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# SPECIAL REPORT

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## ABOUT THE REPORT

This report looks at the multiple roles women in Afghanistan play in supporting, countering, and preventing violent extremism. Based on primary research undertaken from December 2015 through June 2016, it was supported by the Afghanistan program at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP).

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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*Belquis Ahmadi and Sadaf Lakhani*

# Afghan Women and Violent Extremism Colluding, Perpetrating, or Preventing?

## Summary

- Women's role in violent extremism has too often been simplified to a binary: either victim of the choices of men or deviant anomaly.
- Women play a diverse range of roles in violent extremism in Afghanistan—as they do around the world—not only as peacebuilders but also as recruiters, sympathizers, perpetrators, and preventers.
- Roles and motivations vary, but what is clear is that the construct of disempowered victims simply does not hold true for all women involved.
- Women's roles in violent extremism and the underlying reasons behind those roles need to be fully understood and appropriately reflected in policy and practice.
- Women's rights and place in society are central to the narratives of violent extremist groups, and these narratives are the terrain on which women in Afghanistan fight to establish their rights.
- Women have the potential, whether through their own involvement or as family members of those who are involved, to counter radicalization dynamics.
- Countering violent extremism (CVE) and preventing violent extremism (PVE) programming needs to include women as specific target groups, be engendered more generally, and address the underlying issues of women's status and agency.

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## Introduction

Violent extremism takes a toll on the lives of women and girls just as it does on the lives of men. Violence perpetrated by such groups, however, has an impact on women that is distinct from that on men. In Afghanistan, as in other countries experiencing violent extremism and conflict, the actions and narratives of violent extremist groups threaten to

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roll back many of the gains and hard-won rights women have made and earned over the last fifteen years.

Much of the recent research and the popular discourse on countering violent extremism (CVE) is reductionist in its views on women.<sup>1</sup> Women are typically portrayed either as victims—of direct, targeted violence and male-dominated decision making—or as an untapped force for preventing violent extremism. The field of CVE—and preventing violent extremism (PVE)—is growing and evolving. Many of the insights, especially those concerning women's roles, however, have been directly transplanted from the peacebuilding and conflict resolution fields. They bring with them an assumption that women are overwhelmingly a positive force for peace.<sup>2</sup>

Women, though, can just as easily be involved in and supporters of violent extremism. Solid empirical work on the involvement of women in violent extremism and how this can be addressed is lacking. Correspondingly, the ways in which existing gender roles and gender relations have or can be used by women as part of CVE responses has been little explored.

Empirical data on women and violent extremism in Afghanistan is even more scant.<sup>3</sup> Many international experts and practitioners, for example, were long unaware that, despite strict gender norms, Afghan women have been involved in violence and the actions of violent extremist groups, both historically and today.

Those recruiting for violent extremist groups seek to enlist women for many reasons. For some, women are considered property, their bodies and labor at the disposal of men. Women can perform certain functions that are critical to violent extremist groups more easily because security procedures for women are often more lax than for men.<sup>4</sup> Men accompanied by women are less likely to raise suspicion. Women reinforce values and beliefs that are central to radicalizing others. As mothers and wives, they perform an essential function in the domestic sphere. Women are also held up by extremist groups as symbolic bearers of cultural and tribal identity, the producers of the community's future generations and signs of piety.

Afghan women have played pivotal roles during the past four decades of war as mobilizers, sympathizers, logistics providers, and informants—not just as preventers of violence—particularly during the fighting between the mujahideen and the Soviets in the 1980s. Women still play a role in support for violent extremist groups today, but it is much less direct. The Taliban movement and other conservative groups have created an environment in which the roles of women in society have become more restricted, which in turn constrains the role that women play in either propagating or preventing violent extremism within and beyond their family and community circles.

The findings of this study are applicable beyond Afghanistan. They point to the way in which dominant social relations between men and women restrict the role of women in propagating and contributing to violent extremism. But they also illustrate that women can and do play an active role in propagating violent extremism, that they are not simply victims with inherent desires and capacities for peace. Without a strong evidence basis, one that recognizes the nuanced roles and motivations of women, programming on women and CVE remains driven by misconceptions. These efforts will at least miss the mark, and at worst will do harm to efforts to advance women's rights. Moreover, without an explicit recognition that violence toward women and constructions of gender roles are central to violent extremist ideologies, CVE and PVE programming in general will not be able to tackle the central elements common to much violent extremism today.

The methodology for this study differs from most recent work focusing on women and radicalization. Social media channels—which are a common and readily available resource—were not relevant for this study. We conducted semi-structured interviews with women

(and men) who had been directly or indirectly involved in violent extremism. Interviewees included female family members of current and former Taliban members in five provinces (Nangarhar, Kandahar, Sar-e-Pul, Faryab, and Helmand) and female former supporters or combatants during the jihad in the 1980s and early 1990s, both mujahideen and pro-government militias. We also included male former Taliban and Soviet jihad era commanders and fighters.

