

# The missing gender dimension in risk assessment



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## Introduction

Riks assessment tools developed specifically for violent extremist offenders currently miss an explicit gender dimension. Practice and research suggest that such a dimension would be necessary. Importantly, the implications of this state of fact are not only relevant for the risk assessment as such, but also in the broader context of VE management. For example, a recent UNODC specialised handbook focused on the gender dimension observes:

Risk assessment tools are most often developed for male offenders, without taking into account the gender-specific needs of women – an omission which frequently results in women being placed in higher security settings than appropriate to the level of risk they represent. (1).

Why should gender be a consideration in risk assessment? Before addressing this question, it is important to differentiate between two main aspects of the underlying understanding of *gender*: as 'women' and as 'gender roles'. Following these dimensions, there is first of all the assumption that there are particularities of women's radicalisation. Consequently, it is assumed that these specific features would be relevant to risk assessment, rehabilitation and reintegration. Following this argumentation, they should also be captured in risk assessment tools. Secondly, it is assumed that factors of risk might also be influenced by the way in which gender roles are pictured in extremist propaganda, since they might influence motivation and behaviour more broadly.

From a practical perspective, if aspects that capture women's particular experiences and gender roles are not operationalised, situations of biased assessment might arise. Some examples here can be false negatives: when women are eroneously considered less dangerous than men; or when tasks performed by women are assessed as less relevant for the degree of radicalisation they might have reached. False positives can also occur, such as when men might be considered more high-risk due to the fact that they exercised typical masculine roles (such as wearing a weapon or having fought). Their actual or cognitive radicalisation might be, however, superficial or they might have, in the meantime, effectively disengaged.

The usual approach to risk assessment in the field of VE is SPJ – structured professional judgement, and it is currently considered to be "the best approach for the assessment of VEOs"<sup>2</sup>. The particularity of SPJ tools as compared to actuarial tools, for example, is that they do not provide a risk score automatically, based on mathematical computations, but largely based on the assessment and drawing on the expertise of the assessor.

Actuarial approaches combine their risk factors into a score, which should be cross-validated against known outcomes in the validation phase of developing an actuarial risk assessment tool. SPJ approaches do not combine risk factors numerically in a predetermined or mechanistic fashion, instead providing structured guidance to allow the user to make the judgment as to whether the individual is (for example) high, moderate, or low risk. (3).

The VE risk assessment tools consider several dimensions in the individuals' biography, such as events, social networks, history of violence, access to ideological material, motivation, mental health, etc. Some include all types of extremism (VERA-2R Violent Extremist Risk Assessment 2 Revised; ERG22+ Extremism Risk Guidelines; RRAP Radicalisation Risk Assessment in Prisons), whereas others such as IR46 (Islamic

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> United Nations, Handbook on gender dimensions of criminal justice responses to terrorism, p. 98.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Monahan, J. (2012) The individual risk assessment of terrorism, pp. 520-524, cited in Fernandez, C. & de Lasala, F. (2021) Risk assessment in prison, p. 5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Heilbrun, K., Yasuhara, K., Shah, S., and Locklair, B. (2020) Approaches to Violence Risk Assessment. Overview, Critical Analysis, and Future Directions , p. 8.

Radicalisation Model 46) and RADAR-iTE (Rule-based analysis of potentially destructive perpetrators to assess acute risk – Islamist terrorism) only pertain to violent Islamist extremism. With regard to their aims, some are focused on managing risk, while others aim to assess the vulnerability to radicalisation.<sup>4</sup>

There are a series of more general limitations associated with these risk assessment tools, which also have some implications for gender-related aspects, such as for example a focus on *violent* behaviour and a focus on *risk proper*, with a rather underdeveloped dimension of *risk management*, i.e. what should be undertaken for the purposes of rehabilitation and reintegration. In order to advance the discussion on how gender aspects could and should be considered in risk assessment tools, it is important to understand the original framework and logic of the type of risk assessment tools currently used for VEOs.

