

**How the World Teaches Europe what Gender Means –
Women/ Gender in Violent Extremism & Prevention in a Global Perspective**

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Taken by surprise – the European picture in 2013

Curiously, when our Cultures Interactive team in its EU national starter measure “Women and Gender in Violent Extremism and Prevention” (WomEx)¹ first attempted to reach out to European practitioners in 2012 to look for approaches that focus on gender in preventing group hatred/ hate crime, and violent extremism and group-focused hatred (generally referred to as PVE), hardly any could be found. However, when exchanging on this topic with our colleagues from the EU Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) we realized that quite a number of them seemed to show some freshly stirred interest in this subject.² Only few felt that while gender mainstreaming is always important (but also musing whether it hasn’t somehow been overdone in the past), the issue was probably not a key aspect of prevention and disengagement work so far.

Yet, this sudden awakening of a European interest in gender was mostly prompted by the abrupt and glaring reality of how important women are and how many different roles they played in violent extremism/ terrorism related to ISIS and Al-Qaeda. Moreover, in Germany it was in 2012 that the wider public – and also the majority within pertaining professional communities – was taken by surprise by what had thus far been clear only to quite few specialized researchers and practitioners: that women have – and always had – a key functions in right-wing violent extremist/terrorist milieus (see e.g. Bitzan, Radvan). At that time the neo-Nazi death squad “National Socialist Underground” (NSU) that had killed 9 perceived foreigners and one police woman since 2001 was incidentally uncovered. It then was found that the NSU terrorist cell consisted of three persons (embedded in a larger support milieu) two of whom were men (who had committed suicide when encountering police forces) and the third one being a woman who had lived with the two men under cover and, at the very least, co-organised the group’s under-cover existence over the last 12 years (after having known and been partner with them in different constellations since her teenage years). This woman has now stood trial for two years and is advised by her lawyers not to make any statements on the degree of involvement in the ten first degree murders that the group had committed.

1 WomEx.org is an EU funded ISEC project (internal security), conducted 2012-14 by www.cultures-interactive.de.

2 Thankfully, the RAN was there at all, after it had been newly inaugurated by the European Commission on 9/11 of the year 2011 as a bottom-up network of first-line practitioners who engage in preventing all forms of violent extremism, while working in many different fields, organisations/ institutions and EU member states. Since then Cultures Interactive as one among roughly two to three hundred NGOs in the RAN had been given a thus far inexistent opportunity to regularly liaise with European colleagues.

The suddenness of these realisations also entailed that wherever some beginning awareness of the issue of gender and violent extremism emerged, the focus always was – and mostly still is – exclusively directed to gender in the sense of gender mainstreaming. Hence women/ girls and their function in violent extremism were now looked at which, without doubt, was more than timely. What, however, was not looked at much at the time and still is not sufficiently recognized is: gender in the sense of specific practices of living gender roles of both women and men – and what these roles, concepts and practices mean as integral elements of violent extremism and as powerful vehicle of recruitment for both women and men into subcultures of group-hatred and terrorism

In many cases, it just had not occurred yet to very many fieldwork practitioners or policy makers that vulnerable and radicalized (young) people always also have highly conflictive – and explosive – gender role and gender identity issues. Also, it had not yet been fully realized that there seems to be hardly any violent extremists of whichever sort who are not also at the same time sexist and homophobic or have comparable gender issues – and, in all experience, had been sexist and homophobic in their attitudes and behaviours long before s/he became active in a particular extremist milieu. Likewise it had not been recognized yet – and still needs to be studied with more empirical rigor – how much these sexist, homophobic and other gender role conflict issues, on the mental level of emotions and affects, seem to directly feed into impulses of hatred and violence (sometimes possibly even more than ideology or religion in the strict sense could ever do). The fact that violent extremist organisations and ideologies tend to have conservative or reactionary gender agendas corresponds with this.

Accordingly, in terms of interventions, only very few practitioners had recognized that it often is much more effective and impactful in settings of first-line prevention of and rehabilitation (deradicalisation) from violent extremist involvement, to talk gender with the young people of concern. Only very few colleagues had realized that spurring and facilitating exchange, self-reflection and awareness of what it means to them personally to be a women/feminine or a man/masculine in their peer group can be much more immediately effective and has a more sustainable impact than talking ideology/ religion.³ So, not only have we always overrated cognitive/intellectual approaches and underrated emotional issues. In retrospect, it even seems that we as – presumably non-extremist and resilient – mainstream society have, quite tellingly, overlooked the most obvious societal fault-line which may cause polarisation and group-focused resentment or hatred: The fault-line between the two biological sexes and subsequently between different variations of individual gender identities, which are highly important fault-lines, because they come in so very early in everybody's personal development and are highly laden with emotional charge and affect. In other words, we hadn't been aware of one key issue in which we, the mainstream society in our own gender attitudes, may in fact be *proto-extremist* or at least conducive to extremism – i.e. involuntarily be part of the problem rather than of the solution.

Hence, in 2012 only very few colleagues in the European prevent violent extremism landscape (PVE) had highlighted the gender dimension in both violent extremism and the

³ Among the very few organizations that had focused on gender role issues and violent extremism early on, the WomEx project had liaised with *Dissens* (NGO, Berlin) who developed a gender focused methodology for educational and preventive settings; to a lesser degree with *ROTA/ Racism on the Agenda* (NGO, London) who launched the What about the Boy project focusing on preventing sexual violence (above all in the context of gangs); furthermore the *Expert Centre on Gender and Right-Wing Extremism at the Amadeu Antonio Foundation*, and the *German Network of Researchers on Women and Rightwing Extremism and others which are referred to on womex.org*

prevention thereof (see footnote 1 and womex.org) – neither in terms of *gender specific* approaches working with women specifically (after having mostly worked with men) nor in *gender focused* approaches working with both women and men on their ways of living and enacting certain gender identities. Also the RAN itself, while thankfully co-organising and thus supporting two events of the WomEx project, had not and still has not quite resolved the question of whether the topic of women and gender in prevention violent extremism should be a particular section of RAN work.