We undertook an extensive literature review and assessment of existing data on violent extremism and women in the region—Afghanistan and Pakistan in particular—and more broadly. We interviewed subject matter experts, policymakers, and researchers both in country and elsewhere. Last, we reviewed documentation on programming on both CVE and women in CVE, and spoke with practitioners to find out what kinds of approaches are currently being used in Afghanistan and more widely. One hundred twenty-three women and men—including scholars and practitioners—were interviewed in all. Unless otherwise cited, statements and conclusions in this report are drawn from these interviews.

## Peacebuilders or Symbols of Purity?

Scholars in the field of women and peacebuilding sometimes suggest that women are universally and inherently peaceful.<sup>5</sup> As former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said in highlighting women's role in addressing conflict, "For generations, women have served as peace educators, both in their families and in their societies. They have proved instrumental in building bridges rather than walls."<sup>6</sup>

Women do witness the effects of violence and conflict differently from men, but these perspectives that emphasize their contributions to the peace process as witnesses and victims often overlook both women's involvement in waging violence themselves, and the range of motivations behind the diverse roles they play. Sanam Anderlini notes that the international community

seems incapable of addressing the complex reality of their [women's] experiences. The pendulum swings to extremes. On the one hand, women are vulnerable, passive, unable to protect themselves, inevitable victims of physical and sexual abuse, and in need of protection. On the other hand, women are the panacea, the internal bulwark against extremism; their political participation is the solution to all evils—particularly those of religious militancy.<sup>7</sup>

The UK's Prevent strategy, for example, has included gender-specific interventions.<sup>8</sup> According to renowned legal expert Alex Carlile, women are more moderate and nonviolent and have the appearance of more neutrality.<sup>9</sup> They are considered "safe friends" for the government. The kinds of interventions directly targeting women include internet safety programs and radicalization awareness training so that they can identify and intervene should a family member be radicalized. The U.S. domestic strategy recognizes the importance of the role of families and local communities over that of the federal government in effective strategies for CVE, yet does not have a coherent strategy for understanding and addressing women in violent extremism.<sup>10</sup> The focus on women as a moderating force fails to recognize that women can and do play a direct role in radicalization.<sup>11</sup>

The ideologies underlying the actions of violent extremist groups often place women in defined and limited social roles, not only reinforcing views about women and the use of violence against them, but also greatly determining the role women can play in supporting violent extremist groups. The specific narratives vary from group to group but have certain commonalities. As Harald Weilnboeck points out, "Conflictive gender issues not only coincide with violent

***"Conflictive gender issues not only coincide with violent extremist behavior and group hatred, but are key psychological driving forces behind them."***

extremist behavior and group hatred, but are key psychological driving forces behind them.”<sup>12</sup> That is, gender issues are central to the narratives and behaviors of violent extremist groups.

A common thread of violent extremist groups is a strong patriarchal narrative that centers women’s role as part of both a critique of existing social systems and the replacement order that they propose to bring about. They assert that progressive and egalitarian rights have undermined once-moral societies, and they want to take those rights away. For example, the Islamic State’s discourse concerning women has been described as “pure women for a pure society.”<sup>13</sup> The Islamic State propagates the view that women’s rights have failed society and led to the alleged moral decline they fight against. The Taliban also use women in their propaganda as a marker of a society’s purity. A male youth activist from Kunar told us of how the Taliban show video clips to young mosque-goers after prayers on Friday to incite them to join. Some of these clips show allegedly Afghan women dancing for American soldiers. The men are reminded of their religious and social duties to protect their religion and honor.

Women are worn as a “badge of difference” between the faithful and unbelievers, portrayed as a marker of purity. Women’s bodies are also offered by many violent extremist groups as rewards for the pious and brave, both in paradise and as long as they are committed supporters of the group. Security and gender expert Chantal De Jonge Oudraat argues that “the violent commodification of women and girls is an essential element of the business model of extremist groups.”<sup>14</sup>

## Active Participants

As Sanam Aderitini and Madeline Koch note, “While the dominant voices and leaders of rising conservatism are male, women are both active and passive supporters of these ideologies.”<sup>15</sup> Different violent extremist groups place different types of restrictions and allow differing roles for women in jihadist groups, and in some groups women may play an active role. The Hamas charter, for example, declares that “Resisting and quelling the enemy becomes the individual duty of every Muslim, male or female. A woman can go out to fight the enemy without her husband’s permission, and so does the slave: without his master’s permission.”<sup>16</sup> Although female supporters are overall encouraged to play a more supporting role, this statement permits direct engagement in jihad (that is, a combat role). In 2007, Hamas established a new all-women’s battalion.<sup>17</sup>

