GENDER, DERADICALISATION AND DISENGAGEMENT

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The ways in which gender and terrorism interrelate and intersect have long been overlooked and underestimated (Cunningham, 2003; Gentry and Sjoberg, 2015; Henshaw, 2016). Whilst in the last 20 years in particular, a substantial body of literature on women and terrorism in various parts of the world has developed, comprehensive studies that focus on gender – rather than women – remain rare (Kimmel, 2018). The topic of gender, terrorism and deradicalisation has gained new interest in large parts of the world since the emergence of the so-called ‘Islamic State’ (IS) and the subsequent fall of its self-proclaimed ‘Caliphate’.

The unprecedented numbers of women and girls who joined IS in Syria, Iraq and later Libya (Eggert, 2015) caught the attention of many, who were interested in finding out more about women’s motivations to join violent and/or extremist political organisations, the reasons why organisations decide to include women and the wider communal and societal context in which these processes take place. However, the focus often remained on women and terrorism, rather than extending to a wider focus on the role gender plays more generally in terrorism.

To a certain extent, this new interest in the intersection of gender and terrorism was mirrored by an increased interest in the related issue of gender and deradicalisation and disengagement. The question of what role gender plays in deradicalisation and disengagement is of interest to academics – as the topic remains a relatively blind spot in academic literature on (de)radicalisation and (dis)engagement – and to practitioners and policy-makers, who are faced with the challenge of developing and implementing effective deradicalisation and disengagement programmes.

Considering the role of gender in deradicalisation and disengagement is important for two reasons. Firstly, on a practical level, it allows us to develop deradicalisation and disengagement strategies that address the situation of both male and female (former) members of terrorist groups who are willing to exit (or already have exited) the movement. In recent months, much of the attention of academics, practitioners and policy-makers working on deradicalisation and disengagement has been focused on the issue of IS returnees. Indeed, with the relative defeat of IS and the end of the IS ‘Caliphate’ in Syria and Iraq, the number of returnees is expected to increase (Barrett, 2017) – which poses a considerable challenge to the states and communities in Northern Africa, the Middle

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East, Western Europe and beyond, where many former IS members are expected to either return or move to the next.

A significant number of these returnees are women (Brannen, 2017), who often have different practical needs than men. In order to be able to adequately prosecute, rehabilitate and reintegrate these women, gender-sensitive approaches to deradicalisation and disengagement are crucial.

Whilst much of the recent discussion on gender, deradicalisation and disengagement in Europe, the US, the Middle East and parts of Asia has focused on IS, the role of gender in deradicalisation and disengagement strategies necessitates our attention beyond this very mediated organisation. The vast majority of non-state violent political organisations worldwide have female members (Cunningham, 2003; Eager, 2008; Henshaw, 2016). This includes right-wing extremist organisations in Europe and Northern America, the radical Hindutva movement in India, violent left-wing groups in Latin America as well as violent Islamist organisations in various parts of the world – to name just a few of the more prominent examples (Cunningham, 2003; Eager, 2008; Henshaw, 2016). Female participation in violent and/or extremist political organisations is thus truly a global phenomenon that transcends ideological and geographical boundaries (Eggert, 2015).

The second reason why we cannot afford not to integrate gender into deradicalisation and disengagement approaches is that, on an ideological level, gender is at the heart of most terrorist movements. Gender norms constitute an essential factor of the overall ideology of most terrorist organisations (Weilnböck, 2014a, 2014b). Most terrorist groups tend to have very specific expectations of what a man and a woman are supposed to do and be like. There is a very specific link between gender norms and forms of engagement with terrorist organisations. Terrorist groups use gender tactically and strategically, in order to achieve their aims and gain advantages in the struggle for their cause (Bayard de Volo, 2018). It would thus be negligent not to consider gender in strategies aimed at countering radicalisation and engagement in the work with any (former) member of terrorist organisations – male or female (Weilnböck, 2014a, 2014b).

