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EX POST PAPER

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Gender-specific approaches in exit work

The topic of gender has been discussed extensively within and outside RAN over the past few years. The focus has been directed at gender differences and the role gender plays in the process of radicalisation. However, research on gender and deradicalisation has found that 'even though gender is really pushed in terms of policy and CVE policy ... it's not something being addressed on the ground'.

This ex post paper sets out the key topics and issues for practitioners considering the influence of gender in their exit work, as well as for experts and policymakers active in this area. It highlights the importance of the role gender plays in exit work with diverse violent extremist (VE) groups: gender informs their motives for joining, their experiences and reasons for leaving, as well as their post-VE needs and identity formation. The paper also considers gender-specific aspects of disengagement, deradicalisation and reintegration efforts of exit work: the needs, networks and narratives of participants are influenced by the gender norms and gender roles of the communities with which they reconnect.

Introduction

Although women's participation and loyalty have been crucial to extremist groups' successes,¹ historically their visibility — to researchers, security actors and extremist group leaders — has been low. Recently, a more gender-aware understanding of terrorist actors has emerged, due to wider media coverage of the so-called 'jihadi brides' who challenged expectations by leaving 'comfortable' lives in Europe to join the so-called Islamic State (Daesh). In contrast to the stereotype of the jihadi bride (mistakenly characterised as a helpless victim groomed by men to sexually serve the fighters of Daesh), online and in communities worldwide women have played active roles in Daesh – recruiting others, distributing and creating propaganda, and financing the group.² Signs of change are visible from the far-right extremist (FRE) environment³ (e.g. the role of Beate Zschäpe in the German National Socialist Underground (NSU) group) as well as from the far-left (e.g. Ulrike Meinhoff, co-founder of the Red Army Faction). As with women joining Islamist-inspired groups,⁴ not all FRE women are content with supporting back-room roles confined to 'children, church, and kitchen'. The women involved in extremism are diverse in terms of class, age, marital status, education, race and religion; their motives for entry are similarly diverse, and their participation and roles within movements also vary.⁵

The gendered nature of women's participation and motivations should not be underestimated. Gender ideologies of extremist groups (whether appealing to traditionally defined gender roles or to their subversion) offer empowerment to men and women in different ways. Gender influences the experience of extremism for men and women differently, because groups place different values on activities based on whether the actors are men or women. For example, the macho image and masculine pride evoked in some extremist groups appeals to men because it empowers them to defend 'their women', who represent their nation or caliphate. This applies to VE groups with less defined ideological agendas too. **Theater Fryshuset**⁶ (Sweden) unpack some of the core elements of masculinity for young white men in criminal gangs, football hooliganism and FRE movements: the confidence and strong sense of self for members of

¹ Brown, K. E. (2017). Gender and terrorist movements. In R. Woodward & C. Duncanson (Eds.), *The Palgrave International Handbook of Gender and the Military*. Palgrave Macmillan: London.

² Pearson, E. (2018). Online as the new frontline: Affect, gender, and ISIS-take-down on social media. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 41(11), 850-874.

³ One of the key difficulties for understanding and indeed preventing current activism on the 'far right' (far-right extremism (FRE)) is the terminology. The 'far-right' scene is often understood as neo-Nazi or white supremacist ideology, although not all its supporters are biological racists. To some degree, the difficulty in creating boundaries within the far-right movement is attributable to the ways activists shift between diverse views and groups. Mudde (2007) defines the 'far-right' as encompassing three important belief systems: nativism, authoritarianism and populism. Nativism represents state preference of particular groups identified by citizenship, or through race; authoritarianism refers to a preference for anti-democratic, militarist state tendencies; populism describes how 'ordinary' people of any ideology identify as 'pure' and 'real', in contrast to 'corrupt elites'. For some authors, the most important aspect of fascism is the racial myth of unity as the core of a nationalist movement, excluding particular others. Mudde, C. (2007). *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511492037; Pearson, E., Winterbotham, E., & Brown K. E. (2020). *Countering violent extremism: Making gender matter*. Rethinking Political Violence series. Palgrave Macmillan. doi: 10.1007/978-3-030-21962-8; Castelli Gattinara, P., & Pirro, A. L. (2019). The far right as social movement. *European Societies*, 21(4), 447-462. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2018.1494301>; Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN). (2017). *Right-wing extremism on the rise?* RAN P&P ex post paper. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-p-and-p/docs/ran_p-p_right_wing_extremism_on_rise_prague_12-13_12_2017_en.pdf.)