Al-Qaeda has undergone much internal debate about the role of women in jihad. In a video message Abu Musab al-Zarqawi released in 2005, he called on Muslim women in Iraq to join the jihad. Women were asked to encourage their husbands to fight and to raise children who would be willing to sacrifice their lives.<sup>18</sup> Al-Qaeda’s then second-in-command Ayman al-Zawahiri, however, said on more than one occasion that women have no role in al-Qaeda other than in keeping the home and looking after their husbands and sons. A debate ensued, many women writing to al-Qaeda for asking questions about women’s role in the group.<sup>19</sup> As one blog points out, “many women were upset [by Zawahiri’s comments] and felt it was their right to play an active role in jihad.”<sup>20</sup> The debate illustrated how many women, like many men, saw fighting in these groups as an opportunity to gain status in their communities.<sup>21</sup>

The Islamic State has a strict rule against the involvement of women in direct combat, despite having used images of women carrying arms in its recruitment efforts. Women are given strict instruction on their “honored roles” as wives and mothers of jihadists, and are expected to provide support and sustenance and to fill in positions men have vacated to take part in combat. Deviation from domestic roles is permitted only in extreme cases, such as when under attack or when an imam issues a fatwa. The two Islamic State female-only brigades of al-Khansaa and Umm al-Rayan are an exception. The Islamic State created these brigades for several recruitment reasons, which include attracting female foreign fighters.

The brigades provide those who are motivated to be part of the frontline a way of doing so and give the Islamic State greater patrolling and monitoring capabilities.<sup>22</sup>

Pakistan is another country where women have participated in violent extremist group activities—despite the conservative social conventions that govern (restrict) women's roles and social status. In 2005, Gul Hassan, the head of Lashkar-e-Janghvi, spoke about its plans to use women to hit targets. Both men and women perpetrators were involved in the 2007 standoff at the Lal Masjid–Jamia Hafsa, where hostages were taken.<sup>23</sup>

## Anti-Soviet Jihad

Women have played wide-ranging and pivotal roles in Afghanistan over the past four decades of war as mobilizers, sympathizers, logistic providers, informants, and preventers of violence. Throughout the ten-year Soviet occupation, women were also significant participants. A few rose to local prominence as combatants. Mujahideen groups also had female supporters who encouraged their husbands, sons, and brothers to fight against the Soviet invaders and later the Afghan government forces. Women traveled with mujahideen to cook for them, wash their clothes, tend to the wounded, smuggle weapons, and collect intelligence. Oral testimonies of Afghan women and men about their experiences during decades of war since the 1980s include firsthand perspectives about women's participation in the battlefield, as advocates, or as sympathizers.

A male former mujahideen commander noted the key role women played: "Women also encouraged their sons to join the jihad...They were not concerned about losing their sons...after one son was killed, the mother would bring the other son to us." Speaking of his own decision to join the mujahideen, he said, "At first my mother was very emotional, but once I explained to her that the jihad was for Allah, she was fine. She gave me her blessings. She even sold her jewelry and gave me money for my expenses."

Another former mujahideen fighter from Takhar said, "I grew up in a dysfunctional family and wanted to run away from witnessing helplessly my mother being beaten up by my father every day...I decided to leave home and join the jihad. I wished my mother had tried hard to stop me from joining."

The jihad, according to those directly and indirectly involved, during this time was an all-of-society and all-of-family effort, and women's involvement was not unusual but in fact expected. Although the perceived justification for men joining the mujahideen groups in the 1980s was ideological (religious and political), a significant number also had economic or personal reasons, or were seeking revenge. Many Afghans living as refugees in Pakistan had no choice but to join one of the seven mujahideen factions if they wanted to be eligible for financial and material support from aid organizations. Support from Gulf countries was designated specifically for families of mujahideen fighters. Furthermore, during the early days, Pakistani public schools enrolled only children of members from certain factions, Hezb-e-Islami in particular.

Many Afghan women did not want to be left behind in the national resistance or jihad. Both the government and the mujahideen had female support, from illiterate women in rural areas to middle-class and highly educated women in the cities. A former female recruiter in the 1980s said her motivation was her love for Islam and her country. She talked about her aunt, who had lost six sons and two daughters but never mourned their deaths. It was only when her last son died in a bombing that she openly grieved. When asked why she had not cried over others, she said she cried now because there was no one left in her family to take food to the mujahideen and bring their clothes to her to wash.

On the other side of the conflict, Afghanistan's pro-Communist government in the 1980s took a systematic approach to promoting women's participation in public life and in politics. The Democratic Party of Women of Afghanistan worked to raise awareness among women about their rights as well as services available to them. The party was successful in recruiting women of all ages, in particular high school and university students, who were motivated to advance party objectives. Although some joined the pro-Communist government under coercion and intimidation, others made a conscious and informed decision. In areas under government control, women were offered large sums to join the intelligence service KHAD (Khadamat-e Aetla'at-e Dawlati). KHAD employed both educated and illiterate women of all ages. According to a female interviewee from Paktia, they were provided with specific instructions on how to spy on their relatives and neighbors and to audio record their conversations. Many people were arrested, tortured, or simply disappeared because of their work.

