and counter-radicalization: A gender perspective*, s.l.: EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service.

¹¹ Copland, S. and Langhi, Z. (2021). Policy Brief. A Gender-Informed Approach to the Prevention of Violent Extremism in the Arab Region. United Nations: Beirut

¹² The Women, Peace and Security Agenda more broadly sets parameters for conflict prevention and conflict management which can be applied to PVE and CT to avoid instrumentalizing and securitizing women’s rights For further discussion of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, see this Toolkit’s Policy Brief on “A Security Sector Governance Approach to Women, Peace and Security”

¹³ Copland, S. and Langhi, Z. (2021)

A gendered perspective/approach to P/CVE entails an understanding of the drivers of women's radicalization, followed by tangible ways of overcoming structural inequalities. Hence, in the area of prevention, practitioners should propose initiatives to counter gender stereotypes and oppose women's oppression and gender inequality.¹⁴ In addition, women-led and women's rights CSOs can serve as key interlocutors in their society and help shape the gender aspects in the P/CVE policies and programmes. Therefore, their active involvement in consultations, design and implementation of policies and programmes may inform ways to improve PVE efforts and ensure gender-responsive approaches

ENSURE SAFETY AND SECURITY OF WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS IN P/CVE PROGRAMMING

Women activists from civil society play an instrumental role in the advancement of human rights, democracy and the promotion of peaceful and cohesive societies. However, evidence has shown that women activists from civil society in Albania are prone to constant threats and attacks and they range from smearing campaigns and intimidation to hate speech and harassment, both physical and psychological¹⁵. Women human rights defenders and activists countering VE are at a heightened risk, due to the gender issues they are advocating for. Evidence shows that women's advocacy against PVE can be undermined by security threats. It has been noted that women who are on the frontlines of the fight against violent extremism as human rights defenders are at a heightened risk of reprisal against them.¹⁶

The climate for WHRDs is further aggravated by the patriarchal mentality and the dominant gender stereotypes that shape public perceptions of gender roles, which seem to perpetuate various forms of intimidation and hostility against women activists from civil society. Such gender-based attacks undermine the physical and psychological safety of women, who struggle with the fear that perpetrators will soon retaliate against them. The impunity for such attacks is further exacerbated by the fact that there are no effective gender-sensitive protection mechanisms for Women human rights activists. Women activists from CSOs advocating for such issues might face challenges in accessing protection services, thus requiring gender-responsive investigative and prosecution procedures for female victims and witnesses.¹⁷ Therefore, having in mind the gender perspective in PVE/CVE efforts and the sensitive nature of women's works in this area, it is essential that international organisations should be encouraged to create an enabling environment for women human rights defenders, ensuring appropriate recognition and protection to such groups and that their P/CVE efforts do not infringe on their rights. This would include amongst others efforts to establish effective mechanisms to redress, promptly any form of human rights and gender-based violence. Criminal justice responses to terrorism and law enforcement agencies should take a gendered lens in addressing human rights violations.

¹⁴ Copland, S. and Langhi, Z. (2021)

¹⁵ Xhaho, A. (2019). Human Rights Defenders in the Western Balkans: Albania. European Policy Institute

¹⁶ Ndung'u, I. and Shadung, M. (2017). Can a gendered approach improve responses to violent extremism? Institute for Security Studies.

¹⁷ UNODC. (2020). Mainstreaming gender in terrorism prevention projects/programmes. Briefing note for UNODC staff. UN.

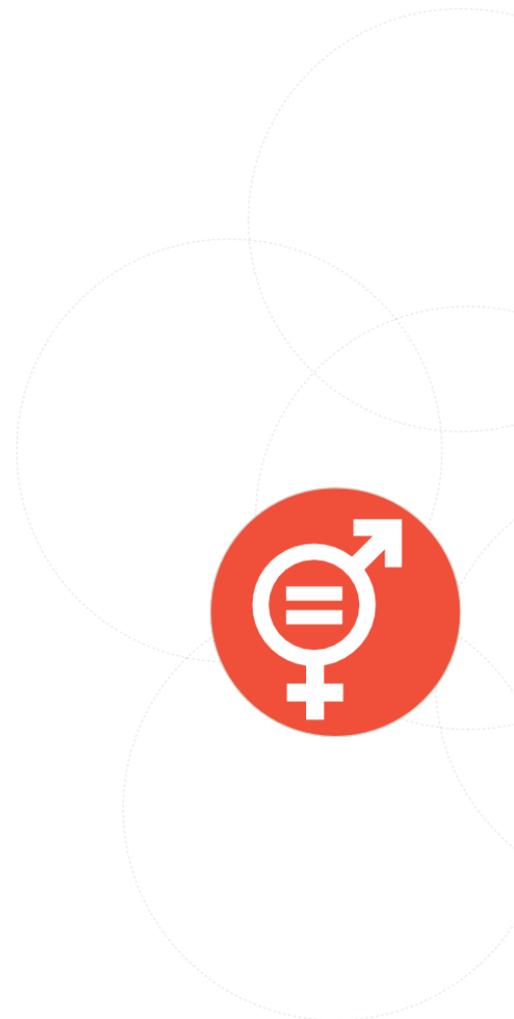
CONCLUDING REMARKS

Gender mainstreaming in CVE involves an understanding of multiple roles women play as preventers, supporters and victims of violent extremism which may inform ways to improve PVE efforts.

Integration of gender analysis on the drivers of radicalization of women to violent extremism and terrorism in relevant programs is crucial for preventing such phenomena. At the same time, such gendered sensitive approaches demand that women's important role in conflict prevention must be acknowledged as a means of building social cohesion and resilience against violent extremism.

“A gender analysis of violent extremism and terrorism is needed to enhance the impact of PVE and CT responses, first, by developing an understanding of the gendered nature and dynamics of these phenomena, and second, by providing the evidence needed to anchor and inform the design, formulation and implementation of gender-sensitive and human rights-compliant responses.”¹⁸ Tailoring gender-sensitive prevention measures against VE, entails those strategies are developed to address terrorism and violent extremism, considering women's empowerment and protection at the centre of such efforts. Particular emphasis should be placed on promoting women's participation in decision and policymaking at all levels, because “gender equality and female empowerment remain key democratic ideals, and their promotion has a positive effect on the success and sustainability of PVE efforts”.¹⁹

Amplifying the role of women in P/CVE means recognizing the myriad roles women can play in preventing violent extremism and their participation in peacebuilding. Women-led initiatives can help shape comprehensive and gender-sensitive CVE policies and programmes that ensure a participatory approach to women's empowerment.



¹⁸ Ndung'u, I. and Shadung, M. (2017)

¹⁹ Ndung'u, I. and Shadung, M. (2017)

