CONCLUSIONS PAPER

GENDER MAINSTREAMING IN P/CVE PROGRAMMING

THEMATIC RESEARCH MEETING

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KEY OUTCOMES

The RAN Policy Support Thematic Research Meeting (TRM) on "Gender Mainstreaming in P/CVE Programming" took place online on 31 October 2023, with 20 participants excluding the core team in attendance. This paper summarises the key themes and provides an overview of the discussion, as well as policy recommendations and suggestions for further reading.

KEY OUTCOMES OF THE MEETING INCLUDE:

1. Gender mainstreaming is crucial in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) efforts, as it provides a comprehensive approach to policy development beyond simple integration of gender perspectives. Recognising gender-specific dimensions in extremism, addressing vulnerabilities, promoting inclusivity, and tackling root causes like gender-based violence enhances tailored interventions, community engagement, and the overall impact of P/CVE initiatives.

2. There remain gaps in the way gender mainstreaming is integrated into P/CVE) programming, especially between what researchers have been able to observe, and the practical design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of programming.

3. There is a need to look outside the field of P/CVE when thinking about gender mainstreaming. There are lessons to be learnt from adjacent fields such as humanitarian work, peacebuilding, and social work. Furthermore, it is important not to consider gender mainstreaming as a tick-in-the-box exercise, but rather to see the application of a gender- and social identity lens as a standard part of all programming and policy.

4. It is important to consider researcher and practitioner biases in the process of gender mainstreaming in P/CVE programming. This should question the ways programmes are designed – e.g., whose perspective is the programme design adopting; how programmes are implemented – e.g., is the programme or policy reaching the right beneficiaries, or only those that designers think are relevant – and, how programmes and policies are evaluated – e.g., whose criteria is being used.

5. Although significant research has been done on gender and gender mainstreaming in P/CVE, the development and utilisation of this work in the practical and policy realms reached a point of stagnation in recent years. To move forward, a systemic change in practice is necessary, as well as a significant overhaul in the general conceptual thinking about gender and gender mainstreaming in policy and practice.

This paper summarises the highlights of the discussion, as well as the recommendations that were formulated by the participants and provides an overview of possible follow-up topics.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE DISCUSSION

Throughout the three panels of the TRM, several important issues were raised, including, *inter alia*: the need to understand gender mainstreaming purposes and processes better; how gender mainstreaming fits within wider social systems; and one's own biases when it comes to all stages of gender mainstreaming in P/CVE. The points below reflect arguments that have been at the forefront of the discussion on gender mainstreaming in P/CVE programming in research and practice, while also offering insights into where gaps remain and where policy should intervene. As the TRM brought together researchers and practitioners with an academic background, the discussion facilitated the exchange of holistic and multidisciplinary viewpoints, demonstrating the wide scope of the topic.

1. UNDERSTANDING GENDER AND GENDER MAINSTREAMING

Comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics within the framework of P/CVE is imperative for policymakers and practitioners engaged in strategic decision-making and programme development. On the one hand, violent extremist (VE) groups exhibit adeptness in leveraging gender nuances for recruitment, be it fundamentalist Buddhist factions in Myanmar, far-right entities in Europe, or paramilitary organisations in Colombia. The strategic use of masculine ideals to foster radicalisation against specific demographics, such as the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant (ISIL)/Da'esh playing on gender insecurities of Muslim communities in Europe portraying them (and specifically men) as threats present in European society, underscores the sophistication of tactics used. Understanding the use of gender disparities by terrorist and VE groups can be used to hinder further radicalisation and recruitment by informing P/CVE strategies. On the other hand, a lack of understanding of gender dynamics on behalf of policymakers and practitioners, leading to ineffective gender mainstreaming in policy and practice, can result in alienation and marginalisation of programme beneficiaries.

Existing P/CVE initiatives often fall short in adequately addressing the complexity of gender considerations, thus warranting a paradigm shift in approach. Gender mainstreaming necessitates methodological tools for analysis. This involves a nuanced exploration of societal constructs of gender and social roles, power dynamics, and the interplay between femininity and masculinity. By developing a better understanding of power dynamics in the development of P/CVE strategies, a more discerning and effective approach to gender mainstreamed programme design, implementation, and M&E can be formulated. The significance of understanding gender, and gender mainstreaming, extends to the deciphering of social relationships, spanning familial dynamics to broader institutional structures such as educational and welfare systems.