⁴ As with the FRE VE groups, the terms for referring to VE apparently inspired by Islamist and jihadist worldviews are disputed. The three prevalent terms that succinctly describe the relationship between religion and violence are jihadist violence, Islamist violence and religiously inspired violence. (Pearson, E. Winterbotham, E., & Brown K. E. (2020). *Countering violent extremism: Making gender matter*. Rethinking Political Violence series. Palgrave Macmillan. doi: 10.1007/978-3-030-21962-8; Brown, K. E. (2020). *Gender, religion, extremism: Finding women in anti-radicalisation*. Oxford University Press; Maher, S. (2016). *Salafi-Jihadism: The history of an idea*. Hurst Press.)

⁵ It is worth noting that the UN Security Council in Resolution 2396 (2017) specifically recognises 'many different roles, including as supporters, facilitators, or perpetrators of terrorist acts' that women play, which 'require special focus when developing tailored prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration strategies, and stresses the importance of assisting women and children associated with foreign terrorist fighters who may have been victims of terrorism, and to do so taking into account gender and age sensitivities' (para. 31).

⁶ See description of Fryshuset at <https://ec.europa.eu/esf/transnationality/ngo-1622> online.

such groups, and the excitement and sense of common purpose that their (seemingly) destructive behaviours can bring.

Given the heightened awareness of women's participation in extremism, and the rise in women's direct involvement in extremist groups, an increase in women participating in exit programmes can be anticipated. In the UK for example, between April 2016 and March 2017, approximately, 18 % of referrals to Prevent and 13 % of Channel referrals were women.⁷ However, exit programmes seem to be designed for and focused on men's needs, are premised on radicalisation theories that are 'gender blind', do not acknowledge that they're built on male-dominated data, and rarely explore the role of gender in that data.⁸

It is therefore vital to consider different gender-specific factors for **both men and women**, but also for the different approaches needed when studying the **variety of active extremist groups**.

Gender

Kimmel argues that 'we cannot fully understand VE movements without a gender analysis'.⁹ However, there is a tendency to reduce gender to a biological male/female binary. A key element to keep in mind is that gender refers to the social attributes, roles, and opportunities associated with being male and female in a society.¹⁰ Exit work starts with an assessment of individual needs, and this includes being mindful of the ways gender intersects with other factors, such as class, age, religion, sexuality. Gender influences and forms many parts of exit (and society) - they are gendered.

GENDER, DERADICALISATION AND/OR EXIT

Each exit programme has a different understanding of and goal for success, which may in turn differ from the overarching objectives put forward by governments. In part, this is because exit is often focused on changes in behaviour and belonging (disengagement), whereas deradicalisation is premised on changes in belief. While the former can occur without the latter, it may not be possible to achieve deradicalisation without associated changes in belief, behaviour and modes of belonging. This is important, since changes in belief may be harder to measure and achieve, but are necessary to ensure long-term stability and security for states. Where VE or terrorist groups advocate the use of violence, they often do so at the expense of upholding human rights, including women's rights. Women are often the first target of VE groups, and there is 'deep concern that acts of sexual and gender-based violence are known to be part of the strategic objectives and ideology of certain terrorist groups and are used as an instrument to increase their power through supporting financing and recruitment, and through the destruction of communities'.¹¹ Therefore, for successful long-term prevention and to fulfil international obligations, deradicalisation efforts must commit to challenging ideologies that curtail women's equality or jeopardise women's security.

⁷ HMG. (2018). *Individuals referred to and supported by the Prevent Programme, April 2016 to March 2017* (Home Office Statistical Bulletin 31/18). Retrieved from https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/694002/individuals-referred-supported-prevent-programme-apr2016-mar2017.pdf. These are the most up-to-date statistics.

⁸ Brown, K. E (2019). Women and de-radicalization: European and Arab experiences. *Female Jihadists of ISIS: Observational, Psychological, and Legal Studies*. Al-Mesbar Studies & Research Center Monthly Book, Book 153, September 2019.

⁹ Kimmell, M. (2018, April 8). 'Almost all violent extremists share one thing: their gender'. *The Guardian*. retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/08/violent-extremists-share-one-thing-gender-michael-kimmel>

¹⁰ The Office of the Special Advisor on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women (OSAGI) in 2001 stated that gender refers to 'the social attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female and the relationships between women and men and girls and boys, as well as the relations between women and those between men. These attributes, opportunities and relationships are socially constructed and are learned through socialization processes. They are context/ time-specific and changeable. Gender determines what is expected, allowed and valued in a woman or a man in a given context. In most societies there are differences and inequalities between women and men in responsibilities assigned, activities undertaken, access to and control over resources, as well as decision-making opportunities'. See OSAGI factsheet 'Gender mainstreaming: strategy for promoting gender equality' (2001) at https://www.humanrights.ch/cms/upload/pdf/070822_factsheet1.pdf online.

