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‘Duped: Why Gender Stereotypes are Leading to Inadequate Deradicalization and Disengagement Strategies’

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1. INTRODUCTION

In narratives around insurgencies, terrorism, and other forms of armed political violence, the media – and policymakers – frequently portray women as victims or unintelligent pawns of men. Occasionally, when a woman has a direct role in a violent act, she will receive more in-depth attention, with various often salacious details reported by the media about her family, motives, romantic relationships, and, especially, her appearance (Brown 2011; Gentry and Sjoberg 2015; Gonsalves 2005; Laster and Erez 2015; Nacos 2005). Arguably, these violent women get significantly more media attention than their male counterparts because they are such a departure from societal stereotypes of nurturing, peaceful women. But even these narratives of deviance reinforce societal stereotypes about women: they are emotional, easily manipulated, often deranged, certainly not political, or simply unintelligent. When Muslim women are involved in violent groups, such stereotypes are often even more exaggerated and paired with religious and racial stereotypes. The trope of oppressed Muslim women has been widespread in post-9/11 “War on Terror” rhetoric, from American justification that invading Afghanistan would liberate Afghani women, to the repeated language of “empowering Muslim women” in counter-terrorism programs in the UK and elsewhere (Jabbara 2006; Rashid 2014). This imagery is not complete without the counterpoint of the dangerous and abusive Muslim man – or, as Jabbara states, the age-old story of “white men rescuing brown women from brown men” (2006, 236). Such sensationalism, however, detracts from the much more common, systematic, and critical roles that women have in building and sustaining the legacy and strength of terrorist and insurgent groups.

The number of foreign women and children travelling to Daesh territory in Syria reportedly increased significantly between 2015-2017 (Barrett 2017). However, media attention on female recruits also skyrocketed in this period due to the three teenage girls from Bethnal Green in the UK who went to Syria in 2015. It is thus unclear if the numbers of women actually increased or if the government and media simply became more aware of it. The current data on “foreign fighters” illustrates the lack of attention on women as important actors in insurgencies and terrorism – as well as the complex legal situation of what to do with them when they try to return home (Maher 2017). According to the most recent estimates, foreign fighters from Western Europe who went to Syria or Iraq numbered approximately 5,778, including 680 women – or just under 12 percent (Barrett 2017). In the European Union, approximately 1,200 of these foreign fighters have returned, including approximately 425 (of an estimated 850) in the United Kingdom (Barrett



2017), but it is unclear how many of these returnees are women. A new dataset estimates that only 8 percent of documented returnees to Western Europe, and 4 percent worldwide are women (Cook and Vale 2018). But because the United Nations term “foreign terrorist fighter” (FTF) by default omits women if they are not deemed to be direct perpetrators of violence, estimates on FTFs often do not include women and children—and this directly affects what policies and programs are designed for them.

As a result, women returnees—and their children where applicable—are difficult both to quantify and to assess. This paper argues that a failure to ask meaningful questions about women’s roles in extremist and insurgent violence in Western Europe has reinforced gender stereotypes, which has in turn led to disengagement and “deradicalization” programs that ignore or downplay women’s importance in fostering violence. Focusing only on attackers and on immediate, visible violence is a strategic mistake. While being involved in armed violence as a woman might break gender stereotypes, this research shows that some women also exploit tropes of women as peaceful and naïve in order to avoid prosecution when they are caught and/or when they return to their home countries. As a result, security professionals are likely underestimating the importance of women in the growth and survival of extremist and insurgent groups, underscored by the fact that women are vastly underrepresented in prevention and disengagement strategies worldwide.

However, the consequences of this argument are rife with tension. For example, by paying more attention to women’s potential roles in Islamist violence in Europe, governments risk making Muslim women’s lives even more securitized than they already are (Brown 2008). Indeed, women involved in armed violence in many countries face high levels of social stigma when they try to disengage, which is unlikely to diminish if security officials start seeing them as an even greater threat. Arguably, with anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiments rapidly increasing throughout Western Europe and North America, this stigma is even higher for women whose skin colour, clothing, or customs make them visible “outsiders”. But dismissing women’s roles and agency is not only a security gap—it is also a gender equity issue and a question of inclusive peace: ignoring that women can make calculated and political decisions to be part of violent groups also discounts them as important actors, which in turn makes it easier to exclude them in post-conflict decisions or negotiations (Alison 2004; Gentry and Sjoberg 2015; King 2015; Ní Aoláin, Haynes, and Cahn 2011). If women are not taken seriously as agents of political violence, they will



not be taken seriously in the politics of ending the violence. Among many other roles, women can be oppressed and oppressors, victims and perpetrators. But persistent stereotypes are preventing the creation of thoughtful, effective policies.

This paper presents preliminary research from Western Europe that is part of a broader project on women's disengagement from political violence. Academic research on the roles of women in insurgent and terrorist violence, and the impact of gender roles and stereotypes in these groups, has increased significantly over the last decade (e.g., Alison 2009; Bloom 2011; Brown 2011; Gentry and Sjoberg 2015; McKay and Mazurana 2004; Nacos 2005; Speckhard 2008; Wood and Thomas 2017). Much of this research highlights not only how policymakers and law enforcement agents underestimate women, but also how gender stereotypes create discrimination and lack of access to resources in post-conflict environments. This first stage of research centres specifically on Islamist violence in Western Europe, focusing on the United Kingdom (UK),² and involves interviews with experts in counter-terrorism (CT) and countering violent extremism (CVE). The aim of these interviews was to investigate if (and why) gender stereotypes were affecting policies and practices around women's disengagement and deradicalization in that region. This paper thus provides a preliminary analysis based on eighteen in-depth interviews with CT and CVE experts in the UK, Ireland, Denmark, and Germany – including practitioners, prosecutors, police officers, and female former members of extremist groups. While this small qualitative sample is not intended to be representative, and the results are presented as only a pilot phase of a much larger project, the data reveal persistent stereotypes that should prompt policy attention and further research.

In general, states have not yet found a systematic and effective way to deal with returnees – the men either disappear or they are imprisoned, and what happens to the women is still unclear; the children are another problem entirely, as many of them have been rendered stateless (Barrett 2017; Maher 2017). Within this lack of systematic policy, there are very few initiatives in Western countries that seriously consider gender dynamics (Brown 2013; Saltman and Smith 2015), and interviewees for this project indicated that there is a particular lack of

² The United Kingdom was selected as the primary research site because it has some of the highest levels of foreign fighter returnees in Western Europe (Barrett 2017), and also because its *Prevent* program has generated significant controversy both domestically and globally. The research was then expanded into other countries via snowball sampling from the initial points of contact in the UK. France is an important comparative case for future research.



understanding gender dynamics within deradicalization efforts. In fact, while gender is increasingly noted in discussions on recruitment and disengagement of men in militant groups (i.e., violent masculinity), and gender is emphasized in many CVE policy documents, many of my interviewees agreed that when it comes to CVE and deradicalization efforts in the UK, women as targets or subjects of CVE are not involved in any substantive way *except* as assets in preventing radicalization (A02, A04, A06, A07, A09, A10, A11, A15).³ This oversight has created two related gaps: 1) women are easily able to exploit gender stereotypes to avoid detection and prosecution, and to conduct and/or plan attacks; and 2) women are ignored when they need assistance to reintegrate into society or if they want to contribute to prevention and disengagement or deradicalization efforts. Indeed, when asked if law enforcement and government in the UK were taking women seriously enough in terms of their involvement in extremist violence, especially when they return to the UK, one British counter-terrorism prosecutor's answer was unequivocal: "No, not even close" (A11).

