

W O M E N W I T H O U T B O R D E R S

DO VIOLENT HOMES MAKE VIOLENT EXTREMISTS?

How childhood experiences around domestic violence may be driving terrorism worldwide

A CO-AUTHORED POLICY PAPER BY
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THE POLICY CONTEXT.

Growing consensus that violent misogyny contributes considerably to the spread of violent extremism raises several key questions. Why has gender-based violence and discrimination been missing from the conversation around drivers of extremism for so long? How can we ensure that information lags and knowledge gaps are plugged and adequately addressed, in real time and with context in mind? Does the P/CVE practitioner environment offer clues and insights that could aid politicians and policy-shapers to avoid remaining in a perpetual loop of playing gender-policy-catch-up?



THE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS.

This policy paper proposes that the field of P/CVE needs to mainstream gender-inclusive programming that uncovers hidden gendered drivers of violent extremism and unlocks the agency of women to address these and other factors in the process. Practitioners, researchers, and policy-shapers may consider the following.

- 1) **Practitioners** could consider more seriously the lived experiences of women. This includes adopting a longer-term approach to build and sustain trust. Resulting access will allow for a better understanding of the nature and repercussions of hidden drivers, including gender-based violence. Only in this way will programming also be able to adapt to evolving dynamics and inform policy in real time, from the bottom up.
- 2) **Researchers** could continue building an evidence base that investigates causal relationships like the apparent link between gender-based violence and violent extremism. Another avenue of enquiry might be the conceivable link between symptoms of regression (roll-back of women's rights / increasing GBV) and an uptick in concern levels or indeed manifestations of community-level radicalisation.
- 3) **Policymakers** could pay more attention to the absence of women-led P/CVE organisations and networks at the local level. A more gender-balanced practitioner environment may help to close authority gaps and ensure that the gender lens is incorporated from the outset. Policymakers may also find merit in supporting evidence-based methodologies encouraging women leadership and networks that not only uncover hidden gendered drivers but also address these directly.

LINKING FAMILY VIOLENCE TO PERPETRATOR BIOGRAPHIES

In cases where domestic violence is seen as something normal, extremism has already started there ... In this instance, those children will be raised in silence, physical violence, or verbal violence. And automatically these children can become the criminals of the future. The collective violence over time can turn into another form of violence. And if this happens in every family, the future with the same perspective means it can happen to all of us.

- MotherSchools Kosovo Graduate, Kaçanik, Exit Interview

Until recently, gender-based violence figured as a long-overlooked driver of radicalisation. In recent years, however, the nexus between terrorism and violence against women has become increasingly difficult to ignore. A deeper consideration of perpetrator biographies has led journalists and academics alike to recognise that domestic violence has touched the lives of most terrorists; many have been witnesses to the crime in their childhood homes. Some researchers now contend that ‘misogyny is often the gateway, driver, and early warning sign of most of this [extremist] violence’ (Díaz & Valji, 2019, pp.44, 38). Evidence-based research in support of this hypothesis has been on the rise.

A recent multi-country study comprising three thousand survey participants found that individuals favouring hostile sexism and gender-based violence are most likely to support violent extremism. The researchers also identified restrictions on women’s rights as a common early warning sign for potential violent extremist engagement. Conversely, factors like religion, gender, age, employment, and education—all of which arguably have received far more attention to

” **Researchers found that ‘misogyny is often the gateway, driver, and early warning sign’ of violent extremism** ”

date—were not found to be correlated or strong predictors (Johnston and True, 2019). Supported by a mounting evidence base, the understanding that gender-based violence and discrimination is contributing to a rise in violent extremism has now also begun to permeate the highest international policy-shaping levels. In 2019, UN Secretary-General António Guterres took note that terrorist attacks, extremism, and other violent crimes are directly linked to the ‘violent misogyny’ of offenders (Guterres, 2019).