Afghan women were able to and did join men on the front lines of war in combat roles. They were also supporters, enablers, and instigators of violence. The flip side of this is that women also had the capacity and space to prevent violence and bloodshed. To demonstrate women's potential to prevent bloodshed, another interviewee remembered when—in a village in Maidan Wardak—a pro-government army helicopter was shot down by mujahideen. The seven soldiers on board the helicopter walked out with non-life threatening injuries. Soon after, they were surrounded by mujahideen poised to kill them all. An older woman from the neighborhood stood in between the survivors of the crash and the mujahideen and warned against harming the soldiers. Not only did she save seven lives, she also arranged for the soldiers to be safely taken to government control area.

## Taliban Insurgency

The differences between the support women provided the mujahideen groups and the support provided to the Taliban today are significant. The jihad against the Soviets was widely held by much of the population, who did not agree with the policies and reforms of the pro-Communist government, to be a legitimate national struggle. The legitimacy of the Taliban's jihad and methods are far more contested. One marked difference is the role in society accorded to women, and thus the forms of support women are able to provide. In families where women are treated as inferior and constantly faced with personal violence in various forms, they not only are rarely found to knowingly provide support to violent extremist groups, but also have almost no role in which to discourage or prevent their sons and husbands from joining. The erosion of women's rights to what we see today as a result of the Taliban and years of conservative agendas—despite the progress made by activists with support from the international community—and the effects of broader insecurity have had clear impacts on the roles women play in supporting violent extremist groups.

The majority of the female family members of fighters interviewed for this study, who also took part in the jihad against the Soviets, said they had a much bolder and active role in the 1980s than women do today. They were included then, they explained, in decisions as well as in providing intelligence and logistical support to mujahideen, regardless of their affiliation and tribal background. The female family members of violent extremist group fighters we interviewed did not mention support for the Taliban. They did, however, confirm women's more traditional roles, such as cooking, cleaning, and mending clothes of members and tending to sick and wounded fighters. They also emphasized raising children and abiding by family and tribal norms.

Leaders of the primary Taliban faction in Afghanistan believe that women should not take part in combat. In an interview, the former head of the Department of Preventing Vice and

Promoting Virtue for the Taliban—Mawlawi Qalamudin—said in an interview, “We did not need women’s sympathy and assistance as we had the public support. There are religiously and traditionally accepted roles for women in our society and being in the battlefield is not one of them.” Core Taliban groups have long and loudly maintained that women have a very limited social role in society. Afghan women are often perceived as nonthreatening by security forces and local power structures, and for that reason violent extremists, including bombers, disguise themselves in women’s clothes and burka.

In November 2015, a splinter group of the Taliban led by Mullah Mohammad Rasool released a statement that women have the same rights as men. Abdul Manan Niazi, one of the leaders of the breakaway faction, said, “We have realized this now, that under Islamic system all rights of human beings, both men and women need to be implemented 100%.”<sup>24</sup> Rasool also said his group would permit women to go to school and work.

Aside from the Taliban, other violent extremist groups operating in Afghanistan have greater space for women to play important roles. The Islamic Jihad Union—a splinter group of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan that was established in 2002, is closely affiliated with al-Qaeda, and operates in southeast and northern Afghanistan as well as North Waziristan in Pakistan—does not have written rules regarding women, but women continue to play an active role in both combat and noncombat situations.

As in any society, war and conflict changes gender relations, even in conservative settings. During the anti-Soviet war, it was expected and generally accepted that women would help strange men hide from government forces, tend to their wounds, or feed them. Since then, however, Afghanistan has seen a reversion to more conservative rules and roles for women. A significant number of current fighters of violent extremist groups are illiterate, or have only limited religious education, and view women as inferior to men and as incapable of performing jihad. Women no longer assist male nonfamily members unless they are coerced to do so. Women’s role in providing support is confined to their immediate family members or close relatives.

None of the female family members of fighters interviewed for this study were consulted by their husbands or sons about their decision to join the Taliban. As one interviewee from Kandahar said, “We [women] only find out about our sons’ affiliation with Taliban after they are injured, or we hear from other women in the village.” Other female members showed a marked understanding of the ways in which their family members (particularly young sons) are being radicalized to violence. They were aware of the video clips shown by the Taliban at mosques, and of the radicalization that takes place in detention centers and prisons, for example.

As the wife of a former Taliban fighter told us, “In the first few years of the war, I was in agreement with my husband to fight against the invaders. But my views have changed now. The ongoing war and violence is not jihad, it is an unjustified war imposed on us [Afghans]. We have lost human life and our valuables because of this so-called jihad.”

Another respondent, whose brother-in-law is currently with the Taliban, said, “My mother-in-law is highly respected in our village and is approached by people even from outside the district to facilitate the release of their loved ones who are detained by her son. When she calls her son she orders him to release the person and the son does what the mother asks him to do.”