This paper begins with background information on prevention and deradicalization strategies in Western Europe, focusing primarily on the UK, and then provides a brief overview of the literature on women in insurgencies and violent extremism. The discussion then moves to three different stereotypes about women involved in armed violence that came up repeatedly in this research: the (stupid) victim, the mother, and the monster. This paper looks at how these stereotypes are employed both by armed groups and by many CT and CVE practitioners, and what impact this has on deradicalization and disengagement policies.

³ Information on each respondent's role and their location is available in the interview list in Appendix A.

2. THEORETICAL APPROACH

Gender-based analysis

The narrow and often stereotypical understanding of women's aggression undermines our overall understanding of the cohesion, morale, and operations of non-state armed groups, and it also affects how women are treated post-conflict. In most cases of armed violence, men and women have vastly unequal access to resources, power, and decision-making, in addition to expectations mandated by traditional gender roles, making their experiences both during war and in post-conflict reconstruction very different (Goldstein 2001; Shekhawat 2015; Theidon 2009). Indeed, established patriarchal structures around the war industry⁴—including the persistent framing of brave, hyper-masculine men rescuing helpless, innocent women—mean that unless women are specifically documented as *combatants*, many scholars examining tactics, demobilization, recruitment, or “manpower” of non-state armed groups do not seriously consider women, instead writing them off as camp followers, fan girls, supporters, or jihadi brides; or, they simply do not mention women at all (e.g., Arjona and Kalyvas 2011; de Vries and Wiegink 2011; Humphreys and Weinstein 2007; Kalyvas 2008; Muggah 2010). Yet, when men are coordinating logistics, shipping supplies, hiding and building weapons, or recruiting teenagers and children, there is little doubt as to their status as real members of an insurgent or terrorist group.

To address these oversights, this research uses gender-based analysis to examine how gendered roles, including stereotypes of both men and women, affect policy responses to extremist and insurgent violence, particularly disengagement. In this paper, “gender” is defined as the social construction of masculinity and femininity and the values attached to these constructions. A gender analysis, therefore, looks at how these social constructions affect and organize personal, political and intellectual life, especially in terms of power structures (Cohn 2013).

Disengagement vs. Deradicalization

In the international relations literature on insurgent groups in civil wars, leaving an armed group generally falls under the terms “demobilization”, “defection”, or “side-switching”, which are distinct types of departures (Kalyvas 2008; Kraemer 2014; Oppenheim et al. 2015). These

⁴While a detailed analyses of gender, patriarchy, and war is beyond the scope of this paper, see Cohn (2013) Enloe (1990; 2000; 2007), Goldstein (2001), and Sjoberg (2013) for in-depth research on this topic.



departures from the armed group are physical, and while they *may* involve a change of beliefs, none of them requires it. In the growing terrorism literature, however, the most frequently used terms are “disengagement” and “deradicalization”. “Disengagement” can be either physical or psychological, or both (Bjørge and Horgan 2009; Horgan 2009). Indeed, one of my interviewees, a practitioner working in disengagement programs in Denmark, specifically touched on this complexity:

“Other people would call it deradicalization or disengagement. We’re looking at it more as disengagement, and sparring partners, in terms of finding out what you want in your life, more than we’re talking about it as, “we have to deradicalize you.” Our goal is of course to deradicalize you in terms of, whatever you think and whatever your goal is, violence is not an acceptable means to achieve it. But other than that we’re actually not trying to remove or change people’s political attitude” (A14).

Similar efforts in Ireland focus on temporary desistance from violence – rather than attempting to change beliefs – with the aim of getting extremists over a certain “age hump” where involvement in violence is less likely (A04).

The terrorism literature also places significant emphasis on the psychological aspects of “deradicalization”, yet in the growing theories on disengagement and defection, there do not appear to be significant motivational differences between people disengaging from “terrorist” groups versus other types of ideological or political violence (e.g., Jacobson 2010; Koehler, Ohl, and Albrecht 2016; Laub and Sampson 2001; Oppenheim et al. 2015; Staniland, Pearlman, and Cunningham 2012). This research indicates that common motivations for disengagement cut across all types of crime and violence: exhaustion, trauma, wanting a change, losing faith in the group, losing faith in the ideology, fear that the group is losing, needing money, safety, food, or other life necessities, having a child – the list is long and varies widely.⁵ Someone may physically exit a terrorist or insurgent group but still subscribe to the group’s radical beliefs, or someone may remain in a group for various reasons but no longer truly believe in what they are doing. Longitudinal studies on this issue are rare, and it is difficult to know if someone is truly

⁵ Interestingly, many of these reasons to leave also come up as reasons for joining violent or extremist groups (Arjona and Kalyvas 2011; Humphreys and Weinstein 2008; Rosenau et al. 2014; Schmidt 2007).

disengaged psychologically, especially when there are incentives to lie. One CVE/CT researcher in the UK felt that the conflation of disengagement with deradicalization was especially prominent with female returnees from Syria and Iraq, even though, she argued, disengagement in these cases is often simply a matter of survival (A02).

For conceptual clarity, this paper primarily uses the term “disengagement” to refer to a physical (and usually, though not always, voluntary) exit from an armed group, whereas “deradicalization” refers to an external effort to change someone’s beliefs.

3. METHODOLOGY

The primary method of inquiry for this project is qualitative analysis in the form of semi-structured, in-depth interviews.⁶ The data presented here are preliminary results for a larger project.⁷ The goal of this pilot phase was to speak to key informants and experts in the United Kingdom CVE/CT policy circles. Through referrals (i.e., snowball sampling) the sample was expanded to 18 interviews in four countries: the UK, Ireland, Denmark, and Germany.⁸ Most of the interviews took place in person, with four taking place over Skype. At the time of writing, several interviews were still pending, and five additional interviews were scheduled but never took place due to the respondents’ availability and/or their reluctance to participate. While additional contact information for several female former members of extremist groups was provided, only two were willing to be interviewed. This is a key constraint of research on women former extremists/insurgents—the ones who want to talk and who engage in prevention programs may have very different profiles compared to those who wish to stay invisible, and policymakers must be cognizant not only of power imbalances between genders but also within them.

While the 18 respondents in this pilot phase were not considered a “vulnerable population” (as all are working publicly in the CVE realm), respondents were given the option to have their quotes attributed to them or to be quoted anonymously. While a few respondents gave permission

⁶ This research was approved by Carleton University’s Research Ethics Review Board (Certificate #106973).

⁷ While the focus in the current paper is Western Europe, and primarily the UK, this larger project will involve over fifty interviews with former members of non-state armed groups in Colombia and Western Europe.

⁸ Participants were recruited via email or WhatsApp, or the participant contacted the author via email or WhatsApp, after the referring contact had obtained permission from the new recruit to share their contact information. A letter of consent was provided to each participant, and only verbal consent was obtained. Interviews were audio-recorded only with participant permission. No financial compensation was provided for the interviews.



to use their names, in the end all responses were kept uniformly anonymous due to the subject matter and because naming some respondents could inadvertently lead to the identity of others. As such, interview materials (recordings, transcripts, field notes) were coded with numbers only, the interviews are cited with numbers only, and the corresponding interviewee information can be found in Appendix A.⁹

4. BACKGROUND

The industry of deradicalization and countering violent extremism is proliferating rapidly, and there is currently a boom of private CVE consultants in Western Europe and North America. While empirical research has lagged behind the significant supply of (and demand for) CVE practitioners, some of these practitioners—particularly in Northern Ireland—argue somewhat contentiously they have been doing for decades what is now being called “CVE” and “deradicalization” (A09). The result is many different programs and approaches that do not always communicate or share results, and are often in competition, from private enterprises and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to government agencies and regional bodies—all with little scientific evidence on what actually works (Koehler 2017). Because many private organizations and NGOs in the UK receive CVE funding directly from the UK government, and because an analysis of the myriad European approaches to CVE is far beyond the scope of this paper, this section focuses specifically on the UK government’s approach. Nonetheless, the study includes interviews from other practitioners and researchers in Western Europe, as much of that region is facing similar issues with foreign fighter returnees and there is some cross-pollination of policies. For example, most of the researchers from Ireland in this study had previously worked in or studied CVE in the UK. However, several interviewees suggested that the United Kingdom seems set on charting its own path and has not necessarily adopted the same strategies as other countries, such as Germany and Denmark (A02; A09; A14).