Given what has already been achieved in the world around Europe the question about RAN and gender may soon appear obsolete. Therefore, this paper shall look at how the subject of women and gender have been part of various strategies in international peace building and developmental cooperation/assistance, long before being introduced into strategies of responding to violent extremism in the third world – and even longer before Europe would take any notice of this subject. This shall be illustrated by referring to examples from Bangladesh and Morocco which will figure prominently among others, such as a US American initiatives that will be quoted here. Also, the risk of overstretching and exhausting women's roles in various scenarios and putting female promoters in situations of danger will be raised.

In light of these existing gender-reflective approaches in peace building on the international level, Europe's peculiar slowness and hesitation to pick up on them will be discussed briefly. Nevertheless, it will also be shown that those few gender-reflective approaches existing in European prevention work may add a different angle to the field that peace building has often overlooked: the aspect of women as supporters, actors, and perpetrators of violent extremism and terrorism. The OSCE's Transnational Threats Department will be emphasized as a pan-European forerunner in this regard.

Finally, building on the findings of the first project on gender and prevention of violent extremism within EU ISEC funding: "Women and Gender in Violent Extremism and Prevention" (WomEx.org) as well as the insights from practitioner exchange in the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) a path to an integrated and more holistic gender-reflective prevention and disengagement practice shall be discussed.

The global picture 1 – peace building and developmental cooperation/ assistance

The relative lack of gender awareness in European Prevent Violent Extremism initiatives (PVE) is all the more surprising when considering the global perspective – especially with regard to "peacebuilding" and PVE strategies in post-conflict or post-(civil)war regions of third world countries. "Peacebuilding" strategies in recent times have often been acutely aware of the role that women can have in mitigating and preventing conflict and warfare or in negotiating and preparing peace (while women's roles in pushing conflict has been notoriously overlooked for a long time). In 2007 the US Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation issued a policy document on the topic. It used the somewhat euphemistic title "Women in conflict – an introductory guide for programming".⁴ While this guide duly concedes

4 web link, The Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance of the United States Agency for International Development/ USAID.

that “women can play active roles in the events that lead to fighting and instability, and even in combat itself”, it emphasizes how women often “served as the forerunners of peace movements that have ended conflict” (p. 2). These statements are based on the fundamental insight that interventions of peacebuilding and social reconstruction “are more effective and lasting when they integrate an understanding of women’s perspectives, while at the same time fostering awareness that crises of fragility and conflict can challenge and alter gender roles - often radically and rapidly” (p. 4). Moreover, since “women often play decisive roles in negotiating the peace process” it is highly recommended that the women in regions of crisis, instability and warfare are “empowered politically and economically” in order to become able to take roles in prevention, resolution and management of such crises – while remaining safeguarded from actual and reputational risks (p. 4).

However, in resuming some historical experiences from various regions of the world, it is also clearly stated that “women are usually left out of formal peacemaking activities unless they exhibit remarkable determination to seat themselves at the peace table”. Further it is noted: “In most cases, women’s efforts towards peace go unrecognized and are under-reported, as data collected on peace processes is often not disaggregated by gender” (p. 4). Needless to say, the specific methods, approaches and actual processes which come into effect when women enter these scenes have not yet been looked at and researched in more detail with regard to their key impact factors. It thus is a good start for any more comprehensive strategy of integrating the perspective women into peacebuilding to demand that “women must be involved in conflict prevention, resolution and management efforts at all levels” because “when they are not active participants, the views, needs and interests of half of the population are not represented, and therefore interventions will not be as appropriate or enduring” (p. 2).

The report then proceeds to refer to an assortment of examples of successful interventions which give proof to the observation that “when women organize themselves for peace efforts, they can significantly impact the peace process”. For instance, this has been demonstrated, among others, by “the Mano River Women’s Peace Network, in which women in three West African countries (Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea) were able to successfully participate in and influence the outcome of the peace process” in recent years (p. 5). Here the organization *Women Waging Peace* needs to be mentioned as the most prevalent umbrella organization that connects and assists “women addressing conflict around the world in the belief that they have a role to play ‘in preventing violent conflict, stopping war, reconstructing ravaged societies, and sustaining peace in fragile areas around the world’” (p. 23). *Women Waging Peace* (which is organized by the Women and Public Policy Program at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government) advocates for the “full participation of women in formal and informal peace processes.” (p. 23, www.womenwagingpeace.net). In these initiatives, however, the notion of violent extremism and international terrorist organizations was not yet an explicit consideration.

The global picture 2 – developmental strategies of gender and prevention of violent extremism

Hence, in the area of peacebuilding and international development cooperation the potential asset of women’s participation and leadership and the offer of special training to this effect

has been recognized for quite some time. However, the field of initiatives which focus on PVE is considerably younger and had not yet interacted with peacebuilding very much due to the compartmentalisation which unfortunately affects many areas of policy making. Therefore the PVE community had not picked up on the gender issue right away. In fact, in the beginning “counter-terrorism interventions have tended to ignore gender perspectives” and it has only been fairly recently – but still earlier than the European field – that “women’s roles – as ‘policy shapers, educators, community members and activists, (OSCE, 2013, p. 2) – in countering violent extremism have started to be recognized” (B.Carter, 2013, p. 2). This holds true for both practice and research: “While much has been written on the subject of terrorism, particularly since September 2001, gaps remain in the understanding of violent extremism, insurgency, and the role of gender (USAID, 2011, p. 4). Gender has tended to be ignored in the literature on terrorism and political violence (Jackson et al, 2011, p.146-147)” (B.Carter, 2013, p. 3, Bjørgo and Gjelsvik 2015, p. 16).