Refined and strategic engagement with gender is imperative for those involved in decision-making and frontline P/CVE endeavours. Without this understanding, all stages of P/CVE programming and policy will be ineffective to a certain extent, due to a lack of sensitivity to diverse societal dynamics, and power structures.

2. GENDER MAINSTREAMING AND WIDER SOCIAL ISSUES

Speakers identified the need to broaden gender mainstreaming efforts beyond the conventional P/CVE sphere, noting that much of the work addressing isolation, alienation, and related issues could be integrated into, for example, social work. However, due to a general trend in funding cuts in social work services seen in certain European contexts, there have been limited initiatives of this kind. Overall, it is important to look beyond counter-terrorism (CT) programme design, and instead look at efforts encompassing broader societal issues and

initiatives like gender equality, peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and humanitarian and social work. This would allow for a more mutually-beneficial approach to gender mainstreaming in targeting issues transcending different social spheres, as well as a shared understanding of what such approaches require. Gender mainstreaming P/CVE initiatives should prioritise addressing the above mentioned broader societal issues and initiatives. Failing to tackle broader social issues through gender mainstreaming efforts hinders the effectiveness of the design, implementation, and M&E of policy and programming. Without addressing these fundamental issues, understanding the context of policy and programming becomes challenging. Therefore, adopting a comprehensive and holistic approach, including active community stakeholder engagement, is crucial in developing and executing effective gender mainstreaming strategies.

A robust, multiagency strategy is paramount when tackling these issues, given their widespread ramifications for society. A speaker from Germany with practical experience in the rehabilitation and reintegration of women and children from Syria and Iraq highlighted that policymakers and practitioners must recognise the intrinsic connection between the efforts in the P/CVE and CT domains, and broader social issues. For example, women's mental health was not prioritised, as their expressed preference for their children's reintegration and well-being was considered a higher priority. While Germany offers provisions for voluntary mental health support for returning women, these provisions fail to account for the various social, personal, or cultural factors that may hinder women's utilisation of these services. This mutual relationship further underscores the indispensability of an interagency approach, as no single agency or policy can effectively deliver targeted interventions without a thorough acknowledgment of the broader context, the extrinsic personal factors, and the collaborative support of multiple agencies.

To complement a multiagency approach, a comprehensive strategy for gender mainstreaming in P/CVE involves acknowledging the intersectionality of online and offline spheres simultaneously. While traditional P/CVE initiatives have predominantly addressed offline aspects of extremism, recent developments, such as the European-wide Digital Services Act (DSA), underscore the importance of safeguarding individual rights in both realms. The DSA incorporates specific provisions for content moderation, aligning with efforts to enhance online safety for individuals and minority groups, and addressing gender-based violence online. This shift in focus recognises the evolving landscape of extremism, necessitating a holistic approach that spans both digital and physical domains.

3. REFLEXIVITY AND SELF-AWARENESS

The practice of gender mainstreaming in all of levels of programming (design, implementation, and M&E) often operates under the base assumption of gender neutrality, although Member States' perception of radicalisation has been, and continues to be, non-neutral in terms of, *inter alia*, gender, ethnicity, and social identity. This means that practitioners, researchers, and policymakers often neglect to apply a self-awareness lens regarding their own positions of power, such as their own gender, race, or being individuals with authority. This oversight can result in disregarding the specific needs of the communities intended for protection.

A crucial aspect is the scrutiny of what is omitted in all stages of P/CVE programming from the design, implementation, to the M&E. Scrutiny fosters a deeper understanding of one's own biases, assumptions, and preconceptions. This introspective process enables practitioners to navigate the complexities of societal gender constructs with greater sensitivity and nuance. By being attuned to personal perspectives and potential blind spots, individuals involved in P/CVE efforts can contribute to more inclusive, culturally sensitive, and effective strategies that account for diverse gender dynamics, thereby enhancing the overall impact of the initiatives. Further, there should be a critical evaluation of what is *not* part of programming, and what biases or personal

prejudices have led to this. Moreover, there is a need to reassess the focus on narratives presented by implementers that align with their perceived importance and effectiveness of gender mainstreaming. To take gender seriously, speakers noted that introspection, self-reflection, and institutional cultural change are paramount, extending beyond perceived tokenistic inclusion of gender mainstreaming practices.

