



Women In
International
Security

Policy Brief

Women Preventing Violent Extremism: Broadening the binary lens of “Mothers and Wives”

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“...In many parts of the world, there is no greater threat to the rights of women and girls than violent extremism.”

Sarah Sewall, U.S. Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy and Human Rights, September 2016

Violent extremist narratives and actions threaten to roll back the hard-won gains women have made in the struggle for equality. With so much at stake, women must be engaged in efforts to counter violent extremism. However, women’s engagement in the fight against violent extremism also threatens these gains if engagement remains binary, failing to take into account the diverse roles of women.

The narrow approach towards women’s engagement in countering violent extremism has resulted in a focus on the concept of women as mothers and wives in most programming that targets women. Emphasis has been placed on the importance of mothers and wives in detecting early signs of radicalization with programming targeting women within the boundaries of family. This overlooks the important roles that many women play outside of the family.

As more studies are conducted to better understand the roles of women in violent extremism - as recruiters, volunteers, fighters, victims, mobilisers, protectors and advocates for good - the oversimplification of approaches targeting women needs to be re-evaluated and improved. Engaging women within the oversimplified lens of mothers and wives poses a number of challenges:

Reinforces gender stereotypes: Gender stereotypes have historically been a barrier to the advancement of women. Oversimplification of messaging and programs that target women reinforces stereotypes that hinder meaningful engagement of women in policy formulation and advocating for change within communities.

Limits women’s inclusion in policy discussions: Women have worked hard to be included at the table. This work can be built upon by ensuring that women’s roles in countering violent extremism

reflect their capabilities to lead and effect change. This can be pursued through awareness raising, legislative reforms, promoting women’s voices and encouraging the creation of role models.

Narrows reintegration efforts: From FARC² in Colombia, where women make up at least 40% of combatants³, to violent extremist groups such as Boko Haram in Nigeria where 89 documented attacks between 2014-2016 were carried out by women⁴, women have been on the front lines of militias. As governments, the international community, and local practitioners try to understand how to best reintegrate women combatants after rehabilitation, it is important to understand the key roles they play within violent groups. This will improve the design and effectiveness of rehabilitation and reintegration programs. Diversification of the roles of women assists in the development of support programs for frontline women ready to reintegrate into society through job placement programs and social and health services.

Leaves out vulnerable groups: Engagement through the lens of mothers may leave out single women and girls who are vulnerable to being targeted by recruiters of violent extremism, especially as they call for “Jihadi wives.” Engagement through the lens of wives leaves out single mothers who bear children out of wedlock. This group is particularly vulnerable in many African communities where religious and customary norms often socially stigmatize unwed mothers.

Affects women’s agency: Both men and women play critical roles - directly and indirectly - in building lasting peace within societies. The diversification of women’s roles allows for understanding of women’s agency within communities and broader societies and recognizes their dynamic strength in prevention of violent extremism.

Engagement of women in prevention of violent extremism is critical. Over the years, countries of the Horn of Africa have experienced increased policy interventions enacted to curb terrorism and to counter and prevent extremism. Despite the increase in policy⁵, the response and engagement with women is still very limited. In order to ensure effective engagement with women, a better understanding of women's roles and responsibilities through a more diverse lens is necessary. Some recommendations in engaging with women include:

Alternative views of women: Breaking away from the lens of mothers and wives is essential. Engagement that views women as key players who can affect change from the regional, national and local levels is important. Empowering and including women in all levels of society creates a better response to violent extremism.

Evolving narratives and trends: With violent extremist groups evolving their tactics for the recruitment and retention of women, it is important to review programs for women, taking into consideration changes in trends. Inclusion of alternative viewpoints that are clear on what needs programming can meet is essential. Building the capacity of women to identify local trends and encouraging "change stories" reflective of the existing dynamics provide for a great space to prevent new recruitment and inoculate the younger generation against becoming future violent extremists.

Enhanced Civil Society Organization (CSO) engagement: CSOs have been the front lines in preventing and countering extremism in the Horn of Africa for many years. Women in particular have played a critical role in promoting inclusion, tolerance, and peace. However, most women's organizations are still under-resourced in both funding and human capacity. Greater emphasis must be placed on promoting women's organizations, building capacity and providing targeted resources to enable women to continue to be forces of good in local communities, countries and the Horn of Africa region.

Meaningful holistic approaches: Over the years, the phrase "holistic approaches" has been used quite often. However, when it comes to meaningfully engaging women, this has fallen short. Women have been under-represented in policy making processes, disproportionately targeted by extremists, and under-utilized in the prevention of extremism. Holistic approaches must understand the roles and responsibilities of women, include women at all societal levels, and address

societal grievances and stereotypical gender roles that extremists exploit. Holistic approaches must also include engagement with religious institutions, which do not always involve women and girls in management, targeted empowerment or conflict resolution mechanisms.

Bridging gaps between policy and practice: Simplification of women's roles in society at national and community levels limits opportunities to bridge the gap between policy and practice. With a better understanding of the roles and responsibilities of women, improved programming can be enacted to enable practitioners to understand, reinforce values and priorities and support effective implementation of policies.

In 2016, the African Union published its first report on the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in Africa. The report highlighted the growing ratification and enactment of instruments promoting women's equality and rights. The Horn of Africa lags behind with only three out of eight countries having developed National Action Plans on Women, Peace and Security (Uganda in 2008, Kenya and South Sudan in 2016). As the Horn of Africa addresses continues to find better ways to address the challenge of violent extremism, it is important to continue to tap into the different roles women can play. Such efforts include increasing the number of women in security forces that serve and protect communities, utilizing women to support efforts to demystify and refute perverse ideology, and encouraging women's leadership in policy-making to ensure policies are informed by women's experiences.

About WIIS Horn of Africa

Women In International Security - Horn of Africa (WIIS-HoA) is an affiliate of WIIS Global, an organization dedicated to advancing the leadership and professional development of women in the field of international peace and security. WIIS-HoA (pronounced “wise-ho-ah”) focuses on gender, peace, and security issues within the Horn of Africa. The organization also works for the empowerment of women and will seek partnerships with men towards the implementation of a human security approach. Headquartered in Kenya, WIIS-HoA supports the development of cross-border networks in the region and seeks to identify good practices in peace and security in neighboring countries (Djibouti, Ethiopia, Somalia and Tanzania). For additional information, please visit <http://wiisglobal.org/wiis-hoa/>.

¹ Fauziya Abdi Ali is the president of WIIS Kenya and chair of Sisters without Borders.

² FARC stands for “Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia” – The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia- Peoples Army is considered a guerilla movement involved in the Colombian armed conflict from 2014.

³ <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/09/farc-deal-female-fighters/501644/>

⁴ <https://www.inclusivesecurity.org/publication/women-as-symbols-and-swords-in-boko-harams-terror/>

⁵ Kenya and Somalia have developed national strategies in 2016.