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United Nations Entity for Gender Equality
and the Empowerment of Women

Expert Meeting

Role of women and young people in promoting peace and preventing violent extremism in the Euro-Mediterranean region

18-19 July 2017, Barcelona

Summary report



Supported by:



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Introduction

On July 18th-19th 2017, a two-day regional expert meeting was jointly organised by the Secretariat of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (UN Women) to take stock of current research and experience on preventing violent extremism as related to the Women, Peace and Security agenda and the Youth, Peace and Security agenda in the Euro-Mediterranean region and to make recommendations for future action.

The meeting provided an open space to discuss approaches and lessons learned at the national and regional levels, to identify areas for regional initiatives and to develop concrete recommendations to address the root causes of violence, radicalization and violent extremism with a specific focus on the roles of women and youth.

Main discussion points

In the different sessions, keynote speakers and presenters shared the findings of recent studies and their direct experiences, focusing on the drivers of and responses to violent extremism.

All available literature around violent extremism recognizes the complexity of the topic by pointing to (often interlinked) economic, social, cultural and religious elements. Many of the participating researchers emphasized the fact that radicalization is often an individual path which makes it difficult to identify a consistent framework for analysis and action. It was noted by many that while joining violent extremist groups is often thought to be associated with mental illness or irrational thinking, data shows that mental illness amongst incarcerated terrorists is in fact lower than the general population. It was also noted that women are political and rational actors, and join violent extremist groups for their own set of issues and ambitions. While some join as 'jihadi wives', women also serve as fighters, recruiters and instigators. As an example, it was noted that ISIS is increasingly using female snipers, highlighting that the role of women in ISIS is evolving.

Throughout this discussion, it was noted that more research is necessary on the drivers towards violent extremism and to better understand why most people do not take up extremist action (i.e. what are the factors that keep people engaged within the social compact, utilizing dialogue and other means to address issues of concern?). One of the key presenters suggested that sometimes membership in organized groups, including apparently radical political movements, serves as a protection against violent extremism in giving people a stake in society.

There was a call to learn more from past experiences in Algeria and elsewhere about reintegrating extremists into their communities to help understand how social factors play a role before and after the experience of radicalization and to learn from the experiences of former extremists to aid future prevention.

Plenary sessions were enriched by participants' direct exposure to research and field work. Some of the highlights noted were:

- The need for a multidimensional approach, since the plurality of causes requires solutions to be the same.
- The interconnection between social, economic, cultural, religious, and other drivers – when it comes to roles and social spaces traditionally opened or denied to women and youth.
- The recognition that many people joining violent extremist groups are actively looking for ways to practice their beliefs and change their societies. Very few are people who stumble upon these groups are then coerced to join. To this end, recruitment is less about poverty and class, and more about frustration.
- The importance of understanding the impact that systems of incentives or access to opportunities for personal growth and emancipation may have in pushing people towards one path rather than another, when it comes to radicalization/recruitment or engagement in preventing violent extremism. An example provided was the issue of revenge when a person is imprisoned, which can push family members towards radicalization. In prison, there is also a risk of radicalization. Understanding this cost/benefit analysis can point to ways of effective prevention.
- The importance of considering issues relating to the security-orientated approach, political marginalization and human rights violations as potential drivers of radicalization as well as the relation to conflicts dynamics.
- The importance of highlighting the positive roles that young people and women can play in preventing violence and factors for rejecting violence.



Specific points on engaging women

It was noted that issues of gender identity and roles serve as a powerful driver into violent extremist groups. For example, violent extremist groups often use female fighters when they have 'run out' of male fighters (e.g. militia snipers in Libya) in part to shame men into joining to take up their 'gendered' responsibilities as fighters and allow women to 'return' to safer space (i.e. the home). To some, the fact women are taking an active role in violent extremism comes as a surprise given the traditional positive image of women as nurturers and caretakers of their homes and families. In the discussion, the following four areas were identified as possible factors pushing women to engage in violent extremism:

- Revenge for something that happened to their families.
- Respect – seeking respect for the freedom to live their religious affiliation (particularly in the Western societies) without judgment, even if religion is often found as not being the primary driver towards joining violent groups. It seems rather that religious narratives are used to then keep cohesion within the groups.
- Relationships – social networks, friends, and family push women to join.
- Redemption and self-realization.

