WOMEN AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

UN WOMEN

AN OVERVIEW OF WOMEN AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

UN Security Council resolution (SCR) 2242 (2015) recognized that the evolving challenge posed by transnational terrorism and violent extremism, and the women, peace and security agenda, are linked in a number of ways. It specifically called for greater integration by Member States and the UN of their agendas on women, peace and security (WPS), counter terrorism and countering violent extremism which can be conducive to terrorism. It requested that key counter terrorism bodies integrate gender as a cross-cutting issue throughout their respective mandates, and urged Member States and the UN system to ensure the participation and leadership of women and women's organizations in developing strategies to counter terrorism and violent extremism and to help build their capacity to do so effectively.[1] Moreover, it tasked UN Women and other relevant UN entities and member states to conduct gender-sensitive research and data collection on the drivers of radicalization for women and the impact of counter-terrorism strategies on women's human rights and women's organizations.

In response to this call and to establish a better knowledge base for future programming, UN Women's Europe and Central Asia (ECA) Regional Office began to collect field data for a series of studies on women and violent extremism in Fall 2016. Research was first carried out in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, southern Serbia (Sandzak region) and Kosovo.[2] In 2017-2018 UN Women's ECA Regional Office plans additional studies, and is developing follow-up activities and programming. This complements efforts at UN Women headquarters, and in regional and country offices, which are analyzing similar trends in other parts of the globe, to deepen understanding of women's roles relation to terrorism and violent extremism and of the impact of terrorism and counter-terrorism efforts on them.

Since 2012, the flow of foreign fighters and supporters primarily joining the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Iraq and Syria, has been notable for the significant number of women, ranging from approximately 15-20% globally, to as high as 30% in some countries. Consequently UN bodies and Member States have Increasingly recognized the role of women in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) in their national policies and in international normative documents. Globally, as well as in Europe and Central Asia (ECA), UN Women has found that women who are effected by violent extremism, especially as promoted by and its supporters and affiliates, can be victims and supporters, preventers and perpetrators. In research carried out in the Western Balkans and Central Asia in 2016-2017, UN Women found that too often women were perceived as simple "followers" of their husbands into violent extremism, and that state officials are rarely considering their possible roles as proactive supporters or recruiters, or the specific push and pull factors that influence women to join violent groups. As a result, the design or implementation of prevention policies and programs rarely integrate a gender dimension and there appears to be little information available regarding their impact or effectiveness with regards to women. The effect of violent extremism on women's rights protection is also rarely studied in the region. However, interest in women's contributions to preventing terrorism and violent extremism and to help re-integrate former fighters and their families is growing. This may help propel a more a gender sensitive understanding of what leads women to join violent extremist groups and the link to women's rights protection, with national and international actors paying greater attention to this issue.

UN Member States are increasingly recognizing the importance of engaging women and integrating a gender dimension in P/CVE, as highlighted in the adoption of SCR 2242 and again during the fifth review

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1 This includes closer partnerships between UN Women, the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (now the UN Office on Counter-Terrorism) and the Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED).

2 This and all other references to Kosovo in this document shall be understood to be in full compliance with UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

of the UN Global Counterterrorism Strategy in 2016. The Global Counterterrorism Forum has adopted a good practices document on women and countering violent extremism, initiated by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and with input from governments, civil society and practitioners. Efforts to translate these policy documents into practice, and to find practical ways of integrating gender as a cross-cutting issue, are more and more common. This is often in line with the UN Secretary General's Plan of Action Prevent Violent Extremism (PVE), presented to the General Assembly in January 2016, which called for women's protection and empowerment to be central to the development of effective strategies to counter terrorism and violent extremism. The Plan has a dedicated section on gender equality and women's empowerment, and the importance of a human rights and gender-sensitive approach is advocated throughout the text. At the same time WPS is an integral part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), especially SDG 5 and SDG 16; as well as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) Recommendation 30.