Our findings suggest that women are far less involved in directly supporting the Taliban than they were the mujahideen forces. They also have less agency in the roles they do play as well as less access to information and exposure to life outside the home from which to form opinions and find voice. In such a context, women are reluctantly accepting what they hear from the men in their family and from mullahs because they don’t know any differently. The lack of women’s direct and informed support to the Taliban, however, does not mean

that the motivations for their joining the mujahideen have simply disappeared. Women in Afghanistan have not become more peaceful; they are often still motivated by the desire to seek revenge, to take action toward something meaningful, or to better their family's economic and social standing; they still have a belief in the jihad. They are simply less able to find a range of spaces for their agency and have fewer options for giving action to their desires. This distinction has implications for programming and challenges the contention that focusing solely on women's empowerment will be enough to mobilize women's agency to preventing violent extremism.

## Motivations for Violence

As noted, men and women have various motivations for their involvement in or support to violent extremist groups. These may take on different significance over time, which makes it extremely difficult within CVE programming to address one motivation at a time, given that they are strongly linked to each other. Regardless of their underlying motivation, men have primarily used religious arguments and reference to historical religious events to justify their decision to join the anti-Soviet jihad. The narratives fighters used then are similar to those that Taliban fighters use today to maintain family and public support for their actions.

The reward of paradise is also a lure for women. Women are told that if they support and encourage their sons to fight for their religion, they too will be rewarded. Conversely, if they prevent their sons from joining, they are in fact preventing them from fulfilling their duty deemed by God and destroying their own chance at entering paradise.

In some cases, Afghan women who took part in both combat and noncombat roles during the Soviet era were motivated by revenge for the deaths of fathers, brothers, or husbands. Some wanted to prove their worth to themselves and to their family. In such cases, ideology did not play an important role.

### *Family Pressures*

Challenging the status accorded to women in the existing social structure is a motivating factor for some women in supporting violent extremist groups globally. The opportunity to be powerful, to contribute to something that others deem important, and to have the same rights and abilities as men can all radicalize women to support violence. The paradox is that women are supporting groups that have regressive views about the status of women. Women may feel they are being empowered, but male members of the group will often “use” them without according them a higher social status.<sup>25</sup> As Fatima Sidiqi points out, although women's participation in violent extremist groups is often encouraged, once mobilization is successful and the violent extremist group has achieved their aims, women are denied decision-making space in the new system or regime.<sup>26</sup> This also holds true for Afghanistan. A female interviewee from Panjshir who served as a recruiter for mujahideen in the 1980s said she ended up in prison for several years; after the mujahideen groups gained power in early 1990s, all her sacrifices were disregarded—yet her male counterparts were recognized and rewarded. A male former mujahideen who is currently a high ranking officer at one of the security agencies explained: “The reality is that women played a very important role during the jihad, but once we won the jihad we forgot about their sacrifices and that was because of our ignorance.” Other influences were found to have come from social pressures to follow the directions of family or broader community members. For many women, this is the norm—supporting violent extremist groups or their male relatives is what others within her family and her immediate social network do. The idea of abstaining from support is often not an option. A lack of alternatives can limit an individual's response to such pressures.

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Again, this applies both to female relatives of the Taliban and former Taliban and to women involved with the mujahideen.

Vengeance can motivate a person to extreme measures to achieve what they see as justice. We heard of women whose husbands or fathers have been killed supporting violent extremist groups. The desire to restore family or personal honor is often inseparable from the desire for revenge. This was true for both female relatives of the Taliban and those directly involved with the mujahideen.

Although some believe it is their religious duty to fight against the Western invaders and the Afghan government, many join insurgent groups for monetary gain. Of the women interviewed, the majority said the main reasons their male family members join the Taliban and other violent extremist groups is the lack of other income-earning opportunities to support their families.

### ***Supporting Male Relatives***

Although most women interviewed were not consulted by their male relatives before the men joined the Taliban, once the women found out their reactions were mixed. Differences were significant in women's roles in supporting or preventing their family members from joining violent extremist groups across the provinces we researched.

In Faryab and Sar-e-pul, a predominately Uzbek and Arab population, women's response to whether they were consulted was, "Our men are stubborn, and they don't value women's opinion." In predominantly Pashtun areas, one interviewee replied, "Yes, of course we are consulted, but that doesn't mean that our advice is considered." Another interviewee from Kandahar said, "We want to be included in family-related decisions, but we are afraid how to bring the issue up because we are always within the four walls of our home, we do not know much. We lack the self-confidence and communication skills as well as religious knowledge."

Others said that parents have lost influence over their sons. An interviewee from Kandahar explained:

I cannot stop my son from joining the armed groups. I cannot go outside to stop him from going to jihad because my husband would kill me. I do not know who he is friends with. My son thinks he knows better because he is always outside meeting people. He doesn't take me seriously because I do not have convincing answers for him.

Some were sympathetic toward their husbands and sons for joining armed groups because that was the only way they were able to provide for their families. One interviewee said, "Our customs don't allow women to earn an income. As a result there is a lot of pressure on men to feed his wife and children, parents and siblings and their offspring. In the absence of job opportunities they have no option but to join armed groups."