Most notable in this regard is the United Kingdom’s *Prevent* strategy, which is the second pillar of its *CONTEST* counter-terrorism strategy¹⁰ and was created shortly after the London bombings on July 7, 2005. Because these attacks came “from within”, the response (and retaliation)

⁹ For further details on data storage and ethics protocols, please contact the author at: rachel.schmidt@carleton.ca.

¹⁰ The other three pillars are “Pursue” (to stop terrorist attacks), “Protect” (to strengthen protection against attacks), and “Prepare” (to mitigate impacts of attacks) (HM Government Home Office 2011).



had to shift to target the domestic population, and this is when the discourse of “active citizenship” became central to counter-terrorism strategies (Altermark and Nilsson 2018). *Prevent* was the foundational pillar in this war of ideas, as its central strategic objective is to challenge extremist ideologies that justify the use of violence (Altermark and Nilsson 2018; HM Government 2015). While the strategy is of course focused on prevention and not disengagement, the approach to one unavoidably influences the other. In its first iteration, *Prevent* money was channelled to local authorities who used it in different ways, with some passing all the funds to Muslim community organizations, while others developed their own programs (Thomas 2016). In practice, however, these measures did not effectively target the underlying motivations to radicalization, and the securitization of civil society, increased police surveillance of Muslim communities, and the ability to lock up terrorist suspects for longer terms without charge all had the cumulative effect of increasing stigmatization of Muslim communities and exacerbating racial tensions (Altermark and Nilsson 2018; Thomas 2016; Thomas 2014). The program does receive referrals for non-Islamist extremists, but the government identifies the most significant threat as coming from Islamist extremism and acknowledges that the bulk of *Prevent* efforts are focused on Muslim communities (HM Government 2015).

Three years after its formation, after public criticism of police dominance of the program and significant negative media coverage (Thomas 2014), *Prevent* was revamped with a shift from hard security to programs focused on “empowerment” and “community resilience” (Altermark and Nilsson 2018). Within this framing, the practice of pre-emptive counter-terrorism is still central, which identifies “at-risk” communities and has targeted innocent people due to “false positives” (Heath-Kelly 2012). Some researchers have argued that *Prevent* is a legitimate strategic response to an urgent societal problem, is widely supported by universities and their students, and that the anti-*Prevent* movement rests mostly on myth and misinformation (Greer 2018; Omand 2006). Indeed, some respondents in this study who had worked with *Prevent* spoke highly of the program and its efforts to engage minority communities (A10, A17). On the other hand, *Prevent* has drawn pointed criticism from a range of scholars and prominent figures, including the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly, Maina Kai:

“The duty imposed on certain categories of public officials, including teachers, to observe, record and report individuals they may consider ‘extremist’ has led to undue restrictions on student union activities and the



singling out of students from minority communities” (2017, 4).

Compounding this sense of restricted freedom is the fact that *Prevent* now includes a statutory duty all the way down to preschool for teachers to report those showing “signs of radicalization”. Indeed, interviewees in this study reported that this duty-to-report environment has made Muslim communities feel ostracized, targeted, and fearful of being reported to authorities (A02; A07; A10).

The recently released *Prevent* report states that 22% of referrals to the program between April 2015 and March 2016 were female (HM Government 2017), but one interviewee in this research, a former *Prevent* staffer, confirmed that until the wide media coverage on the three high school girls from Bethnal Green who travelled to Syria in 2015, his unit had not received one single female referral to *Prevent* (A17). After the Bethnal Green case hit the media, he tracked one in five calls as being about women and girls. This was not likely because more women were becoming extremists; rather, the public suddenly had a new awareness that women could also be involved (A17). This respondent also confirmed that referrals about women were less likely to be followed up on, primarily because women were not generally assessed as a significant threat.

Respondents noted that the *Prevent* program certainly recognizes women’s importance in preventing radicalization (especially in regards to their status as mothers), with the caveat that the program offers insufficient resources to assist Muslim women in improving their quality of life, and the program in general does not see the women as serious security risks themselves (A02; A07; A15; A17). In fact, Muslim women are often mentioned by policymakers as the “missing link” in terms of countering violent extremism in Britain, and yet the securitization of these same women’s lives—and the impact of this on women’s rights—is generally ignored (Brown 2008). Two experts stated outright that women are rarely seen as a key priority for *Prevent* unless the women are somehow helping to report on radicalization (A02; A07). Also, the women-specific CVE initiatives in the UK that received praise from some respondents appeared to stay well within the confines of women as peacemakers and mothers (A10; A15).

Overall, interviewees in this study frequently described *Prevent* as a fear-based environment that utilizes Muslim women for intelligence on radicalization but offers them little in return. As one CVE researcher noted: “A lot of *Prevent* and other [UK] government programs don’t differentiate when it comes to women... women are ‘allowed’ but there is nothing



specifically designed for them” (A01). Indeed, several interviewees criticized CVE programs for women as sporadic, unfocused, and underfunded (A02, A07, A15), with one former *Prevent* staffer noting that her women’s programs had been derided by male superiors as being “too pink and fluffy” (A07). Even the ones who supported *Prevent* acknowledged the shortcomings in terms of gender awareness and women-specific programming. As noted, although *Prevent* is not focused on disengagement, it forms the core of UK counter-terrorism efforts, and the way this program affects Muslim communities undoubtedly affects the treatment of – and options for – returnees.

5. WOMEN AND ARMED VIOLENCE

How female perpetrators of armed violence – or female supporters of such violence – are portrayed by the media and authority figures both during and after conflict can create a stigma that makes it extremely difficult for women to reintegrate back into society. To examine why women leave armed groups and the complicated gender norms that they must navigate both within and after conflict, it is important to examine the highly gendered and polarized narratives that are frequently attached to women who are involved in or actively support violence. When women *are* recognized as perpetrators or supporters of violence, or even if they are members of legitimate armed forces, they often face very strict narratives and highly gendered stereotypes about which they have little choice. For example, King (2015) finds that in Western militaries – where women are increasingly integrated into combat roles – men have created a “slut-bitch” binary to categorize their female peers. “Sluts” are sexually available, whereas “bitches” are not, and King argues that this binary has become so institutionalized that, whatever women do, they are defined by this symbolic and highly sexual coding. Similarly, women in rebel or terrorist groups often appear in the media as overly sexualized (the “whore/slut” narrative), or due to the very nature of the group they are in, they are stigmatized by the assumption that they have been raped or otherwise abused at some point – making them damaged goods (the “victim” narrative) (Gentry and Sjoberg 2015). As noted earlier, the victim narrative is particularly widespread in policies and propaganda around the so-called “War on Terror”, with popular tropes of Western countries saving helpless Muslim women from their stereotypically dangerous and controlling Muslim husbands.