Moreover, it was noted that the voices of women tend to get lost within the dialogue and discourse on violent extremism. To this end, when engaging in partnerships to prevent violent extremism, practitioners should be aware of a tendency to securitize the response, which implies an unbalanced investment of resources between military and non-military solutions. Women are often squeezed between the actions of terrorists and the actions of the state or security forces in combating terrorists. There is a real need to help work with women in affected communities to grow the space in the middle, and to refocus responses to ensure counter-terrorism work is based on human rights but also complemented by a preventative development approach. Further, it was noted that the world of counter terrorism efforts tends to be a male dominated space. This inhibits engagement with women particularly in the military and police sectors.

A series of challenges were identified in current modes of operating. Included amongst these was the tendency for outside interventions to go through English speaking gate-keepers. It was agreed that a positive contribution could be made in the EuroMed area to link local NGOs directly with each other, and not through international NGOs. It was emphasized that at a local level, more can be done to build women's leadership, and to work with women preachers who often have access to hard-to-reach groups. This should also include the effective involvement of women and women's organizations at the local level, building on existing and ongoing initiatives, and support to local networks.

The importance of supporting the families of violent extremists was acknowledged, both to learn from them, to stop stigmatization and to help create exit points from radicalization.

National Action Plans (NAPs) on UN SCR 1325 were mentioned as a potential tool to help integrate government plans with women and women's organizations. However, it was also noted that NAPs in Arab countries are few, and the NAP development process is not always representative in terms of societal diversity.

The link between militarization, violence and extremism was underscored. Also, women's rights actors highlighted the need to balance between spending on security and on prevention and good governance inputs as a means of stemming recruitment into violent extremist groups.



Specific points on engaging youth

When talking of youth engagement in preventing violent extremism, it is important to understand how recruitment is done by ISIS and other organizations inducing radicalization. Prevention should include, for example, narrowcasting when addressing young people, since radical groups study youth on a 1 to 1 basis and individualize messages. In fact, strategies to prevent violent extremism should create clear, viable alternative paths for young people.

Unfortunately, attempts to engage youth more constructively in preventing violent extremism use standardized approaches and tend to repeat stereotypes of youth. These measures should be accompanied by a shift in the narrative around youth groups' actions that provide a powerful public recognition.

Action must be undertaken at local, national and regional levels – as in the case of the involvement of women’s groups. Effective support would require including youth in designing programmes, and providing them with the data and specific case studies coming from research to make them better equipped. Supporting young people and their youth organizations is vital beyond preventing violent extremism. In this regard, the idea of possibly creating an Arab Youth Forum building on lessons learnt from the European Youth Forum was raised.

Support for youth organizations especially in the South Mediterranean region should be increased and scaled up. From their side, Government actors are not always able to meaningfully engage youth in the promotion of peace and social cohesion. They can sometimes take a patronizing attitude rather than supporting young people’s own engagement. Within this context, ISIS seems to have been successful in taking advantage of this situation by providing people with some sort of alternatives. There is a need to invest in more localized partnerships to be able to reach the most vulnerable youth and move away from the binary choice of either facing poverty or looking for the opportunities provided by violent extremism groups.

There was a recognition of the role of religion and religious authorities in engaging youth in preventing violent extremism. Institutional actors could help create non-judgmental spaces about the role of religion at large, both at a social and theological level.

Final recommendations

The groups sought to focus on recommendations that were pertinent to the Euro-Mediterranean area. There were three key groups of recommendations on: research; policy approaches and actions; and engaging networks and resources.