How important it is to amend this deficit becomes even more evident when looking at the most recent research on the subject which gives ample evidence that women and gender need to be a key element on practically every level of prevention and societal resilience building. A 2014 study presented by Krista London Couture focused on Morocco and Bangladesh.⁵ Both countries put “direct and indirect emphasis on women empowerment to fight terrorism”. Couture emphasizes that Morocco and Bangladesh have comparative status on the World Economic Forum Gender Equality Index indicator scales, both are democracies and “Muslim-majority countries that practice moderate versions of Islam, making tolerance an essential element in policy implementation and social planning”; still they are strikingly different “in culture, region, and economic standing” (ix). However, both countries have “strategically identified women as critical components in counterterrorism strategies” and developed programs to empower women in country and culturally specific ways.

This was highly successful: “Bangladesh has experienced no significant ideologically motivated attacks ... since 2005, and on average Morocco has had less than one terrorist attack per year and none since 2011” (ix). Bangladesh’s success is all the more stunning if one considers that by the early 1990s, “extremism in Bangladesh was pervasive, nourished by political turmoil, lack of alternatives, and extreme poverty” (21).

In addition to the gender perspective, Bangladesh had identified “poverty as one of the country’s main sources of radicalization to violence and terrorism”. The basic assumption was that “a lack of economic opportunity has the potential to provide a ripe breeding ground for recruitment into *madrassas* and possibly violent extremist activity” (ix). Consequently, authorities focused “on empowering women through micro-lending programs, primary school attendance” and further measures (ix).

5 Krista London Couture (2014). A Gendered Approach to Countering Violent Extremism: Lessons Learned From Women In Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention Applied Successfully In Bangladesh And Morocco, publ. by the Brookings Institution.

<http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2014/07/30-gender-conflict-prevention-counterterrorism-couture>

Hence, the approach combined gender and economic aspects, being acutely aware that “in micro lending, for every \$1US a woman earns, she reinvests 90 percent back into her family and/or community” while “men reinvest only 40 percent” (viii). Micro lending investment in women always has both economic and social implications which is lucidly shown by its effects in the area of family planning and health care. Since the micro-credit program began in Bangladesh, “there has been a significant increase in the use of contraceptives” (23). Given that eight million women have micro loans in Bangladesh (which accounts for 98 percent of borrowing) the effect in terms of family planning can be assumed to be quite substantial. Another important empirical finding in support of this strategy is the fact that “when a woman has an education, she marries on average four years later, enters into non-abusive relationships, and has 2.2 children who are healthier and better educated” (viii). This is of key importance for any long term prevention strategy if one considers observations which suggest that abusive parental relationships and the lack of education for children are significant factors of violent radicalization.

Looking at Morocco, Couture’s report underlines that the success and sustainability of Morocco’s approach to preventing violent extremism and terrorism over the last decade “is an exception in the Arab world.” This success seems to rely heavily “on the inclusion of women because of their critical cultural role in Moroccan families and communities” (foreword x). Moreover, as in Bangladesh, Moroccan authorities had “determined that poverty definitively exacerbates radicalization”.

Following the terrorist attacks in Casablanca in 2003 which were viewed as “Morocco’s 9/11” the king passed “progressive revisions to the *Moudawana* (family code)” in 2004. These were considered a “landmark development towards the goal of gender parity” in that women were empowered both in social and economic respect. Most noteworthy, in view of the position of women in many Arab countries, may be how women were integrated into the religious sphere of society. In 2005, Morocco’s Ministry of Islamic Affairs began “certifying female preachers (imams), known as *mourchidates*” (x). These women were specifically charged with “promoting religious moderation and tolerance with the objective of curbing radicalization”. Couture points out the sustainability of this policy: While “fifty *mourchidates* were trained and certified in 2005 ... there were more than 500 *mourchidates* working in communities and prisons with women and youths in Rabat and Casablanca today” which amounts to “a 1000 percent increase in less than a decade”.

Couture (2014) emphasizes: “The integration of women into Morocco’s counterterrorism efforts was strategized to ensure long-term sustainability. Hence in expansion of the well-known saying: “If you train a man, you train one person. If you train a woman, you train an entire community”⁶ one could add that training and empowering women also secures the long-term impact of the prevention initiative.

For sure, many questions are still unanswered about the specific ways in which women empowerment bears on preventing violent extremism. Beyond the doubtlessly valid assumption that an “increased independence also extends a woman’s ability to contribute to CVE” because she can then “better protect the rights and safety of those who are close to her” (23) how exactly does this work in family, community and on national and media level? Also, if women are becoming guides who “educate (other) women in good parenting

6 By Fatima Nezza, Moroccan female imam (*Mourchidate*) (in Couture 2014).

techniques” (31), how do these parenting techniques work in terms of strengthening resilience and preventing violent extremism? Indeed, “further research is warranted on the topic of women acting as preventers of terrorism” (50). Yet, the research on Morocco and Bangladesh makes a convincing point that “women can and do play (important roles) in preventing terrorism” and therefore need to be “empowered in relevant and culturally appropriate ways” (50).