The SPJ approach to risk assessment of offenders was originally developed based on the RNR approach to risk assessment. RNR, Risk-Need-Responsivity, considers, apart from static risk factors, also *criminogenic needs* that are *dynamic* and thus can be affected. Furthermore, *responsivity* refers to "the extent to which an individual is likely to respond to intervention(s) enacted to reduce the probability of the targeted outcome behavior." Criminologenic needs have also labeled 'protective factors', but the meaning of 'protective' is not the same as in the case of some VE risk assessment tools that list 'protective factors'. In the latter case, these factors refer to circumstances that can help draw the offender away from extremist beahavior. Criminogenic needs are: "dynamic risk factors that are directly linked to criminal behaviour. Criminogenic needs can come and go unlike static risk factors that can only change in one direction (increase risk) and are immutable to treatment intervention". The seven major risk/need factors are: antisocial personality pattern, procrimnal attitudes, social supports for crime, substance abuse, (poor) family/marital relationships, poor performance/satisfaction in school or work, lack of prosocial recreational activities. Non-criminogenic needs are: self-esteeem, vague feelings of personal distress, major mental disorder and physical health.

Criminogenic needs and resonsibity are highly relevant for the practical disengagement and reintegration work. It is these dynamic needs that are addressed in attempts to affect behaviour or channel it away from extremism. In fact, dynamic risk factors are captured to a more or less extent in VE risk assessment tools. More importantly, as we will see in more detail below, gender related differences can be observed along these dimensions.

In the following, we cast a closer look at the missing gender dimension in current risk assessment in the context of VE, followed by a section on inspirational practices and a final section on recommendations.

## The missing gender dimension and its relevance for risk assessment

Risk assesment tools in the field of VE have been thus far developed by drawing on data relating to men. This does not necessarily come as a surprise, considering that: risk assessment tools have been designed with violent Islamist and violent right-wing types of extremism in mind; and that women continue to be a minority in these two spectra. This has several implications for risk assessment and its related tools with respect to gender bias:

- a focus on typically *male types of behaviour*, most prominently violence, to the detriment of non-violent behaviour, which tends to be more often relevant in the case of women. Specifically for the case of women returnees for example, it is not clear what kinds of risk if any are posed by activities such as educating children and maintaining societal and family order in the territories of Daesh.
- an empirical base that is in the majority male, thus mainly drawing on male radicalisation processes.
- lack of consideration of *gender roles* in radicalisation and extremist behavior.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Fernandez, C. & de Lasala, F. (2021) Risk assessment in prison.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Heilbrun, K., Yasuhara, K., Shah, S., and Locklair, B. (2020) Approaches to Violence Risk Assessment., p. 5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Bonta, J. & Andrews, D.A. (2022) Risk-need-responsivity model for offender assessment and rehabilitation 2007-6., p. 5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 6

- underdevelopment of factors that might have a stronger relevance for the case of women, such as for example the level of indoctrination, which might manifest in these cases in a more complex and dynamic way.

But are there specificities for women regading their radicalisation processes, and are these specificities relevant for the question of risk? Furthermore, what kinds of gender roles are there and what is their relevance for risk assessment?

## Women's radicalisation and gender roles

Women's radicalisation processes and their motivations are not entirely different to those of men. For example particular, women can be as motivated as men to affect political change. Experiences from practice indicate that their level of indoctrination can be comparable if not higher than the one of men. At the same time, anecdotal evidence suggests that there are specificities in certain cases of women's radicalisation, such as for example:

- the incidence of romanticism in the form of marriages with 'holy warriors';
- emancipation from traditional cultural roles9;
- the presence of traumatic experiences prior to radicalisation such as sexual or other types of abuse<sup>10</sup>.

Romatic engagement as such is probably a weak indicator of risk, especially when compared with more salient factors such as indoctrination, but cannot be overruled upfront. Drawing on the broader criminological literature (see below), it can be assumed that experiences of abuse can be a strong indicator of criminal behaviour for radicalised women. An initial study of a woman's radicalisation already indicated links between violent radicalisation and psycho-traumatism. It was found that the radicalisation process could be a reaction to the traumatised person's needs and psychic functioning through: "channeling tensions, being recognized and active in one's life" 11. It should be mentioned at this point that trauma more broadly, and certainly in some cases also sexual abuse, are not specific to women, but can also be present and subsequently play a role in the case of men.