¹¹ United Nations General Assembly Resolution: A/RES/70/291, *supra* note Preamble.

Gender roles in violent extremism

A great deal of information on gender in this area is covered in *The role of gender in extremism and P/CVE* (ex post paper from the RAN YF&C meeting in Manchester) and *The role of gender in violent extremism* (RAN issue paper).¹² To avoid repeating material from these reports, this paper will present a briefer discussion of gender, with a focus on the implications for exit efforts (disengagement, deradicalisation and reintegration).

WOMEN'S ROLES AND MOTIVATIONS IN VE AND DERADICALISATION

Understanding women's roles is challenging in that there is no simple binary between victim and perpetrator, and women engage in extremist violence in complex ways. Because of VE groups, many women have been subject to gender-based violence, forced marriage, trafficking, kidnapping and slavery. In some cases, women who were initially victims become perpetrators, whether to improve their everyday circumstances, through personal relationships or through indoctrination.¹³ They have also experienced other traumas by being associated with VE, and it is crucial to not re-victimise women. Women have been involved through online forums, fundraising, providing a teaching or propaganda role, as well as maintaining group cohesion and operational effectiveness through various activities, e.g. bookkeeping, domestic work or sustaining networks of sisters. These roles in VE can offer women a deeper purpose and meaning in their day-to-day lives, empower them, and give them leadership roles among other women (although rarely over men). This complexity of experiences makes deradicalisation programming a challenge. When considering how to prosecute women's diverse roles in extremist organisations, a further problem is that in cases of no specific conduct or contribution towards any act of terrorism, nor any intent to make such a contribution, any link between an individual's behaviour and the criminal activity is tenuous.¹⁴

Consideration of these roles in exit work is imperative, as some women may be exiting to be freed from gender-based violence, while others maybe be seeking to leave because of VE groups' failure to meet their expectations in terms of opportunities. Others may not be voluntarily seeking to leave, but are required to do so because of external pressures (e.g. a deteriorating security situation or influence from local authorities or legal systems), and still others may be disillusioned with the ideology and objectives of their VE movement.¹⁵

MEN'S ROLES AND MOTIVATIONS IN VE AND DERADICALISATION

Similarly to women, men join VE groups for both private and political reasons. Men's journeys to radicalisation as well as their participation in VE are varied, and as with women, are shaped by their gender

¹² Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN). (2018). *The role of gender in extremism and P/CVE*. RAN YF&C ex post paper. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-yf-and-c/docs/ran_yf-c_role_of_gender_extremism_and_pcve_29-30_11_2018_en.pdf;

Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN). (2015). *The role of gender in violent extremism*. RAN issue paper. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/issue_paper_gender_dec2015_en.pdf

¹³ Christien, A., & Turkington, R., Women, *Deradicalization, and rehabilitation: Lessons from an expert workshop*. Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security (GIWPS), April 2018, p. 3. Retrieved from <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Policy-Brief-Women-Deradicalization-and-Rehabilitation.pdf>

¹⁴ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). (2018). *Guidelines for addressing the threats and challenges of 'foreign terrorist fighters' within a human rights framework*, p. 38. OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR): Warsaw. Retrieved from <https://www.osce.org/odihr/393503?download=true>

¹⁵ Windisch, S., Scott Ligon, G., & Simi, P. (2019). Organizational [dis] trust: Comparing disengagement among former left-wing and right-wing violent extremists. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 42(6), 559-580.

and gender ideologies. It is worth noting that the reasons and motives promoted by VE groups (ideologies) may not be the same as those that motivate or are given by an individual participating in VE.

Some have also linked domestic violence to VE¹⁶ (however, given the prevalence of domestic violence across Europe, it is worth noting that it is difficult to use this as an identifying or causal variable). Troubled teenage years and engagement with petty crime among boys have likewise been linked to VE.¹⁷ Push factors for men are often linked to economic displacement and isolation, as these undermine their sense of (masculine) achievement in society.