This chapter provides an overview of existing work on gender, deradicalisation and disengagement. In the first section following this introduction, it briefly sketches out existing work on gender and terrorism. Whilst this section is not aimed at providing a detailed discussion of gender and terrorism, it is hoped that it will give the uninitiated reader some context to appreciate why adopting a gender-sensitive approach to deradicalisation and disengagement is crucial. The final section of this chapter identifies common pitfalls in this area and how these might be avoided, overcome or – at the very least – mitigated.

**Gender, women and terrorism**

In the summer of 2014, the territorial gains of the terrorist group IS in Syria and Iraq highlighted that the group was not simply a terrorist organisation any more but that it was increasingly developing state-like features (Tziarras, 2017). Realising that in order to form a state, the inclusion of women was required, IS leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi started calling on female supporters to join the group’s self-proclaimed caliphate in Syria and Iraq (Eggert, 2015). The group started a carefully tailored and professionally executed online campaign targeting both men and women in highly gendered ways (Pearson, 2016, 2017). This targeted campaign proved extremely effective. Unlike other previous hotspots of global terrorism (such as Afghanistan or Chechnya), Syria was much more easily accessible – and the gruesome war affecting millions of Syrian and Iraqi civilians provided plenty of images that
IS effectively incorporated into their propaganda efforts. As a result, thousands of supporters (both male and female) followed Al-Baghdadi’s call and joined IS-controlled territory.

The unprecedented numbers of women joining IS (many of whom came from the West) garnered an extraordinary amount of attention by the media, policy-makers and the wider public. As a result, several academic studies of women, gender and IS were published (Eggert, 2015; Hoyle et al., 2015; Jacoby, 2015; Pearson, 2016, 2017; Peresin, 2015; Peresin and Cervone, 2015; Saltman and Smith, 2015). This latest wave of publications on gender and terrorism built upon a (relatively recent) tradition of literature on women, gender and terrorism, which mostly focused on the roles and experiences of women – rather than gender, more broadly speaking. The earliest academic studies of women, gender and terrorism date as far back as the 1980s (Weinberg and Eubank, 1987). However, in terrorism studies, the topic remained relatively neglected until the terrorist attacks in the US on 11 September 2001. In the years following 9/11, a handful of pioneering studies on gender and terrorism were published (Bloom, 2011; Cunningham, 2003, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010; Dalton and Asal, 2011; Davis, 2013, 2017; Dearing, 2010; Eager, 2008; Ness, 2008; Schweitzer, 2006; Speckhard, 2008, 2009). A separate branch of the literature explores women’s participation in right-wing terrorist movements in Northern America and Western Europe, with limited overlap with the broader terrorism literature (see, for example, Blee and Deutsch, 2012). More literature is available by authors who frame women’s participation as political violence rather than terrorism. These studies tend to be situated in conflict, war or area studies and often remain relatively separated from the terrorism studies literature – even if both study the same conflicts, movements and organisations.

Most authors working from a terrorism studies perspective who focus on gender tend to examine the roles of women only. Very few authors also take a broader approach to the topic, by including the roles of both men and women as well as dominant gender norms and expectations. Examples include Gentry and Sjoberg (2015), who went beyond analysing why women joined and what their experiences were within the group. Instead, they highlighted how gender was used strategically by the groups and how expectations of what men and women are and should be like are interlinked.

One recurrent theme in much of the literature on gender and terrorism is that gendered stereotypes continue to dominate our perspective on men’s and women’s roles in terrorist organisations: Whilst women tend to be viewed as victims of terrorism and extremism or actors for peaceful change, men are often presented as perpetrators and supporters of violence. The fact that both men and women are subjected to violence, perpetrate and aim to counter it often remains overlooked.

