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CONCLUSION PAPER

*RAN Small-scale expert meeting on the missing gender-dimension in risk assessment
14 November 2023, online*

The missing gender-dimension in risk assessment

Key outcomes

The development of tailor-made risk assessment protocols in the field of violent extremism is a relatively new practice. In addition to evaluating the likelihood that someone will engage in criminal and/or dangerous behaviour, risk assessment serves several other purposes: it can support the efficient use of resources and the tailor-made design of rehabilitation and reintegration measures.

To date, most risk assessment tools have been based primarily on data about male offenders and are geared towards assessing the risks posed by men. However, these tools are increasingly being used to assess risks posed by women – often with no changes (or minimal changes) to the tools and their settings to make them appropriate for this task or accommodate women’s needs and risks.

The objective of this small-scale meeting was to assess the existing gaps and define the first steps for making risk assessment tools and instruments more gender sensitive. Experts on risk assessment, experts on gender and extremism and practitioner experts on gendered approaches came together in this meeting, and provided the following key outcomes.

- The preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) sector lacks a comprehensive understanding of gender roles and dynamics. This is due to many different factors: the presence of strong gender stereotyping, lack of awareness on the effect of gender on relations and power dynamics, and absence of systematically collected data on the impact of gender on radicalisation and violent extremism.
- Gender plays a role in violent extremism’s push and pull factors and may increase vulnerability to radicalisation and violent extremism. Then again, gender-related aspects can contribute to P/CVE and can positively contribute to successful rehabilitation and reintegration.
- While existing risk assessment tools do not feature components or a set of indicators specifically focusing on gender, many adopt a person-responsive approach. Practitioners can use this framework to their advantage, and focus on gender-related aspects and their interaction with other elements.
- The concept of intersectionality could improve risks and needs assessment by recognising the gender dimension as well as considering its links to factors such as class, ethnicity, religion and disability.
- The gender dimension transcends the man–woman dichotomy; it relates to a given society’s normative framework that promotes expected gender roles and norms, affecting societal and individual behaviour.

Highlights of the discussion

While the development of risk assessment protocols for violent extremism is relatively recent, existing frameworks for risk assessment commonly employed in European contexts vary in their target groups and objectives. Notably, the Violent Extremist Risk Assessment (VERA) and its revised iteration, VERA-2R, used to evaluate vulnerability and risk in prison environments, encompass a wide range of extremist ideologies. By comparison, tools like RADAR and IR46 are used both within and outside prison settings. These well-established instruments assess and manage risks associated with individuals susceptible to radicalisation, and have been used specifically to assess risks from Islamist extremists. Additionally, these instruments can be used to formulate personalised rehabilitation plans for individuals, addressing their unique social and ideological factors.

Most risk assessment tools in the context of violent extremism rely on structured professional judgement (SPJ). Under this empirically guided approach, each assessor considers the same set of risk assessment factors (indicators). The indicators measure concerns related to family history, childhood trauma, migration impact, cultural discord, authoritarian traits, in-group superiority, criminal involvement, outlaw identity, sensation-seeking, recklessness and various mental health aspects.

Other tools discussed in the meeting employ diverse indicators for planning, implementing and evaluating casework in disengagement, deradicalisation and rehabilitation processes. The Violence Prevention Network (DE) has developed a Social Diagnostics Toolkit to guide first-line practitioners in their case management. While the Toolkit is not a risk assessment tool, it helps case managers identify pitfalls and rebounds in the rehabilitation process. The toolkit refers to push-and-pull factors but is notable for not involving psychological or pathology assessments. Instead, it focuses on social positions, aiming to identify risk factors that may impede successful rehabilitation. The tool achieves this through biographical and social assessments, delving into individuals' lives, potential resources, social environments, hobbies and places they regularly visit.

An assessment tool aligned with this approach has been developed by the Centre for Documentation and Counter Extremism (DK), in consultation with practitioners and researchers. This dialogue-based tool also integrates the perspectives of the participating authorities and their information about individuals, fostering a collective discussion and analysis of risk and threat as well as of well-being and resilience (spanning nine dimensions in total). This collaborative and dialogue-oriented methodology aims to provide a holistic understanding of the individual's situation and facilitate more comprehensive risk assessment and intervention planning.

Participants agreed that despite the broad spectrum of indicators for these tools, gaps remain in current risk assessments, particularly as regards gender-specific nuances. Existing tools lack certain gender-specific indicators: the importance of romantic relationships for women, the role of children as protective or motivational factors for mothers, and the impact of trauma on female returnees. Similarly, masculinity and the concept of what it means to be a man is still missing in risk assessment tools. Participants highlighted that gender extends beyond the consideration of women, encompassing both femininity and masculinity, and current tools lack indicators specifically addressing norms associated with femininity and masculinity. It was also stressed that anti-feminist and misogynistic ideological perspectives pervade various groups on the extremist spectrum, especially in far-right extremist contexts.

Participants discussed the oversimplified view of gender aspects in risk assessment tools, noting a binary perspective that lacks consideration for gender diversity needs. The recognition of individuals identifying as either bisexual or homosexual underscores the importance of understanding diverse identities within extremist contexts. A limited understanding of individuals' sexual orientation hampers comprehension of their needs and drivers, potentially compromising the effectiveness of risk assessment.

Nevertheless, incorporating gender aspects into risk assessment proves challenging for several reasons. Participants stressed that there is a lack of solid empirical evidence on these missing gender aspects, emphasising that even for men, much remains unknown. In addition, most violent extremist offenders and terrorists in prison are men,

resulting in limited data on women, which makes it more challenging to establish women's models for assessment purposes.