Despite the progress made in integrating gender into policy and normative frameworks and interest in moving forward quickly to reflect this in programming, there is a need for more research to better understand the contexts, women's roles, the opportunities for interventions, lessons learned and national and regional-level good practices to address violent extremism. Today as the violent extremist threat appears to be shifting, with ISIS rapidly losing ground in Syria and Iraq, new challenges regarding the return and rehabilitation of former fighters and their families, and how to prevent home-grown violent extremism, will also require informed consideration of women's roles.

From 2012 to 2016 much of the international attention on violent extremism was on ISIS and the decision of tens of thousands of men and women to join the group as it attempted to establish control of significant territory in Syria and Iraq.[3] The countries of Europe and Central Asia supplied more than 11,000 foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq, including some 800-1,000 from the Western Balkans and between 2,600-4,000 from Central Asia.[4] While it is difficult to determine the precise number of women who have traveled, roughly 20 percent of those leaving these two regions for the conflict zones were women. They most often traveled to ISIS controlled territory, where women

and girls mainly serve as fighters' wives and as child-bearers for the future ISIS "Caliphate." Some also serve in the ISIS hisbah (police), as teachers, and healthcare workers. Women have been a key part of ISIS's state building project, and the organization established an aggressive online and offline recruitment drive to attract women, claiming that there was a purity of life in the "Islamic state," where women could regain a sense of identity and self-worth. At least from Western Europe, several women appear to have also actively recruited on ISIS's behalf and played a very important role in legitimating their state building narrative and persuading others to travel.

While our focus in this study is on ISIS and similar jihadist groups, this is not to say that other violent extremist groups, especially nationalistic and xenophobic, are not also on the rise in many parts of Europe and Central Asia. It is important to recognize that violent extremism is not linked to any religion or ethnicity and is not a new security challenge. Furthermore, the terms radicalism, radicalization, terrorism, and violent extremism remain poorly defined and understood, and often hotly contested. While some authors equate radicalization with terrorism, radicalization is often a precondition to terrorism,[5] others point out that it is not always the first step toward terrorism or violence.[6]

The UN does not offer a single definition of "terrorism" leaving this to Member States.[7] Due to the lack of an internationally accepted definition of the terms, they tend to be employed differently in different contexts. In some countries, the lack of an internationally accepted definition has created opportunities to penalize opposition groups and dissenters under the rubric of countering terrorism or violent extremism. It therefore becomes much more challenging to verify quantitative and qualitative data from state and non-state sources when the term "terrorism" or "violent extremism" is employed indiscriminately. In our studies, we quote official statistics but were not in a position to verify them.[8]

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3 Since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011, it is estimated that upwards of 38,000 foreign fighters have joined Sunni militant groups, such as ISIS and al-Qaeda, in Iraq and Syria. Roughly 5,000 joined from Western Europe, of which roughly 3,700 originated from France, Germany, Belgium, and U.K.

4 http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/03/29/iraq-and-syria-how-many-foreign-fighters-are-fighting-for-isil/

5 Marc Sageman, Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Michael Taarnby and Lars Hallundbaek, "Al-Shabaab: The Internationalization of Militant Islamism in Somalia and the Implications for Radicalisation Processes in Europe," Ministry of Justice, Copenhagen. (2010).

6 Jamie Barlett and Carl Miller," The Edge of Violence: Towards Telling the Difference between Violent and Non-violent Radicalization." Terrorism and Political Violence 24, no.1 (2014). 1-21.

7 But the UN High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Changes has proposed to define terrorism as "any action… that is intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians or non-combatants, when the purpose of such act, by its nature and context, is to intimidate a population, or to compel a government or an international organisation to do or to abstain from doing any act". Report of the Secretary-General' High Level Panel, UN Document A/59/565 (2004). UN Security Council Resolution S/RES/2178/2014, meanwhile stresses the "link between violent extremism and terrorism." United Nations, Resolution, 2178 (2014), p.2.