Similar biases can be found when it comes to analyses of the reasons why individuals decide to join terrorist organisations. Whilst some of the most recent research has found that, overall, men and women join for largely the same reasons (even if their specific experiences are gendered, i.e. affected by their experience of being a man or a woman) (Eggert, 2015), some of the literature continues to describe gender-specific motivations for joining terrorist organisations. One of these debates focuses on the question of coercion vs. free will, or more specifically whether or not men and women decide to join terrorist organisations or whether they are made to do so. Whilst assumptions that women are more frequently coerced into joining persist, some scholars stress that more nuanced perspectives on the topic are required (Henshaw, 2016). In fact, empirical studies point out that most women join out of their free will, which implies that assumptions to the contrary may be based on the women’s gender rather than substantial research findings (Henshaw, 2016).
Another dominant assumption is that women join for personal and men for political reasons. This stereotype is reflected in wide parts of the media coverage on terrorism. It also can be found in some of the academic literature on the topic (see, for example, Bloom, 2011). In this context, men’s involvement in terrorism is often explained by political grievances or ideological convictions, whereas women’s participation tends to be looked at through personal experiences, such as sexual violence, the loss of a loved one, lack of perspective in a male-dominated society and so on. One pertinent example in this case is Mia Bloom’s book *Bombshell*, in which all of the four factors for women’s participation she identifies are situated on the personal level (Bloom, 2011). Henshaw (2016) has highlighted how problematic such an approach is, as the empirical evidence often points to the importance of both personal and political factors in the decision-making of both men and women. Rather than actual gender-specific differences it is thus often our biases that lead us to assuming there are substantial differences in why men and women engage in terrorism.

Publications that take into account the experiences of men and the role of masculinities remain the exception in their analyses of gender and terrorism. A notable example in this context is the work of Maleeha Aslam (2012) and Michael Kimmel (2018). Aslam and Kimmel argue that men who are unable to live up to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity (and fulfill societal expectations of what a man should be like and achieve) can often be attracted by terrorist organisations, which offer them a way to gain status and redeem their identity as a ‘strong man’. Rather than concentrating solely on the individual and the group they join (and perpetuating the stereotype of ‘the problematic male’), these approaches advocate instead also taking wider societal norms into account (Ezekilov, 2017; Pearson, 2018). Thus, these studies highlight the link between gender norms upheld by the individual, wider society and the organisation:

So this is how it works: These young men feel entitled to a sense of belonging and community, of holding unchallenged moral authority over women and children, and of feeling that they count in the world and that their lives matter. Experiencing threats to the lives they feel they deserve leads these young men to feel ashamed and humiliated. And it is this aggrieved entitlement – entitlement thwarted and frustrated – that leads some men to search for a way to redeem themselves as men, to restore and retrieve that sense of manhood that has been lost. Joining up is a form of masculine compensation, an alternate route to proving manhood.

(Kimmel, 2018)

Deradicalisation and disengagement approaches that do not consider the link between these gender norms, men’s humiliation and their joining of terrorist organisations arguably do not see the full picture.

**Gender, deradicalisation and disengagement**

If the literature on gender, terrorism and extremism is limited, this is even more so the case when it comes to studies on gender, deradicalisation and disengagement. Most mainstream publications on deradicalisation and disengagement fail to take into account gender altogether (see, for example, Bjorgo and Horgan, 2009; El-Said, 2015; El-Said and Harrigan, 2011; Horgan, 2009; Marsden, 2017). The issue of gender and preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE) has received more attention, albeit also at a relatively low level. To
date, only a handful of academic studies on gender and P/CVE have been published (including Brown, 2013; Giscard d’Estaing, 2017; Winterbotham and Pearson, 2016). The number of more practice-oriented reports and studies by think tanks, international organisations and non-governmental organisations on gender and P/CVE is slightly higher (see, for example, for more recently published studies and reports: Centre for Human Rights and Global Justice, 2011; Chowdhury Fink et al., 2013, 2016; Cook, 2017; Couture, 2014; Dufour-Genneson and Alam, 2014; Eggert, 2018; GCTF n.d.; Hedayah, 2015; LSE Centre for Women, Peace and Security, 2017; Permanent Mission of the United Arab Emirates to the United Nations and Georgetown University, 2014; Saltman and Smith, 2015; UN Women, 2016). Whilst most of these focus on gender and P/CVE rather than gender and deradicalisation and disengagement, some of these studies can be of use in informing deradicalisation and disengagement work as well, as there often is a certain degree of overlap of issues that emerge in both P/CVE and deradicalisation and disengagement strategies. Similarly, some of the expertise and experience of academics and practitioners with a background in social work, development or women, peace and security can be useful while working on developing strategies and tools on how to incorporate gender into deradicalisation and disengagement approaches. It will hardly ever be possible to adopt these one by one; however, it would be a wasted opportunity to discard existing approaches in neighbouring disciplines and areas of work altogether.