Gender-specific disengagement factors

Often, women seeking to disengage find the programme and policies do not meet their needs.¹⁸ Women's disengagement is commonly fraught with additional risks and challenges. First, because women are less frequently charged with terrorism-related offences than men (more often, women's charges relate to kidnapping, child abuse or child neglect), they find it harder to qualify for the support and programmes available. Second, because there are relatively few female exit practitioners, building trust and rapport is harder for women, where gender segregation is the norm.¹⁹ Third, for women, leaving these groups can often mean leaving marriages, financial security — and sometimes their children.²⁰ In contrast for men, exit models often view having a girlfriend or wife as a positive (such partners are presumed to be law-abiding, anti-violent and offer familial stability).

It has been noted that men are more likely to disengage as they get older or after spending some time in VE — they become fatigued with the lifestyle and insecurity. These factors appear less common for women.²¹

¹⁶ Malik, N. (2018) "The Role of Domestic Violence in Terrorism" *Forbes* 11 September 2018. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nikitamalik/2018/09/11/the-role-of-domestic-violence-in-terrorism/#3e875ce7ea28>;

Smith, J. (2019) *Home Grown: How Domestic Violence turns men into Terrorists*. Riverrun/Quercus. London;

¹⁷ Basra, R. and Neumann, P (2016) "Criminal Pasts, Terrorist Futures: European Jihadists and the New Crime-Terror Nexus" *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10(6) <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/554/html>;

Ilan, J., & Sandberg, S. (2019). How 'gangsters' become jihadists: Bourdieu, criminology and the crime–terrorism nexus. *European Journal of Criminology*, 16(3), 278–294. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477370819828936>

¹⁸ Ní Aoláin, F. (2017, July 27). Fall of Mosul raises question: What should be done with female foreign fighters?, *Just Security*. Retrieved from <https://www.justsecurity.org/43453/gendered-aftermath-assault-mosul/>. See also: United Nations (UN). (2017). *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism*. Report to the UN General Assembly, UN Doc. A/72/495, 27 September 2017. Retrieved from <https://undocs.org/en/A/72/495>

¹⁹ Schmidt, R. (2019) op.cit

²⁰ Horgan, J., Altier, M. B., Shortland, N., & Taylor, M. (2017). Walking away: the disengagement and de-radicalization of a violent right-wing extremist. *Behavioral sciences of terrorism and political aggression*, 9(2), 63-77.

²¹ Reinares, F. (2011). Exit from terrorism: A qualitative empirical study on disengagement and deradicalization among members of ETA. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 23(5), 780-803; Braddock, K. (2018). Terrorist disengagement and de-radicalization. In A. Silke (Ed). *Routledge Handbook of Terrorism and Counterterrorism* (pp. 458-470). Basingstoke: Routledge.

Considerations for practitioners

- The non-linear process of disengagement is gendered.
 - Women's isolation (both in the group and from society) may make them harder to reach.
 - Prison can provide an opportunity for disengagement for both men and women. However, post-release challenges will differ: overall, women convicts have higher unemployment rates than men, and contend with custody of children considerations as well as greater social stigmatisation.
- Violent intimidation occurs during and post VE disengagement.
 - Men may be less willing to acknowledge the occurrence of such intimidation (breaches norms of masculinity).
 - Consideration of individual security needs must also factor in the security of children and other family members (especially for extreme far-right VE).
- The influence of the networks for disengaging individuals is gendered.
 - Fatherhood and motherhood can motivate men and women to re-evaluate the sustainability of being VE group members.
 - For men, relationships with 'outsiders' (such as girlfriends) offer new opportunities that depart from VE group norms and may lead to re-evaluation of the VE ideology and purpose. These relationships are often supportive and protective factors for men.
- Gender norms of VE groups may facilitate or hinder exit practitioners.
 - Men and women may prefer to work with exit workers of the same sex (age and ethnicity can also influence this relationship).
 - Does the exit-facilitating group have the resources to meet the needs of women seeking to leave? If it holds meetings with 'formers' in the mosque, for instance, women may not feel comfortable there.
- While motives, pathways into VE and roles in VE groups appear similar or even the same for men and women (e.g. grievances and belief in the group ideology, influence of friends and family, quest for significance, empowerment, participation in violent action or protests), the mechanics of these are influenced by gender.
 - Men's leadership and status within VE groups is explicit; they often hold official roles. Although women may not appear to have standing or leadership roles within VE groups (few women hold official leadership roles in VE groups), they have informal power and status within the group.
 - Both men and women are 'love bombed' by VE groups in recruitment processes (i.e. given constant and excessive attention, affirmation and affection) so as to form attachments, but there is a tendency to view only women's recruitment as emotional (and to sexualise it), while overlooking this element in men's pathways to VE.
- VE groups offer the opportunity to deviate from gender norms and roles, or in other cases offer enhanced (i.e. hyper) masculinities and femininities.
 - Both men and women may engage in violence on behalf of, and with the group.
 - Motherhood may be valued by VE groups, and VE women may still be 'good mothers', but often the experience of mothering in VE groups doesn't conform to societal norms (children 'belong to the group', so may be raised by various group members, for example).
- Paradoxically, while being 'empowered' through the group, women appear to suffer high rates of sexual, physical and emotional abuse within the VE group.
 - It is necessary to address trauma before starting other elements of exit work.
 - Nevertheless, practitioners should avoid employing 'victim narratives', as women may not identify with these.