How global prevention of violent extremism is learning gender from peacebuilding

These observations of gender-specific peacebuilding strategies provide interesting implications for preventing violent extremism in Europe (and beyond). It is thus not surprising that a transfer of gender approaches from peacebuilding into the prevention of violent extremism has been promoted recently. Georgia Holmer, leading the Women Preventing Extremist Violence Project (WPEV)⁷ at the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP), points towards the parallels between the older and more consolidated sphere of peacebuilding and developmental work on the one hand and the younger PVE world on the other – while the “consideration of gender” implicitly figures as the key element of this transfer.⁸

Holmer emphasizes that “the peacebuilding community” is “long versed in the challenges of conflict prevention” and that peacebuilding “already contributes in many ways to the prevention of extremist violence and the CVE agenda” (p. 1). Hence, peacebuilding and “its related methods and practices can help develop a more expansive understanding of violent extremism and its causes and a more localized, inclusive, and sustainable approach to countering it”. This, of course, specifically pertains to gender issues, as Holmer points out in context with other important issues of interagency cooperation around prevention and mediation of conflict and aggression. Also, gender based activities are quite interlinked with other dimensions of this subject. One need only think of the common observation that “status-seeking is also commonly identified as a VE driver” which is profoundly gender motivated – “with a former member claiming that ‘walking in the city with a gun as a member of al-Shabaab ensured everybody feared and respected you’ and that ‘girls also liked you’” (Hassan 2012: 19 in Khalil/ Zeuthen p. 7).

Hence, a “closer collaboration between the two domains” (Holmer p. 1) – the peacebuilding on the one hand and the PVE on the other – seems recommendable. The promise which peacebuilding holds for the PVE field particularly pertains to aspects of gender: “A central tenet of peacebuilding is that sustainable peace is achievable only with the engagement and consideration of the rights and needs of both men and women” (p. 5). However, “CVE policy and practice have been criticized for failing to consider the pivotal role women can play in preventing extremist violence”. Being used to working in highly complex “grey” environments

7 USIP’s Women Preventing Extremist Violence (WPEV) project works to build the capacity of women in local communities to prevent conflict and extremist violence and also identify and support ways in which women already play a role in conflict prevention in informal and undocumented ways.

8 Other nations’ developmental assistance engagement tends to follow the US American lead in gender focus at later points in time: The GIZ/ Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, implementing much of Germany’s developmental assistance, is currently formulating its approach of PVE in which gender aspects play an important role both as cross-cutting issues as well as potential project specific goals.

– and being committed to an agenda of “building” (peace, skills etc.) rather than “countering” (violent extremism) – peacebuilders acknowledge that “because of the significant influence of socialization and relationships in the process of radicalization, both men and women are inherently part of the dynamics that push and pull an individual toward and from violent extremism”. Also they have always been aware that “in many societies, gender identities and norms are also deeply embedded in ideas about violence and peace”; which is why peacebuilders have always recognized “the need to examine the role gender plays in both mitigating and fostering trajectories of violence” (p. 5). This, of course, is embedded in a contextual perspective that includes civil society capacity building at large and rests upon inter-agency resilience cooperation on a local level.

This nexus of PVE and gender-specific as well gender-focused methods was impressively implemented by the *Sisters Against Violent Extremism* (SAVE), to name but the most well-known example. B. Carter (2013) refers to SAVE as “the world’s first female counter-terrorism platform” which was launched by *Women without Borders* (Vienna) in 2008 and “is currently operating in Yemen, Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Israel, Palestine, and Northern Ireland” (Carter 7). There SAVE employs a *Mothers for Change!* campaign and skills training “which encourages and empowers mothers, strategically placed at the centre of the family to notice and mitigate at an early stage any violent extremism which may become discernible in their homes and communities” (p. 4). As is further stated, the initiative aims at “bringing together a broad spectrum of women determined to create a united front against violent extremism.”⁹ It also “provides women with the tools for critical debate to challenge extremist thinking and to develop alternative strategies for combating the growth of global terrorism.”

One would probably want to add here, that disengagement and prevention practitioners have found the element of “critical debate” to be much less important than the capacity to build relation, trust, respect – and emotional intelligence. Also, the element of “combating” is something that does not work too well in prevention – and may in any event be little suitable for mothers, fathers, families and communities. Moreover, one might want to caution to what degree women should be specifically commissioned to “inspire a new response to prevent terror, violence and discrimination”, whether it is not too much a task to “use the local and global networks of women to stop the killing”, to single-handedly “support the young generation with non-violent alternatives in their search for a better life” or achieve any other of the most valuable strategic objectives of SAVE. A more systemic and holistic approach seems needed here.

In more general terms, the consideration of how to avoid overstretching and exhausting women’s roles in various local and national scenarios needs to be given more attention – also the question of how to effectively safeguard women whenever they take on sensitive functions in preventing violent extremism. The fine line between making intelligent use of a social resource and instrumentalising women in undue and risky ways is easily crossed.

However, the importance and potential of women in significantly contributing to such systemic response to violent extremism is beyond doubt. Hence, any skill training to this effect is much recommended and can be highly effective where “mothers, especially those with less formal education, struggle to recognize the warning signs, as they may perceive their children as merely becoming more religious and often consider the change to be positive” (SAVE, 2010, quoted by B. Carter 7).

⁹ <http://www.women-without-borders.org/save/activities/24/>.

On a larger scale the *Institute for Inclusive Security* has been promoting a somewhat more constrained and modest – but not any less impactful approach. It also includes the *Women Waging Peace* initiative, a network of more than 2,000 women peacemakers from conflict areas around the world, ranging from Colombia to Congo, Lebanon to Liberia, Sri Lanka to Sudan (founded in 1999 at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government by former US ambassador to Austria Swanee Hunt). Much embedded in a genuine women peacebuilding approach the *Institute for Inclusive Security* had not only changed the international security paradigm, insisting that “sustainable peace is possible only when those who shape policy include women and other affected groups in the prevention and transformation of violent conflict” (mission statement weblink). It ventured early on to engage the complex challenges of violent extremism.

In its section “Why Women”, elaborating on how women can be “a powerful force for peace”, the institute stated, *inter alia*, that ...