Another issue is the lack of empirical evidence for what works and what does not in gendered approaches to deradicalisation and disengagement. The academic literature on the topic is useful in this context; however, it is extremely limited in scope and breadth. As to the studies published by think tanks, international organisations and non-governmental organisations, many of these are position papers or summaries of meetings rather than empirically grounded analyses. Whilst they can be helpful for practitioners and policy-makers, they only provide anecdotal evidence of lessons learned and best practice. In order to fully understand what role gender plays in deradicalisation and disengagement processes, we need more empirical analyses focusing on this topic.

Adopting gendered approaches to deradicalisation and disengagement is important (1) in order to take into account the needs of women willing to leave violent and/or extremist movements, and (2) in order to effectively counter the ideologies of violent and/or extremist organisations, which are often based on very specific gender norms and ideals.

Firstly, despite the fact that the vast majority of violent and/or extremist political organisations worldwide include female members (Cunningham, 2003; Eager, 2008; Henshaw, 2016), very little support is available for women who want to leave violent and/or extremist organisations – or for women who have already done so. Similar to the lack of academic literature on the topic, there are very few deradicalisation and disengagement programmes that take into account gender. This is problematic because it means that the specific needs of women wanting to leave violent and/or extremist political organisations are overlooked (Radvan and Altmeyer, 2014). This is a problem especially (but by no means exclusively) in organisations that adhere to a gender-conservative ideology. For example, in groups with strict division of labour along gendered lines, women can lack the professional training and experience that would allow them to be independent and make their own living away from the movement. This is of particular relevance if the partner of the woman remains a member of the movement, and thus breaking away from the movement would also mean leaving the breadwinner of the couple and/or family. If children are involved (and in many gender-conservative organisations such as right-wing extremist or Islamist groups, organisational ideology tends to encourage families to have
many children), this can be even more challenging (Expert Centre on Gender and Right-Wing Extremism, 2014). Often, the respective movement considers these children as part (even property) of either the husband or the movement the family is a part of. On the other hand, the communities and societies the women (who consider leaving a violent and/or extremist political movement) hail from often regard former members of violent and/or extremist organisations with disdain (Radvan and Altmeyer, 2014). This is particularly the case if the women have been actively involved in perpetrating violence themselves. Evidence from disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes illustrates that reintegration is often particularly challenging for women (UN, 2006). Even in cases where the women joined the organisation against their will (as was the case with the women abducted by Boko Haram in North Western Africa), communities often reject former female members of violent organisations and their children after their return (Ford, 2016). In some cases, this has led the women to return to their former abductors and rejoin the organisation, which would at the very least provide them with the very basics necessary for survival – and the most basic amount of dignity their previous home communities would deny them (Ford, 2016). Considering that perceived marginalisation, isolation and discrimination constitute some of the key factors facilitating and driving radicalisation and involvement in (violent) extremist organisations of both men and women (Eager, 2008; Henshaw, 2016; Saltman and Smith, 2015), it would be negligent to disregard this issue.