CASE STUDIES: 'EXIT: Leaving Extremism Behind' (Sant and Usant Documentaries, 2018)**Karen Winther, Norway, (Trailer: <https://vimeo.com/260719895>)**

The director, Karen Winther, was part of the anti-racist Blitz group in Oslo before joining a violent neo-Nazi group. She documented her experience from these circles in *The Betrayal* (2011). In *Exit*, she meets former extremists from Denmark, Germany, the United States and France, and, by sharing their background, opens up a space for both recognition and cognition. The film centres on 'trigger points' related to both joining and leaving extremism.

As a far-right extremist, Angela believed in conspiracies to exterminate the population of American whites. She was blinded by fear, until the bomb exploded in Oklahoma: 'My first reaction was that he [the bomber] was like me. I started asking myself — is this what I want? There was a kindergarten in the building. Firemen would carry out children covered by black soot and ashes — it was impossible to see if they were dead or alive.'

In France, David, a former member of the Armed Islamic Group, speaks of the solitude of prison, the access to different worldviews and knowledge, and his struggles post-release to become a new man. Fatherhood is a significant motivator in his case, and likewise for Manuel, a former from Germany.

Gender and deradicalisation (beliefs)

Gender influences the ideology of VE groups (e.g. men's defence of their women from foreign attacks/influences) as well as the activities of men and women within VE groups (e.g. forming strong brotherly bonds among men, and women running crèches or hosting family events alongside study circles).²² However, within ideological parameters, VE groups are willing to adapt both their gender roles and ideologies, if this entails a strategic or tactical advantage.²³ Gender also influences disengagement narratives: women will particularly highlight 'their true and good core self', with a focus on suffering and deception, and perhaps positive self-delusion.²⁴

GENDER NORMS IN VE (MASCULINITIES AND FEMININITIES)

Both FRE and jihadist groups tend to focus on the implied or explicit restoration of masculinity — predominantly through a return to honour codes.²⁵ These norms apply to the coherent and stable subject, a normative **life schedule** — social competence, normative (hetero)sexuality and family life, and economic independence.²⁶ They regulate what is considered proper masculinity and a successful and happy

²² Pilkington, H., Ome'chenko E, & Garifzianova A., (2010). *Russia's skinheads: exploring and rethinking subcultural lives*. London and New York: Routledge.

²³ Margolin, D. (2019). The changing roles of women in violent Islamist groups. In A. Alexander (Ed). *Perspectives on the future of women, gender, & violent extremism*. George Washington University Programme on Extremism. pp. 40-49. Retrieved from <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Perspectives%20on%20the%20Future%20of%20Women%20%20Gender%20and%20Violent%20Extremism.pdf>

²⁴ van de Wetering, D., Zick, A., & Mietke, H. (2018). Extreme right women, (dis-)engagement and deradicalisation: findings from a qualitative study. *International journal of developmental science*, (Preprint), vol. 12, no. 1-2, pp. 115-127.

²⁵ Higate, P. (2018). Men, masculinity, and global insecurity: fighting for and against Islamic State. In C. E. Gentry, L. J. Shepherd, L. S. Joberg (Eds), *Routledge Handbook of Gender and Security* (pp. 70-82). Routledge.

²⁶ Halberstam, J. (2005). *In a queer time and place: Transgender bodies, subcultural lives*. Sexual Cultures, Vol. 3. New York: New York University Press.

