Hedayah
Countering Extremism
& Violent Extremism

Exploring trends and research in countering and preventing extremism & violent extremism

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The Link between Singular Identities, Domestic Violence, and Violent Extremism: Exploring insights, lessons, and potential solutions through the lens of MotherSchools Model implementations

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Introduction

"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

Gender-based violence, rooted in deeply entrenched patriarchal and misogynist structural realities that help to normalize cycles of violence, is a long-overlooked driver of radicalization. In recent years, findings from so-called perpetrator research have made the nexus between terrorism and violence against women increasingly difficult to ignore. A consideration of perpetrator biographies suggests that domestic violence and misogynist attitudes have figured in various and divergent ways in the lives of most terrorists. Researchers have even contended 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 favoring 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, findings demonstrate that factors like religion, gender, age, employment, and education—all of which arguably have received far more attention to date—are not correlated or strong predictors (Johnston and True, 2019). Supported by a mounting evidence base, the understanding that gender-based violence and discrimination are 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 noted that terrorist attacks, extremism, and other violent crimes are directly linked to the 'violent misogyny' of offenders.

The growing consensus that misogyny and violence against women contribute 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 violent extremism for so long? How can the broader counter-violent extremism (CVE) community ensure that contextual information lags and knowledge gaps are plugged and adequately addressed in real time? Does the prevention of counter-violent extremism (PCVE) 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 essay addresses the above questions by drawing on the author's experience at the civil society organization Women without Borders (WwB) of supporting the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of recent community-based program iterations of its 'MotherSchools: Parenting for Peace' Model. Our program, adopted in sixteen countries, observed that peace and conflict can be trained at home.[1] It works with parents to prevent and reduce the spread of violence and extremism in vulnerable families and environments. WwB Parenting for Peace programs now also include FatherSchools and engage up to six hundred parents and trainers every year, in line with and corroborated by other study findings in more recent years that 'empowering women and men, as parents, is a critical prevention strategy' (True & Eddyono, 2017, p.44).

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1 MotherSchools have been implemented in Austria, Bangladesh, Belgium, England, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Jordan, Kosovo, 1 Montenegro, Nigeria, North Macedonia, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Zanzibar.

From the outset, we have measured impact based on the participants' 'distance travelled,' doing so mainly through entry and exit interviews with all local-level participants. Having conducted thousands of semi-structured baseline and impact interviews over the past decade, WwB's monitoring and evaluation process has helped to uncover hidden stories, dynamics, and factors that put family and community members at heightened risk of recruitment and radicalisation. The qualitative analysis of a data set well in the thousands has allowed WwB to identify significant and universal themes.

A dominant set of recurring themes across all implementation sites have been gendered hidden contributing factors and drivers leading to violence and extremism. This paper discusses two of these. Firstly, we will discuss how gender-based discrimination locks women into singular identities of motherhood, which in turn has an isolating effect, quashes confidence, competence, and leadership, and hinders many from recognising and working on their security role model potential. Secondly, and related to this, we will consider domestic violence as a driver, and how it fuels dysfunctional family dynamics that can act as a push factor. In employing the MotherSchools Model as a case study example, this paper proposes that the field of P/CVE needs to mainstream gender-inclusive programming that uncovers hidden gendered drives of violent extremism and unlocks the agency of women to address these and other factors in the process.

Methods

Employing a practitioner's lens, the paper draws on insights and findings from four of WwB's impact reports published in 2022.[2] To discern context-specific radicalization dynamics and capture the transformation of program beneficiaries over time, Women without Borders pursued a qualitative data analysis (QDA) of the semi-structured interviews that were conducted with all MotherSchools participants, teachers, and notetakers before and following the MotherSchools. The target groups comprised concerned and affected mothers of adolescents and young adults whose environment had put them at risk of radicalization. In total, WwB staff conducted and coded 562 semi-structured interviews: 113 in both Bangladesh and Kosovo; 113 in Kosovo; 88 in Montenegro, and 248 in North Macedonia. Each interview lasted an hour on average. The Entry Interviews, conducted prior to the