8 For the purpose of this study we are opting for a simple definition of violent extremism as political violence carried out by non-state actors and aimed at civilians for the purposes of influencing or achieving political, ideological, religious, social, or economic goals.

While there has been some initial research into the dynamics shaping the choices of women in Western Europe and the US to join ISIS or similar groups, much less analysis has been carried out on why women from the Western Balkans and Central Asia have done so during the past five years.[9] Whether and how the feminization of poverty, women's unemployment, irregular labour migration, human trafficking, domestic violence, patriarchal values systems, women's uneven access to education and information, and other phenomena which hamper gender equality, women's rights protection and empowerment, effect women being pulled into groups like ISIS is poorly understood.

UN Women's ECA Regional Office selected to start its research in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kosovo and southern Serbia because the percentage of those traveling to Syria and Iraq, as foreign fighters or supporters, is high (per capita) compared with other locations in the region. While economic, political, social and environmental conditions are quite different between Central Asia and the Western Balkans, both regions are undergoing significant transitions after the breakups of the former Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, which are posing similar challenges to institutions, economic systems, social structures, values, identities, and popular beliefs.

The field research found that women from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kosovo and southern Serbia were in many cases traveling with their husbands and other family members to Syria and Iraq. While some women had little knowledge or choice about their final destinations, in other cases women openly acquiesced to the move, and even instigated it. In a few instances, UN Women encountered cases of women who traveled without a male partner with the clear intention of joining violent extremist groups fighting on the ground. In many of the interviews held, especially with local authorities, women were described as passive followers of their husbands with little agency to prevent rapid radicalization and travel

to the Middle East. At the same time our research found that the mothers, sisters, daughters and wives of individuals who choose to become foreign fighters are often deeply ostracized in their communities, and little is done to alleviate the pressures that wives especially are put under to join ISIS themselves.

Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Serbia and Kosovo have started to adopt counter-terrorism policies and established national institutional capacities to address the challenge of violent extremism, but specialized analytical and operational expertise and preventative strategies remain largely gender blind, and P/CVE programs and action plans that include consideration of women's roles are rare. Few explicit links exist between the new national strategies and action plans on P/CVE and those that seek to advance gender equality and women's rights. Women's organizations and civic activists have expressed concern that P/CVE may have a negative effect on women's rights protection, peace activists and their work. P/CVE is focussed on prevention of violent extremism through non-coercive means, using awareness raising, dialogue, education, psycho-social and social-economic means and addressing push and pull factors. They argue that too often states shift quickly into counter-terrorism, including heavy handed crackdowns on suspects and their families, incarceration, covert killings of suspected extremists, and the closing of religious or civil institutions with suspected links to extremism. These measures may put the women and women's organizations, who work on P/CVE or in regions where counter-terrorism operations are ongoing, at risk of human rights violations and violence. At the same time, violent extremist groups generally seek to curtail women's organizations roles and influence. Some conflict resolution organizations have also noted that there is a tendency for conflicts, regardless of their political, economic, social, religious or ethnic causes, to be increasingly seen through a narrow P/CVE lens, "with international actors favouring simplistic counter-radicalization measures rather than holistic strategies that prioritise peace, good governance and gender equality. The WPS agenda is increasingly being used as a tool for CVE/PVE purposes, instead of being seen as a critical agenda in its own right."[10]

Promotion of the women, peace and security agenda with its focus on women's participation in conflict prevention and resolution, and attention to the protection of women's rights, especially against