Groups trying to establish independent territory also need women to give their “government” legitimacy – and this often relies on highly gendered and stereotypical roles, such



as the Daesh declaration of a caliphate and their aggressive online recruitment of women from all over the world to be wives and mothers to sustain and expand the “state” (Erelle 2015; Huey and Peladeau 2016; Mietz 2016; Peresin and Cervone 2015; Potts 2015; Speckhard and Yayla 2015). Yet, when women participate in such non-state armed groups—especially if the group’s violence is aimed at civilians—they have violated two sets of norms, making it even more difficult to reintegrate back into society. Thus, upon defection from a non-state armed group or after the cessation of hostilities, some women have later been rejected by their former comrades—because they are too sexual or have been raped, or because they’ve taken on “masculine” qualities—and by their former communities because they are perpetrators of violence (Anctil Avoine and Tillman 2015; Azm 2015; Dahal 2015; Mendez 2012; Theidon 2009). While some women may join armed groups to improve women’s status in society (or simply to improve their own personal status), they often find that entrenched gender narratives determine how they are treated both within the ranks and after they leave.

As Jacques and Taylor (2013) point out in their discussion on the myths of female terrorism, much of the existing research on women’s involvement in armed violence does not empirically test the characteristics of women who join, leaving large gaps in what we understand about women engaged in insurgent and extremist violence. While early analyses of these women tended to focus on their emotional reasons for violence (differentiating from men’s more political and “rational” grievances), further investigation reveals that women cite a range of motivations very similar to men, such as social and political grievances, revenge, defending their ethnic group, seeking power, money, status or adventure, and familial and romantic ties (Azm 2015; Bloom 2011; Dahal 2015; Gentry and Sjoberg 2015; Henshaw 2016a; Huey and Peladeau 2016; Jacques and Taylor 2013; Potts 2015; McKay and Mazurana 2004; Mietz 2016). In addition, testimonies from women formerly in extremist groups, as well as recent analyses on women’s online activity, show that women are extremely active—and effective—in recruiting other women and in putting pressure on men to join (A10; A15; Huey and Peladeau 2016). Indeed, British researchers have found that female migrants to Daesh are often more ideologically motivated than their male counterparts (Maher 2017). One respondent in this study said that the extremist women she met: “found that vulnerability in me, which was not belonging...they basically gave me a feeling of belonging...so I went along with that...I started wearing the *hijab*, and then the *abaya*...adopting their strict view of Islam” (A10). She recounted how this “multi-layer” approach was extremely



effective, because the women would make her a part of the family and then slowly pressured her to adopt increasingly radical views (A10).

Women may be integral to violent groups, but as Henshaw notes, “there is a tension in many rebellions between a rebel group’s need or desire to mobilize women and its interest in fully recognizing and valuing their work” (2016b, 51). Henshaw’s cross-national survey of women’s participation in armed rebellions shows that while women rarely reach the top command structures in rebel groups, they are much more active in these groups than most current scholarship recognizes (Henshaw 2016b). For example, terrorist groups often rely on histories of past grievances to motivate recruits, and women are integral in passing down historical grievances to the next generation (Vertigans 2011; Speckhard 2008), but this key role is rarely acknowledged. Indeed, Cronin (2006) argues that failing to pass down the legacy to subsequent generations is a common reason for terrorist groups to decline, but she does not recognize women’s roles in this process.

The study of terrorism and civil wars is particularly problematic in this regard, where research dominated by men perpetuates the stereotype that conflict is men’s domain (Henshaw 2016b). This tension arguably applies to counter-insurgency policy as well—the main decision-makers in most counter-terrorist units are still men, and even when women are involved (or in charge) these units seem reluctant to recognize women as important players, or to mobilize women in counter-insurgency roles and peace negotiations (A02, A05, A15). Yet governments use gender and women instrumentally when it is convenient without making real changes that improve women’s societal status and agency. For example, in Brown’s work on Muslim women in the UK, she points out that the increasing securitization of British Muslim women’s lives—and the government’s “instrumental use” of gender to justify policy—is damaging to women’s rights in the long run (2008). By continuing to ignore women (or using them only when convenient), both researchers and policymakers risk misunderstanding violent extremism and may end up perpetuating norms of gender-based discrimination and violence.

In addition, when women purposefully exploit gender stereotypes, in certain cases this allows them to manipulate law enforcement and other decision-makers, which in turn puts other women at risk who may legitimately want to access assistance programs but cannot. While many stereotypes exist about women involved in violence, three of the most commonly used narratives are explored below: the victim, the mother, and the monster.

6. EXPLOITING GENDER STEREOTYPES

6.1. The (Stupid) Victim

To begin with, you saw more women joining radical groups because in the first instance they were not a threat, and so why would you spend money to stop them from joining? And then when you label them as victims, that helps at one level but it frames the types of response available to you.

–CVE/CT researcher/practitioner, England (A02)

I just find it quite interesting that a lot of people overlook that basic question [of women's agency]. Tearing their hair out that they're losing all these young girls, but many of them were mature, educated, self-confident young women. Who is to say they don't want to be there? Surely it's patronizing a wee bit to suggest that they're the victims in all this. It's kind of taking away any agency from them, do you know what I mean? And they never seem to ask that about the fellas.

–CVE practitioner/former police officer, England (A17)

While the international acknowledgement of rape as a weapon of war – including multiple UN Security Council Resolutions on women in armed conflict¹¹ – was a significant step in acknowledging women and girls' experiences in war, the dominant narrative that emerged is that these women are rape victims, entrenching misconceptions that all (or most) women have no agency in conflict environments (Ní Aoláin, Haynes, and Cahn 2011). As Coulter (2008) points out, being a victim of violence does not equate to a complete lack of agency, but the peacemaker/victim narratives continue to exclude women from politics and post-conflict decision-making (Bell and O'Rourke 2010; Hunt and Posa 2001). Indeed, the majority of women respondents for this study agreed that stereotypes of victimhood have led to an environment in which there are very few options for prevention or deradicalization programming for women, because women and girls are simply are not seen as a threat or as a key part of the problem.

¹¹ See, for example, UNSC resolutions 1325, 1327, 1366, 1408, 1820, 1888, 1889, 2106, 2122, 2242, 2272, and 2331, available here: <http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/women-peace-and-security/>



In addition, the victim narratives that present women as easily manipulated or unwitting accomplices reinforce the idea that women are not intelligent enough to be key players, and therefore their grievances need not be taken seriously. This frame justifies a focus on men, but it is clearly problematic in several ways. First, it ignores the fact that women may use violence as a route to power not available to them anywhere else. It also ignores that women play very important roles in building and sustaining conflict, and it allows some women to use gender stereotypes of victimhood to avoid prosecution or responsibility for encouraging violence. In the case of Runa Khan in the UK, who incited terrorism on social media and was training her young sons for jihad, her barrister argued that Khan was "extremely insecure, unsophisticated, binary in her thought processes... devoid of any proper... reasonable Islamic teaching" (BBC News 2014). Although this defense did not work for Khan (she was sentenced to five years in prison), three counter-terrorism prosecutors in England agreed that women arrested for terrorism-related offences repeatedly use scripted narratives of being tricked, manipulated, coerced, and/or abused, because they know that law enforcement officers – and juries – will probably believe them (A11, A12, A13).

Damaging stereotypical narratives of oppressive and/or abusive Muslim men assist in making this victim narrative believable, while also justifying government intervention and monitoring of Muslim communities. Indeed, one prosecutor confirmed that in general, if a woman went to Syria to join Daesh with her husband, especially in 2012-2013 before the abundance of information available online, they "almost always gave her the benefit of the doubt" when she returned (A11). In addition, this prosecutor said that if there was domestic violence on record there would rarely be criminal charges against the woman (A11) – again, the assumption that victimhood erases agency. A second prosecutor said that women arrested on terrorism offences "all try to portray themselves as the innocent stooge, but actually they are not, they are far from it" (A12), while another noted they had "several cases where [the women] have been the driving force" (A13).