However, the specific needs of women wanting to leave violent and/or extremist political organisations are only one reason why it is crucial to incorporate gender into deradicalisation and disengagement approaches. Another factor is the often highly gendered nature of many (violent) extremists’ recruitment pathways and strategies, as well as the narratives, ideologies and hierarchies they adhere to once within the group. Gender norms and expectations are often at the heart of violent and/or extremist political organisations, with specific roles pre-defined for both men and women within the movement (Expert Center on Gender and Right-Wing Extremism, 2014; Radvan and Altmeyer, 2014; Weilnböck, 2014a, 2014b; Task Force on Gendered Right-Wing Extremism Prevention, 2016). These gender norms are often used to distinguish the ingroup (which is part of the violent and/or extremist movement) from the outgroup (which is made up of the majority of society and/or community). In many cases, these gender norms are based on harmful concepts of masculinity and femininity, celebrating ‘masculine’ violence and ‘feminine’ subordination (Expert Centre on Gender and Right-Wing Extremism, 2014; Radvan and Altmeyer, 2014; Weilnböck, 2014a, 2014b; Task Force on Gendered Right-Wing Extremism Prevention, 2016). It is thus important to take dominant gender norms and expectations into account in deradicalisation and disengagement approaches, in order to gain access to (formerly) radicalised and/or violent individuals, better support them during deradicalisation and disengagement processes and help them in their critical engagement with previously held beliefs. Encouraging a critical engagement with the role harmful masculinities and femininities play both prior to joining and within many violent and/or extremist organisations is particularly important in deradicalisation efforts, which are aimed at a disassociation from extremist beliefs. Considering how central gender in general and harmful masculinities and femininities in particular are to many violent and/or extremist movements (and how critical they can be during the radicalisation and engagement process, as outlined in the previous section), it is hard to conceive how extremist ideologies can be countered without also addressing gender.
Common pitfalls and ways to avoid them

Despite the current lack of comprehensive empirical studies on gender, deradicalisation and disengagement, it is possible to identify a number of potential pitfalls and ways to avoid them. Some of these are based on the very limited academic literature on the topic, whilst others rely on anecdotal evidence from practitioners working on gender, deradicalisation and disengagement and/or experts focusing on gender in related fields – such as development, social work or peace and security.

Instead of simplifying matters – adopt comprehensive approaches

One common pitfall in gender, deradicalisation and disengagement strategies is the tendency to not base them on a truly comprehensive approach. This includes several aspects: (1) a tendency towards simplifying gendered victim/perpetrator binaries; (2) the tendency to conflate women with gender and a lack of focus on how masculinities and femininities are constructed; (3) the failure to adopt an intersectional approach; (4) single-level approaches; and (5) an instrumentalisation of gender.

Firstly, in debates on terrorism, extremism and ways of countering them, many often focus on women as victims of terrorism and/or actors for peaceful change (whilst men are seen as perpetrators). However, such binary approaches to the role of gender in terrorism are not rooted in empirical analyses of the topic (Cunningham, 2003; Eager, 2008; Henshaw, 2016). Instead, it is important to acknowledge that both men and women are victims of terrorism, both men and women support and perpetrate terrorism, and both men and women help prevent and counter terrorism. Existing research suggests that men and women largely get involved in terrorism for very similar reasons (Eggert, 2015). However, due to their alleged peaceful and non-violent nature, in many cases, female members of violent extremist movements are less often arrested and convicted than men, which is likely one reason for women’s lower numbers in exit programmes in Europe (Alison, 2009; Radvan and Altmeyer, 2014; Weilnböck, 2014a, 2014b). In a similar vein, numerous media reports presented female IS members as ‘naïve’ or ‘brainwashed’, unlike their male counterparts (Radvan and Altmeyer, 2014; Eggert, 2015). Deradicalisation and disengagement programmes that aim at effectively reaching and engaging both men and women must thus take into account that victimhood and perpetration are more complex than widespread gender stereotypes may suggest.