Growing consensus that violent misogyny contributes considerably to the spread of violent extremism raises several key questions. Why

” *Why has gender-based violence been missing from the conversation around drivers of violent extremism?* ”

has gender-based violence and discrimination been missing from the conversation around drivers of extremism for so long? How can we ensure that information lags and knowledge gaps are plugged and adequately addressed, in real time and with context in mind? Does the P/CVE practitioner environment offer clues and insights that could aid politicians and policy-shapers to avoid remaining in a perpetual loop of playing gender-policy-catch-up?

This policy paper touches upon the above questions by exploring hidden gendered contributing factors and drivers leading to violence and extremism. In employing the Women without Borders ‘MotherSchools: Parenting for Peace’ Model as a case study example, it further proposes that domestic violence fuels dysfunctional family dynamics that can act as a significant push factor.

THE HIDDEN PUSH-FACTOR POTENTIAL OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

If there is domestic violence from the father, that child will want to find shelter, will want to belong somewhere. If there is a cold home and the family structure is not strong, I think then those children are very much in danger of getting into extremist groups, because they want to feel they belong We can be that push factor for the child; to make them go.

- MotherSchools North Macedonia Graduate, Ljubin, Exit Interview

Communication and tolerance can be taught at home but so too can violence and prejudice, as the above excerpt proposes. While the trajectories of communities, societies, and future generations are linked to parenting styles and family dynamics (Tankosic Girt, 2022), these are the preserve of the private sphere. This in turn renders their push factor potential more difficult to probe and uncover than community-level factors like poverty and drugs. In this view, experiences of family violence can be deemed ‘hidden drivers’ of violent extremism. Chief among the ‘hidden drivers’ within families appears to be domestic violence. Women without Borders has yet to monitor and evaluate a MotherSchools country iteration where intimate partner violence does not emerge as a key theme among programme participants—first as a taboo topic, and finally as a push factor to address.

Communication and tolerance can be taught at home but so too can violence and prejudice

Everywhere, but in Bangladesh in particular, domestic violence has been front and centre in interviews with MotherSchools participants. Reinforcing this assessment, a participant noted: ‘There’s violence against women in the community, but I did not think it’s a mentionable thing. It’s a very common and normal thing in every family’, so much so that ultimately wives do not question their partners in the face of

violence. Further highlighting the severity of the problem, one participant, who also described it as a common problem, expressed feeling ‘proud’ that her husband did not use physical force against her. As is the case with structural violence—underpinned by psychological and physical abuse—family and community members can all play a role in the cycle of gender-based subjugation.¹ Some of the possible consequences of such dynamics were astutely laid out by a MotherSchools teacher in North Macedonia:

A violent home is a way of life ... In a research study we conducted here, forty-three per cent of women we interviewed admitted they have been violated by the husband, mothers-in-law, or fathers-in-law. Especially the children are traumatised and will find any excuse to run away from the house. I worked with children at my school and have seen some who have problems—are more withdrawn, isolated in themselves ... Those who are isolated do not talk at school or home and have problems expressing themselves ... It usually happens when the father is violating the mother. Children are traumatised and unable to do schoolwork and creative things that every child does at this age... One factor is enough to push a child into radicalisation. There are children who are not connected with families, and this influences them, pushes them into radicalisation.

**“A violent home is a way of life ...
One factor is enough to push a child
into radicalisation”**

That violence is learned and trained at home is a common finding. In one case in Bangladesh, a MotherSchools participant’s thirteen-year-old son purportedly took to beating his mother, in lieu of his paralysed father who could now only abuse the mother verbally. ‘The son’, as one of the teachers from her group relayed, ‘thought this is the behaviour of a son; he would hit his mother for not making good food, clean clothes, not doing enough’.

¹ For context-specific examples and further analysis, the reader may wish to consult the four 2022 Women without Borders impact reports cited in the bibliography.

The aforementioned examples all point to the need for more programming that builds awareness around generational systems of gender-based violence that appear to sustain hidden drivers of violent extremism. In such cases, it requires building awareness that this type of abuse tends to breed violence, and that in identifying with the aggressor, children may carry over such drivers into their future lives. In the short term, such dynamics can act as push factors that further isolate children and make them susceptible to recruiters who act as substitute role models and offer false promises of escaping this culture of violence.