- “women bridge divides between unlikely groups” (referring to Columbia and the FARC);
- “women have a unique understanding of community needs” (in reference to the 2006 Darfur/Sudan Peace Agreement)
- “women have access that men don't”, pointing towards Somalia where “women are able to move physically between clans with a freedom that men do not have” which is why they “have sometimes served as first-line diplomats and mediators”,
- “women have untapped power” in that they “wield influence within their families and communities – influence they can use to moderate political and religious extremism.” Researchers note that women recognize when their sons, daughters, or husbands exhibit telltale signs of violent ideologies”. In Pakistan women employ “moderating extremism travel” in which they regularly go to remote areas of the country “to persuade young men against becoming suicide bombers.” There, in particular, the institute launched a programme to “support Pakistani women to (1) advocate for policies at the national and international level to address the drivers and consequences of extremism, and (2) conduct peace-building activities at the local level with outreach to youth groups, civil society organizations, the media, religious leaders and educators (Chatellier, 2012)” (quoted from B. Carter p. 4).

Looking at the entirety of this tradition of activities, it must have been more than a decade ago that the first gender-focussed approaches were applied in the global prevention of violent extremism outside of Europe – in so-called developing countries. Plus, these were based on an even older tradition of practicing gender strategies in peacebuilding and developmental assistance. Hence, these countries had discovered and promoted issues of gender and prevention out of their own contexts, probably because these issues were more readily visible there. Another contributing factor might have been that developmental cooperation eventually comes down to a good handful of international actors, among them the USA with its traditionally strong gender agenda.

Europe on the other side just now seems to begin rubbing its eyes and wonder whether women and gender may play a significant role in violent extremism and its prevention – and whether gender mainstreaming is not just a somewhat boring exercise which is done mostly for political reasons. Above all European security and counter terrorism sectors seem caught

by surprise – and even the prevention sector – as in the RAN – seems curiously hesitant. Hence, the *RAN Collection of Practices and Approaches*, too, as mentioned above, has not yet found sufficient reason to open up a section on gender and prevention. It thus seems still quite uncertain whether the European counter violent extremism community will soon reach a more profound understanding of this issue. The EU's somewhat compartmentalized structure – which also entails some degree of dissociation between internal security and fundamental rights initiatives – seems to be a hindrance here.¹⁰

Women as supporters and perpetrators of violent extremism and terrorism

What could then be Europe's role concerning this key aspect of PVE? It does not seem unlikely that Europe may eventually come around to overcoming its compartmentalized thinking (causing divisions between internal security and fundamental rights) and arriving at a more holistic view. This might even entail looking at one particular aspect which global peacebuilding, in turn, seemed to have totally overlooked for a long time, namely: women as supporters, actors, and perpetrators of violent extremism and terrorism. This initiative could be especially valuable if it achieves to view more systemically on how targeted women and men may be understood in a double perspective of being both victims and perpetrators of violent extremism.

Thus far the main emphasis in global peacebuilding/ developmental work and gender has always been on women as agents and facilitators of prevention, mediation and resilience building – according to the gender stereotype of the motherly and peaceful women. This also coincided with and was powerfully driven by a women rights agenda which was and still is much needed in practically all countries under consideration, since talking on tasks of mediation and prevention does effectively emancipate women from restrictive gender role. Less prevalent, however, it has been in peacebuilding/ developmental work to consider those women that are part of the problem rather than of the solution. Hence, the aspect of female supporters and perpetrators of violent extremism seems to be missing.

A veritable forerunner in amending this was the OSCE's Transnational Threats Department/ Action against Terrorism Unit (TNTD/ATU) with its 2011/12 international expert roundtables, resulting in the 2013 report on Women and Terrorist Radicalisation.¹¹ The TNTD's base concept of violent extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism (VERLT) is sufficiently complex and holistic to be able to approach the phenomena at stake: "VERLT transcends socio-political, national, cultural, geographical and age boundaries" and it thus "also transcends gender". It is clearly stated, that "for decades, terrorist organizations have targeted women for recruitment" and that "the potential for women radicalization and involvement in violent extremist groups has long existed but continues to be relatively underestimated as the misconception that violent extremism and terrorism exclusively concern men still prevails" (p. 1).¹²

10 For instance, it has been as late as the beginning of 2015 that SAVE has attempted to reach out to European ISEC financing in order to pilot it's highly effective Mothers School approach in European countries (and was denied funding thus far).

11 The Berlin NGO Cultures Interactive which would later launch the EU WomEx.org approach has participated in these roundtables and has exchanged with the OSCE on these issues since.

12 OSCE (2013). Women and Terrorist Radicalization. Final Report. February 2013. OSCE Secretariat – OSCE ODIHR Expert Roundtables. Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

The report also emphasizes that “violent extremism and terrorist radicalization are still often considered a male issue” and that in “situations of conflict and violence, women are often seen as passive, victims, helpless, subordinate and maternal”. Not only do such “assumptions reinforce gender stereotypes” but, consequently, women are “neither considered to be potential terrorists, nor perceived to be as dangerous as their male counterparts if they were to be involved in terrorism.” It thus seems recommended in principle that “a woman should not be assumed to be more or less dangerous, nor more prone to peace, dialogue, non-violence and co-operation than a man”; and that “the very image of the peaceful woman has been used by terrorist groups to recruit women and to claim an innocent and nonviolent character by highlighting the involvement of women in their organizations.” This reflects the observations and recognitions which have been made with regard to women in right-wing extremism and terrorism in Germany at this point in time (cf.; see Radvan 2013 ; Baer, Kossack, Posselius 2016).

