



# Improving risk assessment: Accounting for gender

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## Introduction

Risk assessment tools developed specifically for violent extremist offenders (VEOs) currently lack an explicit gender dimension. Practice and research suggest that such a dimension is necessary. Importantly, the implications are relevant not only for the risk assessment itself, but also in the broader context of violent extremism (VE) management. For example, a recent United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) specialised handbook focused on gender observes:

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*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.<sup>1</sup>*

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Why should gender be a consideration in risk assessment? Before addressing this question, it is important to differentiate between two main aspects of our underlying understanding of gender: ‘women’ and ‘gender roles’. These dimensions point to the distinct nature of women’s radicalisation, and it is assumed that these specific features are relevant to risk assessment, rehabilitation, and reintegration. It follows that they should also be captured in risk assessment tools. Secondly, it is assumed that risk factors might also be influenced by the way in which gender roles are portrayed in extremist propaganda, since they might influence motivation and behaviour more broadly.

From a practical perspective, if the aspects reflecting women’s particular experiences and gender roles are not operationalised, there is a risk of carrying out biased assessments. One such example is that of false negatives: when women are erroneously considered less dangerous than men, or when tasks performed by women are assessed as less relevant to their given degree of radicalisation. False positives can also occur, such as when men are considered more high-risk due to taking on typical masculine roles (such as carrying a weapon or having fought), while their actual or cognitive radicalisation is superficial, or they have since effectively disengaged.

The usual approach to risk assessment in the field of VE is structured professional judgement (SPJ), currently considered to be “the best approach for the assessment of VEOs”.<sup>2</sup> Compared to actuarial tools, SPJ tools do not provide a risk score automatically, based on mathematical computations, but are instead largely based on assessment and draw on the assessor’s expertise.

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*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.<sup>3</sup>*

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VE risk assessment tools consider several dimensions in the individual’s biography: events, social networks, history of violence, access to ideological material, motivation, mental health, etc. Some cover all types of extremism: examples include the Violent Extremist Risk Assessment 2 Revised protocol (VERA-2R), the Extremism Risk Guidelines (ERG22+) and the Radicalisation Risk Assessment in Prisons (RRAP). Other tools have been created with violent Islamist extremism in mind: examples include the Islamic Radicalisation Model 46 (IR46) and the Rule-based Analysis of potentially Destructive perpetrators to assess Acute Risk –

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *UNODC handbook on gender dimensions of criminal justice responses to terrorism*, p. 98.

<sup>2</sup> Monahan, *The individual risk assessment of terrorism*, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Heilbrun, Yasuhara, Shah and Locklair, *Approaches to violence risk assessment. Overview, critical analysis, and future directions*, 8.

Islamist Terrorism (RADAR-iTE). With regard to their aims, some are focused on managing risk, while others aim to assess vulnerability to radicalisation.<sup>4</sup>

There are a series of more general limitations associated with these risk assessment tools that also have implications for gender-related aspects. One example is their focus on **violent** behaviour and on **risk proper**, with a rather underdeveloped dimension of **risk management**, i.e. what should be undertaken for the purposes of rehabilitation and reintegration. 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 Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) approach. RNR considers static risk factors as well as **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 behaviour”.<sup>5</sup> Criminogenic needs have also been labelled ‘protective factors’, but here ‘protective’ has a different meaning to the ‘protective factors’ listed in some VE risk assessment tools. In the latter case, these factors refer to circumstances that can help draw the offender away from extremist behaviour. 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”.<sup>6</sup> The seven major risk/need factors are antisocial personality patterns, pro-criminal attitudes, social supports for crime, substance abuse, (poor) family/marital relationships, poor performance/satisfaction in school or work, and lack of prosocial recreational activities.<sup>7</sup> Non-criminogenic needs are self-esteem, vague feelings of personal distress, major mental disorder and physical health.<sup>8</sup>

Criminogenic needs and responsibility are vital to 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 greater or lesser extent in VE risk assessment tools. More importantly, as is explored in more detail below, gender-related differences can be observed in these aspects.

The following section takes a closer look at the missing gender dimension in current risk assessment in the context of VE. A discussion of the related inspirational practices follows. The paper ends with proposed recommendations.

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

To date, risk assessment tools in the field of VE have been developed using data that relates to men. This is not particularly surprising, considering that these tools are designed with violent Islamist and violent right-wing types of extremism in mind – areas of activity in which women continue to be a minority.

This has several implications for risk assessment and its related tools, in terms of gender bias, as follows.

- A focus on typically **male types of behaviour**, most prominently violence, accompanied by a lack of attention on non-violent behaviour, which tends to be relevant in the case of women. Specifically for 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 principally male, and thus draws on **male radicalisation processes**.
- A lack of consideration of **gender roles** in radicalisation and extremist behaviour.

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<sup>4</sup> Fernandez and de Lasala, *Risk assessment in prison*.