Additionally, the speakers noted the impact of certain gender biases and normative assumptions in P/CVE programming and policy as evident. One speaker highlighted a funding disparity in programming across Europe, noting more resources allocated to the rehabilitation of young men through initiatives like sports clubs, while little to no equivalent funding being directed towards programmes benefiting young girls. This highlights that programmes and policies are not created equal, and that continued evaluation of biases and assumptions needs to take place to determine if equal priority and attention are given to all programmes and policy. Policymakers and practitioners should critically assess their prioritisation in rehabilitation and reintegration efforts, questioning whether certain funding decisions are influenced by perceptions of vulnerability to radicalisation. It could be worthwhile to not just ask 'Do we prioritise funding for young men because historical precedents of terrorist attacks suggest men pose an increased risk compared to women?' but to also ask, for example, 'Do we prioritise funding for young men because our perception of them as vulnerable to radicalisation is also informed by gender biases?' On the other hand, despite existing political will to prioritise gender, there persists an assumption of gender neutrality, where practitioners claim to treat individuals without considering their gender. However, evidence across Europe reflected in the policies (and reflected in the unequal average number of men and women returnees) towards repatriation demonstrates that there is a clear lack of willingness, and in fact reluctance, to repatriate men based on perceived risks they pose. There is evidence to suggest that recidivism among returnees is generally low.[1] In this regard, the practice of exclusively repatriating women (and children) evidences some sort of perception linked to a gendered notions of risk. There is, according to the speaker, an inherent gendered bias in the actions in policy taken across the EU in this regard.

Understanding the potential impact of research and practices on P/CVE programme and policy beneficiaries is important. This awareness can help practitioners and policymakers comprehend why beneficiaries may provide expected or standard answers throughout the implementation and evaluation stages of programming. Influencing factors may include, for example, imbalances in (gendered) power dynamics between beneficiaries and implementers, as well as differences in the personal perspectives underlying programme design. To improve the effectiveness of gender mainstreaming in P/CVE, it is essential to adopt a mindset of self-reflection, inclusivity, and addressing power dynamics at every stage of programming.

In P/CVE programming, cultivating self-awareness entails a comprehensive examination of what, when, why, how, and whose objectives are measured. Many initiatives focus primarily on quantitative metrics, neglecting the nuanced on-the-ground repercussions of programmes. Insufficient consideration of gender-specific impacts, as well as oversight of implementers' expectations, may prevail in certain policies, necessitating a qualitative understanding of achieved results. This underscores the imperative for a pervasive gender mainstreaming component throughout all stages of P/CVE programming and policy.

4. INTERSECTIONALITY

Many speakers reiterated the long-established importance of taking an intersectional approach when considering gendered dimensions in P/CVE programming and policy. One speaker working with youth in Spain emphasised the plethora of factors affecting an individual at any one time, and therefore gender mainstreaming practices, including, *inter alia,* their environment, identity crises, the internet's role in socialisation, and family

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[1] Although this was not directly discussed at the meeting, latest research reiterates this point. For further information, see for example: Mehra, Tanya, Thomas Renard and Merlina Herbach, ed(s). Female Jihadis Facing Justice: Comparing Approaches in Europe. The Hague: ICCT Press 2024.

dynamics. These factors need to all be considered not only individually, but also at their intersection in an individual's life when considering what P/CVE programme would be most suitable for them. Further, not only are the effects of these programmes affecting individuals in different ways, the effects are also often gendered. This means that including an intersectional gender mainstreaming lens in policy and programming should consider the complexity of P/CVE on multiple levels. Another presenter spoke with reference to the Ukraine war, where vulnerable groups, particularly Eastern European women, are disproportionately targeted by hate speech. An isolated gendered lens might overlook this discrimination by ignoring the different ways women of a certain ethnic background are affected, but an intersectional approach considering all individual characteristics, highlights the need for this holistic viewpoint. The examples above underline that racism and misogyny, while not inherently extremist, contribute significantly to the propagation of gender-based discrimination, violence, and VE.

During the discussion, a speaker highlighted four analytical lenses for interpreting gender mainstreaming: gender inequality, intersectionality, gender norms, and feminism. The use of a specific lens, influenced also by the individuals applying it, leads to distinct priorities in metrics and objectives in gender mainstreaming in P/CVE initiatives. Consequently, careful consideration is essential in the design, implementation, and M&E of gender mainstreaming efforts. For instance, tailored programmes addressing the reintegration of recently repatriated women should account for the intersection of various factors such as their societal position, religion, economic status, maternal roles, and potential physical and/or mental health challenges. However, as observed by a speaker, in Germany many programmes fail to comprehensively address these considerations.