The introductory part of the OSCE report thus underlines: “It is fundamental to increase awareness of the existence of and potential for women terrorist radicalization, as well as of violent extremist propaganda and recruitment strategies directed at women and girls” (p. 2). It is thus mandatory to be aware that while “many conditions conducive to terrorism impact both on the potential violent radicalization of men and women. ... it is critical to understand how these factors may be experienced differently along gender lines.” It then is generally suggested that “sensitizing parents, teachers, social workers, (first-line) police officers, journalists and judges on this issue is key”; as it is important that “the media abstain from disseminating stereotypical preconceptions of women’s roles and behaviour” (3).

Interestingly, however, in its main substance the OSCE’s 2013 report did not focus too much on female supporters and actors yet – nor on what programs and enabling conditions need to be in place to facilitate these women’s disengagement and reintegration into society. In 2013 the predominant emphasis still is on supporting, empowering, and training women – largely following a general women’s liberation agenda – and not much is said about radicalized women who, indeed, cannot immediately be supported and empowered. Within the 40 topical points which the report succinctly formulates, the request that women who “leave terrorist or violent extremist environments should be granted support and adequate protection” is mentioned, almost on the side, in the second half of point 39. And while it is one of the reports roughly 40 policy recommendations to “ensure better access of women to gender-sensitive disengagement and rehabilitation programmes, granting them adequate protection and support” (10), it is not specified or contextualized what this implies in more detail.

In this regard, the USAID paper on “Women & Conflict” (2007, see footnote) in its context of peacebuilding and developmental cooperation was more explicit:

“Women who have been associated with fighting forces need specialized assistance during the process of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR), but they are often overlooked. ... Many female fighters do not present themselves at DDR centres because they do not believe they will be entitled to benefits” (p. 5-6).

...

<http://www.osce.org/secretariat/99919?download=true>

“Addressing the needs of women combatants presents particular challenges. Female ex-combatants may have experienced a newfound degree of autonomy and even prestige within armed groups. ... However, they often face severe feelings of personal guilt and may be rejected by society, depending on the extent of their involvement and the circumstances under which they became part of the armed group.” (p. 6)

...

“Women are found among combatants as forced participants (often as a result of abduction), as dependent “followers” of fighters, in supporting roles assisting fighters but not carrying weapons, as “shields” for combatants, and as active combatant soldiers. Women and girls may have multiple roles among fighting forces—at times domestic servant, cook, sexual partner, porter, guard, informant, and soldier.” (p. 5)

However, a year after its 2013 paper the OSCE, too, had arrived at a more comprehensive view on the need of “gender sensitive” disengagement in its 2014 workshop on “Supporting Civil Society Initiatives to Empower Women’s Roles in Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism” which included a special section on “Addressing Female Terrorist Radicalization and Recruitment”. The resulting report underlines the need of paying attention to, *inter alia*, the aspects of “pull/ push factors that put girls and women specifically at risk”; “the narratives used by terrorist organizations to target girls and women”; “the role of gender inequalities in facilitating terrorist radicalization and recruitment”; “the roles of women in facilitating the terrorist radicalization and recruitment of women and men”; “establish(ing) or adjust(ing) ... disengagement and reintegration programmes ... to address female violent extremist”.

Yet, among the wealth of the above mentioned observations and sources on women/ girls/ gender and prevention/ peacebuilding there may be one aspect of violent extremism which thus far seems to not having been noticed by research or policy writing too much: the aspect of sexuality.

Gender/ sexuality and “dissident sexualities” – a potentially new dimension of group hatred, violent extremism and prevention?

For sure, the dimension gender/ women/ men and extremism/ prevention certainly also encompasses issues of sexuality in principle, since certain concepts of being male or female may also imply certain forms of sexual behaviour – even beyond the base question of sexual orientation. Yet, it seems that sexuality and patterns of sexual behaviour are hardly ever taken into account when thinking about phenomena of group hatred and violent extremism and about what can be done to prevent and intervene – or support resilience in a wider and more general target group.

Looking into the literature on gender and preventing violent extremism (and on peacebuilding) here above, there seems to be only a slight awareness of issues of sexuality – which is expressed implicitly rather than explicitly, if at all. The above quoted OSCE documents and other sources do refer to the issue of sexual violence (which seems to be applied in increasingly systematic forms in contexts of violent extremism) or imply sexuality/

sexualisation¹³ for instance with issues as “front wives” in the so-called Islamic State.¹⁴ Moreover the catch phrase of ‘sex jihad’ has come up recently while there does not seem to be much specific evidence based information about the related phenomena.¹⁵ Not to speak of the notorious offer of dozens of virgins for the heavenly life of martyrs / suicide attackers¹⁶ - and the fact that with the systematic abduction of Jasidic women and girls a veritable sex slave market seems to have developed in the area of the so-called Islamic State while certain phenomena suggest that some kind of “rape theology” seems to be in place.¹⁷

In a similar vein the WomEx project in its base results (here further down) reconfirms what has already been a veritable truism among first-line practitioners working mostly with neo-Nazi affiliated young men, that violent extremists or hate crime offenders on a psychological level often manifests highly conflictive gender identity issues which are sometimes subsumed under the term “hyper-masculinity”. This surely seems to be a plausible explanation for the often observed phenomenon that there is hardly any violent extremist, terrorist, or hate crime offender who is not also sexist and homophobic. In a slightly different angle, first-line prevent and disengagement practitioners who work with hate crime offenders do frequently report that biographical issues of sexual victimization and abuse seem to be of key importance especially in the work with women and girls (but also with men and boys sexual violence (especially in prison environments). However, not yet discussed is what being sexist/homophobic or having been exposed to sexualized victimisation may imply concretely not only in terms of personal gender concepts but also on the level of sexual behaviour – and what this would then mean for designing effective and sustainable prevent strategies and action plans.

On yet a different level, in quantitative social studies authors as Couture in her study on Bangladesh (here above) refer to the importance of contraceptives and to empirical data on the use thereof as indicator of resilience and, implicitly, as issue of prevention. But here again, what is not yet considered or even only mentioned is the specific forms of sexual/sexualized behaviour(s) which are inherent in the question of whether, when, how and under which circumstances contraceptives are or are not used.