Women's appearances also play a significant role in this victim framing, especially if they are young. One prosecutor discussed a case in which they had solid evidence that a young woman "was clearly a committed jihadist" but the defence claimed she was innocent and had been manipulated by a powerful, well-known male jihadist (A12). The prosecutor illustrated an extra hurdle in the case: "She was a tiny little girl, very quietly spoken, looks like she's sweetness



embodied, which makes it harder [to convict]" (A12). Indeed, the prosecutors observed that the women often received lighter sentences than men, even for very serious crimes, if they were convicted at all: "We've always thought it's quite hard to get convictions, historically, against the women" (A13). All three agreed that in recent years, the women coming back from Syria who are detained by police all seem to be using the same script: that they were manipulated, tricked, and did not know what they were getting into. But evidence shows that this "innocent stooge" narrative has serious flaws: one study finds that female terrorists on average have higher education than their male counterparts (Jacques and Taylor 2013), and as mentioned earlier, women recruits are often *more* ideologically motivated than men, not less (Maher 2017). A 2017 case in Birmingham, UK again illustrates this tactic: based on evidence that included WhatsApp conversations, a husband and wife were arrested for planning a terrorist attack, with evidence showing that the wife, Madihah Taheer, sent her husband a text message saying: "I want u to kill ppl for me. I have a list" (BBC 2017b). But when arrested, she immediately played the victim, saying to the media that she was ashamed for allowing herself to be manipulated by her controlling husband (BBC 2017a). Her ploy did not work: both were convicted and sentenced for plotting the attack, though the husband received 16 years in prison and the wife received ten.

One researcher/practitioner, who has worked extensively with women accused or suspected of radicalization, said that the very early research on female extremists which suggested that all (or most) women join militant groups for emotional reasons is "frustratingly still dominant in policy and in the think tank world in the UK...[which] then informs how they think about deradicalization" (A02). That is, if the accepted story is that these women were seduced or duped, and they later manage to come back home, then:

"They've already recognized the folly of their ways, therefore help isn't really needed in the same way [as men]... the women have seen their 'emotional foolishness' and they have moved on—which really doesn't reflect the reality of most women's disengagement. I do not think we can assume that women returning from Iraq and Syria are doing so because they've suddenly realized that they no longer believe or do not want to participate ... and a lot of this stems from this refusal to give up on this idea that women's participation is because they are duped" (A02).



Indeed, this narrative that coming home equates to giving up (and/or victimhood) is problematic on multiple levels. As one interviewee pointed out, the victim stereotype often does not make sense, as many Western women migrants joined Daesh specifically because they wanted to be important:

“Ok, society at large maybe doesn’t consider these women key players per se, but a lot of them travelled in the first instance because they thought that they would be... a whole sway of the propaganda was, ‘you are vital to the success of the caliphate, our society will be built around you, you will have such a key role, we’re going to invest in you.’ [These women] can’t then, I suppose, turn around and say, ‘Oh, you know I never expected to be a key player in all this,’ when that was in part the message that was convincing them to go” (A17).

Of course, in some cases the victim narratives also allow women access to certain assistance and may allow them to avoid prosecution: “If they are smart enough, they realize that a certain narrative helps them to reintegrate and get support” (A16). While men certainly do this too, it is easier for women to convince law enforcement of their victim status because of societal norms. For example, a former police officer working with *Prevent* pointed out that young men are also frequently groomed and seduced, but that is rarely mentioned in the press: “I think females are given too much leniency in terms of their agency, and I think males aren’t given enough leniency in terms of their agency, and somewhere in the middle probably is where we should be” (A17).

6.2. The Mother

I think sometimes CVE reaffirms patriarchal structures that extremist ideologies rely on, such as woman as wife, mother, etc. It is not creative enough in engaging women. In terms of assisting women – in terms of vulnerability – there are systems to support them, but in terms of women informing policy and projects – there is a lack of creativity in engaging women in developing them.

-CVE practitioner, England (A15)



TSAS: Schmidt, 2018

And since they're all family women and they all have obligations to their children, that is a very big part of it. They want themselves away from it but they also want their children away from the extremist community environment, because they can see what it does to the children, and what happened to their men, what happened to other men and other children in the community. So...it's very much family concerns that drive them in these cases.

-CVE practitioner, Denmark (A14)

Another common narrative of women militants revolves around their roles as mothers. Women insurgents are often depicted by media and governments as the worst kind of woman because they have children *and* are involved in violence (violating the ideal of the nurturing and peaceful mother), or the narrative is preoccupied with their roles as mothers to the exclusion of everything else. The role of mothers in preventing extremism has been repeatedly emphasized in British policy documents, fueled by stereotypes such as Muslim women having key educative roles in the family, and Muslim women being more moderate and more “British” than Muslim men (CHR&GJ 2012). In the Khan case mentioned above, news articles about the trial repeatedly referred to Khan as a mother or “mother-of-six” before any other identifiers (BBC News 2014; Johnston 2014; The Guardian 2014). Women who have taught their young children to be jihadis have received perhaps the greatest amount of public outrage. Yet, in general, mothers who return with children from Syria to Western European nations seem to receive the least amount of security precautions or policy attention (A02, A11, A12, A13).

Choosing insurgency or crime over children may indeed be the worst offence possible in many cultures—for women. One counter-terrorism prosecutor in England noted that while women seem to get more lenient sentences in general, mothers on trial who have children are judged particularly harshly by juries and the public, especially if they have allegedly been training their children to be extremists (A11). Similarly, one practitioner in Ireland who works with former prisoners observed that women with children are treated with particular disdain by judges and juries, and these women are often penalized more harshly because they are mothers, even though male criminals with children are not treated the same way:

“I’ve seen in bail applications that women are dealt with more harshly by the courts [than men] ... [One woman] had missed a hearing and her excuse was



TSAS: Schmidt, 2018

that she had an appointment with her child who was in care and she didn't want to miss it. I would 100% believe she was being honest, but she would have been better off saying she forgot, because the judge had no sympathy, it was: 'Ok, well, you couldn't be bothered to turn up, I'll remand you in custody for one week and we'll see what happens then.' But I've seen men all the time say, 'Oh something came up, my child was sick', or 'my granny died' or any sort of lie. But I think that the fact that she had a child in care... that just is the worst. The absolute worst" (A15).

In the UK, families suspected of radicalizing their own children are at risk of having their children taken away, and because mothers are generally the ones spending more time with the children, they are heavily interrogated and coerced to cooperate (A02). As one CVE researcher in England said, threatening to remove children from their parents is "a very big stick" in ensuring that these women cooperate with authorities, or at least give the appearance of cooperating (A02). But because this is a highly traditional role for women, it is an aspect of building and sustaining extremist violence that is often overlooked in analyses of insurgent and terrorist groups – women only get increased attention when they are breaking gender stereotypes by being frontline combatants or suicide bombers. There is a complex balance here that several of my interviewees identified: how do governments and other organizations working with returnees recognize that mothers can be essential in encouraging extremist violence and acknowledge women's agency in violent groups, without sensationalizing this participation and/or stigmatizing an entire segment of the population? And how do policy approaches balance this with the knowledge that many mothers in extremist groups may indeed be in abusive relationships and need help to get out?