Turning now to the discussion of gender as gender roles, extremist and terrorist organisations, in particular the ones in the violent Islamist and violent right-wing extremist spectra, usually delineate gender roles in a very clear manner. Such a delineation is for example as leaders for men vs. supportive or domestic roles for women, and it is reflected in recruitment, propaganda and training. From a different perspective, men tend to be considered as active, publicly visible, whereas women as passive and less visible in the public sphere. Finally, a further, obvious dimension of gender roles is that of motherhood. Above and beyond this, however, gender roles are not necessarily fixed. Indeed, extremist and terrorist organisations can innovate or even instrumentalise gender stereotypes. Daesh, for example, agreed to allow women to fight under certain conditions, and even included this in their propaganda in an explicit way, not least in order to motivate men to join and participate in the fight. Terrorist organisations have also been known to exploit the perceptions of women as less threatening, by deploying women on purpose as suicide bombers. Subsequently, studies have shown that, when used as suicide bombers, women tend to be more efficient than men, because people have gender biased expectations of their behavior, i.e. as pacifist<sup>12</sup>.

## Challenges and gaps in assessing VE women

In the context of prison, probation and exit work, dealing with women VETOs poses some specific challenges. With regard to the specific aspect of risk assessment, but also more broadly, with regard to rehabilitation and reintegration, there is a lack of specific practices for women, or practices that consider gender aspects. An exception here is the practice of providing female case managers. In other words, deradicalisation and disengagement programmes have also been developed for men, based on empirical evidence relating to

<sup>10</sup> RAN Issue paper (2015) The role of gender in Violent Extremism.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Peresin, A. & Cervone, A. (2015) The Western *Muhajirat* of ISIS.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Rolling, J., Corduan, G., Roth, M., Schroder, C.M., Mengin, A.C. (2022) Violent Radicalization and Post-traumatic Dissociation: Clinical Case of a Young Adolescent Girl Radicalized.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Peresin, A. & Cervone, A. (2015) The Western *Muhajirat* of ISIS.

men. Practical work has, however, identified a number of specificities for women, which indicate the need for special approaches. These are:

- An apparently higher incidence of mental health problems relating to trauma and having occurred during, but especially before radicalisation;
- Implications of motherhood and situations of separations from the children, which in some countries occur as a standard matter;
- The lack of family support at the stage of reingration, in situations where women are chasticised for being 'bad mothers' for having taken along their children to Daesh territories;
- Considering their mostly subordinate and domestic roles within terrorist organsiations, women's less transferable skills are a challenge for reintegration;
- Double stigmatisation as 'terrorists' and in some cases visibly Muslim women;
- Challenges relating to basic needs, including of financial nature.

All of these aspects influence the nature of risk factors, but in particular of criminogenic needs (i.e. the dynamic risk factors), in ways that current risk assessment do not fully capture. In the criminological literature, differences have been identified between men and women in terms of dynamic risk factors; futhermore, it was found that gender socialisation, gender inequality and gender roles influence behaviour. Spiecifically, "[s]ome of the areas argued to be different for men and women include health care, substance abuse, mental health, abuse, poverty, education, employment, communication, relationships, and parental stress." <sup>13</sup>

There are also a number of challenges associated with the practicalities of risk assessment when working with women. Practitioners have observed that establishing a working alliance with women is typically more difficult than with men. This is because women tend to be less willing or able to open up, in part due to feelings of shame, or that, on the other side, that they can be more able to manipulate the care system for their own purposes. Furthermore, the limited public exposure, especially in the case of violent Islamist extremism, can render data collection on the clients' biographies rather difficult. In this context, establishing a victim vs. perpetrator role in the case of women can be challenging. Overall, the usually subordinate and less public role of women can make it hard to assess the relevence of their activities for terrorist or violent extremist crimes.