Another example was given to illustrate that societal norms often stigmatise single working mothers as parenting failures, overlooking the working-class context. The lack of intersectional approaches means that a woman's position within the economic social context is not considered as a variable affecting the individual's role as a mother. Conversely, there is a tendency to ignore signs of far-right extremism in affluent households, as they are often lacking scrutiny from social services. Consideration of this is crucial in programme design and implementation, as it implies that some vulnerable groups may be excluded due to a lack of perceived vulnerability. This example demonstrates that gender mainstreaming in programming, therefore, emerges as not only a gender issue but also a class concern, highlighting the multifaceted dimensions that must be comprehensively addressed for effective policymaking and programming.

There is wide acknowledgement amongst European policymakers of the role of women in violent extremist organisations, as well as the pervasive nature of violence against women, alongside recognition of the imperative for comprehensive measures across the continent. Policymakers across Europe have made significant steps towards addressing the complex nature of the P/CVE policies in respect to gender mainstreaming. In response, the proposed Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on combating violence against women and domestic violence in 2022 serves as a legislative framework. This directive outlines measures and standards to address and prevent diverse forms of violence targeting women and domestic violence within the European Union, encompassing areas such as prevention, victim protection, perpetrator prosecution, and support services. The directive's multifaceted approach allows for a nuanced consideration of the various impacts on women and gender minorities at different levels, providing essential avenues for addressing gender-based violence comprehensively.

5. AVOIDING OVER-SECURITISATION OF GENDER MAINSTREAMING

As with many aspects of P/CVE, there is a tendency to adopt a highly securitised approach in policy, which then translates into programming as an excessive emphasis on security measures while neglecting the broader and

more nuanced aspects of gender dynamics and social issues. This can be seen through, for example, a narrow or limited understanding of masculinity, the stereotyping of individuals based on gender characteristics, ignoring the aforementioned intersectional aspects to an individual's identity, and, counter-productively, to the reinforcement of harmful gender norms. Addressing the over-securitisation of gender in P/CVE should see a shift towards more fundamental human rights approaches. Incorporating feminist perspectives that emphasise a holistic understanding of gender is crucial, necessitating a process of de-securitisation that extends beyond traditional security institutions and working with other state institutions and civil society actors/community stakeholders. It is imperative for policymakers to engage implementing organisations and beneficiaries actively, emphasising a perspective that views (violent) ideology as a spectrum rather than focusing on its extreme manifestations. This approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the factors at play, facilitating the development of nuanced and effective strategies to counter radicalisation and violence across the entire spectrum of ideological beliefs.

Speakers also advocated for steering away from a securitised approach, emphasising the importance of preventive efforts in sectors such as social work, peacebuilding, and education, and the impact of those on gender mainstreaming in P/CVE. Working with other sectors can enhance the understanding of what gender mainstreaming can look like, leading to more effective programme design, implementation, and M&E. With the objective to combat the broader phenomenon of extremism and VE through these avenues, an effective strategy involves framing discussions not solely in the context of P/CVE but also through the lived experiences of beneficiaries. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of the effectiveness of gender mainstreaming and encourages policymakers and practitioners to reflect on their broader beliefs regarding gender.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Recognising the existing perception that women involved in extremism and VE are often viewed through a lens which emphasises a return to traditional roles, policies and programming need to adopt a more comprehensive approach to understanding gender. This involves reconsidering the roles of women in a holistic manner and placing a strategic focus on empowering their agency within counter-extremism initiatives. Furthermore, an example from Germany involving returnee men seeking to reintegrate into society by challenging stereotypical roles, highlights potential challenges posed by their immediate family circles. Consequently, policymakers and practitioners should cultivate a deeper understanding of the roles, environments, and needs of all individuals involved in P/CVE initiatives and consider the ways that programming will be challenged by existing norms.

- A gender-inclusive and diverse lens could be used to also recognise the potential for men to act as agents of radical change. Emphasis should be placed on identifying and harnessing positive factors associated with both men and women, such as fostering a sense of purpose. This approach aims to promote positive engagement and proactive contributions from programme beneficiaries, irrespective of gender, within broader societal contexts, with the objective to diminish their prospective feelings of marginalisation and isolation.

- Current P/CVE gender mainstreaming policies and programmes require a shift from incremental improvement of certain aspects to a more fundamental reconsideration of the overall approach in design, implementation, and M&E. There is a need for a heightened level of ambition within the P/CVE space both in Europe, as well as on the international level, addressing shortcomings like excessive securitisation and

the lack of integration with other related efforts in areas such as humanitarian or social work. It is crucial to move beyond marginal adjustments and actively question and reshape the fundamental approaches within the P/CVE framework. This approach aims to foster more comprehensive and effective gender mainstreaming policies and programmes.