<sup>5</sup> Heilbrun, Yasuhara, Shah and Locklair, *Approaches to violence risk assessment. Overview, critical analysis, and future directions*, 5.

<sup>6</sup> Bonta and Andrews, *Risk-need-responsivity model for offender assessment and rehabilitation 2007-6*, 5.

<sup>7</sup> Bonta and Andrews, *Risk-need-responsivity model for offender assessment and rehabilitation 2007-6*, 6.

<sup>8</sup> Bonta and Andrews, *Risk-need-responsivity model for offender assessment and rehabilitation 2007-6*, 6.

- Underdevelopment of factors that might pertain to women: the level of indoctrination, for example, might manifest in these cases in a more complex and dynamic way.

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

## Women's radicalisation and gender roles

Women's radicalisation processes and motivations are not entirely different to those of men. For example, women can be equally as motivated as men to affect political change. Moreover, practice experience indicates that women's levels of indoctrination can be comparable to – if not higher than – that of men. At the same time, anecdotal evidence suggests that there are specificities in certain cases of women's radicalisation, such as:

- the incidence of romanticism in the form of marriages with 'holy warriors';
- emancipation from traditional cultural roles;<sup>9</sup>
- the presence of traumatic experiences prior to radicalisation, such as sexual or other types of abuse.<sup>10</sup>

Romantic engagement itself is probably a weak indicator of risk, especially when compared with more salient factors such as indoctrination, but it cannot be overruled in advance. The broader criminological literature (see below) points to the possibility that experiences of abuse can be a strong indicator of criminal behaviour for radicalised women. An initial case study of a young woman who was radicalised points to links between violent radicalisation and psycho-traumatism. The authors of the study noted that the radicalisation process could be a reaction to the traumatised person's needs and psychic functioning through "channelling tensions, being recognised and active in one's life".<sup>11</sup> It should be mentioned at this point that trauma more broadly, and certainly in some cases sexual abuse, are not experiences specific to women, but can also be present and subsequently play a role for men too.

Gender roles are usually very clearly delineated in extremist and terrorist organisations, particularly violent Islamist and violent right-wing extremist ones. For example, this delineation might separate men as leaders from women in supportive or domestic roles, and it is reflected in recruitment, propaganda and training. Moreover, men tend to be considered active, publicly visible figures, whereas women are considered passive and less visible in the public sphere. Finally, another fundamental dimension of gender roles is that of motherhood.

Above and beyond these dimensions, however, gender roles are not necessarily fixed. Indeed, extremist and terrorist organisations can adapt, reformulate or even instrumentalise gender stereotypes. Daesh, for example, agreed to allow women to fight under certain conditions, even including this explicitly in their propaganda, not least in order to motivate men to join the fight. Terrorist organisations have also been known to purposely exploit the societal perception of women as less threatening by deploying them as suicide bombers. Subsequently, studies have shown that in such cases, women tend to be more efficient than men, because people have gender-biased expectations of women's behaviour (i.e. as pacifists).<sup>12</sup>

## Challenges and gaps in assessing VE women

In the context of prison, probation and exit work, the management of women VETOs poses particular challenges. There is a lack of specific practices for women or practices that consider gender aspects in risk assessment, but also more broadly, in rehabilitation and reintegration (an exception here is the practice of assigning female case managers to women VETOs). In other words, deradicalisation and disengagement programmes have also been developed for men, based on empirical evidence relating to men. However,

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<sup>9</sup> Peresin and Cervone, *The Western Muhajirat of ISIS*.

<sup>10</sup> Radicalisation Awareness Network, *The role of gender in violent extremism*.

<sup>11</sup> Rolling, Corduan, Roth, Schroder and Mengin, *Violent radicalization and post-traumatic dissociation: Clinical case of a young adolescent girl radicalized*.

<sup>12</sup> Peresin and Cervone, *The Western Muhajirat of ISIS*.

practitioners working in the field have 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, having occurred before radicalisation in the main, but also during radicalisation;
- the implications of motherhood and of situations of separation from the children, which in some countries occurs as a matter of course;
- the lack of family support at the reintegration stage, in situations where women are chastised as 'bad mothers' for having taken their children with them to Daesh territories;
- women's less transferable skills, considering their mostly subordinate and domestic roles within terrorist organisations, which pose a challenge for reintegration;
- the double stigmatisation as 'terrorists', and in some cases, as visibly Muslim women;
- the challenges relating to basic needs, including of a financial nature.

All these aspects influence the nature of risk factors but particularly the criminogenic needs (i.e. the dynamic risk factors), in ways that current risk assessments do not fully capture. In the criminological literature, differences have been identified between men and women in terms of dynamic risk factors; furthermore, it was found that gender socialisation, gender inequality and gender roles influence behaviour. Specifically, "[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 it is with men. This is because women tend to be less willing or able to open up, in part due to feelings of shame; on the other hand, they are also more able to influence 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 challenging. In this context, establishing a victim vs perpetrator role for women can be challenging. Overall, the usually subordinate and less public role of women can make it hard to assess the relevance of their activities for terrorist or violent extremist crimes.