In the area of **research**, participants called for approaches that put communities at the centre of the research process. They noted the need to support and integrate networks of North African scholars into PVE research, policy making and programming. In addition, the following areas were highlighted as areas that need greater research and exploration, to inform programing and policy making:

- The relationship between religion and violent extremism – grounded in different contexts. From this, specific tools should be developed to support communities and individuals to combat the methods they are facing.
- Patterns in the recruitment and radicalization of women, including analysis of peer and family influences, as well as sexual and gender-based violence, linked to the rise in women’s militancy beyond just extremism.
- The impact of counter-terrorism measures on PVE efforts, as well as an outcome comparison of the two strategies.
- A greater understanding of best practices in prevention efforts: what has been done in preventing extremism in the region; where approaches have proved effective, how can this be adapted and modified to other contexts. Where approaches have been ineffective, how can we stop their proliferation.

- The importance of highlighting the positive roles that young people and women can play in preventing violence and factors for rejecting violence.



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In the area of **policy and programming**, the importance of differentiating between long-term and short-term goals was emphasized. For example, better governance is a long-term goal, while rehabilitation is a short-term and more immediate response. Policy recommendations included:

- The systematic engagement of women and youth groups at early stages of policymaking.
- The importance of adapting disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) strategies to PVE work. There have been decades of work on DDR, which can serve as a useful foundation for work on PVE and reintegrating fighters. This includes ensuring transitional justice mechanisms that support healing processes, ensuring national commitments for the provision of social services to male and female returnees in need of support and protection and working to de-stigmatize families of extremists.
- The importance of prison reform and sharing good practices from different approaches in prison as a space for prevention, rehabilitation and disengagement of men and women, rather than a space for radicalization.
- Use more conflict analysis tools in assessing the impact of extremism and of government policies to counter extremism (“do no harm” principles).
- Use civil society groups to monitor the impact of PVE strategies.

- Share experiences of reintegrating former extremists in society to humanize them and create understanding.
- Use media and creative strategies to promote the roles of women and youth in violence prevention, including:
 - Develop targeted messages and a positive narrative on the role and experiences of youth as positive agents of peace in order to change some of the stereotypes around youth and promote positive opportunities for their futures.
 - Enhance the use and content of existing e-platforms to exchange practices, share experiences and keep a horizontal dialogue among youth and women organizations involved in PVE.
 - Develop coordinated media campaigns as relevant on key topics in EuroMed countries.

On **engaging networks and resources**, recommendations included:

- Find ways of bringing diverse and often divergent groups together to discuss common aims, to build understanding and diversify policy forums.
- Support and utilize existing women's networks and youth networks to bolster against violent extremism and ensure multi-year funding opportunities are open to them.
- Improve grass roots links across the Euro Mediterranean area, putting women's groups and youth groups in direct contact (remove gate-keepers).
- Improve multi-year funding opportunities and generally protect space and safety for civil society to operate, and actively engage on a range of topics in the region, as their role in a democratic society is vital.