This bears similarities to the topic of honour crimes (the abduction or killing mostly of young women and sometimes also men as a result of their sexual conduct and/or for purposes of forced marriage). Honour crimes have been shown to geographically overlap with areas in

13 Sexualization as a psychological concept refers to

14 Farhad Khosrokhavar : Le jihadisme féminin en Europe aujourd’hui. In: <http://www.telos-eu.com/fr/le-jihadisme-feminin-en-europe-aujourd'hui.html>, March 17, 2015.

15 Dr. Mohammed Ilyas, Lecture in Sociology, University of Liverpool, UK, may figure as one researcher who has written on issues of gender and violent extremism and mentions the topic of ‘sex jihad’/ ‘jihad brides’ while renouncing the terms: Muslim Women and the Attraction of the Islamic State. In: The Journal for Society, Religion and Sciences, February 26, 2015, (<http://www.jsrs.co.uk/western-muslim-women-and-the-attraction-of-the-islamic-state/>). Also see: Mohammed Ilyas: Women affiliated with Muslims Against Crusaders and Women4Shariah, Journal of Muslims in Europe 3 (2014) p. 49-65.

16 The promise of virgins in heavenly afterlife may, however, may be based on a wrong reading of the ancient scripts which “when being retranslated and redacted (may suggest) that the heavenly offering might consist of sweet white raisins rather than virgins”; Alex Schmid 2015, p. 69 (in reference to Luxenburg, 2000; Küng, 2006; Al-Azmeh, 2014). In: Countering Violent Extremism - Developing an evidence-base for policy and practice, ed. by edited by Sara Zeiger & Anne Aly.

17 Rukmini Callimachi: ISIS Enshrines a Theology of Rape. Claiming the Quran’s support, the Islamic State codifies sex slavery in conquered regions of Iraq and Syria and uses the practice as a recruiting tool. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/14/world/middleeast/isis-enshrines-a-theology-of-rape.html?_r=0

which there also is a high frequency of violent extremist offenses. Moreover, the topic of sexual grooming (i.e. the imposition of relationships of psychological dependency and/or prostitution) has recently received considerable attention in the context of recruitment into gangs (which seems to show many parallels to recruitment into extremist organisations). However, not much attention has been given to the question what an empirical coincidence of honour crimes and sexual grooming with violent extremism could mean for strategies of preventing violent extremism.

Once again, the literature on developmental approaches in the third world curiously seems to be slightly ahead in the issue – and if the only difference at this point in time is that it introduces the term “dissident sexualities” aside of and in addition to “gender”. A yet unpublished draft of a United Nations background paper on radicalisation in Africa stresses how terrorist organisations on the continent, while they “frequently decry corruption, imperialism, and poverty” display an entirely different agenda once in power (4). In so doing, the paper emphasizes that “the bulk of fundamentalist campaigns, coercion or violence ... have been directed at controlling and punishing dissident sexualities” (next to those which are directed at so-called “‘blasphemers’, ‘apostates’, and ‘atheists’”). Needless to say, “the agents and systems which produce poverty and support neo-colonial economic relations” are then widely ignored by these violent extremist regimes. Rather, their true focus is “on public morality, as expressed through the impositions placed on Muslim women: the determination of an appropriate mode of dressing for women, their complete segregation from men, and restrictions placed on their activities in public space” – and, one might add, also through the impositions on and harassment of other “dissident sexualities”, i.e. of homo- and differently sexually oriented persons.

Whatever gender, sexuality(ies), morality etc. mean in the different policy paper contexts, practice experts from different fields tend to agree that a certain mix “of controlling and punishing dissident sexualities”, “impositions placed on (Muslim) women” and LGTB communities, phenomena of hyper-masculinity and committing/ supporting sexual violence – i.e. sexual/ sexualized behaviour – seems to be an important affective key element of violent extremisms cross the board.

As a consequence, in some more developed and field immersed approaches in the United Kingdom sexual education is a key element of building resilience in vulnerable communities or with at-risk target groups – as for instance has been practiced for many years by the field researcher and Imam Alyas Karmani.¹⁸ Mohamed Ilyas, a University of Liverpool researcher on issues of violent extremism (see footnote 15) in an interview with the author agrees that “lots of research needs to be done on how radicalization and militancy is connected to sex, gender, militarization of gender, emotions, ethnicity, memory etc. ... there is little research on the sexual biographies of the members of political and violent groups. ... But I think we have to be careful when discussing and writing about the possible relationship between honour crimes, sexual grooming and violent extremism. In the UK people have started to conflate radicalization with sexual grooming, as to imply they are the same thing, which in reality are not.”

18 Alyas Karmani may figure as one prime example who has promoted approaches of sexual education also in the context of preventing violent extremism: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/asian-grooming-why-we-need-to-talk-about-sex-7734712.html>; and: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/unsystematictheology/2015/06/isis-the-new-rock-n-roll-on-war-sex-and-meaning/>.

Hence, in summary one may conclude: Besides and before any more empirical research and conceptual clarification on gender/ sexuality(ies) and preventing violent extremism, it seems advisable that practitioners who work in first-line interventions are ready and quipped to also handle and facilitate issues of sexuality and sexual experience.

In any event, the OSCE, the United Nations and some US based initiatives on gender and prevention seem well positioned to serve as a connecting agent between global peacebuilding/ developmental work on the one hand and the security and prevention strategies within the European Union on the other – and to engage in more advanced field research on complex questions about the interrelation of gender/sexuality and violent extremism, as well as prevention.