## Inspirational practices

The limitations in gender awareness in risk assessment are not restricted to the phenomenon of VE. As suggested above, in the broader field of criminology, concerns have been raised on similar grounds. As with VE, risk assessment as a field, as well as risk assessment tools, have been developed based on male samples and male criminal pathways. On the one hand, the criminological literature identifies some risk factors as gender neutral, for example "previous violent behaviour, young age at first violent offence, and substance abuse". On the other, authors have outlined the impact of specific factors for women, like 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".<sup>15</sup>

To date, in the broader field of criminology, few risk assessment tools consider gender. The actuarial tool Women's Risk/Needs Assessment (WRNA) includes both gender-neutral risk/needs and areas 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."<sup>16</sup> Research has identified a number of differences with regard to some of these factors for women and men. An empirical study showed that men score higher than women on the antisocial attitudes scale and criminal history scale as risk factors for criminal behaviour, but they score 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 women,

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<sup>13</sup> Bell, *Gender responsive risk assessment in corrections*, 2.

<sup>14</sup> de Vogel, Bruggeman and Lancel, Gender-sensitive violence risk assessment: predictive validity of six tools in female forensic psychiatric patients, 529.

<sup>15</sup> de Vogel, Bruggeman and Lancel, Gender-sensitive violence risk assessment: predictive validity of six tools in female forensic psychiatric patients.

<sup>16</sup> Bell, *Gender responsive risk assessment in corrections*, 9.



namely 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 across the genders, except for 'self-efficacy', in which men scored higher. There were no significant differences for the remainder, i.e. 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 carried out with women in prison and probation, and which indicate the impact of mental health issues, abuse or motherhood.

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

The newly developed EUTEx Risk and Strength Assessment Tool for VE has also considered a series of gender-related aspects in its formulation. 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 cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) methods, which, among others, present a focus on destructive relationships featuring physical or mental violence.

### The EUTEx course and risk assessment tool

The SPJ EUTEx Risk & Strength Assessment Tool<sup>20</sup> assists practitioners in making a twofold assessment, based on questions considered independently on the risk score:

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

The EUTEx course has been developed to develop and reinforce 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 organised around three core axes: Radicalisation and risk assessment, Rehabilitation and reintegration; and Work with women, minors and communities.

## Practical guidance and recommendations

Looking forward and bearing in mind that the consideration of gender aspects in risk assessment is still a developing field, the following recommendations for policy and practice can be made.

- SPJ risk assessment seems to remain the most appropriate for the VE population, including from the gender perspective. In the broader context of criminology, studies have shown that SPJ risk assessment tools such as the HCR-20, apart from providing a gender-neutral framework of assessment, are also advantageous in themselves, because they include dynamic risk factors useful for case management.<sup>21</sup> Relatedly, dynamic factors were identified in the literature as being particularly relevant for women.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Bell, *Gender responsive risk assessment in corrections*, 89.

<sup>18</sup> Bell, *Gender responsive risk assessment in corrections*, 8.

<sup>19</sup> de Vogel, Bruggeman and Lancel, Gender-sensitive violence risk assessment: predictive validity of six tools in female forensic psychiatric patients.

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.eutex.eu/>

<sup>21</sup> Warren, Wellbeloved-Stone, Dietz and Millspaugh, Gender and violence risk assessment in prisons

<sup>22</sup> de Vogel, Bruggeman and Lancel, Gender-sensitive violence risk assessment: predictive validity of six tools in female forensic psychiatric patients.



- On the question of how to practically integrate the gender dimension in risk assessment, adapting existing risk assessment tools to include gender seems to be preferred over creating an entirely new tool exclusively for women. This entails taking the following steps: keeping the gender-neutral factors as they are; adapting (the weighing of) the factors that impact more on women or produce different predictive outcomes for women; adding factors that are specific for women; and adding indicators that are specifically related to gender norms and roles. As 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 adapting risk assessment tools is intersectionality, where the impact of gender and race, for instance, are considered together. Adopting an intersectional analysis framework 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 addressed further by increasing the knowledge of practitioners directly involved in risk assessment protocols. To this end, consideration of gender-related factors can be introduced through specific follow-up questions and/or observations that practitioners can adopt and employ, 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 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;
- integrate intersectionality in training on rehabilitation methods.

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<sup>23</sup> Van Voorhis, Wright, Salisbury and Bauman, Women's risk factors and their contributions to existing risk/needs assessment, cited in Scanlan, Yesberg, Fortune and Polaschek, 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:

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3. van der Heide, L., van der Zwan, M., & van Leyenhorst, M. (2019). *The practitioner's guide to the galaxy - a comparison of risk assessment tools for violent extremism*. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep29450>

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