## Inspirational practices

The limited gender awareness in risk assessment is not specific to the phenomenon of VE. As suggested above, in the broader field of criminology similar points of critique have been raised. Similar to the case of VE, risk assessment as a field, as well as risk assessment tools, have developed based on male samples and male criminal pathways. On the one hand, the criminological literature outlines that some of the risk factors are gender neutral, such as for example "previous violent behaviour, young age at first violent offense, and substance abuse". On the other, authors have outlined the impact of specific factors for women, such as traumatic experiences and mental health issues, early pregnancy or prostitution<sup>14</sup>. Furthermore, some risk factors have been found to be more impactful on women than on men, such as "disruptions of social relationships" 15.

To date, also in the broader field of criminology, there are only a few risk assessment tools that consider gender. The actuarial tool Women's Risk/Needs Assessment (WRNA) includes both gender neutral risk/needs, and areas that are particularly relevant for women offenders. These are: "self-efficacy, parental stress, parental involvement, relationship dysfunction, child abuse, adult physical abuse, family support, unsafe housing, dynamic mental health, mental health history, educational assets, relationship support, and anger/hostility." Research has identified a number of differences with regard to some of these factors as applied to women and men. An empirical study showed that men score higher than women on the antisocial

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Bell, V.R. (2014) Gender responsive Risk Assessment in Corrections, p. 2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> de Vogel, Vivienne, Bruggeman, M. and Lancel, M. (2019) Gender-Sensitive Violence Risk Assessment, p. 529.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Bell, V.R. (2014) Gender responsive Risk Assessment in Corrections, p. 9.

attitudes scale and criminal history scale as risk factors for criminal behaviour, but lower than women in regard to employment/finances or substance abuse history. Furthermore, a series of gender responsive risk/need scales showed higher scores in the case of women, namely those of housing safety, depression, mental health history, parental difficulties, parental stress, relationship dysfunction, and adult abuse<sup>17</sup>. Interestingly, the protective factors tested in the study did not show significant differences among the genders except for 'self-efficacy', which scored higher for men. There were no significant differences for the rest: educational assets, relationship involvement, parental involvement and family of origin support<sup>18</sup>, meaning that these factors of risk acted similarly on both men and women. These are important insights which confirm anecdotal evidence from the practical work with women in prison and probation, and which indicated the impact of mental health issues, abuse, or motherhood.

Two SPJ risk assessment tools that consider gender are Early Assessment Risk List for Girls EARL-21G and the Female Additional Manual for female forensich psychiatric patients which is an addition to the general HCR-20 (Historical, Clinical and Risk Management) tool. The FAM's additional factors are: risk factors such as low self-esteeem and prostitution; and risk judgements such as: self-destructive behaviour, victimization, nonviolent criminal behaviour. As relatively new tools, empirical evidence for their validity is currently meager<sup>19</sup>.

The newly developed EUTEx risk and strengh assessment tool for VE has also considered a series of gender related aspects in formulating its items. Risk factors include "exposure to violence or trauma", and "exposure to social abuse or pressure to behave in a coerced way". Furthermore, the EUTEx methodological kit includes also CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy) methods, which, among others, present a focus on destructive relationships containing physical or mental violence.

### EUTEx course and risk assessment tool<sup>20</sup>

The SPJ EUTEx Risk & Strength Assessment Tool assists practitioners in making a twofold assessment:

- Which and to which extent have static risk items (on a micro level) and dynamic risk items (micro and meso level) contributed to individuals' radicalisation?
- And, (in)dependently on the risk score: How can these (if any) reduce each risk item and to which extent can they predict a full or partial impact in risk reduction?

The EUTEx course has been developed to develops and reinforces specific and advanced competencies in European prison and probation professionals who work on the rehabilitation of jihadist and right-wing extremist offenders. The three modules that make up the EUTEx course are specifically organised around three core axes: Radicalisation and risk assessment, Rehabilitation and reintegration; Work with women, minors, and communities.