For example, an experienced CVE practitioner in Denmark said that all of the women he had worked with in their disengagement program were mothers who were trying to leave violent relationships (A14). He said that some even admitted that they had originally supported their husband's jihadi efforts, but after having children, or seeing the effect of the violence on their children, they wanted to get out (A14). These narratives may indeed be true, but if a man told the same story (i.e., that he was trying to get his children away from his violent jihadi wife), he would be assessed with much greater skepticism—even though there are many examples of women being the driving force in joining extremism (A11, A12, A13), or of women willingly taking their



children to Daesh territory, with or without their husbands (Bajekal 2015; Hubbard 2018). Due to assumptions of women as victims and mothers as nurturing—as well as pervasive negative stereotypes of violent and abusive Muslim husbands—it is easier and more socially acceptable for practitioners and law enforcement to believe the story of a mother fleeing to protect her children than to accuse her of lying. This combination of the victim and mother narratives is very compelling.

Although mothers in Muslim communities have been identified as the “first line of defence” against radicalization because they are more likely to spot the warning signs in their own children (A02, A05), the approach thus far has been very one-sided. Brown (2008) notes that the rights of Muslim women in Britain are normally used to justify policy rather than to acknowledge and encourage their political agency. A respondent in this study voiced frustration that the women are seen as important “tools” against radicalization but are given very little resources or support in other areas, which has built resentment against the program and the government more broadly:

“I hear this all the time: ‘Women are the first ones to see signs of radicalization’. Everybody says that, it’s just a standard line now. I think that’s the whole idea. You go and find as many women within communities, give them resources, give them tools, build their capacity and then there’s more resilience against extremism. It was a very simple model. But what was happening was that women were saying, ‘You can’t just define us’. Because it was very hidden, the radicalization. They were feeling like ‘you can’t just come in and do *Prevent* stuff twenty-four seven. There’s more to our life than that, there are more things that will help us be resilient enough, help us build capacity, because there are more things going on in our lives.’ We can’t be these superwomen who are going to save the world unless you help us in these other areas” (A07).

This stereotype is perhaps the one most directly observable in policy. In the creation of “active citizens”—an idea central to CVE counter-narratives in the UK—this has generally been interpreted for Muslim women as being socially engaged but also being “good mothers” and, specifically, knowing what their children and other Muslim youth are up to (Altermark and Nilsson 2018). With women returnees, the mother role is again key: a woman with children must be dealt with in a very different



way than a man or woman returning alone. Being a mother can be an advantage in such cases in that the woman may be assessed as more in need of social assistance than security assessment. On the other hand, if these women are seen *only* as mothers, law enforcement could miss security risks, and in general women's ability to engage in political processes, and be taken seriously when doing so, will be greatly reduced.

6.3. The Monster

I think the women are quite manipulative actually.

-CT prosecutor, England (A12)

These women can really get into your head if you're not careful, if you're vulnerable.

-CVE practitioner/former member of extremist group (A10)

Utilizing indiscriminate violence against civilians is an affront to basic societal norms. But utilizing violence against civilians as a *woman* is another offence entirely, and militant groups know this: women's violence is highly sensationalized, illustrated by the fact that a stunning majority of research on women in terrorism focuses on their role as suicide bombers, even though suicide bombing represents a miniscule fraction what women actually do in terrorist groups (Cohn 2013). And because violent women are such an aberration from what women are "supposed" to be like, women attackers make people very uncomfortable, which works well for armed groups whose main currency is fear. Popular labels like "Black Widow" or "White Widow" for female attackers deliberately reference the women as bereaved (and possibly deranged) wives out for revenge as explanations for their violence—even though many woman attackers are not widows, and the majority of women involved in extremist and insurgent violence have less visible roles.

Nonetheless, based on news headlines alone, this idea that women involved in violence are insane or monstrous is a popular one—it seems extremely difficult for Western society (and many societies globally) to accept that a woman could be calculatingly violent, or that a woman with no mental defect could send her own children (or husband) out to die. Media stories of the *al-Khansaa Brigade*—an all-female Daesh police force in Raqqa—have been rife with



sensationalistic accounts of these women's brutality (e.g., Eleftheriou-Smith 2015; Kafanov 2016). While some of these accounts may be accurate, arguably this brigade garnered a disproportionate amount of attention due to the fact that the violent oppressors were women over other women: "The women that are instrumental, the hardliner women...these women are really harsh. They lack empathy, they are representative of everything harsh" (A10).

Writing off violent women as aberrations makes it much easier to ignore them in any sort of CVE or disarmament, disengagement, and reintegration (DDR) programming. If violent women are rare, then policymakers need not worry about them. But women in these groups are not rare—they are just less visible than the men. If law enforcement and media and government stay focused on front line attackers, they are likely to overlook the much more mundane but essential roles that women commonly have in these groups—such as fundraising, logistical planning, indoctrinating children or new members, gathering intelligence, and acquiring weapons and supplies. Women in support roles fly under the radar, because that's what society expects from women, therefore it is not "interesting" or threatening.

The flip side of this is that Muslim women in the UK and other Western nations are paying a steep price for the sensationalistic coverage on female terrorists, often facing a particularly harsh stigma because their "outsider" status is more visible than men if they wear a *hijab* or *abaya*, or other highly conservative Islamic clothing (A10). One of the Muslim interviewees in this study said that she sees and hears noticeable hostility from non-Muslims in England when she wears her hijab in the traditional manner (i.e., wrapped under her chin to cover her neck and throat), whereas when she wears it only around her hair, people treat her differently (A10). At the same time, this woman—who described herself as once "teetering on the edge of extremism"—highlighted how critical women were in her own radicalization process, strategically playing on her need for love and slowly influencing her to adopt increasingly more extreme behaviour in order to belong. She articulated the tension between the need to pay more attention to women involved in violence and the risk of demonizing *all* visibly Muslim women:

"You're right, security, intelligence need to be aware that that woman with the full *abaya* with the children can be just as dangerous, or even more dangerous than that man with a rifle... But you see also I work with women with *niqab*, with *abaya*, and they have a really tricky time... unfortunately they often are



looked at as a suspect element in society. ‘Is she one of them?’ But I understand why people think that. I’m not saying I agree, but I understand” (A10).

One experienced CVE researcher in the UK agreed that there is a “fetish concept” around women terrorists, but in her experience there was even less sympathy in the UK for women returnees than for men: “They are deemed stupid, dumb, deviant—like they deserve the punishment even more” (A08). Although the counter-terrorism prosecutors felt that it was harder, generally, to get convictions on women, one indicated that when there was incontrovertible evidence that a woman was guilty, juries were likely to support harsher penalties—in part because society saw the crime as even more deviant and offensive than if a man had done the same thing (A11).

While there are certainly additional stereotypes about women involved in violence, the three examined here came up repeatedly, not only in interviews but also in news articles, social media posts, television programs, and other material reviewed in this study. While at times these stereotypes are employed deliberately on all sides, these gender stereotypes are so pervasive that they are often utilized—or at least accepted—unintentionally. Such an uncritical lens on women’s involvement in terrorism and other forms of armed violence unavoidably affects how decision-makers craft (or fail to craft) policies for women who disengage from violence.

7. DISENGAGEMENT AND DERADICALIZATION POLICIES

To the best of my knowledge in the UK there is no specific derad program for women. I would go so far as to say they don’t consider deradicalization for women as a targeted group.

–CVE/CT researcher/practitioner, UK (A02)

Even though gender is really pushed in terms of policy and CVE policy...it’s not something being addressed on the ground.

–CVE/CT researcher, Ireland (A06)

Recent research has critiqued the proliferation of deradicalization programs across the world as being poorly structured and lacking evidence (El-Said 2015; Koehler 2017). Similarly,

scholars have criticized the wide range of counter-narrative strategies, which often have different tactics and goals, saying that the approach has weak theoretical foundations and there is still a poor understanding of what works (Glazzard 2017; Schmid 2014). This idea of counter-narratives first emerged with the UK's CONTEST strategy in 2005 and is now firmly embedded in UK government policy and political activism, despite very little evidence on its efficacy (Glazzard 2017).