Halberstam, J. (2005). *In a queer time and place: Transgender bodies, subcultural lives* (Vol. 3). NYU press.

middle-class lifestyle.²⁷ Jihadist discourses contain the additional norm of piety.²⁸ As Pearson notes, this masculine norm is placed in opposition to particular femininities (caring, maternal, chaste qualities) that need protecting.²⁹ Women's participation in violence or in 'front-line' extremist activities may seem to contradict this narrative, but their engagement is often used to shame men into participating. Moreover, they often refer to a return to traditional domestic roles, once the extreme times have passed and the needs of the group are met. Far-left and single issue groups (e.g., animal rights and environmental activists), tend not to value such adherence to patriarchy and often reject gender stereotyping.

These gender norms are also rooted in society, and engaging in extremism may therefore be viewed as an attempt to compensate for failures to live up to these norms, by blaming 'outsiders' for their situation. However, this narrative of a 'crisis of masculinity' or an excessive focus on 'toxic masculinity' can result in working-class men being held accountable for actions and ideas that middle-class or wealthy men are not (polite racism vs aggressive racism).³⁰ Therefore, it is essential to be mindful of how class intersects with race and gender. As Weilnböck points out, '[leaving] attitudes and life styles of violent extremism and group-orientated hatred is a very complicated long-term process of personal change'.³¹ Practitioners seeking to question VE misogyny should engage in a socio-culturally sensitive manner with different ideas about gender (and race), instead of perpetuating gender stereotypes.³²

MEN AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN VE

Women's participation in VE groups is viewed by many as a paradox. The underlying presumption is that on the whole, women in the West have achieved hard-earned empowerment and freedom from patriarchy, and that women joining VE groups are rejecting these obvious benefits. The alternative gender norms promoted by VE groups are framed as empowerment or emancipation, but only in the sense of a greater divine freedom — and they include obvious limitations and inequalities. Some FRE groups support the narrative that women's equality and the acknowledgement of the human rights of women and sexual minorities has weakened the 'white race'. Conversely, leftist and anarchist groups argue that society hasn't gone far enough in reforms to protect women and sexual minorities. However, this disregards the say-do gap in state and local government rhetoric regarding women's rights, security and equality (notably around employment inequalities, domestic violence, rape culture and low rate of representation in politics). It also neglects to address the fact that women of minority groups are additionally burdened by racism and Islamophobia. Further, this paradox is exploited by VE groups in their propaganda.³³ This presumed empowerment paradox, particularly in relation to jihadist groups, is sometimes interpreted by policymakers

²⁷ Reeser, T. W. (2010). *Masculinities in theory: An introduction*. Malden: Blackwell. p. 32.

²⁸ Brown, K. E. (2018). Gendered violence in the making of the proto-state Islamic State. In S. Parashar, A. Tickner, & J. True (Eds.), *Gendered States Revisited* (Chapter 11). Oxford: OUP.

[Brown, K. E. (2018). Violence and gender politics in the proto-state 'Islamic State'. In S. Parashar, A. Tickner and J. True (Eds), *Revisiting Gendered States: Feminist Imaginings of the State in International Relations*. Oxford University Press. Oxford University Scholarship Online. doi:10.1093/oso/9780190644031.003.0011]

²⁹ Pearson, E. (2018). Why men fight and women don't: masculinity and extremist violence. *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change*. Retrieved from <https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/why-men-fight-and-women-dont-masculinity-and-extremist-violence>

³⁰ Pearson, E. (2019). Extremism and toxic masculinity: the man question re-posed. *International Affairs*, 95(6), 1251-1270.

³¹ Weilnböck, H. (2014, September 2). Rehabilitating perpetrators of violent extremism and hate crime: the importance of gender-based approaches and the limits of online interventions. *openDemocracy*. Retrieved from <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/rehabilitating-perpetrators-of-violent-extremism-and-hate-crime/>

Weilnböck, H. (2014). Why should deradicalisation and prevention interventions be attentive to gender issues?. *Cultures Interactive*. Retrieved from http://cultures-interactive.de/tl_files/publikationen/Fachartikel/2014_Weilnböck_Why%20Should%20Deradicalisation%20and%20Prevention%20Intervention%20be%20Attentive%20to%20Gender%20Issues.pdf

³² Eggert, J. P. (2020). Gender, deradicalisation and disengagement. In S. J. Hansen & S. Lid (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of DeRadicalisation and Disengagement* (Chapter 6). London: Routledge.