Secondly, it is important to bear in mind that the concept of gender goes beyond a focus on or an engagement with women. Whilst much of the academic literature and several programmes implemented in the area focus on women, more recent research and practice tend to look at gender more broadly, and take into account masculinities, femininities, relations between men and women, LGBTIQ&A issues, homo- and transphobia. When working on deradicalisation and disengagement, it is of particular importance to focus on the construction of masculinities and femininities, as gender ideals are at the very heart of many violent and/or extremist political organisations, as outlined above. Encouraging an active, critical engagement with these gender norms, therefore, is often critical during deradicalisation and disengagement processes.

Thirdly, in order to implement effective deradicalisation and disengagement approaches, it is important to not simply focus on gender but instead adopt an intersectional approach. In other words, it is essential to also take into account other identifiers such as class, race, ethnicity, age, citizenship, faith/religion (or lack thereof), sexuality and the roles these play.
during processes of deradicalisation and disengagement. For example, whilst it is likely that
the needs and experiences of a 25-year-old female right-wing extremist will differ from
those of a 25-year-old male right-wing extremist in some ways, they might differ in others
from those of a 70-year-old female right-wing extremist – because of the specific ways in
which age, gender and ideological orientation intersect in this case.

Fourthly, just as radicalisation and engagement in terrorism and extremism are processes
in which individual, organisational, communal and societal factors are at play (Horgan,
2009), the same is true for deradicalisation and disengagement processes. Comprehensive
deradicalisation and disengagement processes must thus take into account all of these differ-
ent levels and address them appropriately.

Finally, the instrumentalisation of gender should be avoided. Several studies of P/CVE
identify the instrumentalisation of gender and engagement with women and/or communities
as one of the key factors contributing to an alienation of members of already marginalised
societal groups (Brown, 2013; Cook, 2017; Giscard d’Estaing, 2017; Winterbotham and
Pearson, 2016; Eggert, 2018). This is problematic, because it is unethical, but also because
perceived marginalisation, isolation and discrimination are amongst the driving and facilitat-
ing factors of radicalisation for both men and women, as outlined above. During processes
of deradicalisation and disengagement, such experiences thus have the potential of reinfor-
cing previously held extremist views. Problematic single-issue approaches that should be
avoided include strategies focusing on gender only for the purpose of deradicalisation and
disengagement, without addressing some of the wider gender-related issues people are
facing. For example, people tend to be much less receptive to analyses of harmful masculin-
ities in the violent extremist movements they used to be a part of if the very same gender
concepts are perpetuated within wider society (or even within the organisation which works
on deradicalising and disengaging this group of people), without being addressed with the
same vehemence (Huckerby, 2011). Many communities also tend to be less open to engage-
ment with agencies and organisations that only seem to be interested in gender and/or
women’s rights when it seems to serve their agenda.

**Instead of perpetuating problematic gender stereotypes – avoid them**

A second common pitfall in attempts to integrate gender into deradicalisation and disengage-
ment approaches is the tendency to perpetuate problematic gender stereotypes. This problem
is often linked to underlying assumptions about women’s and men’s roles and experiences in
violent and/or extremist political movements, as well as in society more broadly.

Women are often perceived to be more prone to non-violent conflict resolution and
peaceful change, while men are often presented as perpetrators of violence (Gentry and Sjo-
berg, 2015). As a result, women’s involvement in social and political processes is often seen
as ‘the’ solution to effective peace-building or, indeed, deradicalisation and disengagement.
Whilst it is certainly advisable to adopt comprehensive approaches to deradicalisation and
disengagement and involve a broad variety of different societal stakeholders (including
women), the belief that women are essentially and inherently peace-loving (while men are
the opposite) is misleading. Indeed, this belief is contradicted on an empirical level by the
many women who play active roles in supporting and perpetrating extremist violence.