VISIBLE WOMEN IN POLICY; INVISIBLE WOMEN IN PRACTICE?

Although international P/CVE conferences now regularly convene gender panels, women are still underrepresented in practice on the ground, most notably in at-risk communities. This is surprising seeing that the notion of women as promising local-level security stakeholders in the fight against violent extremism has been lauded by national and international counter-extremism stakeholders for close to two decades. Disproportionately few resources have ultimately trickled down and into putting this assumption to the test. Women are too seldomly engaged in vulnerable settings, and thus are missing from the conversation in the very environments where extremism takes root.

The counter-extremism space indeed may be troubled by an ‘invisible women’ problem, to borrow from Caroline Criado Perez’s concept (2019). In this logic,

“ *Conferences convene gender panels, but women are still underrepresented in practice* ”

counter-extremism approaches have been designed mostly by men and thus inevitably also for men. With women’s perspectives largely lagging behind and at times absent altogether, counter-terrorism and prevention

considerations become the product of an imbalanced, biased, and incomplete data set. Such gaps in our understanding will only continue to hinder broader whole-of-society ambitions.

The lived experience of women in communities that are vulnerable to radicalisation thus demands our attention. Favourable resolutions and theory-based consensus notwithstanding, identifying the most effective ways in which women can guide our understanding of evolving radicalisation dynamics and contribute to reducing the spread of violent extremism is contingent on their inclusion in P/CVE programming. This requires focusing on gender-sensitive prevention efforts to uproot factors in the very environments where violence often is trained, normalised, and eventually carried over into wider society and emulated by the young generation.

” *The lived experience of women in communities vulnerable to radicalisation demands our attention* ”

WOMEN BEYOND THE BINARY OF VICTIMS OR PERPETRATORS?

MotherSchools is the idea of removing all the family violence in a peaceful way. It can help reduce family violence, gangs, the recruiting of our children. They can learn it from the mothers of our groups.

- MotherSchools Bangladesh Teacher, Dhaka, Exit Interview

As this policy paper has proposed, Women without Borders' MotherSchools Model is an example of a methodology that alerts us to how women at the local level are an underutilised information source on radicalisation dynamics. It suggests that barriers to women's participation in P/CVE can be overcome even in the most isolated of communities, and that authority gaps can be closed when women

position themselves as role models and security stakeholders. Many MotherSchools participants have since disseminated parenting and push-and-pull factor knowledge through their personal networks, and some have intervened directly in challenging hidden gendered drivers like domestic violence.

Such insights and interventions are generally beyond the scope and radar of local authorities. This only further highlights the need to work with women directly to uproot the factors that keep them restricted and future generations more prone to being affected by or engaging in violence and radicalisation. It is about providing an option space and toolkit for women at all levels to become part of the broader whole-of-society prevention effort and conversation; an offer to have a stake in efforts that tend by and large to be the preserve of men.

” *A gendered power dynamics framework may help researchers avoid oscillating between the two extremes of labelling women either as victims or perpetrators* ”

Further research on the role of women and violent extremism may also benefit from situating analyses more definitively within the framework of gendered power dynamics. Heightened interest in viewing women

through the lens of perpetration and complicity without an adequate framework can do harm. This may lead to stigmatisation and social exclusion more broadly, steering us to oscillate between the two extremes of victimhood and perpetration. While warranted and important in equal measures, the lens applied must always account for the power dynamics at play.

After all, structural gender prisons are not dissimilar to the cynical leadership promises of extremist movements, which ‘empower’ women

only to sustain a system of misogyny that strengthens gender inequality and perpetuates cycles of violence. This arguably can lead to a false sense of self-determination. In the absence of a balanced understanding of power dynamics, we may also run the risk of exaggerating the roles of women as either victims or perpetrators, further marginalising already isolated individuals and blocking efforts that seek to encourage their positive agency in P/CVE.

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Women without Borders (WwB) is an international nonprofit organisation headquartered in Vienna. Since 2001, WwB has been building capacity through women leadership and empowered dialogue efforts to address gender-based violence and violent extremism, the world over.

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