These customs, however, do not mean that women do not help in supporting violence and preventing their family members from joining. One interviewee explained, "Even though women have very little role in decision making, they can still motivate and provoke men to do wrong things. For example, if a mother tells her son or a wife tells her husband to take revenge from someone or to do jihad, then there is nothing that can stop the son or husband. It becomes an issue of honor."

Women who have managed to prevent their sons and husband from continuing to fight alongside violent extremist groups have used emotional pleas. One mother said, "As soon as I found out that my son had joined the Taliban, I called him and told him I will not forgive my milk to you if you don't quit."

Another said, “I told my husband to divorce me so that I could carry on with my life if he wished to continue the jihad. I told him I didn’t want to become a widow and become a property of another man. That same day he surrendered to government and joined the peace process.”

An interviewee from Kandahar explained more fully:

One needs the right set of communication skills and religious knowledge to be able to convince another person from following the wrong path in life. One has to be able to logically argue. Unfortunately, women lack these necessary knowledge and skills. You cannot just say to son or husband give up arms. You need to constantly tell him why he needs to give up violence. Those who are ideologically devoted and are brainwashed cannot easily be persuaded and may never be persuaded to give up violence. But one must never stop trying.

A male interviewee from Paktia provided another perspective:

No matter how oppressed women are, they have some level of influence over their sons and husbands, more so over their sons. When women talk about the hardships such as loss of income, dependency on others, insecurity, separation from spouses and children and or mothers, men listen. Sometimes men want to hear these from their mothers or wives and they want to listen to them, but women either lack the confidence to raise their voice or just do not care. This is the case in families where women are victims of domestic violence. Women want the men to be away from home.

### ***Limited Exposure and Access to Information***

A woman’s knowledge—or lack of it—can be exploited by men in positions of authority. Religious figures are particularly powerful in radicalizing women or persuading women to recruit their family members into jihad. The narrative woven by today’s violent extremist groups resonates across societal levels. It is convincing to ordinary Afghans and women because they have little knowledge of religious teachings. Many observant but poorly educated Afghans look up to mullahs and other recognized or self-proclaimed religious scholars for guidance and interpretation of religious texts. This has given religious actors a great deal of influence and authority over the population.

Women are at a particular disadvantage when it comes to questioning violent extremist narratives—especially when the narratives are allegedly based on Quranic teachings. Women’s religious knowledge is often more limited than that of the men in their families, they have little access to information from outside the home, and gender norms do not permit their questioning male or religious figures of authority. One woman told us, “I don’t know what jihad means, but from what I am hearing from my family and the mullah through loudspeaker jihad is a religious duty. But then I hear about the killing of innocent people I get so confused.” Women—even more than men—lack the social networks to access alternative views. Religious perspectives in particular emphasize both the obligation and rewards for jihad. Combined with social pressures, they provide a powerful web of motivations. These religious interpretations and the power they wield are effective in controlling not only women but also communities more broadly. Some women firmly believe—simply because they are told so by male relatives and by the mullahs—that the men in the family are doing “God’s work.”

Lack of information can also play into the reasons and motivations for women to provide support, or simply turn a blind eye, in other ways. For some women, their male relatives have

been found to have involved them in actions that support violent extremist groups—such as transporting arms—but given them only limited information about what they were doing. This removes the choice of whether and how the woman wishes to express support, in essence, removing her agency while still utilizing her.

One interviewee from Kandahar said that women lack self-confidence, communication skills, and religious knowledge to persuade their family members from joining armed groups. “When it comes to religious knowledge, all we know is how to pray five times a day and recite the prayer in a language that we don’t even understand. How can we engage in a meaningful conversation about what jihad is or isn’t?”

In interviews with female relatives of fighters, most had strong opinions that jihad against non-Muslims was a religious duty for all Muslims. One woman said, “I am against violence of any kind, but knowing that jihad is a religious duty sometimes it has crossed my mind to join the armed groups and fight against the infidels after I hear the horrible stories from my family members.” Nearly all condemned the killing of Muslims—fellow Afghans—in Afghanistan, and the vast majority of women said they did not support the current fighting. However, opinions vary on the definition of jihad as well as whether the current fighting really constitutes jihad. Several women defined it as a religious duty and a fight against infidels. Others focused on jihad as a way to protect country and religion. Fewer referred to it as a way to reconciliation and peace. A little over half of the female relatives of former Taliban interviewed said that the current war in Afghanistan was not jihad, primarily because many Muslims are being harmed. One said, “We are made to believe and act upon whatever the mullah preaches or quietly accept the religious argument our men make to justify their involvement in violence.”

The predominance and preference for madrasa education for girls plays a strong part in the sense of a religious obligation among women. These religious educational institutions also espouse a form of gender relationships that is disempowering for women, adding to their lack of ability to question and counter the religious teachings and propaganda of the Taliban. According to data from the Afghan Ministry of Education, an estimated eleven hundred official madrassas and eighty private registered madrassas operate across the country.<sup>27</sup> Female madrasa attendance at the national level could not be established, but in Kunduz city, more than six thousand girls and women attend an unregistered women-only madrasa, Ashraf-ul Madares. Although in principle the curriculum of the registered madrassas are developed and approved by the Ministry of Education, in reality the teachers have full autonomy on what and how they teach. An estimated twenty-four thousand private nonregistered madrassas have also been established by religious clerics, over which the government has no control over the teaching materials or the method of teaching. This was corroborated by an official from the National Department of Security who did not want to be identified. Kunduz-based civil society organizations have raised serious concern about the fate of the six thousand-plus girls who act as moral police in their family and the society. Some young women have quit their formal studies and have joined the Ashraf-ul Madares and other such madrassas.

