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CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN Small Scale Meeting

24 November 2020, Digital Meeting

(Young) Women's Usage of Social Media and Lessons for Preventing Violent Extremism

Key outcomes

The perspective on the role of (young) women in extremism has changed over the last years towards better understanding of how women radicalise, how they are recruited, and what their role in terrorist or extremist organisations can be. For many years, the public view on the agency of women has been neglected or marginalised. With substantial numbers of women travelling to Iraq and Syria to join Daesh, this view has changed. Despite the relatively large amount of research done on gender and radicalisation/extremism, there are still considerable gaps to fill. While the focus of the recent years has been on Islamist extremism, women and other forms of extremism have been rather understudied.

One of the main challenges for an effective intervention is the fact that much of the interaction has moved online. Studies have shown that women spend more time on social media than men and that the internet and social media can serve as a gateway to extremism. Therefore, the (online) radicalisation of women in different extremist settings needs to be explored further and understood to a degree that practitioners can adjust their intervention accordingly.

The RAN small-scale expert meeting on (young) women's usage of social media and lessons learned for preventing violent extremism (PVE) was aimed at unpacking some of the gaps. This paper summarises the highlights of the discussion, discusses the vulnerabilities that are specific to (young) women, explains how recruiters use these vulnerabilities online and, finally, presents the recommendations that the experts stressed during the meeting.

Ten highlights of the discussion

The discussion amongst the experts can be captured in 10 highlights.

1. Research suggests that men and women perceive political changes and socioeconomic issues significantly differently from one another. This, in turn, also suggests that (young) women may be driven into radicalisation by different push and pull factors than men.
2. Generally, (young) women will attract the attention of the media, especially related to radicalisation. Certain cultural frameworks define the role of women in society, giving them a certain space to act and certain conditions on socialising. This has meant that for many young women, the online space and social media are the most accepted spaces of engagement.
3. Although often perceived as victims of some extremist recruiter, women have a certain and at times very active or prominent position within extremist groups. In other cases, they have themselves been very active recruiters for terrorist purposes.
4. Talking about women also necessitates talking about men. This involves intersectional approaches and an understanding of gender constructs. Conversations were about relationships between genders and how these are perceived within certain communities. Much of the online engagement is about questions relating to sex, love, marriage (arranged, appropriate age), family, children, etc.
5. Especially in patriarchal families, but also generally speaking, fathers were often mentioned as pivotal figures. Their absence as well as their dominant role could play a big role in a woman's vulnerabilities. These offline experiences can also impact young women's online behaviour and the way they express grievances and vulnerabilities on social media.
6. In extremely conservative religious contexts, young women often only have limited access to information regarding highlights 3 and 4 in their offline world. The internet gives them a possibility to reach out, get information and connect.
7. The experts recognised the significant social media generation gap between young people and the practitioners who are supposed to prevent radicalisation. Although such differences are not new, social media's rapidly changing landscapes make it challenging — if not impossible — for the often older practitioners to keep pace, adapt and stay agile. As soon as they begin to grasp the medium, it is already "uncool" for young people to engage on such a platform.
8. There is a difference in the way social media is used and, especially, which medium is used in various countries. As a result, social media use can be very country or culturally specific. For example, radical right and/or conservative groups are switching to Parler ⁽¹⁾ (instead of Facebook) in the United Kingdom/United States. This move is currently unique to the Anglo-Saxon world, but the experts mentioned that similar trends take place within the EU. It was dubbed the localisation of social media.
9. The relevant information is there to find vulnerable (young) women, but intervention means are currently missing. At times, professionals hide behind legal justifications, which limits options for adequate interventions. Some of those constraints are caused by GDPR, while others are hindered by a lack of political pressure. For practitioners, this means that they are much more restricted than extremist actors in online engagement.

⁽¹⁾ At the time of writing, Parler was still accessible. However, after the storming of the capital in the US, the website was taken down.

10. Practitioners are often funded by government money, which comes with certain restrictions to use all platforms. This makes setting up an intervention via social media very difficult. It was mentioned that when such restrictions have been lifted, it was already too late for those practitioners to still reach their target audience via these media because they had moved on to a new platform.