Within the European Union – the results EU project “Women and Gender in Violent Extremism and Prevention” (WomEx.org)

If, indeed, the EU were to begin recognizing global initiatives of gender awareness in preventing violent extremism, this would most likely be facilitated through the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) – in close cooperation with the OSCE’s TNT department and similarly engaged organisations. Cultures Interactive e.V. which is presently co-chairing the RAN working group on disengagement and rehabilitation (RAN Derad) has conducted the first project on gender and prevention within EU Internal Security funding – the WomEx project¹⁹. In light of the EU’s hesitation to recognise gender-sensitive prevention work as a specific field of action, it is not surprising that WomEx has been included in the RAN Collection of Practices under the rubric of ²⁰

The WomEx project started from the assumption that, while the awareness of gender issues in prevention work is still little on EU and national policy levels, once one looks closely into the actual first-line field work of prevention and deradicalisation there are impressive niches of gender strategies and methods. To identify and document such sophisticated gender approaches within Germany was the main objective of WomEx project.

Among the subjects which may arise and are then deepened in the intervention process, gender issues have proven to be of particular importance. European practitioners’ experiences throughout the RAN’s working group on disengagement/rehabilitation (deradicalisation) as well as from the Women/Gender in Extremism and Prevention Network (cf. WomEx²¹) and similar national practitioner networks.

WomEx’s exploration of actual first-line field work has produced some basic observations which may inform further initiatives of action research and development of more nuanced methods of prevention and disengagement/distancing. Among these were the observations that:

- there seems to be hardly any violent extremist, terrorist, or hate crime offender

¹⁹ WomEx.org is an EU funded ISEC project (internal security), conducted 2012-14 by <http://www.cultures-interactive.de/womex.html>; also see womex.org.

²⁰ http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-best-practices/index_en.htm

²¹

who is not also sexist and homophobic, i.e. does manifest highly conflictive gender identity issues (hyper-masculinity, sexism, homophobia etc.); hence, it seems recommendable for prevent and disengagement programmes to take this aspect into account.

- these conflictive gender identity issues seem to not only coincide with violent extremist behaviours and group hatred but be affective triggers and key psychological driving forces behind them, which makes it all the more important for any intervention to focus on such triggers and psychological motivations.
- it is for this reason that women and LGTB communities are prime victim groups of virtually all forms of violent extremism (right-wing extremist, AQ/ISIS related, Christian fundamentalist etc.) which raises the question whether and in which ways these groups could also be part of preventive and rehabilitative measures.
- violent extremist organisations generally seem to be based on ideologies and practices of gender inequality – which is why they forcefully counter the emancipation of women (as in the neo-Nazi anti gender mainstreaming campaigns or in AQ, ISIS and similar organisations’ enforcement of strictly discriminatory views of women and gender).
- not only men but also women play a crucial role in violent extremism as perpetrators, ideologues and supporters – and both do so in a systemic way which, in turn, requires prevent strategies to be as systemic and holistic in their approaches.
- both young men and women join extremism(s) mostly because of social and gender related motives (aside of ideological or religious issues).
- violent extremist and terrorist organizations launch gender specific appeals in order to specifically recruit women – and also further recruitment of both women and men along specific ideas of being female and being male.
- Yet, *women/ girls tend to be overlooked* by prosecution, law enforcement and prevention as potential or actual extremists which requires decisive action in these fields.
- It has sometimes proven to be more effective to focus on individual *gender practices and on identity concepts* of manliness or femininity than engage in ideological or religious debates in the narrower sense – which is why strategies of preventive work would need to steer away from all too cognitive approaches of ideological critique and focus more on emotional identity issues.

The results of the WomEx project as well as of some of the other practices and approaches which are mentioned in the RAN Collection’s rubric of “supporting and empowering families” (which will grow in numbers over the years to come) suggest that the dimension of ‘women/ gender in violent extremism and prevention’ does warrant to be recognized as a distinct dimension in European programs of preventing group hatred and violent extremism.

Conclusion and outlook

How could we then take all this as an onset onto which further gender-reflective research and prevention work could be built?

(1) Follow-up research and methods development, coming out of the national starter measure WomEx, would have to reach out systematically to EU member states' and other countries' practitioners in order to test and refine them in these environments and add their experiences and approaches.

(2) Much more than originally expected, one particular question therein would be in which sense these approaches are ready and equipped to not only employ *gender specific* approaches working with women and girls (after violent extremism has been viewed as male issue mostly) but also engage in *gender focused* approaches in which both men and women are lead to reflect on their behaviours and ideologies of being male or female. This would also imply raising the question of what it means to engage in sexist, misogynist or homophobic ideas and practices – and how this translates into codes of sexual conduct and may entail sexual violence.

(3) An internationally transferable methodology and manual on how to employ this knowledge in different work fields (education, job training, targeted interventions) could follow from this.

(4) A not unimportant side line of this work would possibly be to promote some structural modifications in the policy and funding structures within current administrations on national and EU levels, to the effect that fundamental rights and security departments are brought together more closely.²² That would effectively allow for subjects of gender and security to be further developed in tandem, while thus far security departments had the tendency to declare issues of gender as being neither their competence nor mandate – and refer them to the fundamental rights department.

Clearly, taking both the female and the gender perspectives into account in group hatred, violent extremism and in prevention is not only about adding a missing piece to the picture. Rather this means to approach the matter in a more systemic way and, in so doing, help to secure success and sustainability of the work we do in responding to the problem and in creating societal resilience. This does not mean, however, that gender should be the only focus of prevention work. Rather, an intersectional approach is needed which includes gender issues as one of its crucial dimensions.

²² On the need of closer cooperation between the very different communities of security and prevention professionals see Harald Weilnböck: *Why are we still messing it up? A new Marshall Plan for preventing violent extremism – youth work, gender, mental health*, which will shortly be published on <http://www.cultures-interactive.de>.