Unfortunately, some projects focusing on gender, deradicalisation and disengagement (as
well as P/CVE more generally) rely on simplifying, one-sided gender norms and expect-
ations (Task Force on Gendered Right-Wing Extremism Prevention, 2016). As a result,
they reinforce and perpetuate these gender stereotypes rather than challenging and
deconstructing them. One notorious example in this context are projects focusing on the work with women in their capacity as mothers. When these projects work with mothers only (without also engaging fathers and/or working with women in other capacities), they risk reproducing problematic masculinities and femininities rather than questioning them. Moreover, these projects are often based on the assumption that mothers and/or families can actually prevent and/or counter radicalisation and extremism. Thus, these approaches run the risk of blaming families in general and mothers in particular, if specific counter-extremism and deradicalisation efforts prove to be unsuccessful (Eggert, 2017).

This is not to say that gendered approaches to deradicalisation and disengagement should disregard societal and communal realities altogether and implement the latest developments in gender theory, regardless of the context on the ground. Of course, from a practitioner’s view, it will be important to be realistic of what can be achieved in a given context and to take a step-by-step approach that takes into account socio-cultural sensitivities. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind potential gender-related risks when planning and implementing gendered strategies to deradicalisation and disengagement, as part of a ‘do no harm’ approach.

Instead of deepening existing rifts – bridge research, practice, policy-makers and communities

Experience from P/CVE highlights the often considerable divide between researchers, practitioners, policy-makers and communities (Eggert, 2018). Policy-making and practitioners’ work are not always informed by research; and the mistrust of communities towards both practitioners and policy-makers (and in some cases even towards researchers) can be deep (Eggert, 2018). From a deradicalisation and disengagement perspective, this is highly problematic. The solution to the divide between researchers on the one hand and practitioners and policy-makers on the other lies in promoting exchange between researchers, policy-makers and practitioners. Existing mistrust from communities is more challenging to tackle. Yet, it is particularly important to do so, for a number of reasons. Firstly, strategic considerations apart, it is unethical to marginalise and alienate communities. Secondly, perceived marginalisation and thinking in black-and-white schemes are an integral part of many radicalisation processes (Alison, 2009; Eager, 2008; Saltman and Smith, 2015) and should thus be addressed (rather than perpetuated) by deradicalisation and disengagement approaches. The alienation of communities is particularly problematic when it comes to communities that already feel marginalised in society, such as many Muslim communities in Western European societies (Brown, 2013; Winterbotham and Pearson, 2016). Finally, engaging in deradicalisation and disengagement is linked to considerable risks for the individual. Trust in the individuals and organisations supporting, facilitating and accompanying deradicalisation and disengagement processes is thus essential. This is why it is in the interest of practitioners involved in deradicalisation and disengagement processes to present themselves as (and indeed, be!) credible and reliable partners, who bridge existing rifts and avoid creating additional ones.

As far as gendered approaches are concerned, avoiding an instrumentalisation of gender is thus crucial. Practitioners working on P/CVE highlight the need to include communities instead, and even more so the need to let communities lead (Eggert, 2018; Expert Centre on Gender and Right-Wing Extremism, 2014; Radvan and Altmeyer, 2014; Task Force on Gendered Right-Wing Extremism Prevention, 2016; Weilnböck, 2014a, 2014b). In the context of gendered approaches to deradicalisation and disengagement, this would, for
example, mean that the personal background of practitioners involved in deradicalisation and disengagement processes is to be taken into account, as it could be of relevance in their work. This could include their gender, previous engagement and reputation (or lack thereof) with the respective organisation, movement or community, in addition to other identifiers such as ethnicity, race, age and faith/religion (or lack thereof).