Vulnerabilities of (young) women and recruitment tactics

- Taking control:** Sometimes, (young) women's lives are predestined by cultural norms or family pressure deciding on education, employment and marriage. Recruiters of extremist or terrorist organisations tap into these grievances by specifically propagating an independent and strong role for women within their organisation. They make women believe that they will have control over their life decisions and that they will be able to make a real difference by, for example, helping a specific cause. Some women also might feel underappreciated but at the same time overburdened in their lives, a grievance that recruiters use: "It's hard to imagine a group like Daesh talking about women's rights, but this was the language they used to draw some women into the group" ⁽²⁾.
- Discrimination:** Especially in the context of Islamist extremism, women's beliefs are often more visible as some of them wear a hijab, a burqa or a niqab. As a result, women can be a bigger target for public discrimination than men. This can be a major driver of radicalisation and be specifically used by recruiters who assure young women that they will be able to proudly wear their clothes once they join the organisation.
- Insecurity:** Many girls, especially during puberty, and young women are insecure about their bodies. The World Health Organization has found that more girls than boys perceive themselves as being overweight, although they are not, during these years ⁽³⁾. At the same time, girls spend more time online than offline. This can be used by recruiters to highlight the double standards of modern society and to paint a picture of a different society that does not judge individuals based on their appearance.
- Sexuality:** Naturally, teenage girls have many questions about their changing bodies and their sexuality. However, there is not always enough information about that for (Muslim) girls. While searching on the internet, girls and young women can come across extremist organisations offering this support.
- Purity trap:** One specific approach employed by Islamist recruiters is to lure young women into a (sexual) relationship or to encourage them to send explicit photos of themselves to then pressure them into radicalisation to redeem their sins, as purity is one of the highest values amongst Islamist extremists. Guilt-tripping individuals into radicalisation is a common factor. Moreover, recruiters use the manipulation technique of "love bombing", showering young women with love: "The aim is to create an emotional bond (friendship), which will in turn make it easier for the victim to be manipulated by the groomer. The groomer will aim to make the victim feel on top of the world, important, unmissable" ⁽⁴⁾.
- Domestic violence/abuse:** Experiences from practice have shown that some women who radicalise have either grown up in a violent environment or experienced domestic violence or (sexual) abuse themselves. Many of them are attracted to the concept of hyper-masculinity (protection) or the domination of other people. "Fear can be locomotive for radicalisation" ⁽⁵⁾. In the right-wing context, this often includes the protection of women from the perceived threat posed by migrants.

⁽²⁾ Dr Joana Cook, TEDTalk Tuesday: <https://oursecurefuture.org/blog/tedtalk-tuesday-dr-joana-cook>

⁽³⁾ Read more: <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/332091/9789289055000-eng.pdf>

⁽⁴⁾ Krasenberg & Wouterse, Grooming for terror – Manipulation and control, p. 5.

⁽⁵⁾ Quote of an expert of the meeting.

- **Sisterhood:** Especially in closed social media groups, girls and young women find like-minded peers who offer guidance and support. This sisterhood is often extremely tight and they discuss intimate topics such as sexuality. Women function as recruiters as much as men do and target (young) women in these circles.