start of the program, were analyzed to gain community insights and establish the 'baseline context', which refers to the Participants' point of departure in terms of awareness, confidence, and competence. The Exit Interviews conducted following program completion were analyzed to determine the 'distance travelled' by graduates, and thus to establish the impact of the three MotherSchools groups running in parallel. The QDA method made it possible to code against significant themes and identify the main building blocks that proved integral to developing the prevention potential of mothers, with a view to positioning them as role models who work to reduce the spread of violent extremism in vulnerable families and communities. The five common MotherSchools building blocks that emerged through the coding of all recently implemented programmes are the following: 1. Heightening Awareness and Developing Knowledge; 2. Building Trust and Confidence; 3. Addressing Push Factors by Upgrading Parenting; 4. Addressing Hidden Drivers; and 5. Addressing Common Drivers & Strengthening Resilience. The fourth of these macro-level blocks is the subject of this essay.

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2 Women without Borders. (2022). MotherSchools Bangladesh: Parenting for Peace in Dhaka. Impact Report; 'MotherSchools Kosovo: Parenting for Peace in Pristina and Kaçanik'; 'MotherSchools Montenegro: Parenting for Peace in Podgorica, Nikšić, and Tuzi'; and 'Mother-Schools North Macedonia: Parenting for Peace in Skopje and Beyond'. (Note that all four publications are WwB impact reports published in 2022).

Losing Security Allies to Gender Discrimination and Singular Identities

"First it caught my attention that it was 'Mother-Schools', and I thought, 'We should not reinforce motherhood as the only identity of women'. But when I checked the organization's website, I could see how women were interacting together and how important it is for mothers to come together to challenge motherhood rather than reinforcing it. And here in Kosovo, especially, we have these set ideas of what motherhood means that is usually very submissive; they do not have agency in their house. Having these women in one place and talking with them about what motherhood is—that is powerful. We have women who never had the chance to go to school because here you have kids, and your job is to take care of them, and that's it. This is why I found this really interesting, because working with women as mothers can be really empowering. They can find new identities and their agency as women; not to limit themselves in life anymore."[3]

– MotherSchools Kosovo Teacher, Pristina, Entry Interview

Gender-based discrimination has continuously emerged as a MotherSchools theme that locks a high number of participants firmly into singular identity constructs. This results in roles often being confined to the domestic sphere and identities limited to motherhood. These prescribed roles serve to restrict the social interactions and physical movements of mothers to the home, where many live to serve in-laws and husbands. This has serious implications, because in deeply gender-policed environments, half of the potential security actors are ultimately not considered or engaged. As part of a whole-of-society security architecture, counter-extremism work needs to consider the consequences of leaving gender discrimination unaddressed. The limits placed on their leadership and prevention potential make gendered perspectives less visible to the counter-extremism community. As a result, it reduces their potential to communicate with legitimacy and authority not only horizontally amongst peers, but also vertically with security stakeholders at all levels.

During MotherSchools entry interviews, conducted at the start of each programme, common clusters of statements generally emerge around early and forced marriages, domestic violence, the denial of basic rights, and a plethora of other psychological and physical methods that preserve the culture of systemic discrimination against women. Isolation and low self-esteem are common side-effects of singular identities, meaning women are less likely to have or seek access to information, networks, and other factors that are required to be role models at home and leaders outside.

An analysis of a recent MotherSchools implementation in Kosovo offers a prime example of the wide-ranging implications of singular identities. A lifetime in the service of anyone but themselves, as the entry interviews lay bare, had left many prospective participants without a trusted network and far from having asserted their voice and reached their potential. The conversations with future participants at the time clearly indicated that self-confidence levels were being suppressed by familial and community factors and actors. In the absence of, inter alia, self-respect, hobbies, and personal aspirations, many defined themselves through—and made their confidence contingent on—the lives and decisions of their husbands and children. In the telling words of a Pristina participant, 'The most influence comes from my husband, and this determines whether I feel good or bad'. Questions around pride and confidence frequently prompted interviewees to mention their children, and to discuss the lack of support they had received to pursue an education beyond primary or high school. While the latter ranked as the most frequent source of low self-confidence, it also acted as a motivating factor to begin to challenge barriers, with several hoping that the MotherSchools provided an opportunity to work on themselves for the sake of their children. Given how inextricably linked their identities were to the actions and inactions of their children, however, several future participants were unable yet to define themselves beyond motherhood.