³³ VE Islamist groups' claims are premised on discrediting Western women, 'the willing victim who sacrifices herself for the immoral "freedoms" of her people, offering her *fitrah* [modesty] on the altar of secular liberalism'. (Source: Islamic State (IS), *Dabiq*, Issue 15, 31 July 2016, p.25. Retrieved from <http://clarionproject.org/wp-content/uploads/islamic-state-magazine-dabiq-fifteen-breaking-the-cross.pdf>).

and counter-jihadist movements as a need to instil better ideas and practices about women's rights in minority communities, but this overlooks women's participation as white converts and in FRE groups.³⁴

Gender-specific reintegration factors

Women's reintegration into society has not been prioritised owing to the gendered assumption that men's 'idleness' (here meaning lack of employment and/or inability to access opportunities) is 'dangerous'. This means that keeping men occupied, with retraining and other reintegration programmes, is a higher priority than keeping women occupied is. It is implied that women do not generally pose security threats: childcare and household responsibilities rarely afford them the time to be idle. However, women who have frequently engaged with VE find that local authorities remove their children from their immediate care — and therefore, they also struggle with idleness, but lack motivation (although seeking to have their children returned to their care is often a priority). As one European practitioner in P/CVE told a researcher: 'It's a men club. Mosques are men's clubs. The whole Prevent and counter-terrorism [sector] has become a men's club.'³⁵

Considerations for practitioners

- Review women's and girls' confidence and redirect men's and boy's confidence.
 - VE groups appear to offer self-esteem and individual significance, but for women and girls this may be relational (i.e. seeking to please others) rather than intrinsic.
- Consider whether working with gender norms of VE groups facilitates short-term disengagement, but also hampers long-term reintegration and rehabilitation.
 - For instance, reinforcing ideas about motherhood may support women, but the purpose of motherhood within VE groups is to support the group by increasing the number of its followers.
 - Supporting or redirecting destructive behaviours (e.g. through sport as an alternative outlet for aggression) without addressing the underlying understanding of masculinity won't provide long-term resilience for formers/those disengaging.
- Exploiting the empowerment gap: different narratives are needed for men and women.
 - Men's accounts of the empowerment gap include fatigue, intragroup disputes, shock at VE activities and questioning of commitments. Women's accounts include shock at VE activities, and concern regarding the empowerment gap in future.

Women's reintegration into communities can often be harder than men's, because of the additional stigma they face. Whereas communities may tacitly accept men's participation, women's participation challenges gender norms within communities. Women may also struggle with the reduction in power and status upon return to their communities. Family exit and reintegration are significant issues needing consideration.³⁶ The international element of some women's participation can call into question their citizenship and that of their children. This factor can pose an additional challenge to reintegration (as families are often fractured), create barriers to resources for recovery and rehabilitation, and generate prolonged uncertainty.³⁷

³⁴ Provost, C., & Whyte, L. (2018, January 31). Why are women joining far-right movements, and why are we so surprised?. *openDemocracy*. Retrieved from <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/women-far-right-movements-why-are-we-surprised/>

³⁵ Cited in Schmidt, R. (2018) op.cit. p.29

³⁶ Spalek, B. (2015). Radicalisation, de-radicalisation and counter-radicalisation in relation to families: Key challenges for research, policy and practice. *Security Journal*, 29(1), pp.39-52.

³⁷ Farah, N. (Director), & Jespersen, S.S. (Director). (2018). *Lost WARRIOR: Leaving al-Shabab* [Motion Picture]. Denmark: Witness Studios. (<https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/witness/2018/08/lost-warrior-leaving-al-shabab-180830085640266.html>). The film/documentary tells the story of a young man born in Somalia who grows up in the UK only to be deported to Somalia where he joins Al Shabab. He later leaves the group and attempts to return to the UK where he has a British wife and child.

Considerations for practitioners

- Transferable skills.
 - Women may not have the same levels of transferable skills or experiences as men after leaving groups, because of their time spent in traditional, home-centred tasks. It is consequently harder for them to gain independence from the group without external financial support and (re)training (e.g. they may not have held jobs, despite doing well at school).
- Double deviance of women.
 - Women face additional stigma and shame upon their return. Their communities may view them as transgressors on two fronts: first for supporting terrorism and VE, and second for breaching gender norms (framing women's independence and agency).
- Prison disengagement often involves non-isolated prisoners.
 - In prison, women's accounts of disengagement are dominated by Good Samaritan narratives rather than official interventions. In the case of far-right extremism, such narratives risk burdening minorities with the additional responsibility of contesting racism and far-right ideology.
 - Time apart from the VE group is important for providing a window for disengagement. However, practitioners report that exit work carried out with men was often undone after wives' visits — they dismissed the 'reformed self' and wanted their 'strong husbands back'.