Many female madrassas are run by Jamiat-e Eslah.<sup>28</sup> In places where the group has influence, women are being radicalized toward a narrow view of society promoted by violent extremist groups. The girls are discouraged from public assembly or even socializing in weddings. Female Jamiat-e Eslah members show up at wedding parties and tell women that listening to music is haram and that they should instead listen to recitations from the Quran. Jamiat-e Eslah is more active in provincial centers, mostly engaging with educated women. A male interviewee from Maidan Wardak believed that “If and when they [Jamiat-e Eslah] find their way to village level, it will be very difficult if not impossible

to reverse things. The government must take this seriously because some of these madrassas are producing the female version of Taliban fanatics.” Many from civil society have expressed serious concerns about the group’s ultraconservative teaching subjects and methodologies.

It is not clear whether madrassas run by Jamiat-e Eslah are contributing to women’s support for violent extremism, but the highly conservative view they present and the lack of exposure and access to alternative points of view have resulted in women’s buying in to the group propaganda that justifies the ongoing war as jihad against foreign occupation. Some women said that were it not for the restrictions imposed on women’s mobility by their families, they would participate in the jihad against non-Muslims.

## Limits of Existing Programming

The predominance of a narrative of women as victims—even when they have been involved directly in violent extremism—has translated into theories of change that the empowerment of women and closing the gap on gender inequalities will make a positive contribution to countering violent extremism.

Our research finds that women do have the potential and ability to break the cycle of violence, both within a family and at the community level. Older women in particular, have more influence on their sons’ actions, especially when the mother is the head of the family. However, in Afghanistan today most women are not consulted or informed by the men in the family about their work outside the house. Parents may miss early signs of radicalization when they can still influence their sons’ life trajectory. In Afghan society, particularly in the rural areas, men who display these behaviors may be hailed as true believers. Other parents simply do not know what to do or how to approach the subject, especially if their sons use religious arguments and justification. This finding, however, accompanied findings on how women can equally be propagators of violent extremism. We propose how to better design programs to address the motivations and dynamics around women’s support for violent extremism, and why and how the central role of gender constructions in violent extremist narratives need to be tackled.

Existing interventions are often based on assumptions about the role of women as inherent peacebuilders. A program targeting mothers in India, Tajikistan, Pakistan, and Nigeria posits that “mothers are strategically placed to serve as a buffer between radical influences and those targeted next,” and that they are the starting point for resiliency in their children’s early years.<sup>29</sup> This is problematic because women are seen as intrinsically moderate, wanting to save their children from extremist groups, and not directly involved in violent extremist groups or in the process of radicalization. Our research indicates otherwise. These programs and the concepts behind them see Muslim women as universally disempowered, consider most women to be inherently peaceful, and perpetuate those stereotypes to harmful effect.

Although the revised U.S. National Action Plan is explicit about bringing a women, peace, and security agenda to CVE, programs that directly address women’s role in violent extremism and CVE/PVE are to date few and far between.<sup>30</sup> Evaluation of those efforts that do have a gender component or that target women is scant.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, an interesting but largely unevicenced assumption holds that progress on broader gender empowerment indicators—such as educational attainment, women involvement in political decision making, and so on—can prevent radicalization to violence. The rationale is that women’s empowerment will assist, first, in preventing their radicalization and, second, in bringing their natural inclinations for peace to fully bear. The assumption—again—is that women are inherently more peaceful than men.

***Our research finds that women do have the potential and ability to break the cycle of violence, both within a family and at the community level.***

In general, however, gender has not been integrated into CVE activities, ongoing project metrics, or evaluations. A recent report found that CVE programming—even by entities such as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) that would normally call for gendered indicators for other kinds of programming—do not require them because of the assumption that these interventions are focused on men.<sup>32</sup> As recently as 2012, *A Decade Lost*—a major review of gender and counterterrorism programming—documented that no international or domestic U.S. government counterterrorism program had mandated collection and reporting on sex-disaggregated indicators in its outputs and outcomes.<sup>33</sup>

Individual factors that contribute to the acceptance and use of violence and support for violent extremist groups—even when they are relevant for both women and men—will still have a different salience for women. Programming needs to take these differing motivations into account if they are to have greater efficacy; for example, counternarratives need to understand women’s interpretations and access to information to appropriately tailor their messaging.

### ***CVE Programs***

In programs that fall within the general rubric of CVE interventions in Afghanistan, the absence of gender is clear.