9   On women from the US and the EU that joined violent extremist groups including ISIS see for example: Sofia Patel, "The Sultanate of Women: Exploring Female Roles in Perpetrating and Preventing Violent Extremism," Australian Strategic Policy Institute, February 2017. Erin Marie Saltman and Melanie Smith, "'Till Martyrdom do us Part' Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon," Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015. Carolyn Hoyle, Alexandra Bradford and Ross Frenett, "Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS," Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015. Van Leuven, Dallin, Dyan Mazurana and Rachel Gordon, "Analysing Foreign Females and Males in the Islamic State in the Levant (ISIL) through a Gender Perspective," in Foreign Fighters under International Law and Beyond, edited by Andrea de Guttry, Francesca Capone and Christopher Paulussen, ASSER/Springer Verlag, 2016. RAN issue paper, "The Role of Gender in Violent Extremism," 04/12/2015. Anne Speckhard, Bride of ISIS: One Young Women's Path into Homegrown Terrorism, Advance Press, 2015 (fiction). Literature on what drove women to join groups that are ISIS predecessors include: Mia Bloom, Bombshell: Women and Terrorism, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011. Paul Murphy, Allah's Angels: Chechen Women in War, Naval Institute Press, 2010. Cindy D. Ness ed., Female Terrorism and Militancy: Agency, Utility and Organization, Routledge, 2008. Margaret Satterwaite and Jayne C. Huckerby, Gender, National Security and Counter-Terrorism: Human Rights Perspectives, Routledge, 2013.

10 Anna Moller-Loswick, "The countering violent extremism agenda risks undermining women who need greater support," 26 April 2017, Saferworld. http://www.saferworld.org.uk/news-and-views/comment/236-the-countering-violent-extremism-agenda-risks-undermining-women-who-need-greater-support

gender based violence, is essential in Central Asia and the Balkans to ensure long term security for men and women. Serbia, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have all four prepared at least one action plan for the implementation of UN SCR 1325 and the subsequent WPS resolutions. However there has been very limited thought to date on the ground on how to bring together P/CVE efforts and the WPS agenda, especially linking up national security actors, gender machineries and women peace activists. More reflection on how this can be done, in ways that strengthen women's participation and rights protection, and the role of women's organizations, is still needed.

For the studies on Serbia, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, UN Women sought to determine women's engagement in violent extremism, as well as the extent to which local governments, NGOs and UN counterparts have recognized and relied on women to prevent and counter violent extremism. UN Women hired experts Anna Matveeva and Anne Speckhard, to develop the research methodology, carry out the field based interview and write up findings. They worked collaboratively with Ardian Shajkovic in Kosovo, Sandzak and Kyrgyzstan, Chinara Esengul in Kyrgyzstan, and Bahrom Faizullaev in Tajikistan. UN Women staff in all locations also provided guidance and support. Field research was carried out in Kosovo from 17-26 October 2016, in Sandzak from 27-30 October, in Tajikistan in November – December and in Kyrgyzstan from 24 November – 4 December, with extensive travel throughout the countries and regions.[11] Some internet content about these foreign fighters posted on social media accounts was also collected to enhance primary data collection.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND PROGRAMMING IMPLICATIONS:

In Kosovo, southern Serbia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, state bodies, non-governmental organizations and international partners engaged in preventing and countering terrorism and violent extremism are just beginning to integrate a gender dimension, though for example, in Tajikistan, this is already an explicit element of their national strategy. UN Women recommends that gender be fully integrated in national P/CVE policies and programming. Based on our research, the theory of change of UN Women's Europe and Central Asia Regional Office program is that: if the causes driving women to violent extremism and women's roles in prevention and interventions are better understood; states bodies and non-state actors have increased capacities to include women in their prevention and intervention efforts; and services are available to women who are vulnerable to extremist narratives, it is likely that interventions to reduce violent extremism amongst women and their families in the Western Balkans and Central Asia will be more effective.

Based on our research to date, we therefore recommend that:

1) National and local authorities in the ECA region continue to implement UN SCRs on preventing/ countering violent extremism (especially 2178) and on women, peace and security (especially 2242) in a holistic way, to build up the effectiveness of their interventions and strengthen women's participation.

2) Governments, civil society actors and international partners increase their understanding of the gender dimension of violent extremism and women's roles in terms of recruitment, engagement, prevention and rehabilitation of former fighters through deeper research and engagement at the governmental and community levels.