Differences between VE groups

It is important not to assume easy transference of a successful approach or method from one type of VE to another. Ideologies, operational structures, recruitment bases and activities will vary, and as such, deradicalisation and disengagement activities need to be mindful of their nuances in order to be most productive. This is true within FRE groups too. For example, the English Defence League (EDL), an example of 'new FRE' (in contrast to certain other white ethno-nationalist groups (sometimes labelled 'old FRE')), supports a strong women's rights narrative in its anti-Islamic rhetoric.³⁸ This is because they highlight cultural incompatibility, and the treatment of women in a culture is seen as a benchmark of this. Women's status, behaviour and presumed morality are indicative of what they consider white cultural superiority and dominance (and similarly for Islamist VE groups, the status, behaviour and presumed immorality or lack of piety among Western women is indicative of Islamist VE superiority).

³⁸ Pilkington, H. (2017). 'EDL angels stand beside their men... not behind them': The politics of gender and sexuality in an anti-Islam(ist) movement. *Gender and Education*, 29(2), 238-257.

Considerations for practitioners

- European women (regardless of background) in VE Islamist groups are often highly capable, motivated and committed to the VE cause. They may have left secure homes and livelihoods to join VE groups, deceiving their social and community groups as they did so. Many women were radicalised via online connections and recruiters, and therefore their networks of support may not be in their communities, in contrast to men who may have been radicalised in social spaces, or on 'the street'. Not all women in VE Islamist groups have black or minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds, and as such, their participation in VE and understanding of wider grievances and Islamist ideologies may differ. To secure ongoing support for their members, both men and women, VE Islamist groups weaponise marriage and children. To avoid further demonisation, women are likely to minimise their role in such groups.
- European women in FRE groups (regardless of their background) appear highly articulate, committed to supporting the men in their groups, and willing to engage in violence directly. However, younger women may not be achieving in school, and many women suffer from the weaponisation of marriage and children. Women report relatively high levels of violence and abuse in VE.
- European women (regardless of their background) in far-left or single issue VE (e.g. eco-terrorism) also appear as highly committed to their cause and are willing to engage in violence directly. They support strong gender emancipatory norms, even though they may also face violence from the men in the group. There are tensions in the far-left regarding anti-Semitism — some groups support anti-Semitic views while others violently resist them.
- Gender intersects with age and class as well as ethnicity in shaping men and women's experiences in VE, and middle class women may avoid detection by authorities in FRE groups.

Conclusion: gender-mainstreaming exit

Exit practitioners focus on meeting the needs of the individuals they work with, and have an understanding that gender is a component of that person's identity. Nevertheless, the centrality of gender to VE identity experiences and to the ideology of the VE groups makes it a core facet to engage with. Gender-sensitive approaches call for exit work to address prior assumptions about women's motivations and experiences in VE, and to reflect on men's motivations and experiences in VE. This allows for consideration of how ideas about masculinity and femininity inform the narratives of the self that 'formers' cast for understanding their past and future lives. It also helps practitioners reflect on the gender appropriateness of activities, locations and frameworks for those disengaging from such groups, as they design and develop exit programmes. Gender-mainstreaming approaches also require exit workers to think about whose input is informing their programmes (Are women's voices being listened to?) and who is leading, designing and participating in exit work (Are women included in the organisation at all levels?). Another key consideration for exit workers in this context is whether men and women are equally surveyed and consulted in monitoring the evaluation of exit work (Are opportunities for consultation in line with child care responsibilities or restricted mobility?).

Questions for further consideration and reflective practice

- What differing explanations do formers/participants give you for joining and leaving VE?
 - How different are these for men and women?
 - How much does gender influence these?
- What barriers do formers/participants describe when attempting to disengage from VE?
 - How different are these for men and women?
 - How much does gender influence these?
- What obstacles do formers/participants face when seeking to reintegrate into their communities?
 - How different are these for men and women?
 - How much does gender influence these?
- What facilitates and improves participants'/formers' chances of successful exit?
 - How different are these for men and women?
 - How much does gender influence these?
 - Does the measure of 'success' differ for men and women?
- What services do formers/participants in exit need from authorities or civil society to facilitate their initial disengagement?
 - How different are these for men and women?
 - How much does gender influence these?
- What does 'best practitioners/people' (as opposed to best practice) mean for exit work?
 - How different are these for men and women?
 - How much does gender influence these?

Resources for wider consideration

Eggert, J. P. (2020). Gender, deradicalisation and disengagement. In S. J. Hansen & S. Lid (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of deradicalisation and disengagement* (Chapter 6). London: Routledge (forthcoming in January).

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