**Instead of focusing on short-term – think one step ahead**

Lastly, when incorporating gender into deradicalisation and disengagement strategies, it is important to plan for the long term rather than focusing on short-term solutions only. As Weilnböck points out, ‘(l)eaving attitudes and life styles of violent extremism and group-orientated hatred is a very complicated long-term process of personal change’ (Weilnböck, 2014a; see also Bjorgo and Horgan, 2009; Horgan, 2009; Marsden, 2017). As part of a full deradicalisation and disengagement process, change must take place on both an ideological as well as a physical level (Marsden, 2017). (Former) extremists willing to deradicalise and disengage must be supported in distancing themselves both from extremist ideology as well as behaviour – two processes that do not always occur in parallel to each other (Marsden, 2017). It is thus important to develop long-term strategies that provide (former) extremists with viable and sustainable solutions, which take into account the complexity of the process of leaving and distancing oneself from (violent) extremist movements and their ideology. In this context, it is essential to not just see deradicalisation and disengagement as a process that happens on an individual level. Rather, it is important to consider that (former) extremists are also members of groups, communities and a society and that their association with these various societal groups can, and often does, affect the deradicalisation and disengagement process.

As in all deradicalisation and disengagement processes, this must also be borne in mind when adopting gendered approaches to deradicalisation and disengagement. Bearing in mind both the long and short term in gender-sensitive deradicalisation and disengagement processes, could, for example, involve considering how the different stages of deradicalisation and disengagement processes affect men and women. One group that often requires additional support are women with dependent children. If they lack the required opportunities, resources and support networks to cover their and their children’s financial (and emotional) needs, they might be able to leave a violent and/or extremist organisation in the short term, but in the long term, maintaining an independent lifestyle away from previous networks that remain part of the movement may prove to be challenging.

**Conclusion**

Whilst there has been an increased interest in the roles and experiences of women in terrorism in recent years, the role of gender in terrorist movements more broadly often continues to be overlooked. Similarly, in the fight against terrorism, researchers, practitioners and policy-makers are only slowly – but increasingly – becoming aware of the need to take gender into account. Often, this interest manifests itself in a focus on women, which is a first step, but must be followed by more comprehensive approaches that consider gender more broadly. Most of the (very limited) literature which is available on the topic focuses on gender and P/CVE. Much fewer studies have been published on gender and deradicalisation and disengagement. Specifically, very little research and empirical evidence exists on what works and what does not in deradicalisation and disengagement programmes that take
Gender into account. To a certain extent, insights can be gained from neighbouring areas of work, such as social work, development and – of course – P/CVE. In the mid and long term, however, more (empirical) research on gender and deradicalisation and disengagement is needed.

Gendered approaches to deradicalisation and disengagement are needed for two reasons. Firstly, men and women who are undergoing processes of deradicalisation and disengagement can have gender-specific needs and experiences. Without the required knowledge and experience in this area, it is impossible to provide the gender-specific assistance and support that are often required. Considering the fact that both men and women are active members of the vast majority of terrorist organisations worldwide, the issue is likely to remain of relevance in the foreseeable future. Secondly, harmful gender norms and ideals (often based on ‘male violence’ and ‘female submission’) are an essential part of the ideology of many terrorist organisations, and often play a crucial role in the radicalisation and engagement process, especially – but not exclusively – in right-wing extremist and Islamist groups. Challenging these norms is thus an integral part of deradicalisation and disengagement processes.

When integrating gender into deradicalisation and disengagement processes, it is crucial to take a comprehensive approach to the topic (rather than oversimplifying matters), to avoid problematic gender stereotypes (rather than perpetuating them), to focus on bridging research, practice, policy-makers and communities (rather than deepening existing divides) and to see deradicalisation and disengagement as a process (rather than focus on short-term solutions and outcomes only). There are no easy, one-kind-fits-all solutions to including gender in deradicalisation and disengagement processes. Just as radicalisation and involvement in terrorism are complex, complicated and often very long processes, so too are deradicalisation and disengagement. However, it is the well-being and security of our communities and societies that are at stake. Not taking into account all the aspects that play a role in deradicalisation and disengagement – including gender – is thus simply not an option.

References


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Gender, deradicalisation and disengagement