Recommendations

- Researchers should map what underlying emotional and cognitive processes drive women to radicalisation online. How are they radicalised? What are their common denominators, and how does the online behaviour of young women influence their radicalisation process? **Constant monitoring** of online trends and social media platforms is crucial to learn about changes and developments in recruiting and radicalisation. Only this can ensure an appropriate reaction. Social media is an ecosystem that practitioners need to adapt to.
- Researchers should pay attention to differences in **dynamics and narratives** regarding the position of women in order to be able to tailor interventions to the target group. For example, the shift towards right-wing extremism and conspiracy theories requires new research as narratives might be different to other forms of extremism.
- Practitioners should engage with (young) women on their needs and life questions. Engaging them online could simply mean providing them with culturally relevant resources and with nuances that address these needs. These are conversations they are having anyway, but often with the wrong people. This means that practitioners need to reach out to women in more vulnerable communities. Regarding sensitive topics, it is important to provide a safe space for young adolescents. These look more like awareness campaigns and talk about the dangers of not having these discussions. By doing so, (young) women can be **empowered** to voice perceived or real grievances and to consult different sources on questions they may have. Women might require a different approach than men, which is more focused on trust. Practitioners should focus on trust foremost and should take into account that the online world is not disconnected from the offline world and always includes an offline component.
- For practitioners, it is impossible to keep up with the fast-changing online landscape. Additionally, they are often not seen as the right messenger. Peers (e.g. RAN YOUNG) are best equipped to adapt and engage with young people as older adults often "don't speak the language". This could be done by, for example, consulting RAN YOUNG about current online behaviours of young people and emerging social media platforms. Another good example of this is [Jamal al-Khatib](#) ⁽⁶⁾, where they involved their target audience in order to reach peers. Practitioners, researchers and policymakers should generally speaking **try to involve** — depending on the purpose — their target audience if they wish to research, find, engage with and safeguard those in need.
- After (young) women who joined extremist groups have burned their bridges, they need somewhere to return to if you wish them to leave these groups. As mentioned in the paper on grooming, practitioners can be the bridge. It was determined that one of the most crucial aspects of preventing people from being groomed/recruited is for the potential victim or recruit to maintain previous social networks. The professional is a **bridge to the non-extremist world**.

⁽⁶⁾ Jamal al-Khatib is an Austrian Online-Streetwork project that produces short films with authentic counter-narratives based on real-life experiences of young people regarding topics around radicalisation, democracy and identity.

- Practitioners and policymakers need to **fine-tune in consultation any restrictions** posed by funding and how this limits them in reaching their target audience. Public funding needs to be more flexible for practitioners to be able to deliver immediate interventions on all relevant social media platforms. Slow processes and legal boundaries delay the implementation of interventions. Additionally, practitioners could be helped with interpreting privacy rules (GDPR, information sharing) so they can plan their interventions and signalling accordingly.
- It is crucial to **understand your target audience** and their context. When considering what social media platform to engage on, consider at least age, gender and country specifics. The [GAMMMMA+ model](#) provides practitioners with a tool to map their target audience.
- Social, prevention and intervention work need to manage the bridge between the online and offline worlds. There is a need for **evaluation** of online social work to identify the best strategies to reach out to vulnerable (young) women online.

Social media / internet platforms / messenger services to pay attention to

- TikTok
- Houseparty
- Live streams (LiveMe, YouNow)
- KIK (has been used for high-profile crimes)
- Reddit
- The Dark Web
- Parler

Especially the growing popularity of live streams makes intervention and prevention work increasingly difficult as content cannot be predicted, moderated or prohibited.

Relevant practices

1. The Diamond programme of the Dutch [Foundation for Intercultural Participation and Integration](#) is aimed at 12-24 year-olds who are experiencing identity problems. It offers room for young people to explore their identity and perspectives, also including gender roles and the problematic of loverboys.
2. The [Groundswell Project](#) offers the ability to connect with others who want to inspire change, build bridges and promote tolerance/understanding in their own community. It gives an overview of projects that are also aimed at young people.
3. The German online magazine [jetzt.de](#) has a column dedicated specifically to gender, sexuality, clichés and Islam.

Follow-up

- Research on online radicalisation needs to include new topics such as hate speech and analyse how it contributes to radicalisation.
- Only in a historical context was far-left extremism and the role of women in these movements mentioned during the meeting. Future meetings and/or research could delve into the far-left narratives, recruitment, and push and pull factors for young women.

Further reading

In the RAN paper '[Effective Narratives: Updating the GAMMMA+ model](#)', more information can be found on identifying your target audience, using the right messenger and how to construct the right message. The GAMMMA+ model is a useful tool for practitioners to better understand young women's online behaviour.

In the RAN paper '[Grooming for terror – Manipulation and control](#)', more information can be found on recruitment strategies and tactics, while also providing information on how to prevent these from succeeding.

Tech Against Terrorism has interviewed ICCT Senior Project Manager Dr Joana Cook and Dr Elizabeth Pearson in "A Gender Approach to Women's Role in the Online Extremist Sphere". The podcast as well as the transcript can be found [here](#).

Gabriel Weimann has published a [Research Note: Spreading Hate on TikTok](#) in which he argues that TikTok's unique features make it more troublesome than other social media platforms.