However, even these pointed critiques do not mention the absence of women-focused programs or the lack of gendered approaches or analysis. Counter-narratives about women being "good citizens" rarely, if ever, treat women as politically active subjects separate from female roles as wives and mothers. While terrorist propaganda uses gender narratives often and well (e.g., Daesh images of the "male jihadi lion fighter", or the "jihadi bride" who births the next generation of fighters), counter-terrorism is lagging on this front. For example, in Glazzard's literary examination of terrorist narratives (2017), he only mentions women in quotes from a bin Laden speech, paired with children, as victims (i.e., "killing women and children"). Yet the imagery of women-and-children-as-victims that strong, brave men must take up arms to protect is a highly gendered – and ancient – war narrative. Similarly, Schmid (2014) argues that Al Qaeda narratives have very little to offer women, but the large numbers of women who support Al Qaeda and other jihadi groups, whether it is online or in person, clearly contradict this view (Huey and Peladeau 2016).

The lack of attention on women in prevention work continues into the disengagement end of the process. As one researcher said when discussing the dearth of information on how women reintegrate into society after life in violent groups: "Most work on women, terrorism, exit from terrorism, is not about the next bit" (A06).¹² Indeed, women's reintegration is generally not a priority because the gendered assumption in many disarmament, disengagement, and reintegration (DDR) programs that men's "idleness" (i.e., their lack of employment and/or inability to access opportunities) is dangerous means that keeping men occupied with job retraining and other reintegration programs is a much higher priority than keeping women occupied; embedded in this is the assumption that women are not security threats because they are rarely "idle" due to childcare and household responsibilities (Jennings 2009). But if DDR, as

¹² Notably, there is some very interesting and insightful work on women ex-combatants' reintegration in Colombia (e.g., Ancil Avoine and Tillman 2015; Mendez 2012; Nieto-Valdivieso 2015; Schwitalla and Dietrich 2007), but it seems to rarely reach mainstream research and policy circles.

Muggah (2010) states, is “firmly wedded to the logic of stabilization, reconstruction and ultimately reconstituting effective states and state-civil society bargaining”, then the absence of women-specific programming certainly reflects how little policymakers consider women to be key actors in these processes.

Several interviewees in this research agreed that in the UK, “gender” was included in many policy documents as an important area for deradicalization and prevention, but it was rarely incorporated in these programs in any meaningful way (A06, A07, A08, A09, A15). Indeed, several (male) practitioners that I spoke to emphasized that the prevention and deradicalization programs are designed on an as-needed, one-on-one basis, therefore gender is not necessarily a key element—because each person is treated based on their individual needs (A01, A014, A17). Similarly, a UK representative recently said that the government assesses the threat of women returnees in “the same way” as men.¹³ But multiple other (female) practitioners contradicted this, asserting that “gender neutral” policies are *not* the same as taking women into consideration, and they questioned how women (especially highly conservative Muslim women) could feel welcome or included in male-dominated programs or counter-narratives, pointing out that the vast majority of *Prevent* staff and mentors are still men (A02; A07; A08). Clearly, being permitted is not the same as being welcome, as even women in Western militaries and police forces can attest (King 2015). One prominent researcher and government consultant noted that government-funded women’s CVE programs in the UK have been repeatedly cut after only one year, often due to lack of notable progress, but she questioned the logic of this: “The outcome cannot be measured in one year... gender differences and patriarchy cannot change in a year, [especially when] we also need the engagement of men” (A08).

There are women’s programs supported by *Prevent*, and with increased input from Muslim women, some positive changes do appear to be happening. But most experts in this study were skeptical about how much input and influence women actually had in the UK’s counter-terrorism strategy. As one British CVE practitioner said: “I don’t believe CVE has fully cracked working with women—often they treat women in relation to others (wives, mothers, daughters) and not as individuals with agency” (A15). The initiatives involving women seem to rise up as reactions to complaints or unexpected incidents, rather than as proactive measures to engage

¹³ Response received at a G7 ad-hoc meeting on gender and counter-terrorism, Ottawa, Ontario, March 2018.



communities. One former *Prevent* staffer noted that she had repeatedly tried to get the program to pay more attention to women in extremism in a substantive, proactive way, but nothing happened until the Bethnal Green girls left for Syria and suddenly there was widespread panic: “I [said] what all the risks were [for women] in 2010 and...no one read it...it wasn’t taken seriously, but in hindsight, I think, it was disrespectful because we know what happened in 2014-2015 with girls running off to Syria” (A07). One Muslim woman consultant with *Prevent* said:

“[*Prevent*] said [to me], ‘Look we’re accused of not being engaged [with communities],’ because I’ve brought this up in our meetings: ‘It’s about getting to the women, you need to speak to the women, they are your key.’ And it’s all men sitting there, you know? The funny thing is, they’re sitting there, no solutions, just moaning about this and that, and I’m saying, look, we need to engage with women, we need to get women involved who are invisible, give them a platform—hence how this platform [the women’s circle] came about” (A10).

Indeed, the lack of long-term planning and failure to recognize deeply embedded gender norms and harmful stereotypes that relegate women to the sidelines—not only in “at risk” communities but also in government departments—was a problem that several women interviewees pointed out: “It’s a men club. Mosques are a men’s club. The whole *Prevent* and counter-terrorism [sector] has become a men’s club” (A07). The poor reputation of *Prevent* in many Muslim communities, the constant cancellation of women’s programs, and the feeling that many Muslim mothers have of being “used” as informants, has led to some *Prevent*-funded programs for women not using the *Prevent* “brand” at all, to avoid the potential backlash of being associated with the program (A10). This hidden funding, however, is highly problematic, as Muslim women are less likely to engage with social programs if they suspect or fear that these programs are somehow connected to the police (CHR&GJ 2012). Muslim women have also expressed concerns that their own activism is being co-opted and increasingly associated with government CVE efforts (CHR&GJ 2012).

What does this mean for women who try to disengage from violence? While treating each person on a case-by-case basis makes sense at face value—and in fact giving women “special” treatment based on their gender was something that several practitioners took issue with—it is



important to recognize the problems of returnee policies being gender blind (i.e., not seeing or recognizing any differences in needs or status between men and women) or even gender neutral (treating men and women exactly the same). In the overwhelmingly male-dominated cases of armed violence, it is simply not possible to be gender neutral – even if governments want to treat men and women equally, they also must recognize that men and women’s access to resources, power, status, and employment is often vastly different. In some contexts of armed violence, men are more highly stigmatized, and in others, women. Men *are* the predominant actors in armed groups and the vast majority of women involved do indeed have supporting roles – but that does not make them less essential or their disengagement any less fraught with risk and challenges. With very few exceptions, women also bear different burdens of care work for children and the elderly compared to men. Thus, even being “gender neutral”, if that were possible, is insufficient to ensure that women have equal access to the same opportunities if policymakers do not recognize the barriers that many women face to access these opportunities.

For example, one interviewee noted that the *Prevent* program had a hard time making progress with one woman (in terms of deradicalization) because her mentor was a man; she could not be seen in public with him, nor could she be alone in private with him (A17). After they switched to a female mentor, her progress significantly improved. But when asked if it was now official policy that women should have women mentors, the respondent said that they simply did not have enough female staff to guarantee that. Another researcher used the example of deradicalization programs in prison, noting that women often couldn’t access deradicalization programs in prisons because either their sentences were too short (because the wait list for these programs is usually over six months long), or because they didn’t get convicted of a “terrorism-related” offence, which is a program entry requirement (A02). This interviewee pointed out that women will often be charged with child abuse or neglect or kidnap, and not with charges directly related to terrorism; thus, they rarely qualify for deradicalization programs. In addition, while there has been a flurry of attention on men’s radicalization in prisons in recent years, there has not been any notable interest in the potential radicalization of female detainees (Cook and Vale 2018).