The entry interviews in Kosovo also speak to how gendered local-level programming can secure access and build trust in isolated communities to uncover hidden, context-specific dynamics impacting the prevention potential of isolated community members. A consideration of their biographies uncovers a myriad of complex layers of wartime trauma resulting in isolation and social marginalization that, throughout their lifetimes, had placed downward pressure on their sense of adequacy and ability. The motivation to join the program can in some cases be traced back to the legacies of the war and society's neglect and stigmatization of women as survivors of rape. In the words of a mother from Kaçanic,

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3 200205 XK MST EnRK 1 | Pristina, Paragraph 22.

> *"I belong to the generation that saw the war stop dreams. Because I wanted to have an education and to have a better job but unfortunately it was a war situation in Kosovo. Now the only thing that I am proud of are my children, because I have very good boys who are good and kind to the community, and well-respected as well. And that is the only thing that I am proud of—to be a mother."*

With a singular identity, personal views beyond motherhood tend to be pegged to that of others, which in turn limits agency and heightens vulnerabilities. This can be viewed through the broader lens of the so-called push factor potential of parents, especially with respect to at-risk youth growing up in the absence of a role model. Revisiting identity constructs ultimately acts as the foundation to overcoming perceived personal limitations and supports the process of moving from victimhood to agency.

When coupled with knowledge and practical tools, the resulting formula embodies the MotherSchools theory of change, namely that self-confident and competent mothers position themselves as the first line of defence in the fight against extremism. Starting with 'the Self' is a prerequisite. For even where an individual may possess knowledge of early warning signs and a theoretical understanding of how to respond, insufficient conviction and low self-trust can make the difference between rendering someone a bystander or 'upstander'—an individual who stands up for the rights of others or indeed their own in the face of injustice. The paralysing effect of low self-esteem demands identifying and addressing the chief symptoms. This includes questioning self- and community-imposed identity constructs that confine women as mothers to a singular conception of their role. The MotherSchools education therefore has a strong taboo-breaking dialogue function by providing a platform and space to unearth, discuss, and work to remove possible barriers holding participants back from achieving their potential and exploring their multiple roles beyond the domestic sphere.

The Push-Factor Potential of Domestic Violence

> *"You can be the push factor. You can't help that person who is in danger if you do not know how … 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 … I think it is hard to live with this fear. MotherSchools should have real schools in every country, because it helps women learn how to protect themselves and their children—from bad groups, from bad husbands. If you do not have communication with your child, I don't think you have information how this child feels and how he or she has problems …. We can be that push factor for the child; to make them go."*

– MotherSchools North Macedonia Graduate, Ljubin Group, Exit Interview

Communication and tolerance can be taught at home but so 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. In this view, experiences of family violence can be deemed 'hidden drivers' of violent extremism. The MotherSchools method, through its local-level parenting approach, aims to create the trust necessary to permeate this otherwise largely inaccessible realm. The resulting insights are unique in that they allow us to trace the intimate journey by which participants identify barriers to their prevention role and begin effecting changes that work to safeguard their homes, communities, and future generations.

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 against women does not emerge as a key theme among programme participants—first as a taboo topic, and finally as a push factor to address. What we often see is that singular identity constructs further perpetuate the problem. Where identities are tied mostly to husbands and children, generally, we see a pattern that violence is tolerated, excused, and generally not discussed or critically reflected on.

There is a clear interplay between the previously discussed issue of singular identities and domestic violence. Seeing that many mothers ultimately become trapped in this singular identity of motherhood to be closely associated with their children, they often become the sole source of blame for the actions of their children. In turn, this heightens their vulnerability to and acceptance of their position. To draw on a telling example from Bangladesh, when one of the mother's children was imprisoned for carrying drugs, the husband blamed and physically abused her as a direct result. Initially, as she conceded in her exit interview, she had accepted the blame until she had her new support network of mothers who helped each other to challenge these notions.