- To optimise the effectiveness of programme design, implementation, and M&E of gender mainstreaming in P/CVE, it is advised that such programmes and policies address distinct roles of individuals separately. By comprehensively understanding the unique dynamics and contributions of various roles in (de-)radicalisation processes, policymakers can inform more targeted initiatives. This approach emphasises the importance of recognising complementarity among different roles, providing a nuanced perspective that can enhance the overall efficacy of P/CVE programmes.

- In both research and policy, there is a notable tendency to overlook the intermediate stages between understanding why individuals radicalise and the strategies created for their disengagement from VE groups and deradicalisation and rehabilitation more generally. The German example involving returnee men underscores that in the course of engaging in terrorism and VE, the evolving needs of individuals necessitate a dedicated focus on comprehension and responsiveness. A comprehensive approach should consider gender roles throughout the process, addressing the motivations for joining and leaving, as well as understanding the nuanced dynamics that unfold throughout.

- The overarching objective of programming should be to move away from gender-blind goals and tailor M&E frameworks to acknowledge and address the diverse needs and aspirations of both men and women involved in P/CVE processes.

- Recognising the strong incentive within the donor market to incorporate gender mainstreaming, it is crucial to couple this with a focus on fostering structural changes. All parties involved, including policymakers, practitioners, and donors, should consider the various stakeholder expectations that surface during all stages of gender mainstreaming in P/CVE programming. To enhance the impact of donor-supported programmes, there is a need for a more coordinated approach, ensuring alignment between the overarching policy goals, expectations, and the practical implementations carried out by various partners. This involves fostering collaboration, transparency, and accountability to bridge the gap between intentions and on-the-ground outcomes in gender mainstreaming efforts.

- Gender mainstreaming should be evaluated at all stages during programming, as well as during policymaking processes. Although there should be an inclusion of quantitative metrics, priority should also be given to aiming for a nuanced understanding through qualitative assessments to refine and enhance the impact of gender mainstreaming initiatives. This approach enables an evaluation of programming from the perspective of beneficiaries, extending beyond a narrow focus on achieving quantitative targets.

- To address the limited expertise, awareness, and self-reflectivity required for practical gender integration into policies and programmes, it is important to implement targeted training and awareness initiatives among policymakers and practitioners.

- Improve the effectiveness of gender mainstreaming in P/CVE programming and policy design by evaluating and articulating the added value and impact of gender integration into such policy and programming, ensuring a more informed and purposeful approach.

- Enhance the efficacy of gender mainstreaming by fortifying intersectional approaches, recognising and addressing the interconnected impact of various identity factors. Policymaking, traditionally focused on the first lens of gender inequality, should evolve towards a mixed gender lens approach to encompass a more comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics and impacts.

- Additionally, promote inclusive decision-making processes by establishing and reinforcing safe spaces that foster diverse perspectives and ensure the active involvement of all stakeholders. Establishing and reinforcing safe spaces for inclusive decision-making is crucial to enhance the legitimacy of processes and promote a comprehensive understanding of relevant issues. Actively creating and maintaining these spaces involves open dialogue, respect for diverse viewpoints, and clear policies that support inclusivity, ensuring that all stakeholders feel heard and valued.

CONCLUSION

The meeting highlighted key outcomes in the discussion on gender mainstreaming in P/CVE programming and practice. Recognising its crucial role, the need for a paradigm shift in P/CVE initiatives, the importance of learning from adjacent fields, adopting an intersectional approach, and the imperative for reflexivity and self-awareness were emphasised. Speakers also highlighted that the field of P/CVE more generally suffers from dangers of over-securitisation. On the other hand, speakers also noted key recent developments across the EU, in policy and practice, that lead to significant recognition of the complexity of these issues. The key recommendations provided in this paper are a direct result of the discussion and include: a call for comprehensive understanding of gender and gender-mainstreaming; the use of gender-inclusive lenses; and fostering intersectional, socially-conscious approaches in P/CVE programming. The importance of recognising intermediate stages, moving beyond gender-blind goals, and promoting inclusive decision-making processes were also emphasised. Overall, a systemic change in practice and conceptual thinking about gender in policy and practice was highlighted as necessary for effective gender mainstreaming in P/CVE.

FURTHER READING

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION ON THIS TOPIC

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