Annex I

Agenda

DAY ONE			
Time	Session		
08:30 - 09:00	Registration		
09:00 - 09:30 <i>Plenary</i>	Welcome session <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Opening remarks from the organizers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ambassador Delphine Borione, Senior Deputy Secretary General, UFM ○ Mohammad Naciri, Regional Director, UNWomen ○ Zena Ali-Ahmed, Deputy Director, UNDP 		
09:30 - 10:30 <i>Plenary</i>	Stocktaking and understanding lessons from current research on causes and drivers of violent extremism and the role of women and youth <p>Speakers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Dr. Muhammad Abu Rumman, Center for Strategic Studies, University of Jordan ● Dr. Dalia-Zina Ghanem-Yazbeck, Carnegie Middle East Center, Lebanon ● Dr. Georges Fahmi, Robert Schuman Center for Advanced Studies, European University Institute, Italy <p>Moderator: Ms. Zena Ali-Ahmed, UNDP</p>		
10:30 - 11:00	Coffee break		
11:00 - 13:00 <i>Open Plenary</i>	Stocktaking and understanding lessons from current research on causes and drivers of violent extremism and the role of women and youth <p><i>Participants' experience sharing</i></p> <p>Moderator: Ms. Zena Ali-Ahmed, UNDP</p>		
13:00 - 14:00	Lunch		
14:00 - 16:30 <i>Round tables</i>	<table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"> Role of women in sustaining peace and development approaches to PVE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What roles- if any- are women playing in mobilizing, facilitating, and/or preventing violent extremism? ● Exchanges concerning good practices to support women's inclusion and meaningful participation in PVE policymaking and programming. <p>Discussants:</p> </td> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"> Role of youth in sustaining peace and development approaches to PVE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What roles do young people play in preventing violent extremism in the region? ● Exchanges concerning good practices to support participation by young people in PVE policy making and programming ● Discussion of ongoing activities in the region by different actors to promote the role of youth as agents for positive change. <p>Discussants:</p> </td> </tr> </table>	Role of women in sustaining peace and development approaches to PVE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What roles- if any- are women playing in mobilizing, facilitating, and/or preventing violent extremism? ● Exchanges concerning good practices to support women's inclusion and meaningful participation in PVE policymaking and programming. <p>Discussants:</p>	Role of youth in sustaining peace and development approaches to PVE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What roles do young people play in preventing violent extremism in the region? ● Exchanges concerning good practices to support participation by young people in PVE policy making and programming ● Discussion of ongoing activities in the region by different actors to promote the role of youth as agents for positive change. <p>Discussants:</p>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ms. Clara Cabera Brasero, Women Peace Security Focal Points Network Ms. Fatima El-Zahr Langhi, Libyan Women's Platform for Peace <p>Moderator: Mr. Mohammad Naciri, UN Women</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ms. Hilde Deman, Search for Common Ground Ms. Sandra Sachetti, OSCE Mr. Emad Badi, Peaceful Change Initiative <p>Moderator: Ms. Noella Richard, UNDP</p>
16.30-17.15 <i>Plenary</i>	Conclusions and summary of the day	

DAY TWO		
Time	Session	
09:00 - 09:30 <i>Plenary</i>	Introduction	
09:30 - 11:00 <i>Round tables</i>	<p>Networks and partnerships to promote the role of women in sustaining peace and preventing violence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The roles and requirements of women's, civil society organizations, networks and other key stakeholders in promoting experience-sharing, dialogue and advocacy. The role of national and local authorities and municipalities in supporting women's roles. <p>Discussants:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ms. Hibaaq Osman, Karama Dr. Jayne Huckerby, Duke University <p>Moderator: Amb. Delphine Borione, UfM</p>	<p>Networks and partnerships to promote the role of young people in sustaining peace and preventing violence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The role of youth, youth organizations and other key stakeholders in promoting experience-sharing, dialogue, and advocacy The role of national and local authorities and municipalities in supporting civil society and individual efforts to empower young people. <p>Discussants:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ms. Mari Stromsvag, European Youth Forum Ms. Mahassen Haddarah, Youth Center for Dialogue, Lebanon <p>Moderator: Francesco Galtieri, Independent Expert</p>
11:00 - 11:30	Coffee break	
11:30 - 13:00 <i>Working groups</i>	<p>Action-Oriented Regional Responses and Initiatives</p> <p>Working groups to discuss and prepare suggestions and recommendations for future action-oriented responses and initiatives.</p> <p>Group 1. – focused on women Group 2. – focused on youth</p>	

	Group 3. – focused on both women and youth
13:00 - 14:00	Lunch
14:00 - 16:00 <i>Plenary</i>	Conclusions and Summary: Recommendations for regional responses and initiatives
16:00 - 16:30	Closing remarks