## Practical guidance and recommendations

Looking forward and considering that the gender aspects of risk assessment is still a developing field, a number of recommendations for policy and practice can be made:

SPJ risk assessment seems to remain the most appropriate for the VE population, also from the
perspective of gender. In the broader context of criminology, studies have shown that SPJ risk
assessemnt tools such as HCR-20, apart from providing a gender-neutral framework of assessment, are
also advantageous in themselves, because they include dynamic risk factors which are useful for case

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> de Vogel, Vivienne, Bruggeman, M. and Lancel, M. (2019) Gender-Sensitive Violence Risk Assessment.

management.<sup>21</sup> Relatedly, dynamic factors were identified in the literature as being particularly relevant for women.<sup>22</sup>

- Regarding the question of how to practically integrate the gender dimension in risk assessment, the option of adapting existing risk assessment tools to include gender seems to be a preferred way, rather than creating an entirely new tool only for women. This means the following steps forward: keeping the gender-neutral factors as they are; adapting (the weighing of) the factors that impact more on women or produce different predictive outcomes in the case of women; adding factors that are specific for women; adding indicators that are specifically related to gender norms and roles. As it has been noted in the literature: "Previous research has shown a series of gender-informed supplements may enhance the predictive power of an existing gender-neutral model."<sup>23</sup>
- An important, relatively new aspect to consider in adapting risk assessment tools would be
  intersectionality, such as for example the impact of gender and race together. Adopting an intersectional
  framework of analysis would allow for a more precise assessment of how different identity factors such
  as gender, ethnic affiliation, class, and sexual orientation mutually shape the meanings of identity and
  may exacerbate situations of oppression and/or discrimination.
- Gender related aspects need to be additionally tackled through increasing the knowledge of practitioners
  directly involved in risk assessment protocols. To this end, gender-related factors can be scrutinized by
  specific follow-up questions and/or observations that practitioners can enact if trained on the concepts of
  gender roles and norms and their impact on radicalisation processes and risk management.

Based on practical experiences of working with women, the following more detailed recommendations can be made

- Consider gender roles and norms in operationalising risk factors associated with the ideology.
- Include factors that operationalise and assess non-violent types of behaviour.
- Systematically train practitioners in recognising and working with gender aspects of risk assessment.
- Conduct research to validate risk assessment tools, including with regard to the gender dimension.
- During assessment, provide spaces for the discussion of sexual identity and experience gender normative framework.
- Integrate intersectionality in training on rehabilitation methods.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Warren, J. I. and Wellbeloved-Stone, J. M., Dietz, P. E. and Millspaugh, S. B. (2018) Gender and Violence Risk Assessment in Prisons.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> de Vogel, Vivienne, Bruggeman, M. and Lancel, M. (2019) Gender-Sensitive Violence Risk Assessment.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Van Voorhis P., Wright E. M., Salisbury E., Bauman A. (2010). Women's risk factors and their contributions to existing risk/needs assessment, cited in Scanlan, J. M., Yesberg, J. A., Fortune, C.-A., & Polaschek, D. L. L. (2020). Predicting Women's Recidivism Using the Dynamic Risk Assessment for Offender Re-Entry: Preliminary Evidence of Predictive Validity With Community-Sentenced Women Using a "Gender-Neutral" Risk Measure

## Further reading

For additional information on risk assessment in theory and practice please see:

- 2. RAN Practitioners (2021) Conclusion paper. RAN PRISONS Working Group Meeting, 18 February 2021, <a href="https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-08/ran\_prisons\_risk\_and\_needs\_assessment\_tools\_10122020\_en.pdf">https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-08/ran\_prisons\_risk\_and\_needs\_assessment\_tools\_10122020\_en.pdf</a>
- 3. van der Heide, L., van der Zwan, M. and van Leyenhorst, M (2019). The Practitioner's Guide to the Galaxy A Comparison of Risk Assessment Tools for Violent Extremism, International Centre for Counter-Extremism, <a href="https://www.istor.org/stable/resrep29450">https://www.istor.org/stable/resrep29450</a>

#### About the author:

**Daniela Pisoiu** is Senior Researcher at the Austrian Institute for International Affairs in Vienna, Austria. Her research is focused on individual radicalisation processes, deradicalisation and disengagement in prison, probation and exit work, as well as online radicalisation and extremism prevention. She is a member of the RAN expert pool.

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