Relationships also matter and must be considered in the disengagement process. One British woman formerly part of an extremist group, who now does community engagement in CVE initiatives, noted that “marriage was always a difficult barrier for the women [she] knew –



leaving the group would mean leaving the marriage and if there were children involved and financial dependence on the husband, this proved even more difficult” (A15). This is an important departure from disengagement and desistance studies on men, where marriage is repeatedly cited as an important pathway *out* of criminal activity. Yet for women, marriage often works the opposite way—it frequently prevents women from getting out even if they want to: “...for men [in crime] a positive female partner can help them but for women it’s not the same—the men are very often part of their problems” (A05).

Yet this circles back to the problem of the “women as victims” stereotype. An important aspect often missing from discussions on women in armed groups is the positive benefits that many women get from these groups—which likely affect their decisions to disengage. Until very recently, acknowledging women’s violence or support for violence has been difficult even for feminist scholars, yet some studies find that war can create opportunities not otherwise available to women (Ní Aoláin, Haynes, and Cahn 2011). Indeed, while some women may use the victim narrative to avoid persecution or stigmatization, other women ex-insurgents report that they enjoyed their participation in militancy (Nieto-Valdivieso 2017). But this admission not only violates gendered expectations of women’s behaviour, it also violates societal expectations of repentance from ex-combatants in reintegration and reconciliation, and it upends official narratives about the development and dynamics of the conflict (Nieto-Valdivieso 2017). In addition, these often unexpected narratives of women enjoying militancy force researchers to examine power dynamics not only between men and women in these armed groups, but between women and other women. When discussing what factors might influence a woman to enrol (or not) in a government disengagement or deradicalization program, one of my interviewees discussed the importance of considering what the women are leaving behind, and what they are going back to:

“The only problem there is, do paramilitary groups give women a sense of empowerment? I mean...I’m not sure that would read so well. But it’s very interesting, but I would say the reality is that it’s not. There is no way that paramilitary groups have overcome the patriarchy and are treating women the same. So the dynamics no doubt are replicated in those groups. But it’s probably an exposure to opportunity that they wouldn’t have had without the



paramilitary groups, or the access to power, or all of those things.”

Overlooking the benefits that women may get from being in non-state armed groups creates a blind spot in understanding the appeal of insurgency or terrorism. Governments have long stressed that winning “hearts and minds” is key to CVE strategies, but if counter-narrative strategies only see women as instruments in preventing radicalization, and not as political actors with their own ideological convictions, they will miss key opportunities to engage women in these discussions. In other words, when government narratives do not consider that winning the hearts and minds of women is just as critical as winning those of men, they are likely to fail.

8. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

We have one terrorist judge at [xxx]. And ... one counsel that had a couple of cases in a row with him, and [the judge] made a comment to counsel on the case he had at one point: “I see this time you’ve decided to go after the man of the house.” With approval. As opposed to the previous case where he had given what we thought was a really light sentence, against the female defendant. And it just for us illustrated that even at the top level there isn’t necessarily an appreciation of [the role of women].

–CT prosecutor, England (A12)

It is important women are not just treated as women in this work but people with agency regardless of their gender. If we gender every aspect of our engagement with women, ultimately we reaffirm patriarchal structures that may have made them vulnerable to extremism and the hold the group had over them in the first place.

–CVE practitioner, England (A15)

This fieldwork, while preliminary, suggests a significant disconnect between women’s actual roles in various forms of terrorism and the types of intervention policies available to them when they try to disengage. For example, almost all the women interviewees (researchers, prosecutors, and former members of extremist groups) emphasized the critical nature of women’s roles in fostering violent extremism both in Europe and abroad (A2, A4-A13, A15, A18). Yet, several men who were designing and running deradicalization or CVE programs did not think women’s violence was a significant concern, largely based on the observation that very few



women were enrolled in disengagement programs (A9, A14, A17). In addition, several interviewees working in or researching CVE implied that a gender focus was not a priority, as their programs were open to both men and women (A9, A14, A17). Yet, as one former *Prevent* employee argued, many women join armed groups because they feel marginalized in their societies, but when they disengage from violence the government continues to ignore them (A7).

As the interviews above have illustrated, the continued CVE emphasis on men has left little room for substantive input from women, except where they are viewed as expedient tools for preventing radicalization. One of my female interviewees felt that on both the militant and government sides of violent extremism, men are either talking only to each other, or fighting each other, or trying to “one up” each other (A07). In general, policy and research around disengagement and reintegration also lack adequate theorizing of women as perpetrators of violence or benefactors of oppression; the research that does examine this suggests that underestimating women’s roles in violence creates many security issues both during and after conflict (Alison 2004; Alison 2009; Gentry and Sjoberg 2015; Sjoberg and Gentry 2011). To truly understand these complex issues, policymakers must investigate who wields power and to what ends, while also anticipating the potential repercussions to women when they move into male-dominated spaces.

Finally, the cohesion of non-state armed groups has a significant impact in sustaining both terrorism and civil war (Kenny 2010; Oppenheim et al. 2015), and women are a key element in that cohesion, whether they are “fighters” or not. Highlighting the roles that women play in perpetuating violent norms and sustaining the survival of non-state armed groups is necessary not only to emphasize the importance of including women in disengagement programming, but also to find entry points through which to encourage defection from these groups. If governments and other organizations want to create counter-narratives to prevent recruitment and encourage disengagement, they must do so based on empirical evidence on what works, and on which messages appeal to specific audiences. While to date, women have not been treated as one of these specific audiences, the repercussions of this oversight are becoming clear with the general lack of attention toward women returnees or policies around what to do with them. As Cook and Vale (2018) also suggest, reaching out to people and organizations with experience reintegrating combatants and other women associated with fighting forces, such as in Sierra Leone or Colombia, could identify best practices and highlight historic problems stemming from ignoring women or



creating programs based on gender stereotypes. Programs targeting would-be defectors and returnees (without conflating the two) must also consider carefully how to tailor such narratives towards women who feel exploited by their governments as “tools” of deradicalization, and who also may be facing high levels of stigmatization and discrimination in their own societies. Understanding women’s varied roles in armed groups can reveal often ignored power dynamics and patterns of violence, which, in turn, will inform more effective policies to disarm and dismantle such groups.



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10. APPENDIX A: Interview List

Interview No.	Expert Role	Sex	Location
A01	Researcher	M	UK
A02	Researcher and government consultant	F	UK
A03	CVE analyst	M	UK
A04	Researcher	F	Ireland
A05	Researcher	F	Ireland
A06	Researcher	F	Ireland
A07	Former <i>Prevent</i> employee / activist	F	UK
A08	CVE analyst	F	UK
A09	Researcher	F	Ireland
A10	CVE practitioner / <i>Prevent</i> consultant / former member of extremist group	F	UK
A11	Counter-terrorism prosecutor	F	UK
A12	Counter-terrorism prosecutor	F	UK
A13	Counter-terrorism prosecutor	F	UK
A14	CVE practitioner	M	Denmark
A15	CVE practitioner / former member of extremist group	F	UK
A16	CVE practitioner	M	Germany
A17	Former police officer / <i>Prevent</i> consultant	M	UK
A18	Researcher	F	Ireland