Participants also stressed that existing risk assessment tools are designed to evaluate the risk of violent and extremist behaviour, aligning with the conventional belief that men are typically involved in violent activism. While there is still a strong assumption that women, restricted from engaging in fighting, often assume responsibilities for the household and childcare, participants noted a shift in the Islamist scene, pointing to attempts to involve women in non-traditional roles and a broader array of extremist activities, especially online recruitment and indoctrination.

This evolving dynamic underscores the need for risk assessment tools to adapt and account for changing gender roles in extremist contexts, recognising that women may engage in diverse roles beyond those traditionally ascribed to them. The incorporation of such gender aspects, particularly considering the complex political contexts, raises a number of questions: Should new tools be developed? Should existing ones be complemented? Are the current instruments sufficiently broad to encompass gender-specific dimensions?

Recommendations

Participants agreed that the following recommendations could help make risk assessment tools more gender responsive.

- **Incorporate gender components in ideological assessments:** acknowledge the gender component in various ideologies, including jihadist and right-wing ideologies. Explore how to incorporate gender-responsive features in the risk assessment of resources.
- **Consider gender in rehabilitation processes:** assess the gender responsiveness of the rehabilitation process, considering the representation of gender, the roles of men and women, and the impact on intervention effectiveness.
- **Clarify gender aspects for men and women:** clarify the gender aspects for both men and women before incorporating them into risk assessment tools. Build an understanding of gender dynamics in the radicalisation process and rehabilitation.
- **Address cross-cutting gender issues:** recognise gender as a cross-cutting issue that requires experts with gender-specific knowledge. Tailor risk assessments to consider gender differences and similarities, emphasising the importance of conducting research and the expertise of practitioners. Include expert insights in tool development, particularly those working directly with clients. Systematically interview practitioners to identify relevant gender-related threats and themes.
- **Capacity-building over tool adaptation:** prioritise capacity-building of practitioners over constant tool adaptation. Equip them with the skills and knowledge required to address each situation effectively.
- **Avoid bias and stereotypes:** overcome bias by ensuring that additional risk assessment elements are evidence based. Conduct systematic research to inform the inclusion of gender-related elements. Raise awareness among practitioners administering the tools on gender aspects and dynamics.
- **Enhance gender awareness for P/CVE:** focus on enhancing gender awareness among practitioners in P/CVE efforts without complicating the tools, i.e. avoid overloading the risk assessment tools. Keep it simple, while ensuring gender-specific elements are included for both men and women.
- **Integrate in-depth gender questions:** consider adding in-depth gender-related questions to risk assessments. Develop a framework addressing the intersectionality of gender and identity factors, such as the role of children, romantic relationships and sexual orientation. Ensure the tool accounts for non-violent behaviours indicative of potential risks, like online recruitment and indoctrination. Consider trauma as an indicator, especially in the context of female returnees. It is important to address the discomfort around discussing trauma by normalising these conversations and stressing their importance for a comprehensive understanding of an individual's risk profile.

- Explore identity expression opportunities: provide opportunities for individuals to express their gender identity within the rehabilitation process, to allow for the identification of drivers and needs.
- Intersectionality and vulnerability: integrate discussions on intersectionality into training, emphasising how the interplay of factors such as class, race, nationality and the social and biographical contexts creates vulnerabilities.

Inspiring practices

- The **Centre for Documentation and Counter Extremism** is a Danish governmental agency working to prevent and counter extremism in Denmark at different levels, including nationally, locally, online and offline. The Centre developed a tool that serves as a basis for a **model of work**. Through the implementation of the tool, practitioners can better structure their assessment. The tool considers risks and threats as well as protective factors. It has been in use for 3 years, and is implemented after the training of relevant practitioners.
- Building on the experience of its first-line practitioners, the Violence Prevention Network has developed a **Social Diagnostics Toolkit** to support the planning, implementation and evaluation of casework in disengagement, deradicalisation and rehabilitation processes. The toolkit is centred around the identification and management of risks, resources and resonances; it provides a comprehensive methodology to assess the biographies, needs and social situations of clients. While the toolkit does not feature a section specifically on gender-related aspects, practitioners tackle these issues by assessing gender dynamics within the biographical, social and needs assessment.
- The **EUTEx risk and strength assessment tool** was developed under the framework of the EUTEx project. The assessment is intended to guide the reintegration process. The project also designed a comprehensive training course that includes specific approaches for women and children.

Follow-up

Future meetings could focus on promoting further awareness among practitioners, in the form of a webinar on the impact that gender plays in engagement in terrorism and violent extremism as well as on its potential as a preventative and rehabilitative factor.

Scientific research is necessary to systematically assess the influence of the gender dimension in radicalisation processes as well as to better understand how gender can contribute to successful rehabilitation and social reintegration.

Further reading

- RAN Practitioners, [Gender-specificity in practical P/CVE: Reviewing RAN Practitioners' activities in 2021](#), 2022
- RAN P&P Working Group (ex post paper), [Developing, implementing and using risk assessment for violent extremist and terrorist offenders](#), Brussels, 9-10 July 2018
- RAN small-scale expert meeting (conclusion paper), [Lone Actors: Making use of needs and risk assessment tools in P/CVE](#), 10 December 2021, online
- RAN Expert Pool Members, [Risk Assessment in Prison](#), 2021
- RAN, [The potential for social diagnostics in P/CVE](#), 2021