- International and national partners should build capacity of local researchers and organizations to carry out research and analysis on the causes that drive women to violent extremism, including linked to the violation of women's rights, and the capacities of local counterparts be strengthened to carry out gender responsive data collection, analysis and reporting on violent extremism.

- National and international partners should conduct a gender analysis of existing plans and strategies, and identify areas of complementarity between 1325 action plans and P/CVE strategies.

- Government counterparts should include women's organizations or representatives from national gender machineries on high level P/CVE working groups

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11 Dr. Speckhard supplemented the data collected with information that she gathered in Kosovo during a previous research trip in June 2016. Dr. Matveeva shared findings from the interviews that she carried out in Kyrgyzstan in summer 2016 within the context of a UN country team research project.

3) National and local authorities and non-governmental groups increase their capacities to prevent women and girls from engaging in extremism, do more to support women's engagement in P/CVE, and develop rehabilitation and reintegration strategies for returning combatants, supporters and families which consider women's needs and engage women as part of reintegration.

- Training should be organized for women (including women in local government, teachers, police, social workers, medical professionals, religious experts) on violent extremism, online and offline recruitment, gender sensitive prevention and rehabilitation.

- Women's voices should be amplified as part of P/CVE campaigns. Counter-narrative videos and materials should be produced and disseminated using the voices of women.

- National governments and civil society should support women's local creative capacities in implementing gender sensitive P/CVE efforts through visual arts, mobile and forum-theatre, story-telling, essay competition, debates of contentious issues to do with position of women and girls, using creative mediums of expression including online should be supported. Women's engagement with new and traditional media to improve the gender sensitivity of reporting on violent extremism should be facilitated

- Police, border guards and other security forces, should facilitate the set-up of women's associations in their structures, and apply human resource and operations standards that enhance recruitment and retention of women, including to engage in P/CVE operations

- National partners should provide encouragement to youth groups, bringing together girls and boys, to foster dialogue, critical thinking and discussions on violent extremism

4) National and local authorities and non-governmental groups provide more referral mechanisms and services to women and their families who are vulnerable or have otherwise been effected by violent extremism.

- Helplines, referral mechanisms and rapid response teams with governmental and non-governmental partners should be established or their work should be sustained

- Support the establishment of gender sensitive rehabilitation and reintegration programs in local communities and prisons; facilitate the training of prison staff to apply gender sensitive approaches

- Help women's groups, including with grants, that are able to solve women's practical problems in terms of jobs, housing, legal and social support if they wish to escape being drawn into radicalization/ VE movements or undergo a disengagement/deradicalization.

5) Practitioners and policy makers strengthen networks of those working on women and P/CVE to facilitate more exchanges of good practices, lessons learned and cross regional expertize to strengthen women's participation in knowledge production, policy making and programming related to violent extremism.

- Support the dissemination of lessons learned on gender responsive P/CVE at the cross regional and global levels

- Facilitate the organization of learning visits amongst practitioners

- Establish a regional electronic platform on women and P/CVE

UN Women's Regional Office in Europe and Central Asia has developed a program based on the research findings and the recommendations above to implement in cooperation with national and international partners, and in support of Member States, civil society and expert institutions. The program aims to meet existing gaps in information, data collection, policies, programs, capacities and services related to preventing violent extremism, that exist because violent extremism has been largely seen as a male phenomenon whereas women were believed to play secondary roles. The program therefore seeks to support the implementation of more effective policies, action plans and P/CVE interventions, especially with more gender-responsive analysis and data; to increase state bodies and civil society capacities to prevent women from joining violent extremist groups and to support women's engagement in P/CVE; to create referral mechanisms and other services for women and girls who are vulnerable to violent extremism; and to facilitate knowledge exchange and cross regional networking for practitioners and policy makers working on women and P/CVE.