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 relationship in the face of violence.[4] 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.[5]

As is the case with structural violence—underpinned by psychological and physical abuse—community members can all play a role in the cycle of gender-based subjugation that restricts women's identities across generations. In perfect albeit destructive harmony, a common pattern in successive stages can be gleaned from the data we evaluated through recent MotherSchools implementations: first, conservative family milieus within which children are raised lay the groundwork (e.g., denial of education, early/forced marriage, children as witnesses of domestic violence), their husbands go on to sustain the culture of psychological and physical forms of violence against women (e.g., violence and restrictions on career and physical movement), and, finally, individuals like in-laws often chime in to create an orchestra of suppression (e.g. superimposing parenting expectations and household duties).[6] Some of these dynamics at play are astutely summarized in the following excerpt from an entry interview with a MotherSchools teacher from the Gostivar group 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 traumatized 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 traumatized and unable to do schoolwork and creative things that every child does at this age... One factor is enough to push a child into radicalization. There are children who are not connected with families, and this influences them, pushes them into radicalization."

That violence is learned and perfected at home emerges as a common finding. In one case in Bangladesh, a MotherSchools participant's thirteen-year-old son purportedly took to beating his mother with an iron rod; the woman's husband was paralysed and could now only abuse her 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.' Such examples point to the need for more programming that builds awareness around generational systems of gender-based violence that 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 a push factor that further isolates children and makes them susceptible to recruiters who act as substitute role models and offer false promises of escaping this culture of violence.

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4 '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 … they will continue their loving relationship.' (190619 BDN MSP EnM 7, Paragraph 57).

5 'The most proud thing is that my husband is an honest person. In my community it is common [that men use] violence and other things, but my husband never do that activity, so it is the most proud thing. I am happy in family life'. (190619 BDN MSP EnM 4, Paragraph 30).

6 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.

Conclusion

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

– MotherSchools Bangladesh Teacher, Dhaka, Exit Interview

Although international conferences now generally 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 nearly 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 often takes root. To borrow from Caroline Criado Perez's concept, the counter-extremism space may be troubled by an 'invisible women' problem (2019). In this logic, 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 living in communities that are vulnerable to radicalization thus demands our attention. The P/CVE space will otherwise continue to operate with gender blind-spots and forsake up to half of its possible community safeguards. Some of the most isolated and least visible members of our societies will otherwise continue to be overlooked, and their potential to challenge the very gendered hidden drivers that also help to lock them into singular identities will not be reached. Favorable resolutions and theory-based consensus notwithstanding, identifying the most effective ways in which women can guide our understanding of evolving radicalization dynamics and contribute to reducing the spread of violent extremism is contingent on their inclusion in the P/CVE programming. This requires focusing on gender-sensitive prevention to uproot factors in the very environments where violence often is trained, normalized, and eventually carried over into wider society and emulated by the young generation. In so doing, we will unlock multiple identities and challenge generational cycles of violence in the process.

As this essay 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 underutilized information source on radicalization 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 have disseminated through their personal networks parenting and push-and-pull factor knowledge, 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 radicalization. By no means should the expectation arise that women must become security allies or that women are intrinsically peaceful. In the case of mothers, this would only further limit them to an expected and singular identity of the 'good mother'. Instead, it is about providing an option space and toolkit to confront such stereotypes and 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.

Practitioners, researchers, and policy-shapers may wish to consider the following recommendations to put a central puzzle piece of the whole-of-community P/CVE architecture in the right place.

► Prevention practitioners applying a gendered lens could consider more seriously the lived experience of women. This includes adopting a longer-term approach to build and sustain trust. The resulting access will allow for a better understanding of the nature and repercussions of hidden drivers, including gender-based violence and related contributing factors like singular identities. Only in this way will programming also be able to adapt to evolving dynamics over time and inform policy in real time, bottom up.

► Researchers in the field of PCVE—aided by resulting practitioner insights—could continue building an academic evidence base that investigates possible causal relationships like the apparent link between gender-based violence and violent extremism. Another and related avenue of enquiry might be the conceivable link between gendered symptoms of regression (roll-back of women's rights / increasing levels of gender-based violence) and an uptick in concern levels or, indeed, manifestations of community-level radicalisation.

▶ Policy-shapers could pay more attention to the absence of women-led PCVE 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. Rather than reinventing the wheel, policy-shapers may also find merit in picking up on existing methodologies and supporting evidence-based methodologies encouraging women leadership and networks that not only uncover hidden gendered drivers but also address these directly.

Finally, 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, leading 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 multiple identities. 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 PCVE.

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