Little countermessaging content—through any channels—has been created specifically for women. General information may have some utility, but in a context where women are socialized to naturally defer to men’s opinion and knowledge, speaking to them directly can be particularly powerful. Television and radio may be information channels for women, although some madrassa education is contesting women’s access to these channels; mobile SMS campaigns, however, which have been commonly used in Afghanistan, are less effective because women are not direct targets.

In religious tolerance programs, women end up being a once-removed target group because they are not able to attend mosques and religious gatherings in the same way that men are. The information that they receive is filtered through their male relatives.

When deradicalization programs have targeted radicalized individuals, women were not part of the target group but instead engaged as a positive force in the process. Women need to be the subject of deradicalization efforts.

Human rights promotion is not well suited to countering the degradation of human rights that inevitably accompanies violent extremist group activity. Our interviews suggest that using religious arguments instead is more effective in raising awareness among women about such myths and superstitious beliefs, in deconstructing the untruths and inconsistencies of violent extremists, and in providing different narratives that can resonate with ordinary people. As a female interviewee from Paktia province observed, “Using human rights narrative and constitutional arguments do not mean anything to ordinary people, particularly to women.”

### ***Propagating Violence, Supporting Violent Extremism***

As discussed, an assumption among CVE proponents and practitioners is that women are well positioned to participate in countering radicalization at all stages. As domestic providers, their emotional support of and transmission of values to young children is crucial. The assumption should not be made that they play these roles for peaceful ends, however.

Our research has shown that some women are key agents in radicalization within the domestic sphere and that some challenge the support their family members provide to violent extremist groups. Programming to reach these women must take into account the full range of their roles—in direct and indirect support, as well as that which counters the radi-

***Little countermessaging content—through any channels—has been created specifically for women.***

calization of family members. Programs must also seek to address the dynamics underlying these roles and their motivations, including—as some commentators have argued—that the ideology and actions of violent extremist groups are a terrain in which women are fighting for their rights and their rights are being simultaneously undermined.

Women’s empowerment is an aim by itself, many critics have said, and should not be instrumentalized for a security agenda. However, recognizing that the ideologies and actions of violent extremist groups have the degradation of women’s rights at their core does mean that protecting and bolstering those rights must also be central in responses to violent extremism. As one of the female activists noted, “Women’s role in preventing violent extremism is tied to their relation with authority and their role in governance, be it at the level of society or family.” Integrating gendered CVE efforts with women’s empowerment programming is thus a critical area of practice that should be explored further.

## Recommendations

Human rights promotion is not, as noted, well suited to countering the degradation of human rights that inevitably accompanies violent extremist group activity. To counter violent extremist propaganda, policymakers and practitioners must consider using religious arguments that can resonate with ordinary people to deconstruct and discredit violent extremist narratives.

- **Understand differences between genders when looking at violent extremist dynamics and individual factors in support for violent extremism.** For example, a gendered analysis reveals in the Afghan context that unemployment issues may have more to do with status and satisfaction for men, and with incoming resources for women. Relevant programming may need to consider these motivations.
- **Break down the myth of rewards gleaned by women in their support for violent extremist groups.** If violent extremist groups are terrain on which women fight for their rights, it is critical to show women that these groups do not respect their rights and roles—that they as women are very often used instrumentally. Women should be encouraged to question whether they are being accorded positions of power as reward for the critical roles they played and whether the groups they support provide and push for a vision they—and other women—support.
- **Work on counter and alternative narratives that engage specifically with violent extremist groups’ propaganda on women.** The centrality of regressive constructions of gender to violent extremist groups’ ideologies means that a critique and reenvisioning through both men’s and women’s voices should be central to the narratives that challenge them. Deradicalization programming should include more flexible and accommodating views of gender identities and behaviors.<sup>34</sup>
- **Continue support for women’s education and women’s presence in leadership positions, particularly as religious authorities.** Women must be confident and knowledgeable in their own interpretations and views on religious obligations if they are to counter radical interpretations. It would be in error, however, to assume that by themselves such interventions will ensure that women do not support violent extremism.
- **Educate women on early intervention for deradicalization.** Religious actors, institutions, and civil society organizations can play an important role in raising awareness on early interventions for parents to carry out against youth radicalization. Parents and community leaders must also have the required skills and knowledge to guide young men and women to dismiss radical ideologies.

- **Build alternate visions.** Violent extremist groups offer a vision for the future; they are often very clear about what change they wish to see. Preventing and countering violent extremism should also involve creating visions. For women who wish to be part of a change process, and thus have been motivated to support violent extremist groups or sympathize with them, it is essential to help them envision a different future, of their choosing, and then to build that vision. This means also refraining from pushing what looks like Western-backed notions of their futures.
- **Provide alternative channels for claiming rights and having their grievances heard.** While challenging the legitimacy of the use of violence, work on CVE must also be able to provide other options for men and women who wish to fight for or claim their rights. For example, they could be informed and supported to do this using nonviolence, using existing channels for accountability open for women, or assuming leadership positions.

## Notes

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